

# NATO's 1999 War on Yugoslavia: The Bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Was it Deliberate?

By [Ilija Trojanovic](#)

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In-depth Report: [THE BALKANS](#)

## Background

*Five states emerged after the breakup of the nation formerly known as Yugoslavia: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the FYR Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia. Later, Montenegro split from Serbia in 2006, and Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008 (despite not being recognized by the UN and many more nations). This essay however, will keep its focus before the turn of the century, ignoring Serbia later secessions of Montenegro and dubiously, Kosovo. These five states that used to be Yugoslavia were in economic, political, and above all social turmoil. Serbia, more than others, suffered the most.*

*Also, Serbia's then president, Slobodan Milošević, was the only premier of all the give former Yugoslav republics that kept Serbia running under the same Socialist system as in the past. In addition to these circumstances Serbia was also interlaced in the Kosovo conflict. More of a nationalist than a socialist however, Milošević kept a close eye on Kosovo as there was rising tension between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians. Over time, Kosovo became all that Milošević could think about, and as a Serb himself he ordered the slaughter and eviction of many ethnic Albanians, some of whom nasty criminals that killed Serbs, but many if not the majority were helpless civilians. Inspired and if not pushed by the USA, NATO moved into Kosovo to halt Milošević's work. After several failed attempts to solve the problem diplomatically, Operation Allied Force (the continuous bombing of Serbia until the Milošević government gave in to US/NATO demands) began. On May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1999, the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was a target of an Operation Allied Force mission that went haywire...or did it? This essay will examine whether or not the bombing was deliberate or unintentional.*

## Analysis

After peace talks over Kosovo between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (now the Republic of Serbia) and NATO failed in 1998, the latter began its offensive targeting Belgrade and other cities, towns, and villages throughout Serbia. From March 24 to June 11 NATO would heavily bombard the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Many around the world condemned the four-month nonstop onslaught, but the works of the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1999, only poured fuel on the ever-burning fire in the Balkans. On that spring night, NATO forces bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, fatally wounding three journalists and injuring twenty staff members. The Operation, known as Operation Allied Force, was intended to bomb targets such as: arms warehouses, ammunition storages, fuel storages, military airfields, communication

sites, critical infrastructure in key cities, ministries, and criminal hideouts with an aim to stop Serbian military operations in Kosovo...embassies, were not included as part of their mission.

There are two lenses, or two different perspectives, that one may choose to look through when examining this incident. One possible view will show that NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy was a mere mistake, caused by 'outdated maps' and a lack of intelligence. The other view is quite different, completely dismissing the thought of the embassy being bombed unintentionally; this perspective sees the bombing as a completely deliberate attack. The views cross each other out entirely, yet both seem to have some degree of plausibility.

However, when the aggressor who claims the incident was a mistake due to faulty intelligence and old maps also has the greatest air forces in the world (US Air Force, Royal Air Force, German Air Force), suspicions over what really happened are aroused (T. Pickering, 1999). Not to help things, the embassy bombed was that of a nation that was helping the Serbian army during the war and also follows a political ideology that the United States despise; Communism. Some may believe the Cold War was over a long time ago, that may instigate a nice debate, but that wasn't what this essay is about and China's communist stance may have a role to play. Here, we see that to a great extent, the May 7 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was as intentional and as planned as the rest of the bombings carried out by Operation Allied Force in Serbia.

The most popular explanation of the bombing that lay May night in 1999 was that the maps provided were outdated that the coordinates were flawed. Since the US was in charge of 83% of all military procedures in Operation Allied Force, and since it was an American jet that was on call that night, they took most of the blame, not NATO. In addition, since an American company called the National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA) produced the outdated maps in the US, virtually the whole affair, more or less, rested in the hands of the Americans (W. Cohen, 1999). In a joint statement by then-US Secretary of Defense William Cohen and former CIA Director George Tenet, the "military supply facility was the intended target, certainly not the Chinese embassy". (W. Cohen, 1999)

Then, Thomas Pickering the former US Under Secretary of State, concluded the same thing, only adding that the target was supposed to be "the headquarters of the Yugoslav Federal Directorate for Supply and Procurement (FDSP)" (E. Schmitt, 1999). The US would not stand down completely though, defending themselves by highlighting the fact that in 1996, the Chinese embassy changed locations from Old Belgrade to New Belgrade across the river Danube. NIMA, they claimed, did not change the location of the Chinese embassy. This reasoning is the main defense of the bombing being a true mistake of war. Yet, according to NAT and US sources, the FDSP was actually a secret weapons warehouse for the Serb criminal and paramilitary leader Željko Ražnatović, also known as *Arkan* (NATO Press Conference, 1999). Again, new information makes matters seem even more dubious. In the end, this is how the world accepted it, and it was brandished *collateral damage* that comes with war the same way sugar comes with tea...well, sometimes. In NATO spokesman Jamie Shea's own words, the bombing was an "unlawful killing" (NATO Press Conference, 1999).

