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MILITARY STRATEGY IN ETHNIC CONFLICTS

CORE COURSE FIVE ESSAY

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MILITARY STRATEGY IN ETHNIC CONFLICTS

“Race in southern Africa, religion in Iran, a thick tangle of religion and history in the Arab-Israeli conflict - everywhere a web of historical, cultural, national, religious, and racial complexities of the past lies heavily on the present. No matter where one looks along the spectrum of affairs demanding American concern, these deeply subjective sources of political behavior press hard on the shaping of events and the making of conflict. Policy-makers who like to think of themselves as dealing with the “hard” facts of international political life - hard enough, it turns out to identify and handle - are confronted more and more with the “soft” facts of human experience, remembrances of things past, emotions, perceptions, behaviors so much more difficult to grasp, much less take effectively into account.”¹

This quotation aptly describes the international environment we face today, yet it was written nearly twenty years ago (1979) in the midst of the Cold War. Furthermore, its author, citing over 40 “major” bloodlettings from 1945-79 involving over 14 million deaths, argued that the prevailing bi-polar international order made ethnic conflicts more rather than less difficult to deal with because the superpowers were constrained from intervention by concern that their actions might lead to a larger war.² It is therefore ironic to find so many of today’s observers of the international scene arguing that the Cold War kept a lid on ethnic conflict and that with its passing this type of conflict is likely to proliferate. Yet as one surveys the globe it is easy to cite dozens of locations where ethnic violence has either recently occurred or could break out in the near future. My purpose is not to argue the accuracy of either view, but rather to show that ethnic conflict is an ongoing feature of the international arena that has always been difficult for the world’s major powers to handle.

¹ Harold Isaacs, *Power and Identity: Tribalism in World Politics*, Foreign Policy Association Inc., New York, 1979 p. 7

² Ibid, pp. 11-12

Americans seem to have a particularly difficult time understanding and addressing ethnic conflict, perhaps because of our unique 'melting pot' history, but as the world's sole superpower we will undoubtedly be called upon to lead efforts to resolve or at least ameliorate the horrors and suffering that generally accompany ethnic wars. It is therefore imperative that we make a greater effort to understand this type of conflict. In this paper I will address the question of why ethnic conflicts are so difficult, then look at whether and how military interventions can contribute to the successful management/resolution of these disputes.

THE NATURE OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS

There is a vast array of writings and conflicting theories about the causes of ethnic conflict which, unfortunately, often seem to complicate rather than clarify the issue. Because space does not allow for the full range of issues to be covered, I will focus on two elements that seem to be common to virtually all ethnic conflicts and look at how they shape the nature of this conflict. They are 1) fear/survival and 2) identity.

Sociologists and psychologists generally agree that survival is the most basic human instinct and that the fear (whether legitimate or not) that one's survival is at stake leads to the calculation that the use of violence is justified. Thus while aggression is widely condemned, every society in the world recognizes the legitimacy of the use of force in self-defense. In ethnic conflicts we find that at least one, if not both of the protagonists always perceives itself as being engaged in a struggle for survival, regardless of the immediate catalyst of the conflict. "When ethnicity is linked with acute social

uncertainty, a history of conflict, and fear of what the future might bring, it emerges as one of the major fault lines along which societies fracture ”³

The second element common to ethnic conflicts is the need to preserve or safeguard identity This is a concept that we Americans are not as well-acquainted with as fear/survival, but it is equally simple. Identity is what gives meaning to life In essence, it involves the notion that all human beings need to know that they are a part of something larger than themselves, that there is a place where they will be always be welcomed or at least accepted. Developing a sense of identity is an essential element in human development because it is this quality that allows us to think, feel, and act beyond individual needs ⁴ And in most corners of the world identity is based not on nationality but on race, religion, or ethnic (including tribal) origin “Many analysts point to a deep psychological - perhaps even physiological - need for humans to belong to a group. In the process of drawing distinctions, however, some individuals often overstate the goodness of their own group while simultaneously vilifying others ”⁵

When a threat to group survival is linked to the fear of individual survival the two become inseparable, and when the threat is personified by another group, ethnic conflict erupts The ‘enemy’ becomes *any* member of the opposing group or even its allies, often there are no noncombatants The threat can only be removed by either the complete annihilation of the other side (genocide) or the total subjugation of the opposing group In fact, throughout most of human history the only way ethnic conflicts have been solved

³ Lake and Rothchild, *Containing Fear The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict*, International Security, Vol 21, No 2, Fall 1996, MIT Press, p 43

⁴ Eric Erikson, *Identity Versus Self-Diffusion*, p 85

⁵ Ibid p 55

is when one group becomes strong enough to impose its will, including social order, on its opponent.⁶ Though there are thousands of examples, Iraq's policy towards its Kurdish minority is an example of this kind of outcome.

