Milosevic leaving dock at U.N. War Crimes Tribunal.

AP/Wide World Photo (ICTY TV)

Deterring Attack
The Role of Information Operations

By GREGORY L. SCHULTE

The overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000 was a turning point in Balkan history. It set Serbia on a course to political and economic reform and also boosted international efforts to build peace in Bosnia and Kosovo. And it helped turn the Balkans away from nationalist violence and toward European integration.

Milosevic fell from power for many reasons. Chief among them were the unexpected unity of Yugoslavian opposition parties and the ridicule and civil disobedience inflicted on the regime by student activists. The United States, European governments, and nongovernmental organizations bolstered opposition forces while working to isolate the regime, undermine its legitimacy, and attack its power base. Even Milosevic contributed to his own demise by holding elections, which he could not successfully rig.

Before his downfall, Milosevic was president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which formally consisted of the republics of Serbia and Montenegro. However, his real authority was limited to Serbia less the province of Kosovo, which was administered by the United Nations after the intervention by NATO in 1999. The small republic of Montenegro was increasingly independent

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and played a principal role in undermining Milosevic's autocratic rule. As he came under more and more pressure, Washington policymakers became concerned that Serbia might launch a spoiling attack on Montenegro and use it as an excuse to call off elections and suppress the opposition. This would have been a major blow to Western hopes of bringing democracy to Yugoslavia and stability to the region.

Defeating a Serbian attack would have been difficult without a preemptive deployment of American or NATO ground forces to Montenegro. Political leaders in Washington and Europe were reluctant to commit ground forces, and chose to *deter* an attack rather than *defeat* one.

Information operations to influence Milosevic and his military advisors were a key part of the deterrent strategy. Those operations were broadly successful and reinforced previous lessons about the importance of starting early, clearly articulating objectives, coordinating domestically and internationally, and developing and monitoring measures of effectiveness.

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Ousting Milosevic

In 1998, the Milosevic regime cracked down on the Albanian majority population in Kosovo, a restive province of Serbia. While the crackdown was prompted in part by violent provocations by the Kosovo Liberation Army, Serb security forces employed the same heavy-handed tactics that had caused widespread death and suffering elsewhere in the Balkans. A quarter million ethnic Albanians fled to the mountains by September and faced death from starvation and exposure. Only American diplomacy backed by a threat of NATO airpower convinced Milosevic to withdraw his forces and allow the Albanians to return to their villages.

The United States had previously tolerated Milosevic's presence despite his reputation as the butcher of the Balkans after the conflict in Bosnia. His campaign of violence in Kosovo and the associated risks to regional stability now convinced Washington to begin creating the conditions for a change in regime. Washington adopted a new strategy which sought to strengthen democratic forces by providing resources and advice to the political opposition, student movement, and independent media. The strategy also sought to undermine the three pillars of Milosevic's power base—the security services, a network of cronies, and control of the media—with targeted sanctions and other means to encourage dissent.

Renewed attacks by Serbia on Kosovo Albanians in early 1999 made American policymakers more determined to unseat Milosevic. Belgrade's continued use of violence, combined with its rejection of a political settlement at Rambouillet, led NATO to carry out its threat of air strikes starting in March. These attacks, Operation Allied Force, were initially foreseen as lasting days or perhaps weeks. Milosevic's intransigence meant they continued for nearly three months.

Allied Force did not aim explicitly to oust Milosevic, but the Alliance did seek to weaken his political control. In the midst of air strikes, President Bill Clinton called for a democratic transition, saying that "the region's democracies would never be safe with a belligerent tyrant in their midst." At the Washington summit in April 1999, held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of NATO, Allied leaders joined the call for democratic change.

The air strikes included regime-related targets such as leadership, security forces, and military-related factories owned by Milosevic cronies. Some of the latter were hit after the cronies had been warned about their support for the regime. A precision attack on Milosevic's residence, leaving a hole in his bedroom wall, was perhaps the most pointed. The Joint Warfare Analysis Center helped design this effects-based targeting.

Allied Force was complemented by diplomatic efforts, economic sanctions, and information operations designed to isolate Milosevic and undermine his support. The United States helped establish broadcasting facilities in neighboring countries. The so-called "Ring around Serbia," augmented by broadcasts from Commando Solo aircraft, allowed the Serbian public to hear independent media which Milosevic had tried to suppress. In one incident, Yugoslav army draftees deserted when they heard from the Voice of America that state riot police were violently suppressing peaceful protestors in their home towns.

In June 1999, after 78 days of air strikes, Milosevic conceded to NATO demands. The reason for his decision remains a matter of debate, though political survival surely weighed in his calculations. But after the atrocities in Kosovo and his indictment for war crimes, Allied governments could not countenance his rule. Bringing peace and stability to the region could not succeed with Milosevic in power.

Working with its allies in Europe, Washington stepped up its efforts to undermine the regime. The targeted sanctions remained in force, and Belgrade was kept isolated internationally. At a meeting in Sarajevo to inaugurate the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe, U.S. and European leaders used the occasion to underscore Yugoslavia's isolation under Milosevic as well as the place reserved in Europe for a democratic Yugoslavia without him.

