



Why the Balkans?

Abstract After trying to ignore the Balkans after the Cold War, the United States led NATO military interventions there at the height of the unipolar moment in 1995 (Bosnia) and 1999 (Kosovo) to stop wars that Washington feared would taint the post-Cold War world. Those interventions and a diplomatic one in Macedonia in 2001 were relatively successful, because they included serious international guarantees as well as major, multilateral, postwar peace- and state-building undertaken jointly by the United States and Europe with the consent of the warring parties. That experience suggests what will be necessary to deal with ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, though the multiplicity of players will make the latter far more difficult than the former.

Keywords Unipolar moment · CNN effect · Ethnic nationalism · State-building

In 2018 the United States and Europe worry about Iranian and North Korean nuclear weapons, Islamic State and Al Qaeda extremists, China's rise, Russian threats to elections as well as to Ukraine, and the war in Syria, which has inundated its neighbors and beyond with refugees. Europe is also preoccupied with its own economic and financial woes (a lengthy recession, a shaky euro, almost bankrupt Greece, and Brexit) as well as refugees and migrants, some still coming from the Balkans but

many more from the Middle East and North Africa, in part through the Balkans. Washington frets about Chinese economic competition and its growing security threat in the Asia Pacific, countering violent extremism as well as its own illegal immigrants. The Balkans did not appear for years on the Council on Foreign Relations list of thirty possible contingencies possibly requiring American attention, though it made the cut for 2018.¹ It might appear on a comparable European list, but not near the top.

It was not always so. In the 1990s the United States led dramatic international interventions to end the most recent Balkan wars, now largely forgotten. First in Bosnia in 1995 and then in Kosovo in 1999, American-led NATO forces bombed Serb forces, bringing Milošević to the negotiating table at Dayton and forcing him to retreat from Kosovo. The Balkans was then a major focus of American foreign policy. After the Soviet Union dissolved and the United States led a coalition to expel Iraq from Kuwait, the region absorbed endless hours of high-level energy and time.² Neither the 1994 genocide in Rwanda nor the 1996 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan attracted more attention in Washington. Both attracted less response.

American military intervention came on the heels of four years of European and United Nations failure to manage the Balkan conflicts successfully. For Europe, the dissolution of former Yugoslavia was an unwanted but unavoidable challenge: the Balkan wars threw refugees onto its doorstep and threatened to destabilize the immediate neighborhood. The European Community (EC), as the predecessor to the European Union was then called, deployed unarmed monitors to former Yugoslavia in the summer of 1991. UN peacekeepers entered Croatia in 1992 to protect Serb-populated areas and deployed to Bosnia in 1993 to protect mostly Muslim and Croat population centers. The UN- and EC-sponsored International Conference on the former Yugoslavia met repeatedly from 1992 onward. It spawned useful criteria for recognition of the former Yugoslav republics and resolved some succession issues, but it failed to produce the peace settlement sought.³

American attention to the Balkans in the 1990s is harder to explain. Few refugees made it across the Atlantic. Yugoslavia's six republics had a total population of under 24 million. Serbia, the largest of them, had close to 10 million, including 2 million in the autonomous province of Kosovo. Prewar Bosnia had 4.3 million, about twice the population of Macedonia. These were small places that did not threaten U.S. national security or offer significant economic opportunities. Yugoslavia's

few natural resources were of little interest to Europe and even less to America. By the late 1980s, Socialist Yugoslavia was heavily indebted both internally and externally. Inflation and unemployment soared. Its economy was shrinking and its banks were folding.

Yugoslavia's Cold War strategic significance as a buffer between East and West had evaporated quickly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. There was no longer any geopolitical sense in Yugoslavia's policy of non-alignment, or strategic sense in vigorous American support for Socialist Yugoslavia. Secretary of State James Baker, on a trip to Belgrade to try to save Yugoslavia from dissolution, failed. His reaction was to declare that the United States had no dog in the fight to come.⁴ The Balkans region was irrelevant to America's major interests, which lay in the reunification of Germany, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the ongoing Israeli/Palestinian conflict, not to mention China and the Far East. American trade and investment with the region were minimal, its importance as a crossroads of Muslim and Christian civilization had faded, and its intricate politics and ethnic mosaic were mystifying.

