



Military Operations in Kosovo and the Danger of 'Mission Creep'

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As the Army enters into a time of self-reflection, doctrinal re-assessment, and fiscal re-prioritization, the most pressing existential questions that operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have created, are the implications of long-term military operations and their relationship with the political goals articulated by civilian leadership. There is no need to explain that a disparity between these two envisioned end-states, the military and the civilian, can force catastrophic deviations from the original mission. To this end, the Army and its civilian leadership have long sought to avoid mission creep (a term popularized during the 1990s as an operational scarecrow for policy-makers to evade long-term entanglements in the domestic issues of other nations).¹ While the political dimension of fourth-generation warfare has been a predominant field of study in light of the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan, this seemingly novel fear of uncontrolled mission development predates these operations significantly.

In this regard, as one of the few remaining large-scale contingency operations whose origins are in the pre-9/11 world, the continued US presence in the Kosovo Forces

(KFOR) mission affords a unique case study in the effects of 'mission creep.' When analyzed carefully, the KFOR mission is an operational time capsule. Kosovo is a mission that exists in our Army's pre-9/11 past, its uncertain present, and likely in its future, the conservative politico-military concerns of the 1990s fossilized into very roots of the mission. As our Army moves inexorably towards a reduced force structure similar to that of the Army of 1999 when the mission first began, the ramifications of political and military incongruity in Kosovo provide a timely collection of lessons learned that we could apply to the future of Army operations.

This work will first lay out the idea of mission creep as a political and military landmine to successful operations, whether largely combative or peacekeeping in nature. Next, it will provide a concise overview of KFOR's operational trajectory, marking its steady failure to synchronize political realities with military tasks. Last, it will focus on the specific missteps made by both military and civilian leadership and the contributions of those mistakes towards mission creep in Kosovo.

'Mission Creep': A Conceptual Understanding

In order to understand the descent of the KFOR mission into deviated mission creep, it

is first necessary to establish a suitable framework wherein to characterize this prolific, yet highly misunderstood idea. In a prophetic July 1998 study from the Center for Naval Analyses,



Kosovo Force troops react to a Molotov cocktail thrown during the Silver Saber training exercise at Camp Vrelo Oct. 16. KFOR soldiers also had to breach obstacles, evacuate casualties and perform crowd and riot control operations throughout the three-day exercise.

(U.S. Army photo by Capt. Randy Ready, 4th Public Affairs Detachment)

Adam Siegel attempted to provide a specific articulation of the parameters of actual mission creep, feeling that the term was a hollow platitude utilized only to stymie the use of military force in operations that military leadership deemed inappropriate. While the military and its civilian leadership at the time were already highly conservative about the employment of American forces abroad, the recent and generally negative experiences of the Army in achieving political goals in Haiti and Somalia simply compounded the fear that mission creep would entangle American forces in yet more developing-world quagmires.

However, the term did not have a formal definition in the Department of Defense and was, as Ambassador Richard Holbrooke stat-

ed, “[...] never clearly defined, only invoked, and always in a negative sense, used only to kill someone else’s proposal.”² The term was captured in FM 3-16 *The Army in Multinational Operations* as “tangential efforts to assist in areas of concern unrelated to assigned duties that cripple efficient mission accomplishment.” However, it does not specifically prescribe the root causes of this idea, nor does it define the basis by which tasks are considered ‘unrelated.’³ Thus, Siegel’s attempt to define the term when the military itself offered no definition is a highly useful conceptualization of uncontrolled mission evolution.

Siegel argued because the military was asked to perform tasks for which it had not originally planned and trained for, or considered nation

building in nature, this did not constitute *mission creep* per se, in the derogatory sense it was being used.⁴ Instead, flexibility among military commanders to adapt to changing situations was a trait to be expected by civilian leadership. The tasks required to accomplish the mission as originally formulated, will evolve over time. Siegel reframed the idea of mission change over time into four categories: *task accretion*, *mission shift*, *mission transition*, and *mission leap*. While these terms collectively captured the relatively narrow definition that remained of mission creep, each carried with it specific applicability to the idea of incongruent mission understanding by political and military elements over time. Most succinctly, Siegel argued that true harmony and avoidance of unwanted deviation in mission focus comes from the ability to “tie policy goals, policy guidance, force planning, and tasks together.”⁵ When military action becomes detached from the political mandate for that action, policy goals concurrently cease to correspond with the nature of military operations.

