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Operation ALLIED FORCE: Operational Planning and Political Constraints

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Introduction and Thesis

From March through June 1999, NATO air forces conducted Operation ALLIED FORCE in response to continued aggression against Kosovo Albanians by Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) forces under the direction of their President, Slobodan Milosevic. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operation was to be an air- and missile-only campaign to stop Milosevic’s forces from cleansing ethnic Albanians from the Kosovo region and forcing Milosevic to capitulate to NATO and United Nations (UN) demands.

Operation ALLIED FORCE lasted 78 days, from 24 March to 9 June 1999. The operation was touted as an overwhelming success as the first air-only campaign to decide the outcome of an armed conflict from start to finish. Several political and military leaders involved in the operation praised it for its many successes. These successes were achieved as a result of the most precise and lowest collateral damage air campaign in history. Political and military leaders claimed that ALLIED FORCE achieved all its objectives at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war in the face of an extremely complex set of challenges.\(^1\) NATO forces utilized over 900 aircraft, conducted nearly 11,000 strike sorties, and flew more than 37,000 total sorties without losing any aircrew to enemy combat arms.\(^2\)

At face value these are tremendous successes that suggest NATO military leaders worked with reliable political direction and flawlessly executed a well thought out operational plan. But, further analysis of the Kosovo crisis and the NATO operation reveal that no matter how highly effective and superbly executed, ALLIED FORCE was politically constrained nearly from start to finish. This paper will attempt to argue that
while the tenets of operational planning existed, they were not followed during ALLIED FORCE planning. This was due in part because of political constraints, poor operational coordination, and mismanaged resources to achieve ill-defined policy objectives.

Background: Operation ALLIED FORCE and Kosovo

In 1974, Tito, the President of Yugoslavia, authorized a Constitution declaring Yugoslavia to be a Socialist Federal Republic made up of individual Republics. Serbia was one and Kosovo was designated as an autonomous region within it. After Tito’s death in 1980, the Federation began to fall apart. The former Yugoslavia now consists of the independent states of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Serbia and Montenegro. Officially a province of Serbia, Kosovo is overwhelmingly composed of ethnic Albanian Muslims that make up over 90% of the population. Under Milosevic’s rule, the majority of Kosovo Albanians demanded independence. Milosevic responded by completely withdrawing the autonomy granted to Kosovo in 1974 and commenced a brutal campaign of repression and ethnic genocide. Kosovo Albanians responded by forming the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) which is well funded by a widespread and wealthy Albanian international community.

By May 1998, the U.S. had stated it was prepared to act unilaterally in support of the Kosovo Albanians and NATO had announced plans to conduct military exercises in Macedonia to serve as a warning to Serbia against further violence. NATO also warned Milosevic they were ready to send troops to prevent the conflict in Kosovo from spreading. NATO and the international community continued to warn Milosevic throughout the summer and fall of 1998. It was at this point NATO operational planning
began in earnest. A brief description of these plans is provided from the viewpoint of General Wesley Clark, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and the operational commander of ALLIED FORCE.

Gen. Clark described a plan to mount a steadily escalating series of steps designed to increase pressure on Milosevic. The first step was to be persuasion--diplomacy backed by threat.9 This phase occurred during the summer and fall of 1998 when Milosevic refused to comply with the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1199 requiring the withdrawal of excess forces from Kosovo.10 The second step was to be coercion--diplomacy backed by force.11 This phase took place with the commencement of Operation ALLIED FORCE on 24 March 1999. Gen. Clark stated in conjunction with an air campaign during this phase there was the possibility of a ground threat in June 1999.12 The third step would be forcible territorial seizure and securing by ground operations backed by appropriate diplomacy.13

In October 1998, as Yugoslav attacks on Kosovo Albanians grew in ferocity, it was clear to the North Atlantic Council (NAC)14 that diplomatic persuasion was having no effect on Milosevic. It was then the NAC prepared orders for NATO to organize air operations against Yugoslavia and was followed by NATO's issuance of an activation order.15 Under the threat of NATO air strikes, Milosevic was persuaded into ceasing hostilities and complying with UNSCR 1199. He also agreed to a deployment of observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and a NATO air verification mission.16 During the meeting in which the Yugoslav President agreed to these actions, Milosevic also foreshadowed events to come. He told the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, the NATO Secretary General, and
SACEUR, “We know how to deal with the problem of these Albanians. We’ve done this before...in central Kosovo in 1946. We killed them. We killed them all. It took several years, but eventually we killed them all. And then we had no problem.”