The Balkans nevertheless returned to prominence. The fall of the Berlin Wall was a source of celebration in Europe and the United States, but scholars East and West predicted the emergence of ethnic and religious strife in the ruins of Communism.⁵ Their worst fears did not materialize in the former Soviet Union, whose breakup was for the most part peaceful. But they did emerge in Socialist Yugoslavia, where opposition to Communism had taken ethnically "nationalist" forms. Most of the early leaders of what are now independent countries—Franjo Tuđman, Slobodan Milošević, Alija Izetbegović, and Ibrahim Rugova—were ethnic nationalists. They were concerned to assert Croat, Serb, Muslim, and Albanian identity, even if they differed in their intolerance toward other groups and their capacity to inflict harm.

Each felt his people aggrieved, mistreated, and discriminated against. Even Serbs, whom many other Yugoslavs regarded as demographically and politically dominant in Socialist Yugoslavia, felt ill-served. The Serbian Academy wrote in 1986:

All nations are not equal: the Serbian nation, for example, did not obtain the right to its own state. Unlike national minorities, portions of the Serbian people, who live in other republics in large numbers, do not have the right to use their own language and alphabet, to organize politically and culturally, and to develop the unique culture of their nation.

The unstoppable persecution of Serbs in Kosovo in a drastic manner shows that those principles that protect the autonomy of a minority (Albanians) are not applied when it comes to a minority within a minority (Serbs, Montenegrins, Turks and Gypsies in Kosovo).⁶

Socialist Yugoslavia was remarkably unsuccessful at convincing any of its ethnic groups that they were getting a fair shake.⁷ All believed they were victims. Victimhood can be a prelude to violence, both for purposes of punishment and protection from real or imagined threats.⁸ Thus was born the nationalist idea of providing protection to “all Serbs in one country” by incorporating into Serbia areas outside its borders where Serbs were in the majority or could be rendered the majority by chasing out the others who lived there.

The last, Western-oriented prime minister of Yugoslavia, Ante Marković, failed in his efforts to renegotiate the Yugoslav government’s economic and financial relations with its six republics. The results were catastrophic. Slovenia’s “ten-day” war for independence in 1991 gave way to Croatia’s long, uphill struggle to regain control of its entire territory, parts of which were out of Zagreb’s control and run by separatist Serbs under UN protection for more than three years. A Croatian *blitzkrieg* in 1995 and subsequent negotiations returned them to Croatian sovereignty. Bosnia slogged through three and a half years of war (1992–1995), with Muslims and Croats fighting each other part of the time, even while some of them fought together against Serbs. One hundred thousand of Bosnia’s citizens died and half its population displaced. Kosovo lost fewer people—no more than 10,000—but saw more than a third of its population temporarily made refugees. Macedonia suffered a short Albanian rebellion in 2001. Montenegro escaped war on its own territory, but only with a lot of international assistance. Serbia, which lost wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, ended up absorbing hundreds of thousands of Serb refugees. Thus was the nationalist goal partly realized, with an ironic twist: they came to Serbia without the lands they had once called home in neighboring countries. This outcome rankles with more nationalist Serbs to this day.

American attention was partly due to the “CNN effect.” Real-time news coverage from conflict zones was still a novelty, and it had a deep psychological impact. Photographs of emaciated inmates in Bosnian concentration camps could not be ignored, even if they were far less gruesome than what we see today on social media. Concentration camps were

not supposed to happen in Europe: “Never again.” That many of the victims were Muslim both attracted sympathy and generated concern about radicalization. American campuses organized to press the U.S. government for action on the Balkans. Bosnia had charismatic spokesmen in Haris Silajđić, its wartime prime minister, and former Tulane University football player Muhamed Sacirbey (née Šaćirbegović), its UN ambassador. They were daily stars on American news broadcasts. Kosovo had the less charismatic but still photogenic Ibrahim Rugova, president of his internationally unrecognized and supposedly autonomous province. He had pledged to wear his silk scarf until independence.

