

THE KOSOVO AIR CAMPAIGN PROVED TO BE MORE CHALLENGING THAN EXPECTED, SHAPED BY MISTAKES AND MISJUDGEMENTS.

By ME5 Jeremy Kang Wei Sheng

ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author highlights that during the Kosovo Air Campaign, also known as Operation Allied Force (OAF), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) leaders misjudged the capabilities of airpower and the importance of Kosovo to the Serbians. In addition, the author also felt that poor strategic decisions regarding the need to maintain political unity, exclusion of a ground option and deviation from conventional military doctrine all added to the challenges that dogged NATO forces in OAF. In this essay, the author presents his research in three parts. First, he discusses NATO's expectations of the Kosovo campaign. He then identifies the misjudgements and mistakes made by NATO, and assess how these result in challenges for them. Finally, the author assesses the counter-claim that NATO's actions actually reduced operational friction.

Keywords: Airpower; Campaign; Misjudgment; Challenges; Expectations

INTRODUCTION

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)'s Kosovo Air Campaign¹ has been hailed as the first time airpower alone has been credited as the deciding factor in the outcome of a war.² Despite the impressive result, the campaign did not go smoothly as planned—what was envisaged as a short-term operation became a relatively lengthy two-and-a-half-month campaign. Indeed, Lambeth noted that NATO leaders 'had little to congratulate themselves about when it came to the manner in which the air war was planned and carried out.'³ What were the missteps of the campaign, and how did they affect NATO's expected conduct of Operation Allied Force (OAF)?⁴

In this essay, the author highlights that NATO's leaders misjudged the capabilities of airpower and the importance the Serbians placed on Kosovo. In addition, poor strategic decisions regarding the need to maintain political unity, exclusion of a ground option and deviation from conventional military doctrine all added to the challenges that dogged NATO forces in OAF. The author presents his research in three parts. First, he discusses NATO's expectations of the Kosovo Campaign. Second, he identifies the misjudgments and mistakes

made by NATO, and assesses how these resulted in challenges. Finally, the author examines the counter-claim that NATO's actions actually reduced operational friction.

NATO'S EXPECTATIONS OF OPERATION ALLIED FORCE

Buoyed by their success in Operation Deliberate Force (ODF) a few years earlier, NATO's leaders were keen to employ the same strategy in OAF.⁵ NATO's expectations were founded in part on their mistaken assessment that air-power was the key to achieving the ODF ceasefire in 1995. By modelling OAF after ODF, NATO hoped to achieve the same decisive outcome using the same methods.⁶ To this end, NATO had commenced formulating air strikes against Serbia aimed at:

1. Putting a stop to all military actions and violence;
2. The withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo;
3. Stationing of international military presence in Kosovo;
4. Returning all refugees;
5. Establishing a political framework agreement for Kosovo based on the Rambouillet Accords.⁷

However, political concerns from NATO member governments on possible collateral damage imposed limitations on the intensity and duration of air strikes. Lieutenant General (LTG) Michael C. Short, Air Component Commander, testified: '(he was) only going to be allowed to bomb two, maybe three nights. That's all Washington can stand, and that's all some members of the alliance can stand. That's why (he's) got only 90 targets. This will be over in three nights.'⁸

Ultimately, the political expectation of airpower as a panacea for NATO's objectives in Kosovo weighed heavily in the minds of military planners, and bogged down the execution of the air campaign. In the end, NATO had to revise or water-down its objectives in order to declare that their objectives were met.

These evidences suggest that NATO saw OAF as: (1) a strict air campaign, and (2) a short- term operation lasting a few days at most. Although the former was

achieved, it came at the cost of sacrificing the latter. The next section highlights certain missteps that NATO made during the planning and execution phase, and assesses how they impacted NATO's expectations of OAF.

MISJUDGEMENTS

Seeing Kosovo as another Bosnia

The most significant misjudgment was NATO's belief that Slobodan Milosevic, President of Serbia from 1989 to 1997 and President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1997 until his overthrow in 2000, would 'give in after a mere 48 hours of bombardment.'⁹ In making such a mistake, NATO's leaders were perhaps too hasty to assume that the same strategy in ODF would produce the same quick and easy results in OAF. NATO failed to 'appreciate the historical and cultural importance of Kosovo to the Serbians, and the consequent criticality of Kosovo to Milosevic's continued political livelihood.'¹⁰ While Milosevic was prepared to sacrifice his Bosnian Serbian counterparts to achieve what he wanted during ODF, he had strong attachment to Kosovo due to its great historical importance to him as a Serbian. It was also the region where he also launched his Greater Serbia campaign in 1989. Hence, it was almost inconceivable that NATO would achieve Milosevic's quick capitulation that they expected.¹¹



Bombed Factory 'Krusik' in Valjevo/Serbia.

