

Essay

Air Power for Peace? NATO's Role in Ceasing Hostilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1995

By Squadron Leader Chloe Bridge

Biography: Squadron Leader Chloé Bridge has operational experience in Afghanistan, West Africa, and the Middle East. Serving in multiple roles in the UK and the British Embassy in the United States, she is a CAS Fellow, having graduated with a MA from King's College London. With published works in the *Air and Space Power Review* and the *RAF100 Cookbook*, Chloé has a passion for history, specifically the post-Cold War period.

Abstract: This article considers the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) air power and its relative importance in ending the armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995. A diverse range of air power capabilities were used, but journalistic and academic discourse focuses on the short intense bombing campaign under Operation Deliberate Force, because within weeks, and after three years of failed negotiations, leaders declared peace in December 1995 under the Dayton Accords. However, 'air power for peace' and its strategic effect should always be contextualised. This article considers the importance of NATO air power within an economic, military, political, and diplomatic framework to examine why fighting stopped in December 1995. It determines that NATO air power was significant but was set against a background of contemporaneous activities and events that were arguably of equal importance to the ceasing of hostilities.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the authors concerned, not necessarily the MOD.

Introduction

It has been more than 30 years since the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina¹ erupted during the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Historical and political ethnic tensions between Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs,² along with the break-up of the SFRY, turned Bosnia into an armed conflict with the loss of thousands of lives. Initially, a three-sided war began in April 1992, involving two neighbouring countries, Croatia and Serbia, which was led by President Slobodan Milošević. The Bosnian Serbs, who were opposed to the newly independent Bosnia, mobilised both para-military forces and the Yugoslav People's Army, later renamed the Army of Republika Srpska (or VRS).³ Led by General Ratko Mladić, the VRS seized ethnic Serb territory and surrounded the capital city of Sarajevo.

Initially, the international response to the dissolution of the SFRY and its regional conflicts was slow. The international community worked at cross purposes and considered the war to be a 'European problem'.⁴ This was despite United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 713 in September 1991, declaring that the emerging situation within the SFRY was a threat to international peace and security.⁵ Between 1991 and 1995, the four main measures adopted by the international community were economic, military, political and diplomatic, with air power a common theme throughout these measures. For the purpose of this article, NATO air power is defined as, 'the ability to coordinate, control, and exploit the air domain in the pursuit of Alliance objectives'.⁶ A variety of platforms from different nations were allocated to the conflict, performing four key roles that included Counter-Air, Attack, Air Mobility and Joint Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (JISR).

The European Economic Community (EEC) and United Nations (UN) were



Map illustrating the six Socialist Republics of the SFRY before the dissolution. (Credit: BBC News)



Map illustrating the multi-ethnic diversity within Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991. (Credit: BBC News)

the first international organisations to become involved in the conflict, with NATO being requested by the former to be used as a military force. UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was first deployed in 1992 and its key role was to stabilise the region and to ensure peace between Croats and Krajina Serbs. After a series of additional UNSCRs, UNPROFOR expanded its role and in March 1992 moved its headquarters to Sarajevo.

After three years of fighting, peace was declared with the signing of the General Framework Agreement, also known as the Dayton Accords, on 14 December, having been agreed on 21 November 1995. Signed by the three political leaders of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, the main agreement focused on a single sovereign state consisting of nearly equal areas of a Bosnian Croat Federation (51%) and a Serb Republic or Republika Srpska (RS) (49%). Other notable features included the lifting of economic sanctions placed on Serbia and the ceasing of hostilities which came into force on 12 October 1995. There is no denying that the Dayton Accords ended hostilities, so this article will not review the specifics of the peace agreement nor how it was academically or physically digested post-conflict, but instead focus on air power, its role, and the context and conditions that led to the signing.

Much of the academic discussion regarding the signing of the Dayton Accords focuses on Operation Deliberate Force. It appeared that specific targeting from NATO jets broke the stalemate after three years' worth of failed negotiations, peace plans, and economic sanctions. A causal link between the two formed but specific discourse surrounding the importance of this operation varies depending on perspectives. Richard Holbrooke, the US lead negotiator, coined the term 'bombs for peace'⁷ and was an advocate of NATO air strikes citing that they were an essential part of getting Milošević to the negotiating table.⁸ US President Bill Clinton added that NATO air strikes and Bosnian Muslim and Croat battlefield gains convinced the Serbs to think about making peace.⁹ Whether NATO air power was the proximate influence in getting to the Dayton Accords is subject to significant discourse.