At the U.S. State Department, Richard Holbrooke—made Assistant Secretary for Europe in September 1994—was determined to redeem the Cold War loss of Vietnam and demonstrate that American power could be projected to make good things happen in the post-Cold War world.⁹ He and others worried that NATO risked irrelevance or worse if it failed to deal with a threat on Europe’s doorstep, even if it was technically “out of area,” the Cold War term for territory NATO was not obligated to defend.¹⁰ Just before leaving office, President George H. W. Bush, who had intervened in late 1989 in Panama against a drug-trafficking president and in 1992 to relieve famine in Somalia, also threatened military intervention against Serbia if it caused conflict in Kosovo.¹¹ His successor, President Bill Clinton, promised during his first presidential campaign to intervene against Serbs in Bosnia, saying he would “lift” the arms embargo and “strike” the Bosnian Serb Army. He hesitated for more than three years, cautious in part because Secretary of State Warren Christopher failed to sell that idea to the Europeans. Unable to negotiate an end to the war, Europe did not want to “pour fuel on the fire next door.”¹²

No single vital or strategic interest took the United States to war in the Balkans. Clinton’s hesitation allowed an accumulation of secondary interests: preventing atrocities and refugee flows that might radicalize Balkan Muslims, calming domestic American reaction, maintaining U.S., EU, and NATO credibility, and reducing tensions within the Alliance. It was the combination of these that triggered American action.¹³

Bosnia eventually became a campaign issue. The Republican presidential candidate, Senator Robert Dole, started making political hay in the summer of 1995 by criticizing President Clinton for failing to follow through. Newly elected French President Jacques Chirac joined the chorus.¹⁴ The die was cast. Acting to implement United Nations

Security Council Resolution 836 (1993) for protection of designated safe areas in Bosnia, the United States would use its vast military power in combination with its NATO allies to end the war and initiate two decades of U.S.- and EU-led postwar reconstruction, state-building, and peace-building.¹⁵ Decades later, at the twentieth anniversary of the Dayton Accords, former President Clinton emphasized that Bosnia was the “canary in the coal mine” for a whole, free, peaceful, and democratic Europe.¹⁶ Idealism had prevailed, albeit after a long delay.

The unipolar moment made it possible.¹⁷ American power was uncontested in most of the world. The Bosnia success emboldened Washington. The United States intervened again in 1999 in Kosovo, where Milošević had instituted a reign of terror intended to chase Albanians from their homes and reclaim the “Serb Jerusalem.” When a last-ditch negotiation at the Château de Rambouillet outside Paris failed, NATO again attacked from the air, supporting Kosovo Liberation Army insurgents on the ground. This time the Alliance acted without Security Council approval but with a wink and a nod from Boris Yeltsin’s Russia, which in the endgame tried unsuccessfully to seize the Pristina airport but subsequently signed on to the Security Council resolution that ended the war.¹⁸ Again the military effort succeeded, initiating another decade of postwar international state-building efforts, this time led by the UN.

There was ample historical precedent for war in the Balkans involving the Great Powers. The first (1912–1913) and second (1913) Balkan wars ushered in the twentieth century with a scramble for division of former Ottoman Empire territories. Soon thereafter, the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo triggered World War I. In World War II, the Balkans fell quickly to the Axis powers by June 1941. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia emerged at the end of the war, after partisan leader Josip Broz “Tito” triumphed in a civil war over anti-Communist rivals. Throughout the Cold War, Socialist Yugoslavia remained a focus for the United States and NATO, because Tito defied the Soviet Union and achieved a measure of independence as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The facile explanation for the Balkan wars of the 1990s is “ancient hatreds,” an idea that caused the Americans to hesitate to intervene.¹⁹ You won’t find that canard here. There have been episodes of inter-ethnic violence in the Balkans prior to the 1990s, but there have also been long periods of coexistence, co-operation, intermarriage, assimilation, and mutual assistance.²⁰ Balkan identities are remarkably fluid and multiple. You cannot tell the ethnic groups apart by looking at them (only a

few ethnic nationalists make that claim). Their genetic heritage is indistinguishable, despite linguistic, cultural, religious, and other differences. The intolerance required to produce the wars of the 1990s is not indigenous, natural, or ancient.

