A Fragile Peace

Eythan Sontag

Flying over the Macedonian border and into Kosovo was surreal. From inside the Blackhawk helicopter, I saw some of the obvious signs of recent warfare: a bomb-mangled factory, smoldering houses, mortar-pocked stores, and twisted vehicle wreckage. Much of the damage was clearly the result of NATO bombs, but some appeared to be the handiwork of retreating Yugoslav forces. For nearly two months during the bombing campaign, I was part of a reconnaissance unit based in Macedonia that patrolled the border with Serbia. My brief glimpses into Kosovo and Serbia were through binoculars, from the outside. Now, as part of the first wave of NATO peacekeepers to enter the province, we freely crossed the border under the authorization of the United Nations and observed the situation from within.

The helicopter pilot dropped several hundred feet in altitude, signaling his intention to fly nap of the earth—aviation lingo for hugging the contours of the ground at high speed. The phased withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo several days before did not mean that hostile paramilitaries or armed civilians had also departed. Given the unknown threat, our pilot was not taking any chances. As we swooped low, I compared the deep gorges and prominent mountaintops of Southern Kosovo to the topographic maps that I had scrutinized for hours just weeks before, uncertain then whether I—or any other peacekeepers—would ever see these

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features up close. We sped north towards the American sector and I pondered the fact that in a few seconds I had passed over a frontier and into a country that for years was perceived as an enemy of the United States and a threat to European security.

As a U.S. Army intelligence officer, I was responsible for a twelve-soldier analysis section whose primary mission was to synthesize information from a variety of sources and translate it into finished intelligence products. We were part of the American element of the Kosovo peacekeeping force, dubbed KFOR that was charged with creating a secure environment in the province, including public safety and order. The force was also responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance with the Military Technical Agreement, a statement laying out the terms of the Yugoslav military withdrawal from the region, and the Kosovo Liberation Army Undertaking, the plan by which the KLA would voluntarily demilitarize and begin the transformation into a civil force.

KFOR was a model of diversity, consisting of troops from over thirty countries, many of which were non-NATO. I communicated almost daily with intelligence counterparts from France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Britain. Though we encountered the usual array of cultural and linguistic stumbling blocks, a common purpose and the spirit of teamwork easily bridged the differences. I participated in missions not only with officers from NATO countries such as Greece and Poland, but also with Russian and Jordanian units operating in the American sector. Although Americans did not represent the largest peacekeeping contingent, it was clear that other KFOR contributing countries looked to the United States for operational, intelligence, and logistical support. Help was extended whenever possible—for supplemental ground forces, satellite imagery, or upgraded communications links—and the United States assumed a low-key but indispensable leadership position in the KFOR effort. From an operational perspective, American participation was crucial in facilitating international collaboration and successful advancement of NATO's goals. At the tactical or small-unit level, a strong working relationship developed between American and foreign soldiers. Enduring similar challenges and frustrations created a feeling of camaraderie amongst the peacekeepers and helped us to overcome the obstacles we faced at the outset of the mission.

When we occupied our sector in eastern Kosovo in June 1999, following the seventy-eight-day air campaign, there was little information on the demography, local leaders, and recent history of the area. These were essential factors in establishing an intelligence baseline—a picture of the local environment that would help us to interpret and, more importantly, predict activity. It would be several weeks before a regular flow of information was established. Our ground patrols were simply too busy learning about and adjusting to an uncertain environment. National intelligence assets and local sources, such as non-governmental organizations, did not yet have their feet on the ground. The immediate concern, then, was to establish some order to the state of lawlessness and insecurity that existed throughout the sector.

Chaos was the buzzword in the first weeks of the KFOR mission. Small villages appeared abandoned, and even the streets of Urosevac, the largest city in the

U.S. sector, were empty. Kosovar Serbs regarded us as a hostile, occupying force, and those Albanians who had not fled the province during the war were unsure if it was safe to reemerge. American troops considered both sides armed and dangerous. Gunfire and grenade attacks, sometimes aimed at us and sometimes between opposing ethnic groups, were daily occurrences. Frequently, we were caught in the crossfire between two factions. Like in other parts of the Balkans, weapons were a mark of social status in Kosovo, and their ubiquity was a constant cause of concern. When the Yugoslav army (VJ) withdrew, it left hundreds of weapons in the hands of Kosovar Serbs, telling them that the rifles were their last remaining defense against NATO. In the uncertainty of those first weeks, local Serbs, fearing both American soldiers and vengeful Albanians, fired indiscriminately at anyone approaching their enclaves. Eventually, they realized that their wariness of KFOR was unfounded. Their fear of revenge from returning Albanians, however, could not be dispelled—and with good reason.