To analyse the relationship between NATO air power and setting the conditions for the Dayton Accords, this article will review air power's role in the four measures adopted by the international community. Other synchronous activities and events that led to the signing of the Dayton Accords will also be examined. This article will review air power's influence on the international response to the conflict, the extent to which actions were a deterrent, and its impact on Bosnian Serbs' will and resources to continue the fight between 1991 and 1995. It will determine that NATO air power was significant but not independently decisive owing to complementary activities and events that were at least of equal importance to the ceasing of hostilities. 'Air power for peace' must always be contextualised.

Economic

On 21 September 1991, UNSCR 713 created an arms embargo by suspending the delivery of military equipment and weapons to the SFRY. The aim was to restrict the availability

of weapons to force an end to the fighting. NATO's first air power involvement was the monitoring of the arms embargo by utilising E-3 Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) aircraft.¹⁰ This naval blockade supported by the air domain was a joint mission between NATO and the Western European Union and was initially a monitoring operation beginning in July 1992. With further UNSCRs, this monitoring expanded to include a more active enforcement of the arms embargo by June 1993 when Operation Sharp Guard commenced. The use of AWACS aircraft, whilst only in a supporting role, assisted in ensuring that no ship broke the embargo.¹¹ Although new weapons and military equipment were restricted, the arms embargo favoured the VRS who had access to significant stockpiles of conventional weapons left over from the SFRY.¹²

In 1993, the US called for the arms embargo to be lifted for the Bosnian Muslim Government and for air strikes to be conducted against the Bosnian Serbs. This policy of 'Lift and Strike' was pursued strongly by the US but the British and French opposed it owing to a fear of escalation that would endanger peacekeeping troops on the ground. As such, the policy was never adopted and as the conflict continued, the arms embargo lost its effectiveness as all sides found effective ways to evade measures.

Sanctions are a form of coercive behaviour and are seen as the first step in resolving conflicts designed to inflict an element of pain against an adversary.¹³ Economic sanctions against Serbia influenced the conflict but the full effects and impacts took time to appear. UNSCRs in the form of 757 (May 1992), 787 (November 1992), and 820 (April 1993) economically restricted movements within the region and ceased outside aid. By Holbrooke's account, Milošević's goal throughout diplomatic negotiations was the lifting of the economic sanctions.¹⁴ However, in the summer of 1994 economic sanctions against Milošević were further tightened. This had a dramatic impact on Serbia, which had experienced significant inflation and unemployment rates. In August 1994 Serbia cut all relations with the Bosnian Serbs, stopped supplying the VRS, and closed their common border. Some economic sanctions against Serbia were lifted in return but the impact on the VRS was significant in terms of their offensive action within Bosnia.¹⁵

Economic sanctions against Serbia indirectly influenced the VRS's ability to fight during the latter stages of the conflict. Diplomatic pressure on Milošević from the international community, coupled with additional sanctions, made the situation unsustainable forcing Milošević to cease support to the Bosnian Serbs. NATO air power was successful in its mission, but the arms embargo had limited strategic effect on the conflict. Overall, economic measures were the first step in resolving the conflict, the first of many measures that combined with NATO air power in a complex web of interrelated activities and events over the course of three years. It is also noteworthy that a UNSC 2022 document recognises that after several decades' worth of experience, other conflict resolution strategies should be used in addition to sanctions.¹⁶

Military

Operations Sky Monitor and Deny Flight

Operation Sky Monitor, initiated in October 1992 under UNSCR 781, banned military aircraft over Bosnia without the approval from UNPROFOR.¹⁷ Bosnian Serb aircraft bombed ground targets, whilst concurrently the US dropped essential humanitarian food parcels to villages, but this resolution made no attempt to enforce the ban, it simply allowed for passive monitoring. Whilst UNPROFOR would deploy observers and adopt approval processes, other states would deliver all necessary measures, meaning that NATO could assist with the UNSCR. As such, NATO was asked by the UN to provide aerial surveillance in the form of E-3 AWACS aircraft. Between October 1992 and April 1993 there were over 500 documented unauthorised incursions.¹⁸ While the UNSC was optimistic that the ban would be a decisive step in ending hostilities in Bosnia, it became evident that it had limited impact on the conflict, despite the general effectiveness of NATO monitoring the incursions.