By December, Milosevic and his Yugoslav Army (VJ) and Special Police (MUP) forces had violated the October agreements by massing reinforcements, increasing the fighting, and deliberately planning future operations in the Kosovo region. This necessitated activation of the coercion step of NATO’s plan—diplomacy backed by force. Operation ALLIED FORCE was intended to be a systematic air campaign to attack, disrupt, and degrade Serb military potential and deter further ethnic cleansing actions in Kosovo.

Now that a background of the conflict has been established, the following sections will examine the operational planning tenets that should have guided Operation ALLIED FORCE planning.

**Operation ALLIED FORCE Planning**

In order to develop an operational plan, a regressive planning technique should be used. In regressive operational planning, the process works backward from the desired end state, through the strategic objectives, then the military objectives and the military flexible deterrent options. Sound strategic guidance should contain a clear statement by political authorities of the desired situation for the post-hostilities phase. Throughout the Kosovo crisis there was never a clearly defined policy objective or desired end state for the Kosovo region. Political leaders never stated unambiguously whether the desire
was for Kosovo to regain its autonomy as a province of Serbia or that Kosovo should be granted complete independence like several other former Yugoslav states.

In December 1998 at a Ministerial Meeting of the NAC, a statement on Kosovo was released publicly. It stated simply that NATO supported a "political solution that would provide an enhanced status for Kosovo... and meaningful self-administration."\textsuperscript{20} If this is considered policy, then it is an ambiguous one that does not clearly state the desired situation that would follow potential hostilities. Kosovo had been an international hot button issue for at least nine months at this point and NATO had already issued an activation order for air strikes in October 1998. If war is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will\textsuperscript{21} and war is merely the continuation of policy by other means,\textsuperscript{22} then the activation order in October should have been made with certain policy objectives in mind. Certainly by the time Operation ALLIED FORCE planning had started, the policy objectives should have been clearly stated.

There were certainly interests at stake for both the United States and the NATO Alliance. These interests were outlined in a U.S. Department of Defense Joint Statement on the Kosovo after action review.\textsuperscript{23} First, Serbian aggression in Kosovo directly threatened peace throughout the Balkans and the stability of NATO’s southeastern region.\textsuperscript{24} Second, Belgrade’s repression in Kosovo created a humanitarian crisis of staggering proportions.\textsuperscript{25} Third, Milosevic’s conduct leading up to ALLIED FORCE directly challenged the credibility of NATO.\textsuperscript{26} While these interests were evidently clear to political leaders, they were never formulated into a definitive policy.

Regardless of an ill-defined end state, NATO decided to use force to bring about an end to a humanitarian crisis. NATO’s grand strategic objective was to stop the ethnic
cleansing in Kosovo. The NATO Secretary General at the time, Javier Solana, stated that military action was aimed solely at ending the violence and reversing the repressive policies of the Yugoslav regime.27 The military strategy developed by NATO consisted of a coercive air campaign, efforts to isolate the FRY physically, and provide humanitarian relief to refugees.28 This military strategy was designed to force Milosevic to concede to the NATO’s demands that were reaffirmed in April 1999 at NATO’s Washington Summit. The demands were stated as follows: stop all military action, violence and repression in Kosovo; withdraw all forces from Kosovo; agree to an international military presence in Kosovo; agree to the safe return of all refugees; and provide assurance to work for a political framework agreement.29

The strategic objective was defined clearly and was seemingly attainable with the military assets available. The next step for the planners would be to define the ultimate military objectives of the operation that would lead to successfully accomplishing the strategic objective. NATO agreed the aim of the military should be to attack, disrupt, and degrade current Serbian military operations in Kosovo.30 This would be followed by attempts to deter any further aggressive Serb actions and degrade Serb military potential.31 This is where a disconnect occurs between the strategic and military objectives. The military’s objective should have been more directly related to stopping the ethnic cleansing, not destroying Serbian forces in Kosovo. This point may be better emphasized in the following section describing centers of gravity.

One of the key steps in operational planning is the identification of the enemy’s center of gravity (CÖG). After identifying enemy strengths, the one that would most likely lead to enemy defeat if destroyed would be the center of gravity NATO forces
would have to attack to achieve the cessation of ethnic cleansing. At the strategic level of war the Yugoslav COG was the leadership of Milosevic. He was responsible for setting repressive policy and ordering the ethnic cleansing campaign conducted by VJ and MUP forces. At the operational/tactical level the COG was the Serbian military force. In order to attack COGs they must be vulnerable to attack or other targets must be identified that once prosecuted will lead to the vulnerability of the COG.