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As Kosovar Albanians filtered back to the province or came out of hiding, they returned to houses and villages that were looted, burned, and desecrated. Their reaction was spontaneous and violent—destroy or kill anything Serb. From the vantage point of Camp Bondsteel, the American headquarters set atop a series of low hilltops overlooking Urosevac, it was easy to see the hundreds of fires burning in the town. At first we tried to keep track of the number of fires, how they were set, and in which parts of town. Serb homes and businesses were almost exclusively targeted, and our patrols were spread too thinly to prevent every act of arson. We were disadvantaged both by our lack of intimate demographic knowledge of the town and by our equipment. Weighed down by almost thirty pounds of combat gear, it was next to impossible to chase down arsonists who wore sneakers and carried only a few bottles of gas.

The protective equipment every soldier was required to wear was a mixed blessing. It provided an extra layer of safety, but also appeared intimidating to the local populace. The volatility of the first months in Kosovo, marked by firefights, sniper attacks, and indiscriminate grenadings, created an atmosphere of instability. Troops were cautioned to take strong measures of security and conduct operations as if in combat. While this approach emphasized protecting our own forces, it limited accessibility to the local inhabitants. The heavily armed and protected U.S. soldiers gave the impression that the situation was still quite unsafe—exactly the opposite perception we wanted to project to both Serbs and Albanians. The cumbersome combat gear was not only a barrier against bullets, but also against establishing rapport and trust with civilians. Interestingly, the other NATO countries had markedly less stringent uniform requirements, which may have facilitated their interaction with the locals.

The emphasis on "force protection," ensuring the safety of American soldiers, was a top priority of the early U.S. mission in Kosovo, but proved sometimes to be a hindrance to the success of operations. One of the most powerful deterrents against ethnically-motivated attacks was simply our presence in a potential hot spot. We had success with the tactic of scattering platoon and company-sized outposts throughout the sector. Concentrating them in areas that were ethnically mixed was also successful. When some of these positions were threatened, however, senior commanders preferred to remove them entirely. Sensitive to the political consequences of U.S. casualties, many senior commanders put excessive weight on protecting the force at the expense of more effectively halting ongoing ethnic strife. Patrols were still launched into these areas, but they could not replace the valuable reassurance that a constant physical presence provided to all sides. What was the point of sending peacekeepers to Kosovo only to hunker down in isolated camps behind earthen fortifications and razor wire? Our mission was to be as visible as possible, to interact, and to make it known that we would not hesitate to intervene under any circumstance. As Urosevac burned, and the Serb population there plummetted from a pre-war level of several thousand to less than five, I wondered if we were truly providing a secure environment for all ethnicities, or simply slowing the inevitable.

Straddling the fine line between projecting an image of force protection and security while not appearing overly threatening was a challenge in Kosovo. Peace support operations have broadened the scope of military employment, and brought with it the need to develop new sets of skills. The KFOR mission, like peacekeeping in Bosnia and elsewhere, tended to blur the lines between specific military responsibilities. Routine missions such as presence patrols—making ourselves as visible as possible to provide reassurance—or vehicle and personnel security checkpoints were as likely to be carried out by infantrymen as by engineers or military policemen. Additionally, soldiers on the ground were sensitized to specific intelligence indicators, and became important information gatherers. Though my primary function was to conduct intelligence analysis, I frequently participated in security patrols and reconnaissance missions. This involvement not only helped me better understand the fluid environment in which we operated, but also helped expand the visible U.S. presence. The more our vehicles and troops patrolled the roads and villages, the greater the deterrence against ethnic conflict and crime.

Ultimately, though, neither our equipment nor the new roles and skills we acquired as peacekeepers could completely prevent violent flareups of old hatreds. The process of retaliatory ethnic cleansing had begun, a diffuse and pervasive force that was never centrally directed, but was psychologically and culturally reinforced by the Kosovar Albanian majority.