Balkan ethnic nationalism is an example of Freud's "narcissism of small differences," magnified by political needs of the protagonists.²¹ Conflict with neighbors on grounds of ethnic difference helped to keep Slobodan Milošević in power once the Soviet Union was gone. He encouraged Serbs to view the 1389 Battle of Kosovo Polje as the origin of their state and its antagonism with Albanians. But Albanians, who were not yet predominantly Muslims, fought on both sides of that battle with the advancing Ottomans, as did Serbs. It was only in the nineteenth century that a poet, Vuk Karadžić, provided the narrative that made the battle the foundation of Serbian nationalism.²² There are ghosts needing exorcism in the Balkans, but they are not ancient ones.

Figure 2.1 attempts to structure the interlocking issues that brought war to the Balkans:

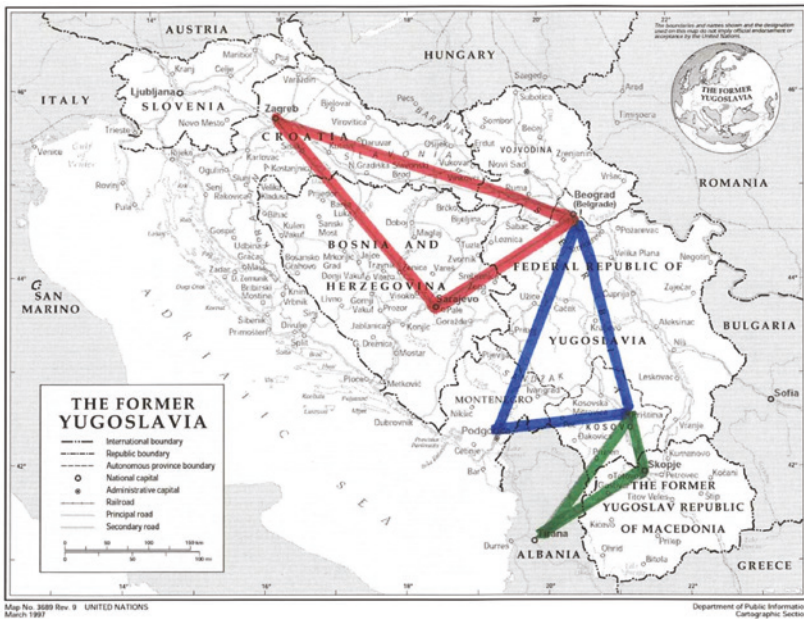


Fig. 2.1 The former Yugoslavia, dissected (United Nations)

The top triangle links the protagonists of the war in Bosnia: Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Zagreb. The main issue there was what the nineteenth century called “the Serbian question”: Would Serbs live in several countries, or just one? That is where the United States tentatively entered the Balkans in 1994 to end fighting between Croats and Bosniaks (with a diplomatic agreement that created the Bosnian Federation) and more forcefully in 1995, when it intervened in the Bosnian War on behalf of those who wanted to preserve the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The middle triangle links Belgrade, Pristina, and Podgorica (once Titograd, the capital of Montenegro), which were protagonists in the continuing dissolution of former Yugoslavia after Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Bosnia became independent in the early 1990s. That interlude ended with the independence of Montenegro in 2006 and of Kosovo in 2008.

The bottom triangle links Pristina, Skopje, and Tirana, the main players in what the nineteenth century regarded as “the Albanian question.” That is the mirror image of the Serbian question that arose farther north: Will Albanians live in several countries, or in just one? While never asked as loudly as the Serbian question, the Albanian question remains open today, at least for some in the Balkans. It could still cause instability, if not war.