AP/Wide World Photo (Lefteris Pitarakis)

Demonstrating against Milosevic in Montenegro.

Despite his public defiance, Milosevic was feeling the political pressure. In July 2000, Milosevic called for elections to be held within two months in an ill-calculated attempt to bolster his legitimacy at home and abroad. That was a fatal mistake that allowed Washington to shift from a strategy aimed at discrediting his rule to one that sought to depose him from power.

With international encouragement and assistance, the opposition coalition threw its full support behind Vojislav Kostunica, the strongest challenger to Milosevic. In the elections held on September 24, the opposition parties, local and international electoral observers, and the U.N. Mission in Kosovo acted in concert to uncover and defeat the regime's efforts at electoral fraud. Finally, after Milosevic refused to accept Kostunica's success at the polls, Serb security forces ignored their orders to move against the crowds of citizens mobilized by the opposition.

After meeting with the Russian foreign minister on October 6, 2000, Milosevic went on Serbian television and acknowledged defeat. Eight months later, he was arrested and flown to The Hague to stand trial for war crimes.

Montenegro

From late 1998 until Milosevic was ousted in October 2000, Montenegro played a pivotal role in the strategy to remove him. America sought to bolster the president of Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic, as a counterweight to Milosevic and to use that country as a springboard for a variety of democratization efforts.

While Serbia remained under international sanctions, Montenegro benefitted from U.S. aid and advice. It soon received bilateral assistance rivalling that of any other country on a per capita basis. Encouraged by Washington, Montenegro became increasingly independent of Belgrade, issuing its own currency, building its own institutions, and providing a haven for political opponents and independent media suppressed by Milosevic.

With help from the West, Djukanovic became a direct threat to the legitimacy of Milosevic, both at home and abroad. Milosevic was banished from international events and reduced to contacts with rogue and obscure states. That was a shock to a national leader who had signed the Dayton Accords and regularly hosted heads of state and their envoys. Meanwhile, Djukanovic enjoyed widespread attention. At the invitation of the President of the United States, he went to New York for the Millennium Summit. Indicted by the War Crimes Tribunal, Milosevic stayed home.

Though not sanctioned by Washington, periodic calls by Djukanovic for a referendum on independence also posed a threat to Milosevic. The president portrayed himself as the only person capable of keeping the remnants of Yugoslavia together, but the defiance of Montenegro suggested otherwise.

Milosevic sought to neutralize this threat from Montenegro. During the NATO air campaign in 1999, allied officials worried that Milosevic would use the conflict as cover for an attack on Montenegro. To forestall such an exigency, the Alliance reaffirmed strong support

for the Djukanovic government and warned Belgrade that any attempt to undermine it would have grave consequences. That threat probably had an impact in the midst of an extended campaign, but its credibility receded when air strikes ended in June.

There were clear indications by 2000 that Milosevic was laying the groundwork for an assault on Montenegro. He was good, although not always successful, at operating just below the threshold that would elicit a strong international response. Milosevic probably assumed that an all-out attack would lead to an Allied response, particularly after the bombardment in 1999. But he may have thought that a coup de main, relying on the thugs of 7th Military Police Battalion in Montenegro, would only elicit a flurry of diplomatic activity.

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Deterring Attack

Washington recognized that decapitation of the government of Montenegro would dramatically set back peace efforts in the Balkans. And it would mean a major defeat for NATO. Thus various steps were taken to protect the Djukanovic government, and options were developed for diplomatic, economic, and military responses. Defeating an attack was determined to be problematic without a deployment of either U.S. or NATO forces to Montenegro. That option was not favored by Washington, let alone in Europe.

As a result, U.S. policymakers recognized that effective deterrence was the key. Their strategy was intended to dissuade Milosevic from attacking Montenegro, weaken his legitimacy and power in Serbia, and maintain international isolation and sanctions on Belgrade. Policymakers agreed that the desired endstate was preserving the Djukanovic government as a platform for democracy and undermining and ultimately removing Milosevic from the scene.

The U.S. strategy, which was interagency in nature and in execution, included:

- diplomatic and economic support to the Djukanovic government coupled with private warnings to avoid actions that could provoke an attack
- approaches to Moscow encouraging the Russians to both warn Milosevic and use their influence with the Yugoslav military and Serb security services
- information operations designed to keep Milosevic and the Yugoslav military uncertain about the Western response to an attack
- close consultations with NATO and European allies to promote a common approach.

The Pentagon took the lead in conducting information operations. In the case of Montenegro, these operations focused on influencing the perceptions of the leadership in Belgrade and were part of a larger information campaign overseen by the Department of State.

Information operations used deployments and exercises conducted in the region to demonstrate U.S and NATO capabilities and keep Milosevic and the Yugoslav military uncertain about Allied responses to an attack on Montenegro. The concept was simple: to make Milosevic and his advisors understand that their planning and preparations were being carefully monitored and that an attack, even with minimal warning or force, would elicit a strong response. The intent was to leave Belgrade uncertain about the nature of the response but fearful that one was inevitable, even if the United States and United Kingdom had to act on their own.

