

Rules for Diplomats . . .

. . . and when to break them

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BISMARCK is supposed to have said that asking him to take political principles into account when conducting foreign policy was like suggesting that he walk through a dense forest with a twelve-foot pole between his teeth. Well, he would say that, wouldn't he? Still, even if we discount for the cynicism of a 19th-century practitioner of realpolitik, his observation cannot be dismissed. For when U.S. policy-makers turn to such places as Afghanistan and the Balkans, they bring with them a set of principles that often make them stumble.

Here are three such rules: You should not change borders; you should not propose a peaceful transfer of populations; and your solution—especially if it requires force—must have the approval of the U.N. Now, these are all useful ideas, provided that they are seen as cautionary—and optional—restraints. Changing borders is reasonably seen as dangerous because it might be a precedent encouraging expansionist states to seek the forcible breakup of vulnerable nations. Peaceful transfers of populations are disliked lest they encourage violent “ethnic cleansing.” And U.N. sanction is required because diplomats generally want to place as many obstacles as possible in the way of force as a solution to disputes.

All of these are reasonable aims. But there may well be circumstances in which other solutions are preferable. For example, allowing Slovenia and Croatia to secede from Yugoslavia involved much less violence than would have resulted from an extended attempt to compel them to stay in the federation. The U.S. position—that we had no dog in that fight—effectively gave Milosevic permission to prevent their departure by force.

He soon abandoned that effort, but the U.S. policy—largely dictated by a dislike of changing borders—was a grave error; by re-liberating the genie of political violence, it helped cause the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

Compare and contrast the “velvet divorce” of Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Against the expressed wishes of virtually every Western leader, all concerned to prevent the redrawing of boundaries, the two halves of Czechoslovakia broke apart peacefully and have since developed quite effectively as single states. There is no conflict between them such as might well have developed had significant numbers of Czechs and Slovaks felt imprisoned in a common state. And their recent history compares very favorably with the wars between nations forcibly constrained to stay in Yugoslavia. Yet despite these experiences, redrawing boundaries remains a bugbear to respectable diplomatic opinion.

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Let us now look at transferring population. Hostility to this is so fixed an element in international affairs that when the Dayton Accords were negotiated, one element in them was the return of Bosnian refugees forcibly ejected by ethnic cleansing. But very few refugees have in fact returned to the homes they left—and for good reason: They would be returning to live next door to the very people who drove them out. That would be prudent, indeed possible, only if they were offered more or less permanent protection by NATO. It is hard not to feel that a better solution would have been to compensate them for their loss of property and assist them to settle amid their new (and ethnically similar) neighbors.

What makes this unbending hostility to population transfers so hard to fathom is that the postwar order in Europe rests upon the violent expulsion of ethnic Germans from eastern Europe. Unjust though that it was, it created stable post-

war borders that have minimized conflict ever since. And the decision of successive West German governments not to seek to reverse these expulsions, asking instead for reasonable compensation for their victims, has rightly been seen as a very considerable act of statesmanship.

And then there is the use of force without U.N. sanction. Suppose that a powerful state, say China, invades Freedonia. When the U.S. seeks a U.N. Security Council resolution to condemn and resist the invasion, China vetoes it. If the U.S. has made a prior decision to forswear force without the U.N.'s blessing, then Freedonia will be conquered and occupied. Unlawful force will have triumphed. If that is a bad thing, then the rules that helped bring it about are either foolish, or wicked, or (as I think) a reasonable guide in general but not invariably valid or binding. The U.S. should be very wary of attempts by its European allies to obtain American consent to this U.N. preeminence; when they are not dictated by soft-headed pacifism, these urges reflect an obvious desire to constrain America's “hegemonic” power.

Most of the above rules are dictated by an understandable desire to promote stability in international affairs. That has led some conservatives to mistakenly denounce “stability” as such. Anyone who seriously thinks stability a bad thing should be given a one-way ticket to Colombia. The actual error committed by the diplomats is to confuse stability with unbending support of the status quo. When a status quo is unavoidably dissolving, as Yugoslavia was in 1990, the correct response is to persuade the different parties to abjure violence as a means to a solution. If that can be achieved, then they will be led by the facts on the ground to solutions that reflect the wishes of the local populations. And if those solutions include border changes or transfers of population, so be it.

Another concept has recently entered the diplomatic rulebook: the principle of multi-ethnicity. Baldly stated, this is the assertion that the only really legitimate state is one combining several ethnic groups. This proposition is the precise opposite of the principle of national self-determination that Woodrow Wilson asserted in 1918 as the only legitimate basis for statehood. In those days, the

Habsburg Empire was a model of what to avoid; today it is a model to emulate. Anyone who visits the Balkans today in the company of U.N. officials soon becomes accustomed to hearing “the principle of multi-ethnicity” trip off their tongues. Nor is this mere theory: In the Dayton negotiations, great emphasis was placed on ensuring that Bosnia remained a multi-ethnic state; and in the Kosovo war, the demand of the Kosovar Albanians to form their own ethnic state was rejected—in part because it was seen as conflicting with the principle of multi-ethnicity.

One should, of course, distinguish the *principle* of multi-ethnicity from the *fact* of multi-ethnicity. No one needs to assert the principle when the fact flourishes—as it does, for instance, in New York City. The principle becomes important only when the fact is visibly and vitally lacking, as in Bosnia or Kosovo. A man can be murdered for speaking the wrong language in a Pristina street; but the U.N. authorities labor to ensure that the judiciary contains the percentages of Serb and Albanian appropriate to a multi-ethnic society. An ideological orthodoxy is being pursued, at the expense of commonsense solutions to pressing problems.

A faint echo of these concerns can be seen in the State Department’s current concern that Kabul and Kandahar should not fall to the U.S.-led alliance until a government of all tribal factions has been put together. There is nothing unreasonable in seeking to reconcile the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns, to a new order by including them in the government; but it is unreasonable to insist that real military victories should be given up until the perfect diplomatic solution has been achieved. Nothing in life or war is certain; those victories may not be permanently available; and forswearing them may finally be self-defeating. After all, the Pashtuns are already the largest faction in the Taliban government. Common sense suggests it would be easier to recruit them for betrayal when their tribal colleagues have been defeated; victory drums up its own recruits. Only the *amour-propre* of diplomats will be hurt by a military victory; and that is presumably an occupational hazard, like housemaid’s knee, which need wring no tears from the rest of us. NR