It could be argued that the strategic COG, Milosevic’s leadership, was vulnerable to attack with the overwhelming force available to NATO planners. Serbia was a small power with limited air and surface-to-air missile assets and was economically weak at the start of the operation. Serbia had also alienated most of the world with its ethnic cleansing campaign and lost all meaningful outside political and military support. There were many in the military that believed the air strikes should have targeted Milosevic’s command, control, and communication (C3) centers in the Serbian capital of Belgrade. Lt. Gen. Short, the Joint Forces Air Component Commander of the operation, believed the way to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo would have been to target Milosevic’s electrical power supplies, bridges, and political-military headquarters. This target set would have brought the Serbian economy to a halt and made life miserable for the populace. The primary purpose of these attacks would have been to force Milosevic and the Serbian people to realize the Kosovo policy of ethnic cleansing would not be cost-free. In fact, contemporary air power theory calls for this type approach which employs parallel attack (prosecuting all targets sets simultaneously) and strategic paralysis (caused by the rapid, intense shock effect of parallel attack) which in combination causes strategic collapse.
While determining the enemy’s COG and how to attack it, NATO planners also had to determine what Milosevic thought NATO’s center of gravity was and how he might attack it. The NATO Alliance had three major weaknesses Milosevic could have exploited. First, there were differences between NATO members on the desirability of military action without UN sanction. Second, Milosevic did not believe NATO would wage a war without fundamental issues at stake. Third, NATO was more adverse to casualties to both friendly and enemy forces than Milosevic was.

At the core of each of these weaknesses was the Alliance cohesion that NATO planners identified as their own center of gravity. Operational planners had to account for the security of their own COG and they were forced to impose several constraints on Operation ALLIED FORCE due to the real political sensitivities of the 19 NATO member nations. These constraints are what drove the operational concept or idea for the entire air campaign.

An operational idea is the principal part of any operational design. It should seek to maximize the impact of friendly combat power while focusing explicitly on the destruction or the neutralization of the enemy’s COG. The political constraints placed on operations did not allow this primary tenet to be followed. The reason was because all 19 NATO members had to achieve consensus before any deliberate planning or crisis action planning commenced. Furthermore, all operational planning decisions within NATO had to be backed by complete consensus. The former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, German Gen. Klaus Naumann has stated NATO’s crisis management is flawed and cooperation from each member’s political leadership is required so that no military options are publicly ruled out.
Gen. Naumann was referring to the most glaring political restriction of the campaign, ruling out ground operations. This completely eliminated the threat of a ground invasion. Applying NATO's full combat power directly against the bulk of the enemy's forces was out of the question from the beginning of operational planning since the use of ground forces had been ruled out. Furthermore, NATO political leaders placed constraints on target selection and the methods of attack by NATO air forces. In fact, Gen. Short criticized France for over-exercising its vote against several groups of targets in Belgrade that could have possibly drawn the conflict to a close in a more timely manner.\(^{42}\)

NATO entered the war without a full targeting plan and without a planned option other than a limited number of air strikes.\(^{43}\) These restrictions did not allow attacks on Milosevic's C3 and lines of communication until several weeks into the operation. The operation started with an assumption by U.S. and NATO political and military leaders that Milosevic would capitulate after the first air strikes were completed.\(^{44}\) The effects of the first air strikes on ending the ethnic cleansing were negligible. The assumptions made by political and military leaders could not have been more wrong or damaging to operational planning. The consequence of the assumption created hastily planned follow-on operations, left operational planners grasping for unprepared target sets, and hastened the exodus of refugees. Worse than that, it seems that Serbian forces murdered as many as 10,000 Kosovo Albanians during the air operation that evolved into a war of escalation.

This was the result of employing an escalatory air operational concept. The indirect approach of incremental escalation had to be utilized as a result of the strategic
guidance and political constraints placed on NATO planners by the NAC and President Clinton. Gen. Clark states the beginning of the operation focused on striking VJ and MUP forces in and around KOSOVO. Only after the campaign progressed and grew in intensity did the focus shift to coercing a change in behavior from Serbian leadership. Unfortunately, the evidence of history (Vietnam) is that incremental escalation will not usually achieve the intended coercive effect.

Political concerns over collateral damage created sanctuaries for Serb forces and compounded air strike targeting problems. It created an incremental war and did not allow the conduct of decisive operations. The political environment affected every aspect of planning and execution and most likely prolonged the campaign because of the operational concept forced upon NATO planners. The next section will examine how the principles of operational warfare were effected by the adapted operational concept.