Information operations took advantage of U.S. military activities in the region. These included port visits, the deployment of a Marine

AP/Wide World Photo (Lefteris Pitarakis)

Montenegrin police training in May 1999.

Expeditionary Unit, and an amphibious exercise. They also took advantage of NATO exercises such as Dynamic Response 2000 in Kosovo and deploying the strategic reserve for Stabilization Force (SFOR) and Kosovo Force (KFOR) in March and April.

Detailed planning took place in cells both on the Joint Staff and at U.S. European Command. An interagency core group on information operations in Washington, which was initially established for the Kosovo campaign, provided weekly guidance and deconflicted other aspects of the campaign. It also monitored intelligence on actions by Belgrade and sought to judge the effectiveness of various themes and methods of delivery.

The United Kingdom was integrated into planning and operations at an early stage and made major contributions. British officers were fully involved, often by participating over secure video with the planning cell at U.S. European Command and the core group in Washington. The deployment of a British carrier to the Mediterranean in September had a particularly significant informational impact in Belgrade.

Achieving Success

Milosevic never launched an attack on Montenegro, and the desired endstate was achieved. A good information operator would claim that the deterrence strategy, backed by information operations, had succeeded. But it is also possible that, as some believed, an attack was never likely in the first place.

Uncertainty aside, there were multiple indications that information operations did help alter the perceptions of the intended audiences. The exercises and deployments were noticed in Belgrade, and the Yugoslav military became convinced that NATO would respond to an attack on Montenegro. Milosevic was well aware of the differences in Brussels that might keep the Alliance from acting but was nonetheless concerned about

a military response by the United States and United Kingdom.

The concerns of the regime were reflected in an article published by the state-run press in September 2000. It warned that the United States and its NATO partners "have feverishly sought and still seek a pretext . . . to justify a new military intervention" and cited four exercises in the region. It also cited a statement by the commander of NATO air forces in Europe that the Alliance was looking at a full range of options should Milosevic move against Montenegro.

Information operations were also successfully integrated into a larger information campaign. That thrust, led by the Department of State, was aimed at influencing foreign audiences both inside and outside Yugoslavia. It targeted Milosevic and the September elections in addition to Montenegro. Broad themes and daily messages were distributed interagency and shared with allies at NATO headquarters, where the public warnings of the Secretary General, Lord George Robertson, played an important deterrent role.

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The information campaign was successfully coordinated with diplomatic efforts. When President Clinton met with President Putin in early September, Montenegro was at the top of the agenda—and their meeting was used to signal American seriousness and international support. U.S. diplomats helped arrange for Djukanovic to meet with the British prime minister, French president, and German foreign minister in a show of support. The Secretary of State publicly warned Milosevic to "keep his hands off Montenegro" while refusing to discuss the motives for an exercise by the Marine Corps in Croatia.

Areas for Improvement

Despite an early decision to initiate planning, information operations did not start in earnest until the middle of August 2000 and then only after a push by the White House. The late start reduced the chance to shape the thinking of key audiences. It meant that some activities supporting information operations, such as the Marine Corps exercise, ran up against the September elections in Yugoslavia. As a result, Milosevic was able to cite these events in his campaign rhetoric, claiming that the Allies were using military force to threaten Serbian voters. An earlier start could have avoided these problems.

Once the operations began, their execution was complicated by the mix of players and their disparate views of the meaning, utility, and relevance of information operations. Public affairs officers were wary that information operations aimed at influencing foreign leaders could inadvertently mislead both the media and public at home. This risk of blowback was minimized by the exclusive use of truthful information. Even then, it took some effort to shift the guidance on public affairs from a passive to an active footing to ensure that the military activities, rather than being downplayed as routine, received added attention across the region.

Integrating NATO allies, with the exception of the United Kingdom, was also difficult, reducing the overall coherence of the operations. There were many reasons for allied reluctance to participate in the information operations, including their underestimation of the threat, the lack of NATO doctrine and organization, and the aversion on the part of many diplomats to military action that smacked of propaganda. Similar factors had stymied NATO information operations during the air campaign in the previous year.

Finally, measures of effectiveness were not established or monitored on a regular basis. As a result, there was never a satisfactory mechanism to evaluate performance or help determine when messages or their conduits required adjustment. Policymakers found themselves relying on occasional intelligence or press reports to get a sense of whether the information operations were having any impact.

Information operations in Montenegro reinforced the lessons from Kosovo. Such operations must be based on a clear articulation of objectives and strategy. Interagency and international coordination are essential. Information operations should be integrated from the outset into contingency planning and must start as early as possible to have maximum effect. For each operation, a single agency should be responsible for developing and monitoring measures of effectiveness that employ a broad range of indicators, from sensitive intelligence to public polling.

Done right, it is clear that concerted efforts on the operational level to influence enemy perceptions can have strategic impact, protecting U.S. interests and reinforcing or obviating the use of force. This was the case in Montenegro, where U.S.-led information operations helped to deter attack and created conditions for democratic change and a more stable region. **JFQ**