Mission leap encompassed the idea that the very nature of the mission changed beyond the point of recognition to the original objective and that the military role in that new mission’s completion brought with it new tasks. Similarly, *task accretion* captured those changes pursuant to accomplishing the mission, as originally planned without a change in the end-state as initially formulated. Collectively, Siegel argued that *task accretion* and *mission leap* were “conscious decisions made either on the scene or at higher headquarters to modify or drastically change the mission’s parameters.”⁶ Because of the intentional nature of these types of changes in the mission, they could not be accurately described as mission creep. Instead, Siegel argued the greatest risk came from *mission shift* and *mission transition*, wherein forces adopt new

tasks that expand the mission itself or when the mission, explicitly or otherwise, moves to a new set of goals. Collectively labeled as “mission split,” he argued, these two ideas accurately captured what the policymakers and military leadership ultimately feared: a fundamental divergence between stated political objectives and military action.⁷ It is through this lens that we will evaluate the KFOR mission as a case study in civil-military incongruence.

KFOR: Descent into Mission Split

The events leading to the creation of the KFOR mission reached their boiling point in early 1999, following the sustained NATO bombing to end the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia’s (FRY) forces campaign against ethnic Albanians from the semi-autonomous Serbian province of Kosovo. Hostility between Slobodan Milosevic’s Serbian forces and the ethnic Albanian paramilitary organization known as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), had reached their peak. Western political leaders were unable to force concessions from Belgrade to “resolve the grave humanitarian situation” in the breakaway province.⁸ The 77-day bombing campaign was soon followed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, calling for the intervention of an international security presence to provide a stable environment and safe return for the massive Albanian refugee population that fled. Its mandate, according to the resolution, was the disarmament of the KLA, in addition to decidedly broader tasks such as preventing further aggression in Kosovo, and to support, secure and provide freedom of movement for the international civil presence. The NATO-led security force, known as KFOR, would provide the necessary umbrella of security while



Police Officer Guzmend Jakupi, a member of the Kosovo Border Patrol, shows U.S. Army Capt. Anthony Wilkins and Chief Warrant Officer Two Andre Harris, members of the KFOR 17 Joint Law Enforcement Liaison Team, a distant route used by smugglers during a dismounted patrol along the Administrative Boundary Line, May 29. The ABL serves as a dividing line between Kosovo and Serbia, and both sides patrol the ABL to stop smugglers from crossing the boundary illegally.

(Photo by Staff Sgt. Cody Harding, 4th Public Affairs Detachment)

the international civil presence tended to the development of human rights enforcement, local law and order, Kosovar self-government, and infrastructure development.

NATO's own political guidance came out of this tense time, with the establishment of the Military Technical Agreement (MTA) between KFOR and Serbia in June 1999, articulating the means by which KFOR was able to enforce its mandate under UNSCR 1244. In addition to ordering the rapid withdrawal of FRY forces from Kosovo, the agreement granted the KFOR commander the ability to utilize force, if necessary, to provide a secure environment for the international civil presence that would follow. Curiously, the agreement designated the commander of KFOR as the "final authority regarding interpretation" of the MTA.⁹ The mission now had two shaping forces: UNSCR 1244, the overarching set of political objectives governed by the United Nations, and the MTA, a military agreement overseen by the KFOR commander. From the outset, military and political tasks and guidelines were catalogued in separate documents under different authorities.

Despite violent outbreaks between ethnic Albanian and Serbian enclaves within Kosovo during the initial years of the operation, KFOR witnessed a steady decline of active threats to the stability of their operational environment. With the refugee crisis resolved, the KLA effectively disarmed, and the international civil presence assuming the lion's share of substantive tasks pursuant to development of Kosovar institutions, seemingly little specific directives remained from UNSCR 1244 and the MTA. By 2007, the political discourse in Serbia and across Europe trended inexorably towards an independent Kosovo, leaving the military arm of the operation clinging desperately to its vague guideline to provide a 'safe

and secure environment'. After eight years of presence, violence reached record lows. The Kosovo Police which was non-existent in 1999, had reached over 7,000 personnel, both Albanians and Serbs.¹⁰ The internation-



U.S. soldiers with the 525th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade (BfSB) and Ukrainian soldiers push away a simulated rioter during the Kosovo Force (KFOR) 17 Mission Rehearsal Exercise (MRE) at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, May 3, 2013. The KFOR 17 MRE was designed to prepare the 525th BfSB for operations in support of NATO in Kosovo.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Bryan Rankin)

al civil presence was heavily reinforced with the creation of the European Union Rule of Law force (EULEX). Its mandate in support of the United Nations mission was to develop the legal institutions of Kosovo.¹¹ KFOR, on the other hand, saw a steady decrease in troop force and minor geographical re-alignment with little assessment of their role in this drastically different Kosovo, continuing low-intensity presence patrols and passively monitoring the environment.