Owing to Operation Sky Monitor's ineffectiveness, UNSCR 816 was quickly adopted which initially granted NATO authority to intercept and if required, shoot down aircraft for violating the airspace over Bosnia.¹⁹ Operation Deny Flight started in April 1993 as a 'no-fly zone' consisting of a multi-national force flying 24-hour combat air patrols (CAP) to prevent Bosnian Serb aircraft from attacking targets on the ground. By April 1993, the VRS controlled approximately 70% of Bosnia, a scenario totally unacceptable to the Bosnian Muslims and Croats. Despite the UNSCR explicitly stating that all aircraft would be included in the ban, issues arose with rotary wing assets. Even when helicopters could be identified, fear of shooting down injured soldiers or civilians resulted in the lack of any enforcement.²⁰ Restrictive Rules of Engagement (ROE) for Operation Deny Flight also contributed to a lack of enforcement as NATO had to physically observe all aircraft committing hostile acts.²¹ This resulted in helicopters landing to avoid NATO CAP. For fixed wing aircraft, enforcement was easier.

One notable event for NATO was the 'Banja Luka Incident', which demonstrated a willingness to use force to maintain the 'no-fly zone'. On 28 February 1994, NATO F-16 fighters shot down four Bosnian Serb J-21 Jasteb aircraft after they had physically observed them bombing a munitions factory. This was NATO's first air-to-air engagement in its history and the first time that NATO had directly intervened to enforce UNSCR 781 and 816. News outlets reported the incident as a new 'dimension to the war'²² however, NATO Secretary-General, Manfred Wörner, commented that the attack would not lead to an escalation in the conflict but a newfound respect for NATO.²³ Speculation over NATO's use of force varied from frustration over the lifting of the artillery cordon around Sarajevo to clear violation from the Bosnian Serb jets to ignore warnings to land.²⁴

Within Bosnia itself there was a sense that it was a question of when NATO was going to conduct proactive air strikes rather than if. During the 5 February 1994 mortaring of the Markale marketplace, accusations were raised that the Bosnian Muslims had attacked it themselves to evoke a reaction from NATO. Following the incident, political debate raged with the US showing clear intent for air strikes in contrast to the British Secretary of State for

Defence, Malcom Rifkind, who stated that the UK did not want to be drawn into a civil war.²⁵ General Michael Rose, commander of UNPROFOR between January 1994 and January 1995, commented that there were dangers in prioritising warfighting over peacekeeping.²⁶ Once again, political disagreement prevented significant military intervention to resolve the conflict.

Operation Deny Flight continued to December 1995 and resulted in 109,000 sorties, but only 63 released munitions in 10 incidents.²⁷ Four of these incidents resulted from Close Air Support (CAS) missions requested by UNPROFOR, constituting an expansion to the operation in June 1993, which ultimately produced further challenges. Targets included Bosnian Serb positions, airfields, ammunition dumps and Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) sites, but had limited damage to overall capabilities. Whilst some damage was inflicted, NATO's unwillingness to adopt a more aggressive policy on the UN meant that these strikes had limited impact on UNPROFOR's peacekeeping mission.²⁸ Furthermore, the process for requesting CAS was the frustrating dual-key Command and Control (C2) process, which meant that approval had to be sought from NATO and the UN Secretary General in New York.²⁹ Delays in gaining approval meant that the full application of air power was never fully realised.³⁰

Operation Deny Flight demonstrated the willingness of NATO to contribute to the conflict, but its effectiveness in ceasing hostilities was limited especially with restrictive ROE and convoluted C2 chains. Despite the full force of a multi-national organisation with significant air power capabilities, NATO air power could not initially coerce or influence activities on the ground.

Operations Deadeye and Deliberate Force

The most notable phase of NATO air power were air strikes under Operations Deadeye and Deliberate Force between 30 August – 20 September 1995, albeit only 12 days of the overall campaign had combat missions against ground targets owing to strategic pauses.³¹ The situation in the summer of 1995 was significantly different from multiple perspectives. From a military perspective, the dual-key process for authorising strikes was abandoned which removed the UN's role, allowing for a more streamlined and effective execution. In July 1995, another deadly mortar attack on a market in Sarajevo proved to be a catalyst for action owing to significant civilian casualties.