Principles of Operational Warfare

Any operational idea should provide for the application of selected principles of war. Depending on the scenario, some principles will hold more value in an operation than others. The neglect of a single principle during the execution of an operation will not necessarily lead to defeat but planners must consider all the principles when designing an operational idea. Many times during an operation, separate principles will be interrelated and events that affect one principle will influence another.

The principle of objective is the most important of all the principles guiding the employment of military forces across the spectrum of conflict. The argument presented earlier stated the strategic objective was clearly defined but there was a disconnect in the
military targets selected to accomplish that objective. The operational commander, 
SACEUR, described two separate lines of air operations. The first line attacked tactical 
targets and when that proved ineffective after several weeks, the second line was called 
on to attack more strategic targets. SACEUR described these strategic targets as the 
brains behind the brutality and considered it vitally important to destroy C2 nodes, 
television stations, transmitters, electrical power systems, and supply routes. The 
reasons these targets were not attacked at the beginning of the operation was due to 
political constraints within the NATO process and faulty assumptions made by political 
and military leadership.

Offensive action and the maintenance of initiative are the most effective and 
decisive ways to attain a common goal. The principle of offensive is incompatible with 
a lack of aggressiveness or passivity. This statement is as true for politicians as it is for 
planners and executors. In regard to the planning phase of ALLIED FORCE, the 
determination of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) political leadership must be brought 
into question. NATO leaders spent more time trying to reassure their own people than 
they spent on trying to influence the enemy. It is evident that political leaders were not 
concerned with approving a plan that would lead to a NATO victory in absolute terms. 
Restrictive rules of engagement, collateral damage anxiety, and concerns about the loss 
of any aircrew were highly preventative to planners. Additionally, these publicly voiced 
concerns and the ensuing half-hearted method of waging war must have comforted and 
reinforced Milosevic’s resolve, which was the strategic COG. This is an example of 
how a principle of war at the political/strategic level of war influences the same principle 
at the operational level.
The principle of mass is the main prerequisite to achieving victory by concentrating superior power at the right time and place.\textsuperscript{54} Power must be applied in a concentrated dose to achieve and maintain shock effect.\textsuperscript{55} NATO could not possibly have accomplished a concentration of fires on the vital strategic targets by employing incremental air operations against tactical targets. The shock effect and strategic paralysis of parallel attacks were lost due to incremental escalation. Two weeks after the commencement of operations, the media was reporting on outdoor rock concerts in Belgrade’s square instead of reporting on what should have been Serbian discontent with the war effort.

The higher the level of war the more difficult it is to achieve the principle of surprise in an operation. Strategic surprise in Kosovo would have been difficult to achieve but tactical surprise should have been included in the planning phase. The principle of surprise was lost at the very start of the campaign and would have been foiled even if it were included in the plan. The first target set of Operation ALLIED FORCE was broadcasted to the enemy by way of dozens of warnings from NATO about an impending strike on specific targets.\textsuperscript{56} Not only did this allow the enemy to minimize the intended impact planners expected but it placed NATO aviators at risk by forecasting where the strikes were to occur. In this case, tactical surprise could have been achieved in favor of Serbia.

The economy of force principle ensures the accomplishment of a given objective is not compromised by unnecessary diversions to areas of lower priority. In ALLIED Force the given strategic objective was the cessation of ethnic cleansing. The campaign was advertised as a strategic one but was employed in a tactical role ineffectively
prosecuting tactical targets that did not achieve the strategic objective. This view was expressed by Air Marshal Sir John Walker, Royal Air Force (Ret), when he stated, “Plinking tanks with PGMs from 15,000 ft is not the way to use air power to impose the will or to project power in some sort of anti-ethnic-cleansing morality trip.”

The principle of unity of effort can be accomplished through two methods: unity of command, or cooperation. In NATO, unity of effort is achieved through cooperation instead of through unity of command. This is due to the 19 members of NATO requiring consensus on all military actions. Poor planning throughout the operation effected unity of effort. After the participation of ground forces was ruled out, a Ground Component Commander was never involved in the planning. Absent the staff an ARFOR would have provided forced the JTF staff to compensate. NATO threatened war without having a clear contingency plan to deal with the refugee problem that led it to threaten air strikes in the first place. NATO did not have a clear plan for psyops and political warfare campaign when the operation began. If NATO planners intend to plan for success, they must plan for worst cases and they must be able to plan under conditions that do not cripple military effectiveness. This will greatly improve NATO’s ability to incorporate unity of effort into operational planning.