The Kosovo Republic declared its independence from the Serbian state in 2008. This act demanded a re-assessment of the on-the-ground reality, versus the originally-stated mission for the presence of the still

thousands-strong military force.¹² Instead of synchronizing the evolving political situation with a strongly diminished military role, KFOR instead assumed a variety of tasks it deemed necessary to continue operations in support of a 'safe and secure environment'. The most prominent of these expanded tasks, was KFOR's role in the establishment of the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF). The KSF was aimed at providing the government in Pristina a mechanism to achieve its own control of the environment.¹³

KFOR would spend the next five years developing the KSF as the security situation, with minor exceptions, maintained its stable and nearly quiet status.

Finally, in 2013, the political earth shifted again under KFOR's feet as the Brussels Agreement was signed between Serbia and the Kosovar authorities. In exchange for future EU accession talks, Serbia agreed to remove the relics of its Belgrade-sponsored political and security institutions from the northern (and largely Serbian) provinces in Kosovo.¹⁴ The motivation for Serbian compliance in its normalization of relations with Kosovo, had effectively shifted from its fear of military reprisal by NATO, in hopes of membership in the European Union. Shortly after the agreement, the now 2,500-strong Kosovo Security Forces were declared 'fully operational and capable' to support civil authorities in disaster relief and civil emergencies.¹⁵ Domestic capability to ensure a "safe and secure environment," seemed primed for a long-overdue shift from KFOR to these new institutions; the Kosovo Police along with the EULEX mission in Kosovo.

Missed Opportunities to Achieve Synchronization

Over the course of its operation, KFOR has seen a steady decline in ethnic violence and a drastic increase in the international civil presence and Kosovo security institutions; put simply, the NATO-led force's primary justification for existence has eroded without proper assessment of how its daily tasks support a clearly-articulated political end-state. As Siegel's mission evolution framework posits, the most dangerous examples of unfocused mission conceptualization come from the cases of *mission shift* and *mission transition*, specifically where policy goals and force structure become



Slovenian soldiers form a defensive line while conducting riot control operations during a Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission rehearsal exercise (MRE) at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, May 12, 2013. The KFOR 17 MRE was designed to prepare the U.S. Army's 525th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade for operations in support of NATO in Kosovo.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Bryan Rankin)

increasingly divergent. To this end, there are two primary opportunities wherein KFOR, its civilian leadership in NATO, and the UN failed to re-assess the nature of the military operation in light of drastic political changes.

The first opportunity for KFOR to re-assess its role in accordance with both political objectives and the reality of the security situation, arose with the declaration of independence by the Kosovo Republic and the establishment of the EULEX mission, both in 2008. KFOR's mandate as the international security presence, according to UNSCR 1244 and the MTA, was to facilitate both the return of refugees and the withdrawal of FRY forces from Kosovo, not to establish military or paramilitary elements representative of a Kosovar state. The UNSCR

1244 and the MTA were the political keystones of KFOR's mission. These foundational documents upheld the 'territorial integrity' of Serbia. They only supported Kosovar institutional development as they existed 'within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,' now Serbia.¹⁶ With a Kosovar declaration of independence largely recognized by most of Europe, KFOR and its civilian leaders in NATO and the UN missed a critical opportunity to re-assess the purpose of the military force, or the opportunity to terminate the mission. With the establishment of the EULEX mission in support of the international civil presence, the military's role in the country should have seemed even more in need of re-assessment. Instead, the NATO-led force was content to create tasks to justify its presence,

rather than assess the purpose of its continued presence in light of the changing situation.

Utilizing Siegel's framework of mission divergence, KFOR's decision to accept additional tasks in the form of the development of the KSF constitutes a dangerous form of *mission shift*, and drastic deviation from its political objectives articulated by 1244 and the MTA. Even using FM 3-16's narrowly-defined articulation of mission creep, this effort was by all accounts 'tangential' to the original effort of establishing a safe environment for the civilian presence in Kosovo, and prevent renewed hostilities.¹⁷ This action cannot be accurately described as *task accretion*. The end-state was no longer envisioned as it had been in 1999, with Kosovar statehood entering into the agenda. If policy goals and force structure being synchronized is essential to avoiding mission creep, the inability of NATO forces and its respective political leadership to scale down the military's role in light of increased civilian presence and a normalized security environment was a regrettable failure. Even if the overarching political goals regarding Kosovo had changed from a modest humanitarian mission to one of dedicated 'nation-building,' the civilian documents providing the military its mission focus should have been assessed and revised. The lack of end-state articulation "discouraged long-term solutions" and would leave KFOR a merely reactive force.¹⁸ In either instance, both the military and civilian arms of the mission failed to avoid stumbling into *mission shift* and adopting new tasks not envisioned in the original end-state.