Operation Deadeye focused on Suppression of Enemy Air Defences with Operation Deliberate Force becoming NATO's first bombing campaign in its history. These operations marked a change from previous air power interventions within the conflict, moving from deterrence to direct action. However, Operation Deliberate Force had narrow military objectives which were to, 'adversely alter the VRS's advantage in conducting successful military operations against the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH):³² This reflected the UN's position of impartiality and attempt to adopt a 'level playing field' without simply defeating the VRS militarily.³³ This was a coercive campaign which focused on set targets to protect designated safe areas³⁴ with minimal collateral damage, ensuring political appetite remained. UNPROFOR's

commander from March 1995, General Bernard Janvier, commented that he wanted to, 'inflict pain but not death'³⁵ and to set the conditions for ending the air strikes, which involved ending attacks on the safe areas, removal of heavy weapons from Sarajevo's 20-kilometre total-exclusion zone (TEZ) and a cease-fire.³⁶

NATO flew over 3,500 sorties, dropping 1026 bombs with the loss of a single aircraft.³⁷ NATO operated 350 aircraft with two thirds being classed as combat aircraft,³⁸ with targets ranging from Bosnian Serb heavy weapons surrounding Sarajevo, SAM sites, and Anti-Aircraft Artillery. It was only on 14 September 1995 that the VRS agreed to remove their heavy weapons from the TEZ, which was optimum timing for NATO as they were running out of authorised targets.³⁹

Wishing to enhance their JISR capabilities, the US deployed, for the first time, their Predator RQ-1 remotely piloted aircraft over Bosnia. Their ability to loiter overhead for 24 hours proved valuable, providing real-time images, and highlighting ground that had been disturbed with its Infra-Red sensors.⁴⁰ A US military document from 1996, identified one of the Predator's successes as identifying targets as part of Operation Deliberate Force, which in turn led to the Dayton Accords.⁴¹ Although, this document could be argued to be ameliorative in nature, given how new the technology was, it demonstrated air power's contribution in the summer of 1995.

Operation Deliberate Force was a short, intense operation, and delivered what it had promised from a military perspective in terms of striking specific target sets. Analysing the direct battle damage caused by these strikes, even in the short term, was limited by the eventual ceasefire agreement on 12 October 1995, so no strategic effects could be reviewed. Despite this, the extent to which the operation was the proximate influence in ceasing hostilities lies within multiple contexts. Operation Deliberate Force was one measure adopted which had direct and indirect effects on other military campaigns and diplomatic efforts to cease hostilities.

Battlefield Gains

There is discourse surrounding Croat and Bosnian Muslim offensives in 1995, their influence on the journey to the Dayton Accords and how Operation Deliberate Force supported the changing military balance on the ground. In 1994, under the Washington Agreement, a ceasefire was declared, allowing the creation of a Croat-Muslim Federation, thus allowing both to focus their strategic efforts against the Bosnian Serbs.

Two military operations are notable as they occurred concurrently with Operation Deliberate Force. First, Operation Mistral (Maestral) 2, a Bosnian Croat (HVO) and Croat Army (HV) offensive at the beginning of September 1995 against the VRS. This occurred in the west of Bosnia with the objective of creating a buffer zone between Croatia and Bosnian Serb held positions and placed Banja Luka, Bosnia's second city, under threat. The operation was a success, giving the HVO and HV over 2,500 kms of territory.⁴² The second ground offensive was Operation Sana 95, which was conducted by the ARBiH against the VRS in the north-west of Bosnia.⁴³ By this time, the ARBiH had extensive battlefield experience and was the largest proxy force on the ground

for NATO. Both of these operations to seize key cities were successful, decreasing Bosnian Serb territory from 70% to 50%.⁴⁴

