

VIEWPOINT

Unsplendid Warriors

NATO's nerve held, but the battle for the future defense of Europe starts here

Josef Joffe

DID THE WEST WIN THIS ONE? ARE WE GOING TO DO IT again? Yes, this was a victory of sorts; no, NATO will probably not mount another campaign like the 78-day air war against Slobodan Milosevic. First, the good news. Who would have believed that this 19-member alliance, fractious and feuding in the best of times, would have sustained almost three months of inconclusive warfare? Yet everybody stuck to his guns—the ornery French as well as the peace *über alles* Germans. Kudos to each and all, especially to Joschka Fischer, the peacenik-turned-Foreign Minister who led Germany into its first shooting war since Hitler's surrender.

The good news, part two, is the chastening of Slobodan Milosevic. This man has risen to power by cynically fomenting ethnic hatred. He continued his ugly career by unleashing fourfold war: against Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and finally Kosovo. Apart from instigating the worst humanitarian crimes in Europe since Stalin and Hitler, Milosevic has been a menace to his neighborhood. Though he is still in control, NATO has at least decimated Milosevic's military to the point where he can no longer threaten the Balkan region. He is not out, but he is down.

Third, there is at least the chance of restoring their rightful homeland to 1 million Kosovar Albanians who either fled or were driven out. A horrifying injustice at last might be undone under the loaded guns of KFOR, the army of peace that marched into Kosovo last weekend. Physical safety is not everything, but it is an indispensable start for those trying to rebuild their shattered lives.

So why doesn't the West just break out the champagne to celebrate victory in "a splendid little war," to recall the phrase of John Hay, Madeleine Albright's predecessor during the Spanish-American War of a century ago? Because this contest was neither "little" nor "splendid." In the final stage, the mightiest alliance in the world had to hurl a thousand planes against a third-rate power, and yet it reaped only a victory of sorts.

Belgrade's surrender came in bits and pieces, and it is hedged by all kinds of conditions that are guaranteed to sour the peace to come. Indeed, Milosevic has managed to snatch the biggest prize from the jaws of defeat by forcing NATO to accept the U.N. Security Council as ultimate arbiter over the military operation as well as the civilian administration of Kosovo. This means first that his quondam allies—Russia and China—can at any moment wield their veto power against the West. It means also that Russia as the sixth occupying power does not operate under NATO's command, raising the specter of partition with a purely Serb Kosovo under Russian protection.

The West has fought the war only to end up sharing the peace with those like Russia and China who are not interested in seeing NATO certified as guardian of Europe's order.

From their point of view, of course, the best outcome is a demoralized and discredited NATO that will never flex its muscle again. Red or Russian, the Kremlin has always wanted to sever Europe's Atlantic link. Why would it now act as the West's handmaiden in the pacification of the Balkans?

But whatever mischief Russia might yet make, there are the more serious wounds NATO has inflicted on itself. By fighting above all to avoid casualties, the alliance has shown itself as a most wobbly warrior, and Milosevic as well as his could-be imitators have certainly taken note. They have seen a coalition that would not put its military where its mouth was, that was riven by domestic revulsion against the bombing as well as by barely contained diplomatic dissension. They have seen a NATO all too eager to throw its unsplendid little war into the lap of the U.N., which had already failed so miserably in the Bosnian mayhem 1992-95. Will such an alliance deter the next Milosevic?

Will it even deter this one, who has maneuvered so brilliantly between the tough-minded Britons, the to-and-fro Americans and the so-so Germans? The cracks have become even more apparent after war's end. It is a bizarre irony that so many Europeans of influence now have nothing better to do than demand the speedy establishment of a "European defense identity"—a code word for a military compact operating apart from (perhaps even against) the United States.

This is bizarre for two reasons. It implies that Europe and America no longer share the same interests when it comes to the existential issues of war and peace in Europe. And it is, wittingly or not, a mendacious project. This war as well as the Bosnian prequel have proved that Europe is not capable of mounting a credible operation on its own. It lacks the planes, the ships, the satellites and the 21st century weaponry. The U.S. supplied 70% of the airpower. Surely, Europe is rich enough to field all this stuff by itself, but then it would have to spend not \$170 billion on defense but the \$275 billion currently invested by Mr. Big. Let Europe first put its money where its mouth is. As long as ambition so woefully exceeds determination, it is better to stick with the outfit that has kept Europe's peace for 50 years. Especially as the West must yet win the peace in the Balkans.

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