

ROBERT ADOLPH

NATO allies dancing dangerously close to another world war

SARAJEVO — The United States and NATO may soon find themselves involved in a ground war in the Balkans whether they like it or not. A ground campaign may prove to be the only way to push Serb forces out of Kosovo in the attempt to restore the province to the ones who formerly lived there.

Thus far the West's military technological superiority has failed to save the Kosovars from mass murder and ethnic cleansing. Control of the ground from the air has once again proven to be the pipe dream of myopic politicians and senile air force generals.

The Russians, especially President Boris Yeltsin, are rattling sabers for no reason I can imagine except to demonstrate their solidarity with their Serb brethren.

Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic has been characterized by the Clinton administration as a brutal dictator. He crowns the greatness of the Serbian people at every opportunity and he sees himself as the great man who will lead his people into the Promised Land.

He certainly has proven to be an amoral and merciless adversary of Muslims. In the early half of this decade he presided over the mass murders of tens of thousands of Muslims in Bosnia. His current campaign of terror in Kosovo is merely an extension of the same pogrom.

Clinton no doubt wants to accomplish something grand to demonstrate his greatness, perhaps saving the Kosovars?

Here we have three bruised and battered egos in close proximity on the extraordinarily dangerous chessboard of the Balkans. World War I started here with the assassination of a relatively insignificant archduke.

The Balkans' problems are more than political; they are ethnic and religious as well. The Balkans straddle the historic fault line between East and West, between Occidental and Oriental, and between Islam and Christianity. The Balkans represent a profound clash of cultures. The opportunity for strategic miscalculation here is greater than any one will admit publicly.

Are we on the eve of World War III? This is perhaps an unlikely scenario, but the West has not proven to be terribly prescient concerning our future battlefields. I recall no one in the early 1980s seriously suggesting that the United States would commit its armed forces to battle in such

places as Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Lebanon, Iraq, Haiti and now, Yugoslavia. All of these scenarios were unlikely before they occurred. Now they are history.

The U.S. and NATO have committed themselves to a course of action designed to limit their casualties and capitalize on their technological superiority. In so doing, they have lengthened the time it will take to end the conflict. The longer the war in Yugoslavia drags on, the greater the chance of a strategic miscalculation. No one truly knows how this will end. But it could end very badly if all parties to the conflict are not very careful.

War has a horrible knack of striking out in unexpected directions and of confounding those who attempt to control it. Once begun, it's largely uncontrollable.

War may begin for the best of logical, or, in this case, humanitarian rationales. But once begun, other, more insidious human elements take control, such as national pride, as evidenced by events in Belgrade, where teen-agers now wear anti-NATO T-shirts in stark defiance of the West's continued aerial bombardment. Then there's the backlash of impotence, as evidenced by Russia's bellicosity and the desire on the part of an American president to claim his place among the great leaders. These human and irrational elements, and many more, can create a maelstrom from which no one can escape.

Novelist and military theorist Ralph Peters recently sent me an e-mail that mentioned the "law of unintended consequences." That law essentially states that all consequences cannot be foreseen, and that the reverse of what you intend may in fact occur. That law is doubly correct when it is applied to war.

The recent missile strike on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade is only one example of this law's validity. Many Chinese do not believe in the sincerity of U.S. and NATO statements of "deep regret."

The United States, followed by the other NATO nations, has embarked upon an extraordinarily dangerous course of action in the Balkans. Pandora's box is open. Unlikely scenarios are only unlikely until they occur. □

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