
KOSOVO: DISPUTES CONTINUE 20 YEARS AFTER NATO BOMBING CAMPAIGN

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The bombing campaign against Yugoslavia that began on March 24 1999 was the first time NATO went to war. The 78-day campaign, known as Operation Allied Force, was officially conducted to protect civilians. They had been caught in the middle of the conflict between the secessionist insurgents of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and Yugoslavian security forces. The conflict had dramatically escalated in 1998, when the KLA began an armed campaign to end the Yugoslavian (or, more specifically, Serbian) rule over Kosovo.

Even now, 20 years after the intervention, and despite the military, diplomatic and financial investments of Western powers in Kosovo, a political agreement on the status of Kosovo is nowhere to be seen. Quite to the contrary, tensions between the unilaterally declared Republic of Kosovo and Serbia – the state it seceded from back in February 2008 – are running high. The interests of both parties appear to be diametrically opposed. Kosovo aims to be recognised as a state by Serbia and, in turn, Serbias main national interest is to sabotage the international recognition of its former province.

An excuse to start bombing

NATO's air superiority encountered few obstacles in 1999. The transatlantic military intervention began after negotiations between the members of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the KLA, aimed at giving Kosovo greater self governance, collapsed. Henry Kissinger described the failure of these so-called Rambouillet talks as an excuse to start bombing.

The uninterrupted bombing of Yugoslavia lasted 78 days and involved 38,400 sorties, including 10,484 strike sorties. By the end, Serbian president Slobodan Milošević had capitulated.

In military terms, Operation Allied Force was a clear success. It achieved its major objectives. Perhaps the most important aim was, through the Kumanovo agreement, the withdrawal of the Yugoslav/Serbian security forces from Kosovo. NATO troops were subsequently deployed on the ground and remain there to this day.

It should be noted, however, that the bombing was illegal. It was done without the authorisation of the UN Security Council. An international commission convened to investigate the intervention later came up with a fascinating semantic formula to explain this away – the bombing had been illegal but legitimate.

The operation has been romanticised by its supporters. Former Czech President Václav Havel, for example, described it as the first time that states waged war in the name of principles and values

rather than their national interest. This idealist perspective, however, neglects the fact that the intervention had significant geopolitical motivations.

The operation was fervently supported, and indeed implemented, by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair – leaders who were very much a product of their time. This generation transformed post-Cold War euphoria into military adventurism. Both leaders developed their own humanitarian doctrines which advocated intervention – which, in practice, meant war – to protect threatened civilians. They went on to present themselves as humanitarian heroes at home. Others saw their actions as imperialism.

The campaign also resulted in massive collateral damage. There were hundreds of civilian victims. I've found that between 80% and 87.5% of the victims of the Kosovo conflict died during or in the aftermath of Operation Allied Force. The KLA took advantage of the power vacuum created by the NATO intervention to carry out revenge killings and abductions against Serbs, Bosniaks, Roma and other minorities.

The elusive political settlement

The bombing dramatically shaped the political future of Kosovo. It paved the way towards its (unilaterally declared) independence on February 17 2008 – a move which was encouraged by Washington and some European allies. At first glance, it would seem that this development would solve the crisis in Kosovo.

But Kosovo is far from achieving full international recognition. It is, for one thing, still unable to join the UN, the gold standard when it comes to statehood. Even if enough states did support its bid for membership, Kosovo could face a veto – certainly from Russia and probably from China.

An EU-led agreement signed in 2013 aimed at normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia is in deadlock, sabotaged by the mutual distrust of all parties involved. The term normalise is, of course, deliberately vague. For all Kosovo officials I have talked to, nevertheless, the meaning of the term is crystal clear – full mutual recognition.

The problem is that if a solution is not found, further border alterations could be on the cards. That might mean, for example, a potential exchange of territories between Serbia and Kosovo or the unification of the latter with Albania. The aspiration of uniting all Albanians in a single polity continues to attract support among Albanians in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia.

Western policymakers, however, categorically reject any further border alterations – perhaps because it would illustrate their own failure to settle the Kosovo case. Further border transformations may even plant the seeds for future sovereignty-driven conflicts.

Decades on, it's clear that reaching a political settlement after a military intervention can be a nightmare. Certainly much more difficult than launching a bombing campaign.

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