Even if the political situation was not ripe for re-assessment of the KFOR mission in 2008 following these drastic developments, it was certainly so in early 2013 with the Brussels Agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, followed shortly after by the declaration of Koso-

vo Security Forces as being 'fully-operational and capable.' For the second time in five years, the political environment, the security situation, and the Kosovar government's capabilities had shifted so drastically since the initial intervention in 1999 that KFOR, NATO, and the UN mission were no longer operating on solid ground about providing clear mission focus. Without an equally clear re-assessment of its overarching political objectives, KFOR and the civilian leadership of the UN mission were now largely divorced from each other's understanding of the environment. Brussels had essentially removed NATO as the bulwark against Serbian aggression and replaced military reprisal with economic incentive as a condition for Serbian compliance. There had been, as Siegel articulates in his definition of *mission transition*, an "unstated transition to a new set of objectives."

¹⁹ For Kosovo to declare its independence, establish domestic police and security forces, oversee the removal of old Serbian structures in the north, and enjoy the lowest levels of violence since the intervention were astounding changes. Even more astounding was to accomplish all of these tasks without updating, revising, or terminating NATO's continued military presence.

With the collective focus of the international civilian presence effectively shifting towards the support and development of Kosovar political and security institutions, the guiding hand of NATO's operations had similarly shifted to a newly envisioned but unspoken end-state. Siegel's definition of *mission transition* is particularly useful in this context, charting the further descent of KFOR into 'mission creep' through its movement towards a revised set of political objectives without revising the relevancy of military tasks that were allegedly in support of them. As a result, the lack of a modified politi-

cal end-state in accordance with the new reality of Kosovo left KFOR without clearly defined objectives, bound only to respond as events narrowly permitted.

Conclusion

With our increased study of politico-military affairs and the idea of the ‘whole-of-government’ approach to future military operations, no case study can prove too insignificant to extract at least some useful lessons about the importance of clarity and achieving a unified understanding of the mission and its

end-state. Many if not most of our formation would be surprised to know that we still have forces stationed in Kosovo, performing a mission set whose shifting priorities and ill-defined end-states have left American forces precariously trapped in a seemingly-stable area of operations. As the Army and its civilian leaders move inescapably towards the smaller military, fiscal restraint, and political wariness over troop commitments that punctuated the pre-9/11 era, a 1990s formulation of ‘mission creep’ proves especially interesting when combined with the lessons of Iraq and

Afghanistan. Just as those operations were frequently the victim of an unclear political end-state and a correspondingly unfocused set of military tasks, KFOR was also stymied by a similar incongruity.

From the outset, the KFOR mission’s political and military tasks were devised separately and catalogued in documents managed by different elements. Although KFOR, as the military mission, was able to achieve its initially stated objectives; uncertain political objectives led it to developing additional tasks in order to justify its contin-

ued presence. The failure of the KFOR mission to achieve a common understanding of its military tasks in support of a political end-state is merely one more example of the danger that unfocused operations and mission creep can wreak upon achieving national priorities. By understanding when the political situation that governs military operations has changed dramatically, commanders can re-assess their own role in the greater scheme of these operations, and prevent such ‘creep’ from hijacking both civil and military control of the environment. ■

NOTES

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2. Siegel, 7.

3. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-16, *The Army in Multinational Operations* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 20 May 2010), 4-2.

4. Siegel, 12.

5. Ibid., 4.

6. Ibid., 24.

7. Ibid., 26.

8. United Nations Security Council, 10 June 1999. Resolution S/RES/1244, *On the situation relating Kosovo*. In *United Nations Security Council Resolutions – 1999*, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N99/172/89/PDF/N9917289.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed December 30, 2013).

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12. Ibid., 145.

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16. UNSC, RES 1244.

17. FM 3-16, 4-2.

18. R. Cody Phillips, *Operation Joint Guardian: The U.S. Army in Kosovo* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2007), Pub. 70-109-1, 55.

19. Siegel, 24.