What I believe this tells us about ethnic conflicts is that they are more a quest for security than a fight for power, territory, or socio-economic distribution, the latter may just be the symptoms rather than causes of the conflict. In my estimation the reason ethnic conflicts have been, and will continue to be problematic for great powers to deal with is that the intervening power is rarely able or willing to satisfy the parties' security needs. "The behavior of the external powers today is not the crucial factor. A more fundamental question is whether the warring parties or potential combatants believe the external powers will be there to protect them tomorrow, and in the days and years after that."⁷ What seems clear is that interventions cannot and will not succeed unless they address the fundamental issue of security of giving both sides a sense of security.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY STRATEGY

If this analysis is correct, what are the implications for military strategy and specifically, for U.S. interventions in ethnic conflict? The first implication I see is that the current insistence on impartiality in ethnic conflicts may be misguided. If this kind of conflict is essentially a quest for security, then impartial or 'purely humanitarian' interventions may send precisely the wrong signal. Granted, they send the same message to both sides, but that message is 'We are not here to ensure your group's survival'.

⁶ Isaacs, p. 50-51

⁷ Rothchild and Lake, pp. 55-56

Hence they provide no incentive to either side to reduce the level of violence, much less negotiate an end to it. While humanitarian interventions may induce a pause in the conflict or temporarily relieve a degree of human suffering, they generally prolong the war. "Typically favoring, by design or default, the weaker side in any internal conflict, external powers reduce the stronger sides' chances for success."⁸

In contrast, a credible assurance from one or more outside powers that the extermination of one group will not be permitted, can mitigate fear that the group's survival is at stake, thereby helping to create the conditions necessary for negotiations to take place. Furthermore, demonstrating that commitment through the use of force signals to the opposing group that it cannot achieve the goal of totally eliminating the other side and forces it to opt for a lesser goal. This should not be interpreted as meaning that the U S should seek to defeat the opposing side. Quite the contrary. What is required is for the intervening power or powers to convince one side that it will not permit its destruction while simultaneously signaling to the opposing side that the interveners do not seek their destruction. I realize that this is a delicate balancing act which is enormously difficult to achieve, but it is neither irrational nor impossible. If carried out properly, what this does is to address effectively the security concerns of both sides.

Pursuing this kind of a strategy invariably requires a willingness to make a long-term commitment, which in turn requires the existence of a strong domestic constituency to provide the ongoing support such a commitment demands. Thus the second implication I draw is that decisions about whether to intervene in an ethnic conflict

⁸ Ibid p 67

should be driven by the presence or lack of a domestic constituency, for it is only when Americans feel, or have developed, a strong affinity for one of the parties to the conflict that political leaders will be able to generate support for potentially long-term military operations aimed at ensuring the survival of that group. In determining whether to intervene in an ethnic conflict, it may be that the first question we need to ask is not “What is the U.S. interest?”, but “How strongly do Americans feel about protecting one of these groups?”

The third implication, alluded to above, is that military operations should focus more on demonstrating the United States’ commitment to the survival of a particular group than on the delivery of humanitarian aid. Planning for these operations should thus center on actions the U.S. can take, such as limited strikes against the military capabilities of the opponent or the provision of training and weapons to party we opt to protect. The remainder of this paper explores these concepts in greater depth using examples from recent and ongoing conflicts.

Though often referred to as a humanitarian intervention, the coalition that intervened in Bosnia did so with the clear intent of preventing the Serbs from exterminating the Bosnian Muslims. But it was only when the political commitment to save this group was joined with the credible use of force against Bosnian Serb artillery positions and other military capabilities that the conditions for serious negotiations were created. Once negotiations were undertaken, it was the commitment by the U.S. and the international community to enforce the terms of the Dayton accords that gave both

sides the 'security blanket' they needed in order to reach that agreement. Although the United States was widely criticized for failing to intervene in the Bosnian conflict earlier, it was not until the American public developed a sentiment in favor of action to save the Bosnian Muslims that support for serious military operations could be generated.

Whether a high level of public concern can be sustained is still uncertain, but more than any other factor, the extent to which the U.S. (and the international community) is perceived by the parties to the conflict as being committed to the survival of a Bosnian Muslim entity is likely to determine the success or failure of the accords. For all its flaws, Bosnia is a very good example of how military force can effectively be used in ethnic conflict.