If not a mistake, then what? First, the bigger picture has to be drawn, and Serbia, or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as it was known then, will be left out of the picture for now. The geopolitical relations in 1999 between the world's major powers held a subtle, but nevertheless important explanation that needs to be underlined. If the US, the main culprits

of the bombing, were developing new and improving relations with their former Communist adversaries, the Russians and the Chinese, why would they put it at risk by bombing one of their embassies, again, confusion prevails. Antonio Esteves Martins, a report for Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP), asked if it was a risk bombing the Chinese embassy after ameliorating relations with Russia and needing China to have a United Nations Security Council approve the whole situation (NATO Press Conference, 1999). This was a serious problem facing NATO, but a larger one for the US, who, after decades of distrust and poor diplomatic relations actually improved ties with Boris Yeltsin's Russia and worked tirelessly on improving relations with China. In this context, after reconstructing ties with the hope of complete alliance with China, who is also the US's biggest trading partner, there is no reason to bomb the Chinese embassy whatsoever. It truly seems as if the whole debacle was in fact, a mistake.

Definitely, a mistake is one option. But let's dig deeper, and see if this result can be accepted with even more evidence. A decade before the Chinese embassy ordeal, in Operation Desert Storm, a similar hapless mistake took place in Iraq. An American F-117 fired at the Al-Firdos refugee camp thinking it was an opponent air base and "accidentally killed more than a hundred Iraqi women and children who, unbeknown to US target planners, had been sleeping inside a tent with the false belief that it offered them shelter" (B. Lambeth, 2001). Not only were there fatal miscalculations on NATO and the US's part in Iraq, they actually bombed erroneous locations in Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo during the 78-day bombardment that killed more than two hundred civilians (S. Myers, 2000). Only twenty-four hours before the bombing of the Chinese embassy, NATO forces carried out a mission in the southern Serbian city of Niš aimed at bombing an airfield used by the Yugoslav Army.

After the mission, all the jets, weapons, and parts at the air complex were fine and intact, but the nearby food market and medical clinic as well as the lives of ten civilians were gone. (NATO Press Conference, 1999) In another instance, on April 12, NATO "targeted a bridge over the Jusna Morava River in Kosovo...just as a passenger train full of civilian passengers" was passing by. Two days after that in Djakovica, Kosovo, US Air Force F-116 pilots "killed numerous ethnic Albanian refugees...when [they] mistook civilian vehicles for a convoy". Furthermore, two weeks after the halt in the bombardment of Belgrade, when NATO resumed its attacks, NATO forces "inadvertently damaged the residences of the Swedish, Spanish, and Norwegian ambassadors, the Libyan embassy, and a hospital in which four civilians were killed" (B. Lambeth, 2001). Perhaps the Chinese embassy was put to pieces by mistake, since it's evident now that even the best army in the world isn't perfect.

Still however, the excuse of wrong coordinates and an outdated map is unfounded, and not sufficiently substantiated to be solid grounds for an excuse of bombing a wrong location, especially when it is a 'no-hit zone', like an other embassy, not just the Chinese embassy. There are many reasons which dismiss the wrong coordinates and outdated maps claim. One of them is the fact that "US diplomats visited the embassy on a number of occasions in recent years" (T. Pickering, 1999). If the US diplomats visited the site, not once but several times, then why was the new location never registered in a high-tech database of crucial importance for military operations? It's like driving the best and most expensive car in the world, only to realize that its engineers used the wrong tires. A Ferrari will never have wrong tires.

In an interview with a local resident who lived beside the embassy, reporter Jared Israel says the man told him "prior to the building of the embassy, it was a park" (J. Israel) Ex-Under

Secretary of State adds that the “true location of the FDSP headquarters was some 300 meters away from the Chinese Embassy”, that’s around three football fields in another direction, making the outdated map and wrong coordinates excuse seem as folly arguments. (GR, 2005) A senior intelligence official also added that “it doesn’t look like an office building...it looks like a hotel, it’s too nice a place. Given all the space around it, I didn’t see external fencing that I would expect from a government facility”. (J. Sweeney et. al) Lastly, the rumor that ex-Yugoslavian “leader Slobodan Milošević was to have been in the embassy at the time of the attack” after bombs targeted his house and several ministries missed him. The London Observer also adds that “senior military and intelligence sources in Europe and the US state[d] that the embassy was bombed after its NATO electronic intelligence (ELINT) discovered it was being used to transmit Yugoslav Army communications”. (GR, 2005)

All the same, it does not seem duly plausible for the world’s superpower to conduct so many military mistakes, especially one like this that is so controversial, yet didn’t receive much media attention. Out “of the 4036 combat strikes that have been conducted, roughly 12 or about a dozen have involved unintended casualties”. (T. Pickering, 1999) That is a 3.36% margin for error, which Secretary Cohen thought “was pretty outstanding”.

The aerial mishaps at the bridge near the Jusna Morava River and the convoy in Djakovica carried plausible excuses according to US sources, which makes their record even more convincing. Referring to the other embassy bombings, in which the residences of three European ambassadors as well as the Libyan embassy were targeted, NATO simply strengthened the argument that the bombing of the Chinese embassy was a mistake...just like the other embassies and residences that were bombed. (B. Lambeth, 2001) This has become a tactic the West, the US mainly, has mastered. In late summer of 1964, the US claimed that two naval vessels attacked the USS Maddox and the USS Turner Joy. This led to the Gulf of Tonkin resolution being approved by the US Congress and President Lyndon Johnson waging war against North Vietnam.

