

Five Lessons of the Balkan Conflict

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On June 25, twenty years ago, Slovenia and Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia. This was followed by the Serbo-Croatian (1991 – 1995), Bosnian (1992 – 1995), Kosovo (1998 – 1999) and Macedonian (2001) wars, which became the official facts in textbooks on the history of international relations. Thus, the question arises: Do the Balkan wars of the 1990s offer something more than academic interest?

I think they do. The conflicts in the former Yugoslavia took on global significance almost immediately. They became the platform for the formation of the contemporary world order, while at the same time revealing its new contradictions. In this sense, the Balkan wars of the 1990s taught us five lessons that are still relevant today.

Lesson One: The “Atlantic Community” (the EU and NATO) can exist as a united actor only if it has an external enemy. Otherwise, it is prone to break into groups of interest, like any system. The internationalization of the Balkan conflict began in December 1991, when Germany, despite the protests of Britain and France, unilaterally recognized the sovereignty of Slovenia and Croatia and threatened to withdraw from the European Community over it. This move alarmed Britain and France, so they began to view NATO as a mechanism to keep Germany’s growing independence in check. Moreover, this situation posed a threat to European integration. Thus, it was not Warsaw and Vilnius but London and Paris that were primarily responsible for strengthening the alliance in the early 1990s. The Americans took advantage of these sentiments and again joined NATO in its operations in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999).

This conclusion gives rise to some ideas about the prospects of the alliance’s military policy. Since 2001, NATO’s main opponent has been international terrorism, so the main mission was the operation in Afghanistan. But at the Lisbon Summit on November 20, 2010, NATO leaders pledged to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by 2014. On June 23, U.S. President Barack Obama confirmed that Americans are ready to implement the “Lisbon strategy.” Who will be the alliance’s new enemy after the Afghan war?

Lesson two: NATO remains the priority for the United States. It is how America makes its presence felt in Europe. The wars in Croatia and Bosnia frightened Americans, too. But the reason was not a serious human rights violation (if necessary, Washington can tolerate such things.) The key worry for the White House was the possibility of disagreement among the NATO allies. The growing rift between Britain and France, on the one hand, and Germany, on the other hand, threatened to undermine transatlantic unity. Thus, the alliance needed some joint military operation that could unite the allies in shared sacrifice.

Alongside this, the Clinton Administration managed to solve another problem. In 1992, in

the early days of the European Union, the Petersburg Declaration was adopted, which announced the new challenges of the Western European Union: humanitarian missions and crisis management. Washington considered this as an attempt to create duplicate NATO defense structures. Thus, the Balkan wars allowed them to assign both of these missions to the alliance. In 1996 (just after the Bosnian conflict) the “Berlin formula” was applied: the EU created its own armed forces based on NATO infrastructure. So far, Brussels has not been able to go beyond its scope.

Lesson three: The military operations in Yugoslavia clearly demonstrated that the U.S. would not allow the resurgence of communist regimes in the former Soviet bloc (except Russia). The Croats, Albanians, and Bosnian Muslims were no less cruel than the Serbs. However, NATO carried out a peace keeping operation only against the latter. Why? A possible explanation may be that the leader of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, emphasized his continuity with Tito’s communist regime. Yugoslavia was used as an example to show the socialists of Eastern Europe that they could gain power only if they accepted the conditions of the “Washington Consensus” (1989).

Lesson four: During the Balkan wars there appeared a new type of “war punishment.” Until the late 20th century, war had been traditionally aimed at forcing the enemy to compromise or to bend to the winner’s will. The latter required ground operations: the arrival of the victorious army to establish the desired order. Along with nuclear weapons, the technical impossibility of such a war largely guaranteed the peaceful nature of the Soviet-American relations.

Now the situation has changed. Air operations against the Bosnian Serbs and Yugoslavia, by contrast, were staged only to create conditions for regime change and the subsequent dismemberment of the country. From an ideological perspective, war is not waged on a state but on its “pernicious regime.” The regime is depicted as a pariah well in advance, thus threatening international stability. Similarly, an opposition must be created in advance to carry out the necessary changes.

Lesson five: The Balkan wars of the 1990s developed and consolidated a system of separated legitimacy. Adopted by the Clinton Administration in 1993, the concept of “expansion of democracy” included: (1) strengthening transatlantic unity, (2) the inclusion of the former socialist countries (except Russia) in the common institutions and (3) carrying out “humanitarian actions”. The wars in Bosnia and Kosovo consolidated this. A system was created within which certain regimes now can be given limited rights to conduct domestic policies on their own. Moreover, their leaders cannot be guaranteed personal safety under any circumstance (the “Arab Spring” of 2011 proved that such security is not guaranteed for the allies either, if the U.S. and the EU do not consider them fully legitimate).

These lessons show why the Balkan events caused such a nervous reaction in Russia. It was not because of the “Slavic unity” of 1914. Regarding the fate of Bosnia and Kosovo, Russian elite felt that both the U.S. and the EU countries considered Russia to be alien to them. Thus, it causes fears that under certain conditions the “Balkan scenario” may well be applied to Russia, too. Hence, the discussions over disarmament issues, human rights, criticism of domestic policy, etc. After the events in Yugoslavia, these issues have become not only a matter of morality (as it was during the Gorbachev period), but also an instrument for protecting or, conversely, weakening national security.

In the 1960s, the establishment of nuclear parity with the United States gave the Brezhnev

elite a sense of external security that was unprecedented in Russian history. Without it, it would have been hardly possible to demolish or restructure the old system. However, in the 1990s, under the influence of the Balkan developments, this confidence began to recede. Another more vital, question arose: How would the world change if Russia's military potential was diminished? This issue is still quite relevant today in the context of the Libyan war and the heated debate over missile defense.

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