Unfortunately, NATO chose the same Bosnian strategy with respect to the flawed assessment. Not only did the bombings fail to achieve the coercive effects that it had hoped for, they gave Milosevic *casus belli* to initiate the acceleration of his ethnic cleansing efforts. Although NATO was committed to continuing the air campaign until the aims of OAF were met, in reality, the ball was no longer in their court. By inadvertently triggering greater violence against the Kosovar Albanians, the situation became more complicated for NATO. It was now expected to stop Milosevic regardless of how long the campaign would take or whatever the difficulties.

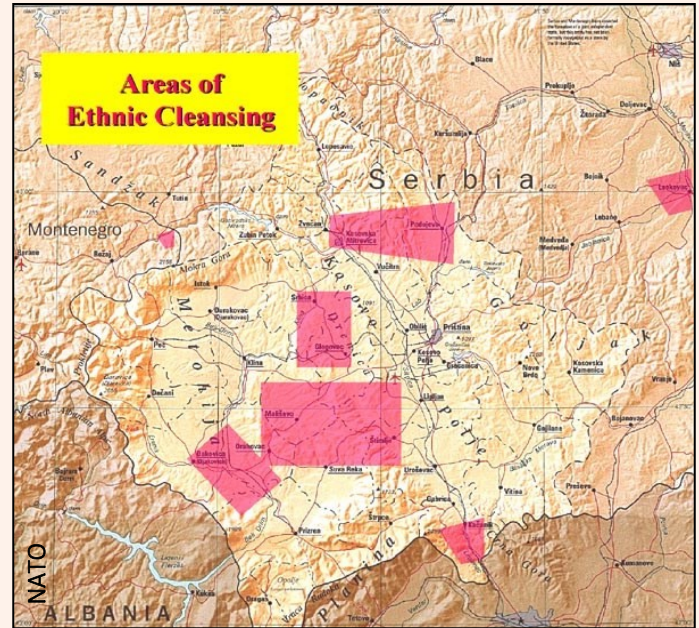
It was never going to be easy to maintain cohesion within all 19 NATO governments without hindering military planning. On the ground, this translated to restrictive rules of engagement, long target generation and approval processes that were counterproductive to the aims of the bombing campaign.

Misjudging the Capabilities of Airpower

As mentioned earlier, NATO had envisaged achieving the objectives of OAF through airpower alone. Given the diverse objectives, it seems puzzling that NATO's assessment of the capabilities of airpower—responsiveness, mobility and perspective—could 'do it all'. For example, how would airpower alone achieve 'Objective 3: stationing of international military presence in Kosovo'? From the onset of OAF, this self-imposed limitation created operational tensions amongst military planners as they struggled to translate intent to actionable plans.

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NATO had to revise or water-down its objectives in order to declare that their objectives were met.¹²



Map of Areas of Ethnic Cleansing used during NATO Press Conference, 28th March, 1999.

MISTAKES

Sacrificing Military Effectiveness for Allied Cohesion

From the onset of OAF, NATO leaders identified its continued cohesion as a critical vulnerability, and thus sought to preserve alliance unity at all costs. Hence, 'any target or attack tactic that was deemed even remotely likely to undermine that cohesion was expressively avoided.'¹³ It was never going to be easy to maintain cohesion within all 19 NATO governments without hindering military planning. On the ground, this translated to restrictive rules of engagement, long target generation and approval processes that were counterproductive to the aims of the bombing campaign.

The need for unanimous agreement often led to compromised actions for the sake of reaching consensus, and resulted in disappointing performances in the initial stages of OAF. Without the 'shock-and-awe' effects of airpower, NATO's expectation of a short-term operation became even more challenging.

Excluding the Option of a Land Campaign

Due to logistical difficulties and political considerations, NATO excluded the option of a land



Finnish President Ahtisaari mediating the Kosovo crisis with US and Russian Defence Ministers in 1999.

campaign during the planning phase for OAF, as support for a land campaign and risk appetite to tolerate combat casualties would likely be low. To reassure Allied governments and canvass public support, United States (US) President Clinton stated, 'I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war.'¹⁴ The announcement went against two most fundamental principles of war: (1) achieving surprise, and (2) keeping the enemy unclear of one's intentions.¹⁵

NATO's experience in Kosovo highlighted the unintended consequences of political inference on military operations, and exposed gaps behind the façade of one NATO—all are valuable lessons that could be applied towards future campaigns.

The impact of the announcement and decision itself were three-fold. First, by communicating precisely what NATO forces would and would not do, Clinton ceded the strategic advantage to Milosevic—without the threat of a ground offensive, the coercive effect of the air campaign was reduced as there was no

immediate risk against Milosevic's military forces in Kosovo. Second, it clearly signaled to the Serbian forces the tasks that they had to undertake, and allowed them to fully concentrate on strengthening their anti-air defences. Last, the exclusion of a ground option also prematurely limited NATO's strategic options, especially for contingency planning should the air option be inadequate in achieving the political objectives. Taken together, NATO leaders actually did more harm than good towards OAF.