More recently in 2003, the US made another claim, that Iraq violated rules of a 1991 agreement and that Saddam Hussein secretly had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Nevertheless, the US went into war based on a mere claim. Unsurprisingly, the Tonkin affair was to enter a war fighting the North Vietnamese, who happened to be Communists, and the WMDs claim was an excuse to enter Iraq and topple Hussein’s Ba’athist regime: both North Vietnam and Iraq being countries that were not democracies. Robert J. Hanyok, a historian for the US National Security Agency, admitted that his agency fabricated reports that were given to Congress by intelligence regarding the Tonkin incident. (S, Scott, 2005) Other claims, like Saddam Hussein having affiliations with Al-Qaeda were other motives behind the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Another argument for why the bombing of the Chinese embassy was deliberate would have to be *how* it was bombed. For clarification, three different bombs fell on three different sections of the building, where three different personnel were asleep. The plane used to bomb the embassy was the B-2 Bomber, also know as the Stealth Bomber because it is “the most effective performer of the entire war” with a “96-percent weapons effectiveness rate”. Why was this particular plane chosen to carry out this specific mission? Other planes were more frequently used in the offensive, such as the F-116, the B-52 Stratofortress, or the F-117 Nighthawk which is a specialized military aircraft for night missions. This spells out that the B-2, most probably the US Air Force’s (USAF) most prolific aircraft, must have been used for a special mission. (B. Lambeth, 2001) Additionally, the Stealth Bomber has only one

home; the Whiteman Air Base in Kansas City, Missouri, so with President Clinton ordering the six or so planes to be sent to bomb a target in Eastern Europe, 7,000 miles away, refuel in Italy, then fly back to Kansas City all seems a little skeptical.

The casualties in the bombing included three journalists who were killed and twenty others who escaped with minor and major injuries. There were three bombs that each hit a specified building. (J. Israel) What could these journalists have done so wrong to be bombed by the USAF's most precise and perilous aircraft? Either they were really dangerous journalists, or, more realistically, spies and intelligence agents working for the Chinese government perhaps. Three NATO officers, a flight controller working in Naples, an intelligence officer monitoring Yugoslav radio traffic from neighboring Macedonia, and a headquarters official in Brussels all knew the "Chinese embassy was acting as a 'rebro' (rebroadcast) station for the Yugoslav Army...[and] was also suspected of monitoring NATO's cruise missile attacks on Belgrade, with a view to developing countermeasures". (J. Sweeney et. al) With this information, it is clear that the Chinese were breaching rules of engagement and breaking a diplomatic code between themselves and the USA. Well, then this means that the bombing of the embassy was a strategic operation and an act of war, which makes it quite intentional. To add more evidence to the case, an intelligence officer in Macedonia said "when President [Milošević's] resident was bombed on 23 April, the signals disappeared for 24 hours. When they came on the air again, we discovered they came from the embassy compound". This meant that after Milošević's own home could not be a 'rebro' they moved to the Chinese embassy, "which NATO located and pinpointed" and later bombed...again, intentionally. Finally, in July 1999, the then "CIA Director [George] Tenet testified in Congress that out of the 900 targets struck by NATO during the three month bombing spree, only one was developed by the CIA: The People's Republic of China Embassy".

In a broader perspective, US foreign policy in the Balkan War of the 90's was a big failure. There were three main aims for entering the war: firstly, a stable Balkan region following the partition of Yugoslavia was key; secondly, the ousting of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević and the installment of a new 'America-friendly' premier; and thirdly, an independent Kosovo. Presently, the nations that consisted of former Yugoslavia do have economic and diplomatic ties but the populations of all nations still hold grudges, especially between Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians. Also, the new leaders of Serbia post-Milošević were Vojislav Koštunica and Zoran Djindjić, by no means pro-American.

And most importantly, despite Kosovo seceding from Serbia in 2008, it is not fully independent having not been recognized by the United Nations. That looks like a zero out of three, or half perhaps. Wait no, back to zero, Serbia's new radical party president Tomislav Nikolić disregarded the massacres at Srebrenica stirring anger in Bosnia and Herzegovina on top of other things that are hindering the peace process. Also, not only did the US and NATO fail miserably in the Balkans, they also killed many civilians and decapitated Serbian infrastructure, not only in Belgrade. In the end, the 78-day bombardment was carried out with "total disregard for human life", with "bombs kill[ing] thousands of innocent civilians and even destroy[ing] hospitals and schools".

All of this while NATO lost two soldiers, two aircrafts, and four unmanned vehicles. NATO halted their bombardment because Milošević gave up, not because he gave in. The Yugoslav (now Serbian) government never agreed to the Rambouillet Agreement. (P. Schlafly)

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*Ilija Trojanovic is a student at the American University of Beirut.*

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