NATO air strikes on VRS targets resulted in some disruption, highlighting the potential relationship between air power and ground forces, especially as there was no military co-ordination between them.⁴⁵ Regardless, the military efforts on the battlefield significantly contributed to the capture of critical territory.⁴⁶ Although, the appearance of unlimited air power and the threat of co-ordination between NATO and Bosnian Muslims and Croats meant there was a risk of the Bosnian Serbs losing even more territory.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the very nature of these ground offensives occurring at the same time as Operation Deliberate Force complicated the relationship between NATO air power and the signing of the Dayton Accords.⁴⁸

Defence analyst, Norman Cigar, stated that the shift in the balance of military power on the ground and air strikes' lack of direct effect on Bosnian Serb military capabilities were the most important factors in ceasing hostilities.⁴⁹ NATO commanders highlighted the interlinked ground offensives and NATO air strikes as being mutually exclusive in ceasing hostilities. Holbrooke stated that it was air strikes alone which were the most effective,⁵⁰ but noted that the diplomatic landscape usually reflected the 'actual balance of forces on the ground'.⁵¹



Map illustrating the territorial split within Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 as agreed at the Dayton Accords. The two entities of the Muslim-Croat Federation (51%) and Bosnian Serb Republic or the RS (49%) remain to this day. For reference, the Brčko District in the north of the country was created in 2000 (not shown on map). (Credit: BBC News)

Political Peace Plans

There were three main attempts at peace negotiations just before and during the conflict, prior to the signing of the Dayton Accords: the Carrington-Cutlerio Plan (1992); the Vance-Owen Peace Plan (1993); and the Owen-Stoltenberg Plan (1993). They all had one factor in common, apart from failure to cease hostilities, which was their own version of how the map of Bosnia should look following the breakup of the SFRY. The main aim for the international community was to keep the integrity of the Bosnian sovereign state, particularly as the US recognised the country in April 1992; however, ethnic nationalism coupled with the differences in centralised and decentralised ideologies made this challenging. All three plans involved some form of partition between the different ethnic groups, but all failed to achieve consensus between each other and the international community.

The Contact Group, consisting of the US, Russian Federation, France, United Kingdom, and Germany, was set up in 1994 to act as an informal mediator to the conflict. Its strategy was to rebalance the territory that the Bosnian Serbs had controlled to leave a 49/51% division.⁵² In 1995 the context had changed with Bosnian Muslim and Croat battlefield gains shifting the military balance on the ground. On 31 August 1995, a day after the first Operation Deliberate Force strikes hit, Milošević had accepted a 51/49% Croat-Muslim Federation/RS division within Bosnia, however this had not been communicated to Mladić, which is why a ceasefire was not initially agreed.⁵³ This demonstrated the willingness of Milošević to negotiate before the full extent of Operation Deliberate Force strikes had occurred.

Changing Role of the US

The US' strategy in the conflict has been described as disinterested at first, disruptive, then decisive in its intent for peace and stability.⁵⁴ Holbrooke stated that the international community's response to the crisis was, 'at best uncertain and at worst appalling.'⁵⁵ Military action in the form of Operation Deliberate Force and the negotiating efforts by Holbrooke only in 1995 demonstrated that US leadership in the conflict was a significant factor in getting to the Dayton Accords.

At first, the US viewed the conflict as a war of choice rather than necessary to their own interests. Furthermore, given its geographical location, the US wanted Europe to step-up and take responsibility in the post-Cold War period; but it became clear that there was neither the political will nor unified opinion on how to respond to the conflict.⁵⁶ The US had already experienced the challenges of European opposition in relation to their request to lift the September 1991 arms embargo and identified that the European allies were taking a cautious approach to military action.⁵⁷ When President Clinton succeeded George HW Bush in January 1993 there was a marked change in how the US viewed European problems. As the conflict continued, European issues became national security issues for the US.⁵⁸ Clinton was immediately presented with options for heavy bombing across the whole country or limited air strikes around Sarajevo.⁵⁹ It was clear that Clinton would take a more hard-line approach to the conflict than his predecessor, but stressed the importance of not deploying US troops on the ground, favouring air power instead to stop Bosnian Serb aggression.⁶⁰ As the Bosnian Conflict raged, US foreign policy and its credibility on the world stage was being challenged. It is noteworthy that Clinton faced a re-election bid for the US presidency in 1996, illustrating an urgency to turn the unresolved conflict into a foreign policy achievement.⁶¹ The US' increasing leadership role and will to resolve the conflict clearly influenced the context leading up to the Dayton Accords.