The United Nations mandate linked KFOR success with maintaining a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse Kosovo. Whether or not this is even possible is still very much in question today. Over the course of my six-month tour, a number of incidents made me increasingly skeptical of its likelihood. One example occurred in Zitinje, which before the war was a bucolic village that was roughly half Albanian and half Serbian. In the weeks preceding the NATO bombing, most of Zitinje's Albanian population either fled the province or moved to larger enclaves. A U.S. Marine command post was established in the village to prevent returning Albanian villagers from carrying out expected retaliation against their Serbian neighbors. Despite our constant presence and heavy patrolling, the entire Serbian population of Zitinje was driven out after two weeks of steady arson, sniper fire, and grenade and rocket attacks perpetrated by Kosovar Albanians. A similar fate befell Letnica, a small Catholic Croatian community that resided in the American sector. The enclave had existed for one hundred years in the mountainous Vitina region before pressure from former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army forced residents to abandon their community and flee to Croatia. KFOR was unsuccessful in stopping the Albanian intimidation, and our vision of maintaining an ethnically diverse Kosovo seemed increasingly difficult to realize.

My skepticism of attaining a multiethnic and harmonious province was increased by the depth of the hatred that existed between Albanians and Serbs. With few exceptions, Albanians considered any gun-owning Serb to be a paramilitary and criminal. Serbs viewed the Albanians as culturally inferior and idle troublemakers. One incident in particular illustrated the pervasiveness of this mutual loathing. I was on a security patrol near the Albanian town of Dobrcane when one of our vehicles broke down. As we called for mechanical support, a crowd of children gathered, wanting to speak English, hold our weapons, or collect American patches. One of the few English expressions every child knew was "Serb bad," a phrase often accompanied by a slashing motion across the neck. Less than a kilometer away from Dobrcane was the small Serbian enclave of Ranilug. The children, none older than twelve, proffered us their graphic opinion of Serbs, pointing toward the village down the road. It was a scene I witnessed repeatedly during my tour in Kosovo, and it left me feeling disheartened that even the youngest generation was tainted by ethnic prejudice. The deeply ingrained distrust and intolerance that marks both sides of the ethnic divide will not disappear soon, and will most certainly have important consequences on the ultimate status of Kosovo.

Although United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 acknowledges "the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the other countries of the region," it is improbable that Kosovo will remain a Serbian province. The animosity runs too deep, and many Albanians sense that NATO occupation is a bridge to independence. In the year and a half since peacekeepers first arrived, no Yugoslav security personnel

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have come close to returning, although Resolution 1244 specifically allows for this eventuality. The prospect of such an occurrence in the near future is doubtful. The rise of relative moderates to power—Vojislav Kostunica in Yugoslavia and Ibrahim Rugova in Kosovo—is promising, but hardly guarantees a peaceful or swift resolution to the most pressing issue: Kosovar independence. Indeed, while Mr. Kostunica appears to be an improvement over his predecessor, he is also a nationalist who has pledged to restore Yugoslav sovereignty. Mr. Rugova, on the other hand, demands full independence for the province, a sentiment universally shared by Albanians. Given these opposing positions, not to mention deep-seated ethnic antipathy, fresh memories of war, and the UN's "neutral" stance, it appears that Kosovo will remain, for the foreseeable future, a *de facto* international protectorate.

Underlying the question of Kosovo's independence is the problem of how it will deal with ethnic minorities that still reside within its borders. Intimidation of Serbs, Roma, and ethnic Turks persists. Serbs' freedom of movement remains restricted, and Serbs continue to rely heavily on the collective security of KFOR-protected convoys and their own ethnic enclaves. Kosovar Serbs live in a besieged world that represents a way of life that is unsustainable in the long run. Mr. Rugova and his party, the Democratic League of Kosovo, must address these issues in conjunction with the international actors in the province if they want to build legitimacy and form the foundation of an independent government. In the meantime, Kosovo's diplomatic status will remain ambiguous—technically a Serbian province, but in reality an autonomous, internationally protected entity.

My experiences in Kosovo gave me a new perspective on the efficacy of military intervention in ethnic conflict, its justification, and its chances for success. Slowly the province is rebuilding, reforming its political structure, and dealing with its recent past, processes in which the United States figures prominently. Unlike the terrain maps I often scrutinized, the topography of Kosovo's future is not so easy to read. Will it gain independence? What will be the role, if any, of peacekeepers? Can multi-ethnicity be preserved? How will events in neighboring Montenegro and the Presevo Valley impact the province? What are the chances of a "Greater Albania" and what would this mean for security in the region? I now have the luxury of pondering these questions as a student of international affairs, sitting safely at my desk. But I cannot easily forget that beyond all the strategizing and grand policy debates there stands a peacekeeper, on guard duty or patrolling, night and day, whose questions and concerns are equally pressing.