If the Balkans seem complicated and confusing, that is because they are. But there is nothing incomprehensible or even arcane about the driving factors, which exist elsewhere as well. War in the Balkans, as in many other parts of the world, is politics by other means. Distribution of power among ethnic nationalists was the main disagreement wherever we look in the region. Each group sought the means to protect itself from one or more of the others, whether the threats were real or imagined for political purposes.

Leadership and resources are important determinants of ethnic nationalism and its consequences. Montenegro’s Milo Đukanović and Macedonia’s Kiro Gligorov, while not immune to ethnic nationalism, tried to limit its impact on their small, weak, and poor countries. Both preferred to govern with the support of ethnic minorities. Some more ethnically nationalist leaders like Kosovo’s Ibrahim Rugova and Bosnia’s Alija Izetbegović still tried to keep their countries out of war and sought international intervention, not least because they lacked armies and were

weaker than their antagonists. Croatia's Franjo Tuđman and Serbia's Slobodan Milošević were far stronger and bolder. Egged on by extremists, they sought confrontation because it consolidated their holds on power. They thought they had the means to win. They encouraged their ethnic compatriots to ask the classic Balkans question: Why should I live as a minority in your country when you can live as minority in mine?

Answering that question by building states that treat their citizens fairly and equally is one of the great challenges of our time. Failing to answer it means continuing to fight over where lines should be drawn between ethnic groups. That is a formula for long wars. There is always someone on the wrong side of the line. There is always a different line that would give one group more resources and another less. The problem arises not only in the Balkans but also in other parts of the former Ottoman Empire: Israel and Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Turkey. It also hovers over the conflict in Ukraine, where some Russian speakers who live in the southeast and Crimea prefer not to live in Ukraine as a minority but rather to live in Russia as part of the majority. The issues that arose in the Balkans were not unique to the Balkans. When not settled in advance, territorial partition, especially when attached to ethnicity or other identities, leads to conflict. The Balkans region is a good place to learn that and other lessons.

Some readers will doubt that the interventions in the Balkans have any claim on success. To them I recommend reading the quantitative analysis offered by RAND.²³ Of the twenty multilateral interventions since 1989, Bosnia and Kosovo were ranked the first and third most difficult, as measured by the calculated probability of returning to civil war within five years (respectively, 40 and 15%). They are still at peace. They have also shown marked improvement in democratization, governance, and prosperity, even if not as much as many might like. Macedonia, with only a 5% chance of returning to civil war within five years, is likewise at peace even if still troubled. It is also more prosperous and democratic than once it was, despite serious challenges. While it is arguable that conditions have deteriorated since RAND completed its work, the Balkans are still far better off than they were in the 1990s.

No one should deny that ethnic nationalism still plagues many Balkans countries. So too does the impulse of some of their leaders to restrict the press and abuse or even capture the state for personal gain.

Ethnic strife, constraints on the media, and corruption are real issues throughout the region. Slow economic growth, especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Greece's financial debacle, and the euro's shakiness, is also a major concern.

But we need to remember how the former Yugoslav republics began their existence as independent states: they were mostly poor, authoritarian, and ferociously conflictual. In the early 1990s it was dangerous to drive from one village to another in Bosnia. Today you can drive safely, except for a serious risk of traffic accidents, from Zagreb through Sarajevo to Podgorica, Pristina, and Skopje, then back through Belgrade. That is remarkable. The roads are little improved, but the environment is. The trip wasn't possible from about 1991 through at the least 2001. The cities mentioned are now the capitals of middle-income, illiberal democracies where large-scale conflict is rare or nonexistent. Slovenia and Croatia are members in pretty good standing of NATO and the EU. Montenegro and Serbia are candidates for EU accession. Albania and Macedonia are expected to start negotiations in 2019. Even some laggards know where they want to end up. Macedonia and Kosovo have NATO aspirations and share the goal of eventually entering the EU.