Peacekeeping and Air Power

NATO air power's utility, and therefore importance in ending the conflict, was influenced by the political will and risk appetite relating to UNPROFOR personnel on the ground. In June 1993 under UNSCR 836, six safe cities were declared where NATO was tasked to provide CAS, under a continuation of Operation Deny Flight, to support UNPROFOR. It was in February 1994 that

air strikes were used as an ultimatum in relation to a mortar attack in Sarajevo that killed nearly 70 Bosnian Muslims. The US advocated for retaliatory air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs, but the British and French were reluctant as they had thousands of troops on the ground as part of UNPROFOR, who were lightly equipped and able to use force for self-defence only. The US had refused to deploy their soldiers to UNPROFOR so did not hold the same risk when advocating for air strikes.⁶² Demands for the VRS to remove their heavy weapons from a 20-kilometre-wide exclusion within 10 days or face air strikes were simply rejected until the offer of Russian peacekeepers was presented as a pro-Serb force.⁶³ Thus, the threat of air strikes alone did not coerce the Bosnian Serbs until the offer of a diplomatic solution was presented as well.

European fears over the protection of UNPROFOR personnel on the ground were realised in April 1994 when they came under attack by Bosnian Serbs around Goražde. Given the threat, NATO was requested by the UN to conduct their first CAS strikes in which US F-16 jets bombed Bosnian Serb command outposts. This was the first time NATO had attacked ground targets from the air however, this resulted in 150 peacekeepers being detained by the VRS to deter further air strikes. This method of taking peacekeepers and placing them in vulnerable locations to be used as human shields was employed several times until the punitive air strikes stopped in June 1994. This cycle of threats, restricted air strikes, and taking peacekeepers hostage continued throughout 1995, suggesting a limitation of air power.

Ultimately the use of NATO air power had limited impact on Bosnian Serb aggression between 1993 and summer 1995. One such example occurred on 21 November 1994 where NATO conducted air strikes on the Bosnian Serb airbase of Udbina in the Krajina region of Croatia. UNSCR 958 expanded the 836 Mandate which enabled the UNPROFOR mission to include Croatia.⁶⁴ Udbina airbase was being used for offensive operations within the Bihać pocket, so NATO planned its largest air raid to date targeting anti-aircraft artillery and the runway. However, the UN prevented destruction of the airfield, instead choosing to send a message that the international community had strong intent to enforce the UNSCRs.⁶⁵ Udbina runway was repaired shortly after the raid with reports of the airbase being used for offensive operations again.⁶⁶

The US' aim was to re-arm the Bosnian Muslims and mount air strikes in contrast to the Europeans who wanted Milošević to put pressure on Bosnian Serbs.⁶⁷ Political tension over diplomacy versus use of force to utilise the full range of NATO air power manifested in several ways. First, there was the avoidance of entering a war against the Bosnian Serbs which had not been authorised; second, was the integrity of the UNPROFOR peacekeeping mission; and third, concerns over VRS additional retaliations against peacekeepers.⁶⁸

Described as 'pinprick air strikes' by the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher,⁶⁹ disagreements across the Atlantic over NATO air power led to the VRS taking control of the safe areas, including Srebrenica in July 1995, and ultimately leading to one of the worst atrocities on European soil since the Holocaust. What had been demonstrated was that air power, especially

when limited in application owing to political constraints, could not defend the safe areas or hold ground. If the full range of air power capabilities were allowed to be adopted without restrictions, such as the destruction of the VRS, the outcome would have looked different, but that was not the mission.

Diplomatic

Holbrooke, the lead negotiator for the Contact Group during the latter stages of the conflict, was an advocate who leveraged the threat of air strikes and use of force as negotiating tools. Holbrooke's, and by association the US', urgency to agree a peace plan was strengthened in the spring of 1995, which saw NATO planners design OpPlan 40-104. Owing to the deteriorating situation on the ground, this contingency plan to withdraw the UN would have led to the deployment of 20,000 US soldiers. The US had not provided soldiers to UNPROFOR owing to risks to life, so the idea of deploying thousands of troops was not politically viable; but neither was refusing to, given their intent to craft a new role in the security of Europe.⁷⁰ As such, Holbrooke noted that it was important to find a solution to avoid a UN withdrawal.⁷¹

