

So far, Slovenia is winning

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IN BOTH military and political terms, the Slovenes have outwitted Yugoslavia's federal forces since their declaration of independence last week. They have also made the European Community and the United States look foolish for reacting with calls for the preservation of Yugoslavia as a unitary state. The Germans are now bowing to domestic public opinion, which supports the independence bids by Slovenia and its neighbouring republic, Croatia: "Yugoslavia's unity cannot be maintained with military violence," Chancellor Helmut Kohl has acknowledged. His Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, has spoken similarly in Belgrade.

Had the EC collectively emphasised that point from the start, the federal government in Belgrade might have hesitated before dispatching troops and armour to Slovenia. The EC peace mission from the Luxembourg summit last weekend helped briefly to cool the situation, but it was based on the same outdated preconception that Yugoslavia's integrity as a state should be preserved.

In dealing with the incursion of federal forces, the Slovene defence force used tactics developed long ago to deal with an invasion by Soviet armour. In numerous instances they succeeded in cutting off, encircling and pinning down the federal troops and armour, whose commanders appear not to have realised that they were behaving just like the putative Soviet invader — in Alpine terrain, moreover, far from suited to tanks. The upshot was humiliating for the federal forces. The Slovenes may have seemed to be pushing their luck in demanding first that the federal troops leave their armour behind, and then that they should remove it on transporters —

both suggesting a form of defeat. But they saw that they were in a strong position.

The Slovenes also seem to have shrewdly calculated the odds against an all-out assault by federal forces. Such a war would be likely to outrage international opinion. It would further tear the federal army apart, even if the troops used were mainly from Serbia (the republic whose leaders are determined to prevent Yugoslavia from disintegrating). It could well precipitate the long-dreaded full-scale civil war between Serbs and Croats; and it might tempt the ethnic Albanians in the province of Kosovo to rebel against their Serbian overlords. Such a combination could be disastrous for the Serbs and their demagogic communist leader, Slobodan Milosevic, whose rabble-rousing appeals to pan-Serbian emotions reinforced the desire of Slovenes and Croats to break away.

Those realities must have been underestimated by the EC and the Americans when they set about trying to keep Yugoslavia intact. The Austrian Chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, rightly rebuked them when he said: "Whoever continues to place the emphasis on the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia does not understand that the problem has already evolved beyond that stage."

It has been evident for weeks that only by granting Slovenia and Croatia virtually complete autonomy, with safeguards for minorities, could Yugoslavia remain a geographical entity. As Volker Rühle, the general secretary of Germany's Christian Democrats, commented this week, it is "morally and politically unbelievable" that the yardstick of self-determination, which brought Germany its unity, should not be applied to its neighbours.