

Yugoslav test for Europe

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HOW WILL it be known to future generations? The Yugoslav civil war? The Slovene war of independence? The beginning of the Great Balkan wars? Or simply the 1991 Yugoslav crisis? No one knows. But it is, for certain, the first real test of the post-cold war security order in Europe. As such, it will have very important consequences well beyond the borders of Yugoslavia.

Tempting providence, one other prediction can be made: this will not be the beginning of the third world war. Although some of the local factors in the Balkans appear to have changed little since 1914, the international context is very different, even from five years ago. Europe today is no longer an armed camp of rival powers or power blocs, each ready to react instantly to the smallest encroachment by the other on its interests or those of its protégés.

That does not mean the Yugoslav conflict can safely be ignored. Even without igniting a Europe-wide conflagration, the break-up of Yugoslavia on ethnic lines can trigger several international conflicts within the Balkans, as well as giving a potent example to other countries in central and eastern Europe where ethnic communities are in dispute.

And even if the conflict is contained within Yugoslavia it is all too likely to produce waves of refugees, mainly towards western Europe, most obviously Austria and Italy, the northern and western neighbours, but including others, notably Germany, with substantial and anxious immigrant populations from Yugoslavia.

Focus of aspirations

Also, the European Community has a degree of leverage, and therefore responsibility, not only as the donor or organiser of large amounts of economic aid, but also as the focus of aspirations among all the peoples of Yugoslavia. Croats and Slovenes may think they can "join Europe" by escaping from Yugoslavia, but the Serbs do not regard themselves as any less European. Last week's attempt at mediation by the EC was, significantly, a response to appeals both from the breakaway republics and

from the federal government. It is clear, moreover, that in this region the US is happy to leave the initiative to Europeans.

Finally, normal human feelings forbid other Europeans to watch idly while Yugoslavia slides into chaos and all-out war. In more distant places impotence may be an acceptable excuse, but in Yugoslavia feelings of solidarity are reinforced by physical proximity, and by the principles of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which have eroded, if not quite abolished, the formerly sharp distinction between internal and external affairs.

Observer force

But what can be done? Mediation, even backed by leverage, has not been an instant success. Can troops be sent to stop the fighting, and if so whose? Nato has no standing in the matter, since none of its members has been, or is likely to be, attacked. No foreign government will wish to involve its forces in the fighting on one side or the other; and given the complexity of the issues that is surely wise.

An observer force to help police an agreed ceasefire while negotiations are resumed seems a more feasible option. In other parts of the world such forces operate under the United Nations flag, but in Europe a CSCE flag might be appropriate, while the Western European Union, perhaps acting on a steer from the EC, could co-ordinate the levying and despatch of appropriate units from among its members.

Clearly the institutional mechanisms of the post-cold war European order are not yet in place. But in real life institutions are more often improvised to deal with specific crises than built from a comprehensive architectural design. The Yugoslav crisis has at least given some tangible reality to the issues discussed recently by the CSCE foreign ministers in Berlin, and by the EC heads of government in Luxembourg. The EC's need for a common foreign and security policy, and the need of Europe as a whole for institutions to manage conflicts and settle disputes peacefully, is being all too graphically demonstrated.