Previous negotiations prior to the summer of 1995 had focused on economic sanctions against Serbia which had been the main bargaining chip since 1992, but one for which Milošević refused to offer anything in return.⁷² It was on 30 August 1995 that an agreement was made for Milošević to take on the role of lead negotiator, speaking directly and making decisions on behalf of the Bosnian Serb military and civilian leadership. On the first day of Operation Deliberate Force and at one of the many negotiating meetings, Holbrooke noted the lack of emotion shown by Milošević towards the air strikes, in contrast to the subject of lifting economic sanctions, suggesting their limited impact at the beginning.⁷³ A small pause during Operation Deliberate Force between 1-4 September, followed by the resumption of strikes to allow Gen Janvier to persuade Mladić to comply with removing heavy weapons from Sarajevo, proved decisive, although not known at the time. Several military meetings took place to discuss the merits of continuing air strikes, but Holbrooke informed Washington that NATO would, 'look like a paper tiger' if the bombings did not continue.⁷⁴ Air strikes resumed on 5 September and on 13 September Milošević informed Holbrooke that NATO was providing CAS to the Bosnian Muslims and Croats, which significantly impacted the Bosnian Serbs.⁷⁵ This was despite any lack of co-ordination between NATO and forces on the ground but this unintentional consequence of Operation Deliberate Force created the conditions for Milošević to negotiate.

Despite leveraging air strikes as core components of Holbrooke's negotiations, the military planning was not co-ordinated with the diplomatic effort, mostly because there was no mechanism to do so.⁷⁶ This military-diplomatic tension flared up in September 1995, when Holbrooke disputed with Admiral Leighton W Smith, the commander of NATO forces in the Southern region, over the number of days left of the Operation Deliberate Force bombing campaign. Admiral Smith stated that there would only be three days' worth of new targets, suggesting a lack of military-diplomatic collaboration.⁷⁷

There is no denying that Holbrooke's negotiating skills and his use of 'shuttle diplomacy' to engage with all three political leaders of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia set the right conditions for the Dayton Accords. Even though Holbrooke's efforts were not properly co-ordinated with NATO commanders, Operation Deliberate Force strikes maximised the diplomatic leverage against Milošević from a position of strength, despite a diminishing list of Bosnian Serb targets. This resulted in the lifting of the siege of Sarajevo and ultimately enabled a three-week peace conference to take place at Dayton in November 1995. Without air strike leverage that indirectly supported Bosnian Muslim and Croat battlefield gains, diplomacy and peace plans would have continued to be unsuccessful as demonstrated in the previous three years.

1991 Gulf War

Military operations during the 1990s helped to contextualise how air power was utilised and interpreted within Bosnia. Whilst not part of this article, it is worth briefly highlighting that the 1991 Gulf War offered a strong argument for the use of air power in delivering decisive results shown during Operation Desert Storm. This was evidenced by the Clinton Administration who favoured air power over US troops on the ground. The Gulf War air campaign, which lasted just over a month, gained air superiority quickly and used Precision-Guided Munitions resulting in the ground assault to declare a ceasefire within hours. The appearance of air power alone winning regional conflicts was supported by academic discourse in the preceding years which raised policy-makers expectations.⁷⁸ A RAND report in 1993 stated that air power was well suited to resolving regional conflicts owing to its mobility, lethality, and survivability.⁷⁹ In 1997, the Balkans Air Campaign Study reaffirmed this position and concluded that air power and specifically Operation Deliberate Force were decisive in ending the Bosnian Conflict stating that it brought peace at minimal cost.⁸⁰ Between March and June 1999, instability within Kosovo led NATO to directly intervene against Milošević as part of Operation Allied Force. There is no surprise that the operation was a strategic air campaign, with NATO believing that Milošević would comply in the same way as in 1995. However, NATO underestimated Milošević and whilst eventually succeeding, the desired air power effect had limited impact on Serbian forces and failed to prevent ethnic cleansing.⁸¹ This overconfidence of air power's ability to bring peace was likely generated by the success and causal link between Operation Deliberate Force and the signing of the Dayton Accords.⁸²

Summary and Conclusion

The Bosnian Conflict was characterised by complexity. Ethnic tensions following the breakup of the SFRY resulted in a brutal struggle for territory all set within a post-Cold War period. International efforts to cease hostilities initially were slow and ineffective, despite a variety of economic, military, political, and diplomatic measures adopted. But, between late 1994 and 1995 the context had changed from the beginning owing to Milošević's termination of support to the Bosnian Serbs; Bosnian Muslim and Croat battlefield gains; and the US' growing leadership to resolve the conflict. The importance of NATO air power and its impact is difficult to quantify owing to a complicated web of interconnected activities and events, but five conclusions can be drawn.

