

Korea: the next Kosovo?

Philip Cunningham
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The following article expresses the views of Philip Cunningham, a 1998 Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. In submitting his article Cunningham noted that the "pro-war capitalist advertising vehicle known as the New York Times" declined to publish this commentary.

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The lavish 1999 Academy Awards ceremony, reigned over by the delightful Gwyneth Paltrow, replete with song, dance and celebration, may one day be regarded as the last hurrah of America's near-universal appeal to the world community, the last gasp of peacetime America before the hostilities started.

War was something far away and imaginary, like *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, when all eyes were on Hollywood. Yet a few days later, Clinton, Berger, Albright and Cohen were on TV telling a disbelieving nation that American credibility was on the line in an isolated mountainous place called Kosovo. Increasingly sober bulletins upped the tension, with talk of punitive bombing strikes during a last minute bout of self-conscious summit diplomacy by the Nobel Prize-seeking Richard Holbrooke. The war was about to be televised, but before it was, a credibility-challenged President Clinton asked his fellow Americans to take time out to look up Kosovo on the map.

Imbibing the arrogance Clinton's foreign policy team, NATO offered Serb President Milosevic a flawed peace deal and then took him to war for not signing it. From then on in it was bombs, bombs and bombs, mixed with draconian actions by the Serb government, the forced relocation of Albanian Kosovars and then a flood of refugees that a surprised and unprepared NATO claimed they had been expected all along.

Rhetoric hardened on both sides and the high-tech bombing campaign escalated, though at 19 nations to one, it was a bit surprising to see little Serbia bouncing back after

attack. NATO appeared to be both bully and weakling, causing one to wonder how it might have fared had it fallen into battle with the Soviet Union in its prime.

US contempt for the insignificance of Yugoslavia was initially demonstrated in an air campaign designed to inflict a maximum of terror without easy retribution, sort of like shooting at a crowd below a well-defended tower. It was a classic Clintonian attack, like the bombing of Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq in past last ten months, except that post-impeachment Clinton didn't want to feel the Serbs' pain. The key of using so many television-guided cruise missiles was to wage war that isn't war, to hurt without being hurt, the ultimate yuppie indulgence, making a video game of death from the air.

Now daily briefings at the White House, Pentagon and NATO to tell us that the fight, however ill-conceived and costly, will take time and must go on for the sake of NATO credibility, even if it is a bloody war in an "unimportant" place. The unstated assumption is that "important" places are the real target.

So what's in store for an important place like Korea, north and south?

If, as many US politicians are now saying, Kosovo is not vital to US interests, but credibility is at stake and an example must be set, North Korea comes to mind as the nation for whom the lesson is intended. Iraq has been battered by US bombs on and off for seven years, so if there are lessons to be learned from being bombed, the Iraqis know all about that.

The sudden, unexpected descent into a punitive war by the US and its NATO allies is of shocking relevance to parties on both sides of the 35th parallel, for if there ever was a country that has been a constant thorn in the side of the US over the last five decades it's North Korea. Peace today, war tomorrow. It happened just last month.

If the US were to attack the North, one can hazard a guess that in addition to fierce fighting and millions of war refugees, all sorts of unexpected terrible things would happen. More than anything else the unfolding battle in Yugoslavia demonstrates the unpredictability of war.

Three possible outcomes of NATO's war with Serbia give

pause for thought on the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

1) If the US-led coalition wins, the world's policeman will consolidate its strength and be on the lookout for human rights violations elsewhere on the globe to justify forceful intervention. China is too big to attack, Japan and ROK are allies, home to US troops. North Korea stands out on the short list.

A victorious US might then call North Korea's bluff: let your people free or be bombed. The recent US agreement to pay North Korea \$300 million (in food aid so as not to appear to be a bribe) to get one-time access to a big hole in the ground at the suspected nuclear site may not be as foolhardy as it appears. It may in fact be a cost-effective investment that permits the electronic infiltration of North Korea parallel to the CIA-infiltrated UNSCOM teams that collected vital information prior to the December 1998 bombing in Iraq.

In other words, the world's last superpower might be cocky enough to pick another fight.

2) If the US pulls out without achieving its goals but only suffers light casualties, an uneasy peace will prevail: the US is strong, but not so strong. NATO isn't what it was cracked up to be. Russian influence will grow deeper in the Balkans.

Americans will remain bound by treaty and troop presence to defend South Korea and Japan, but will be unable to counter strong China moves in the direction of Taiwan and the South China Sea islands. Domestic debate in the US will indicate that fewer and fewer Americans are willing to die for other people's problems and that includes Korea's problems.

3) If the US led mission fails, resulting in heavy casualties, an undesirable situation on the ground and the possible dissolution of NATO, there is a fear that North Korea and other rogue states would see US weakness as a green light for more roguish behavior. That is one possibility.

Yet the collapse of NATO and a sober, less trigger-happy US military might be good for the world in general and actually enhance world peace. After all, the ideal world peace is not necessarily Pax Americana.

In the *Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington predicts a world where conflict can be reduced if nations recognize their "differentness" as something that isn't going to change significantly. He orders the world into large categories: Western culture, Islamic, Hispanic, Sinic, Hindu, Japanese, etc. Interestingly, both Japan and China rank as civilizations, whereas Korea is viewed merely as an appendage of one or the other. This could be an oversight by an otherwise erudite professor, but it could also help explain the tragedy that is Korea; the peninsula in between two great powers.

Huntington suggests that similar cultures are less likely to battle, whereas conflict is inevitable across civilizational

lines. At first glance it would appear that Huntington is painting a bleak war-like future for humankind, but in fact his model is somewhat hopeful because it is posited on the natural balance of power a multipolar world.

In a world without a universal culture or a single hegemon, it's live and let live. The inability to project power and recreate the world in one's image forces each party to show some respect and tolerance for different cultures. In such a multipolar world, different cultures are more or less equal but, well, different. According to such a scheme, the US will remain close to Canada and Britain, but it is almost inconceivable that America would see a vital interest in Korea. By the same token, Japan and China will have inevitable influence on the peninsula as they did in ages past.

According to this world view, Serbia is of vital concern to Russians and other orthodox peoples, but only tangentially important to Western Europe and the US. Indeed, the recent conflict shows the logic of Huntington's argument inasmuch as support for Serbia runs deep in "orthodox" countries such as Russia and Greece, and increases with every bomb drop. Following the same line of reasoning, the borderline Muslim affiliation of Albania and Kosovo evokes support from Turkey, Iran, Malaysia and the sympathy of Muslims around the world.

Though Huntington does not go so far as to wish for the collapse of NATO, the failure of the US-led coalition would teach a necessary lesson about the limits of US power and cause the world's policeman to stick to a police beat closer to home. Russia, at least in cultural terms, is better situated to exert influence in Serbia and help maintain peace in the Slavic areas of the Balkans.

Huntington refines his controversial paradigm in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*. Unlike many American policy makers, he sees it as neither inevitable or even beneficial that the US remain a superpower. Peace, or at least geopolitical stability, is enhanced if the world moves in multipolar direction.

The one glaring exception to the "mind your own business rule" in today's world of course is the US, and in this sense it is the US, not Islamic Iraq or Sinic North Korea, that is the main threat to global stability in systemic terms.

Thus America's tendency to bully other countries to follow the American way is the one thing most likely to upset the balance of power in a multipolar world.



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