Perhaps the best example of how not to handle an ethnic conflict is the U.S. experience in Somalia. But in my view the problem was not that we failed to remain impartial, but that by targeting a particular warlord (Mohammed Farah Aidede) we unwittingly increased one side's perception that its survival was threatened. Viewed from this perspective, the Aidede clan's response was both rational and predictable. Unlike the Bosnia case, neither the U.S. nor the UN coalition ever expressed a clear commitment to the preservation of any particular group. Thus the presence of foreign troops did nothing to induce any of the participants to moderate their demands. However, by ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid, the intervention did alter the balance of power on the ground in a way that threatened the survival of one particular group - the Aidede clan and provoked a violent reaction.⁹ Opinions as to why the U.S. quickly

⁹ Ken Menkhaus, *Key Decisions in the Somalia Intervention*, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 1995

extricated itself from Somalia following the clash with Aideed's forces vary, but I believe that the most important element was the lack of a domestic constituency favoring continued intervention on behalf of any of the warring parties

The real lesson of Somalia then, is not that we must be impartial when we intervene in an ethnic conflict, but that we should not intervene unless we are prepared to make a commitment to one of the parties to the conflict

An example of how military force can both help and hurt is the Arab-Israeli dispute. I say this because in my view, the conflict was prolonged by the Cold War. As long as the U.S. commitment to Israel was matched by a Soviet commitment to the Arabs, neither party to the conflict felt compelled to moderate its demands. Thus while all the necessary ingredients for successful intervention were present - a strong domestic constituency willing to support a long-term commitment to the survival of one of the parties, and a credible threat to use force to achieve that objective - they were not enough to resolve or even prevent the eruption of conflict as long as the other side felt equally supported. The progress we have seen since the end of the Cold War can be linked directly to the fact that the U.S. is now in a position to do precisely what I suggested earlier in this discussion, that is to assure one side (Israel) that its survival will be guaranteed while simultaneously signaling to the other side (the Arabs) that our (the U.S.) goal is not their destruction.

The very successful military strategy we have pursued in this case has been to provide both parties with training and equipment at a level which helps contribute to their sense of security, without unduly alarming the opposing side.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Devising a military strategy for interventions in ethnic conflict is a daunting task and one which will require enormous creativity and flexibility. But based on the ideas presented in this paper, I believe there are clear principles that should guide the development of any such strategy. The first assumption one should make is that U.S. involvement, though not necessarily large scale, is likely to be of long duration. The first question one should pose is whether the American public feels (or can be brought to feel) an affinity towards one of the parties that is strong enough to support intervention. If the response is affirmative, military operations directed at reducing the warfighting capability, but not defeating, the opposing party should become the focus of the intervention. This could include such measures as disabling or interfering with communications, removing selected air defense capabilities, or conducting precision strikes against key facilities, such as airfields or artillery bases.

In addition, the U.S. could provide weapons and training to the side it seeks to protect, in order to enhance their own self-defense capabilities. This would need to be a carefully calibrated effort to ensure that the quantity and quality of equipment provided did not rise to a level that presented an offensive threat to the opponent. The provision of humanitarian assistance to the party we are protecting will be essential, but it should not overshadow the first two missions.

While this may seem a radical departure from existing theories, I believe it is at least an honest and realistic way to approach the problem. If adopted, this or a similar

approach would clarify how military forces could effectively be used in the context of ethnic conflicts

The much more difficult question for the U S will be what strategy can we pursue in cases such as Somalia, where the public does not feel strongly enough about one group to commit to its preservation, yet still wants to relieve suffering? The obvious answer is to do nothing, but that may not always be possible. The next best option then, may be to work cooperatively with the strongest of the parties to the conflict. As we have seen, interventions that purport to be impartial are apt to shift the balance of power by shoring up the weaker side, leading to a prolongation of the conflict. And if we truly have no preference for who wins in an ethnic conflict, allowing (not necessarily assisting) the strongest of the parties to win may be the best we can achieve. This will undoubtedly strike many observers as repugnant, but in fact it is often the norm. "History tells us for the most part that the problem of diverse populations has usually been "solved" politically by the imposition of pecking orders by some group or groups on others, and that such pecking orders are maintained by varying measures of physical, psychological, or cultural force. . . If one goes looking for models of some more humane, just, equitable distribution of power among such groups, the pickings will be predictably lean."¹⁰

¹⁰ Isaacs, pp 50-51

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