First, a combination of measures set the conditions for success at the Dayton Accords. There was no single person, action, or event that proved independently decisive in ceasing hostilities. Economic, military, political, and diplomatic measures over several years coupled with Bosnian Muslim and Croat battlefield gains which created a 49/51% territory split, made 1995 a defining year.

Second, NATO air power demonstrated its agility and contribution in all four measures representing a range of capabilities such as Counter-Air, Attack, Air Mobility, and JISR. Enforcing the arms embargo, indirectly supporting battlefield gains, intelligence collecting, and striking targets contributed towards a synergistic effect leading to the Dayton Accords and NATO's credibility as a fighting force. They were all independently successful, despite individual air power roles having some limited impact on the strategic context owing to political hesitance and restrictive ROE from the UN. NATO air power was also escalatory in nature, used to coerce from deterrence to lethal force, which provided options for the international community. However, this was balanced by a general avoidance of escalation suggesting air power's duality in terms of resolving conflicts and strategic effect.

Third, the extent to which air power contributed to the Dayton Accords was directly linked to political will, risk appetite, and consensus. UNSCRs provided strong narratives in response to the conflict which were not backed by political action. Transatlantic strains over fears of escalation and the use of force restricted the full utility of air power, including the clunky dual-key process for authorising strikes. Narrow military objectives of inflicting pain on the Bosnian Serbs, rather than defeating them, resulted in a limited list of target sets that nearly derailed not only the military action of Operation Deliberate Force, but also the diplomatic negotiations. In addition, air power without political consensus resulted in UNPROFOR becoming a liability instead of an asset.⁸³ The cycle of air strikes followed by the detainment of lightly equipped UNPROFOR personnel limited the use of force. It was only when UNPROFOR personnel were in remote areas that one of the barriers to exerting greater use of force was removed. Furthermore, growing US leadership within the conflict and media reports of crimes against humanity strengthened political will for stronger military intervention.

Fourth, air power's relationship with Bosnian Muslim and Croat ground forces demonstrated the potential for effective air and land integration and operability. Whilst strikes on VRS targets resulted in some disruption and were not co-ordinated, the battlefield gains afforded during Operation Deliberate Force resulted in a near 50/50 split of territory which were strategic goals for all warring factions. However, this did demonstrate the limitations of air power in terms of not being able to hold ground and the need to rely on semi-proxy ground forces.

Fifth, the use of air power, specifically air strikes, were valuable diplomatic tools to leverage negotiations with Milošević. Evidence suggests that the physical strikes under 'inflict pain but don't destroy' objectives had varying success, but the threat of unlimited NATO resources and perceived additional collaboration with the Bosnian Muslims and Croats leading to further

territorial losses were powerful enough to bring Milošević to the Dayton Accords. However, the effectiveness of air power could have been further enhanced if both diplomatic and military efforts were aligned.

In conclusion, NATO air power demonstrated, for the first time, its credibility and utility by contributing to all measures adopted by the international community to cease hostilities in Bosnia. Although the full range of capabilities were not fully exploited owing to political disagreement and policy constraint, the absence of air power would have no doubt prolonged the conflict. The mixture of physical air power and the threat of air strikes as negotiating tools proved valuable in 1995, but its overall impact should be contextualised against other contemporaneous activities and events that occurred within the geopolitical environment. Air power can bring peace and be a significant conflict resolution tool but the 1990s illustrated that context is important when analysing strategic effect.

Notes

¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina will be shortened to Bosnia for brevity.

² The three main ethnic groups within Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time were Bosnian Muslims or Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Serbs. The Serbs and Croats are used to describe those located in geographical areas of the newly independent Croatia and Serbia. There is a subtle difference between these groups of individuals. The article will make it clear which groups of individuals are being described.

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