The Balkan countries are much smaller in population (and land area) than Iraq and Afghanistan, where American-led efforts in the wake of invasion and occupation have been far less successful. Relative to their size, we deployed more troops (about 100 times more per capita) and spent far more (on the order of ten times more per capita) in the Balkans, even if the total expended by the United States (about \$25–30 billion) represents only a few months of war in Afghanistan and Iraq at their peak. The Balkan peace- and state-building efforts were unintentional experiments in what could be achieved if adequate resources were devoted to the task. The United States and Europe not only intervened but also acted jointly to guarantee peace agreements that otherwise might have quickly frayed. The fact that we are no longer willing or able to match that level of resources and commitment rightly gives pause about undertaking future efforts.

There is little danger of that for now. President Barack Obama was determined to avoid the slippery slope into what he termed nation-building, most notably in Syria, a country of close to 22 million before the war that has spewed more than the 5.6 million officially registered refugees into its neighbors, in addition to displacing half the Syrians who remain in the country. President Donald Trump has reiterated the refusal

to do nation-building and says he wants to withdraw from Syria altogether. The Europeans are hesitating even to disembark in Libya, a country today of not more than 6 million people, closer to Balkan dimensions and amply endowed with oil and gas that could ease the process and reward European efforts. No one wants to take on reconstruction in Yemen, a poverty-stricken country of 26 million embroiled in multiple wars.

What are the alternatives to reconstruction and state-building, which are now so out of fashion? Returning to habit, Europeans and Americans are for the moment inclined to hope that an authoritarian like Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi can restore order rather than risk a democratic transition. The West may also simply stand by and monitor state collapse, as in Libya, or provide humanitarian assistance to ease the plight of civilians and assuage our own consciences, as in Syria. Or we may allow or support neighboring countries to intervene, as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are doing in Yemen. All three approaches were tried in the Balkans, without success. Only Great Power-led, multilateral intervention with the United States and the EU acting in tandem worked. It remains to be seen whether the alternatives will be more successful in the Middle East.

There is already no lack of intervention in the Middle East as well as in Ukraine. But the military interventions in Libya (led by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates), Yemen (led by Saudi Arabia), Syria (by Russia and Iran as well as Turkey and the United States), and Ukraine (by Russia) are not the sort that led to relatively stable outcomes in the Balkans. Nor are they likely to be successful. Carefully documented experience suggests that what works is impartial intervention with civilian as well as military means, agreed multilateral Great Power engagement, and consent of the warring parties.²⁴ That is what benefited the Balkans. Russian unilateral intervention in Ukraine, which is far from impartial and without the consent of the Ukrainian government, has little chance of success, if that is defined as ending the war and allowing peace- and state-building to proceed. The multiple interventions in Syria, Egypt's in Libya, and the Saudi/Emirati intervention in Yemen are also unlikely to lead to stable and peaceful outcomes. Insurgencies of the sort that now plague these countries often last for ten years or more.²⁵ Without a dramatic change in attitudes, today's interventions are unlikely to come close to the benefits of those conducted in the 1990s in the Balkans.

While out of fashion, multilateral intervention supported—or at least not opposed—by the Great Powers and undertaken from an impartial stance with the consent of main protagonists will someday somewhere again be judged desirable and feasible. Interim government or even international administration, as in Bosnia and Kosovo, is likely to be required.²⁶ Success and failure in these situations is highly context dependent. Russian and Turkish troops have already policed “de-escalation” zones inside Syria. The United States has sponsored training for police and establishment of a governing body for Raqqa in Syria’s east, which American-allied forces dominate. Many Western analysts have argued for an international peacekeeping deployment to Libya, where a UN-sponsored Government of National Accord has failed to exert its authority, or even protect itself from attack, without international intervention. An eventual political settlement in Yemen will likewise need substantial international support, both civilian and military, and even possible international administration. The Europeans and Russia are discussing the possibility of deploying UN peacekeepers in Ukraine, where international observers deployed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe are already active.

So even if Washington, Brussels, and Moscow would like in principle to avoid state-building in today’s conflict zones, they are already on the slippery slope to doing it, albeit often without the resources and consensus needed for success. Understanding the Balkans experience, a relatively successful one even if not yet completed, can help to calibrate and target what can be done in the Middle East, Ukraine, and elsewhere.

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