The principle of maneuver is planned to enhance force effectiveness by coordinating employment to secure favorable terms for the initial phase of an operation. The maneuver should be planned to obtain advantages of position or strength. Since NATO planners had to conduct an “air forces only” operation, mobility and firepower were easily achieved. But, due to constraints and direction placed on planners by political leaders, the enemy’s COG was not the focus of operational maneuver and the
security of favorable terms for the initial phase of ALLIED FORCE was not achieved. The operational plan did not achieve positional or strength advantages. Two important factors of operational maneuver are force and space. In order to achieve positional advantage, NATO planners needed to confine the space in which the enemy was maneuvering thereby reducing the ability of VJ and MUP forces to recover and conceal themselves. Limited to air power alone, planners could have accomplished this by destroying rail and road bridges, C2 centers, and POL facilities at the beginning of the operation.

Realizing operational sustainment is not a principle of operational warfare, it is still an important function planners must consider. The commander should always be concerned with his own operational reach while simultaneously denying operational reach to the opponent. Failure to plan for logistical sustainment could result in premature culmination. During ALLIED FORCE, two events were widely reported in the press that revealed operational sustainment had not been well planned prior to the crisis. On the logistical side of the operation, the press reported the U.S. Navy was running out of Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missiles (TLAMs). This severely effected the number and types of targets available to planners. On the air operation side, the long distances between targets and air bases required a high number of tanker support sorties that had not been accounted for during initial operational planning. It was also widely reported that NATO was scrambling for new target sets after the first few days of air strikes. All of these shortfalls were due to overconfidence in the anticipated effects the first air strikes were to achieve. This overconfidence led to extreme shortsightedness on the part of senior military planners and should never have interfered with sustainment planning.
Since an operational commander can never be completely certain of the enemy’s response, planning should always be conducted for the “worst case” scenario.

Conclusion

While commenting on future security challenges facing NATO, Gen. Wesley Clark, SACEUR, outlined several concerns for the European region. He stated regional instability in the Balkans will continue to be a problem and that the rapid proliferation of WMD is of paramount concern. In Belgrade, authorities have stated that Yugoslav forces would return to Kosovo one way or another. “With God’s help, don’t mind me saying, this people and this army of ours will return to their ancient cradle, the sacred Serbian land of Kosovo,” said Vladimir Lazarevic, the commander of the army corps that withdrew from Kosovo last June. Gen. Clark also emphasized defense planners will have to further account for transnational threats such as refugee movements, terrorism, criminal activity, environmental issues, and resource scarcity.

NATO has developed a new strategic outlook for the European theater that includes a crisis management mission in addition to collective defense. In order for NATO to respond to future crisis, the entire organizational process needs to be accelerated. Political sensitivities and military jealousies concerning lead nations must not hinder planning. The lessons from Operation ALLIED FORCE reveal political constraints interfered with planning at every level. The forced operational concept of incremental escalation once again proved inadequate in achieving a strategic goal. If the overwhelming forces of NATO, including ground forces, were implemented in a decisively planned operation, NATO would certainly lend itself as a credible deterrent to
future belligerents. Existing operational planning tenets have proven successful in armed conflict and war provided the states, alliances, or coalitions possess the will to employ them. In Kosovo, this was not the case and the desired effects of air strikes were hampered as a result of poor planning.

6 Ibid., 290.
7 Ibid., 293.
8 Ibid., 295.
11 Clark, Parameters.
12 Clark, Parameters.
13 Clark, Parameters.
14 The North Atlantic Council (NAC) is the strategy and policy governing body of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).
15 Clark, NATO Review, 15. (An activation order puts the national forces designated for the operation under the operational command of the Major NATO Commander responsible and authorizes him to begin operations at a time and under conditions specified, as necessary, by the North Atlantic Council.)
16 Ibid.
17 Clark, Parameters.
18 Ibid.
21 Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, Ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, 75.
22 Ibid., 87.
23 Department of Defense, Joint Statement.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
28 Clark, Parameters.
30 Clark, Parameters.
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 13.
37 Dick, 33.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Vego, 353.
43 Cordesman, 15.
45 Clark, NATO Review, 16.
46 Ibid.
48 Vego, 195.
49 Clark, NATO Review, 17.
50 Vego, 195.
51 Ibid.
52 Cordesman, 14.
53 Dick, 34.
54 Vego, 198
55 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 18.
58 Cordesman, 15.
59 Ibid.
60 Vego, 358.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 369.
63 Clark, NATO Review, 16.
64 Clark, Parameters.
66 Clark, Parameters.
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