Improper Application of Military Force

Perhaps what was more grievous than overestimating the impact of airpower was the improper application of military force. NATO leaders chose a gradual, three-phased approach for OAF. In doing so, they violated conventional military doctrine to apply optimal joint forces for decisive results, and contradicted US Air Force doctrine to maximise shock through simultaneous effects-based targeting.¹⁶

The escalating force strategy awarded the Serbians time and space to acclimatise to the bombings and concentrate on their ethnic cleansing efforts. In addition, the lackluster results almost caused the undermining of airpower's credibility, and convinced Milosevic that 'he could ride out the war.'¹⁷ Undoubtedly, these would have added impediments in NATO's conduct of the air war by eroding confidence in the air strategy, and hardening Milosevic's resolve to resist.

BEYOND MISJUDGEMENTS AND MISTAKES

For all that had been assessed about NATO's miscalculations during the Kosovo war, there may have been some merit in their decisions. First, the expectation of zero casualty, zero collateral damage and aversion for combat casualties may have actually been a strategic masterstroke. It turned out to be a source of strength that sustained NATO's political will throughout OAF, given that it was intended to be a humanitarian operation. In addition, it also allowed NATO to avoid post-war recriminations as tolerance for unrestrained and unaccounted military force had fallen since the WWII.¹⁸ Second, NATO's decision to stay united throughout the conflict—at the cost of military effectiveness—may have signaled to Milosevic their collective determination in forcing him to quit Kosovo, thus precipitating his surrender.

CONCLUSION

Despite the successful outcome, the dominant mood at the end of the Kosovo war was not one of

celebration, but of disappointment in the way the air war was planned and conducted. Not only did the air bombings not force Milosevic's surrender, it had the opposite effect of accelerating the ethnic cleansing campaign. The choice of air-only campaign was also incapable of achieving some of NATO's objectives. The need for Allied unity and unanimity resulted in compromised military application of force, and the choice to: (1) openly exclude ground operations, and (2) deviation from conventional military doctrine further reduced the air war's envisaged decisive effects.

NATO's experience in Kosovo highlighted the unintended consequences of political inference on military operations, and exposed gaps behind the façade of one NATO—all are valuable lessons that could be applied towards future campaigns. Potential areas of research include: (1) insurance against political interference over Allied military planning, and (2) an 'intervention committee' to streamline Allied decision making.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Kosovo War was an armed conflict in Kosovo that lasted from 28 February 1998 until 11 June 1999.[47][48][49] It was fought between the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (i.e. Serbia and Montenegro), which controlled Kosovo before the war, and the Kosovo Albanian rebel group known as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The conflict ended when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened by beginning air strikes in March 1999 which resulted in Yugoslav forces withdrawing from Kosovo. Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kosovo_War
2. Byman, D. L., & Waxman, M. C. Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate. (*International Security*, 24(4 (Spring)) 2000)
3. Lambeth, B. S. *NATO's Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment*. (2001). pg 179
4. OAF was NATO's operation code name for the Kosovo Campaign
5. NATO-conducted air campaign in 1995 against the Bosnian Serbs, which had threatened and attacked UN-designated "safe areas" in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
6. Further research suggests that the air strikes were effective only because they were deployed in conjunction with ground forces.
IISS. Air-power over Kosovo. (*Strategic Comments*, 5(7), 1-2. 2007). pg 1
7. NATO. The Situation In and Around Kosovo: Statement Issued at the Extraordinary Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council held at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, (1999, Apr 12). Retrieved from: <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-051e.htm>
8. PBS. Frontline Interviews. Retrieved from: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/interviews/short.html>

9. IISS. Air-power over Kosovo. (Strategic Comments, 5(7), 1-2. 2007).
10. Lambeth, B. S. NATO's Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment. (2001). pg 182
11. Later research indicates that "it was not just that Serbia's stakes in Kosovo were much higher than in Bosnia" First, the 1995 Bosnian air campaign was supported by Croatian, Bosnian, and NATO troops who had been deployed weeks prior to the bombings. Second, Milosevic himself was interested to forge a deal to end the war in Bosnia, and had engaged U.S. negotiators even before the onset of the bombings. Lambeth, B. S. NATO's Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment. (2001). pg 184
12. Hewson, R. Operation Allied Force: The First 30 Days. (World Air Power Journal, 1999, Fall). pg 24.
13. Lambeth, B. S. NATO's Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment. (2001). pg 12
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17. Byman, D. L., & Waxman, M. C. Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate. (International Security, 24(4 (Spring)) 2000)
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18. Ibid. pg 240



ME5 Jeremy Kang Wei Sheng is Hd Army Ops-Tech Office in the Systems Integration Office. He graduated from L'institut Nationale Polytechnique de Grenoble and the National University of Singapore with a Bachelor of Engineering in Mechanical Engineering. He also holds a Master of Science in Systems Engineering from the Naval Postgraduate School and a Master of Science in Defence Technology and Systems from the Temasek Defence Systems Institute.

ME5 Kang is an Army Engineer by vocation, and was previously Ag Hd Plans Sect, HQ CSSCOM and S3 of 1st Army Maintenance Base.