

Diplomacy tested by territorial integrity

Edward Mortimer in London and Lionel Barber in Washington on the west's shift

EUROPEAN Community states yesterday confirmed a dramatic shift in the west's policy towards Slovenia and Croatia, raising the possibility of recognition if the Yugoslav federal army did not cease hostilities.

Nine days ago, when the two Yugoslav republics unilaterally declared their independence, they encountered virtually unanimous official disapproval. No foreign governments recognised the new states.

Only a week earlier, in Ber-

lin, the foreign ministers of the 35 states of the CSCE had appealed to Croatia and Slovenia to remain in the Yugoslav federation, while urging Serbia to negotiate with them on changes in governmental structure which would, they suggested, preserve Yugoslavia's integrity.

Mr James Baker, US secretary of state, flew straight from Berlin to Belgrade to take that message personally. The US, would "neither encourage nor reward unilateral actions" leading to secession.

In Europe, the US did not want to seem to be advocating a break-up of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Bush administration believes that in post-cold war European crises it is up to Europeans, specifically the EC, to take the lead.

The west was also reluctant (after the Kurdish affair in Iraq) to seem to be egging on ethnic minorities to a collision course with the central authorities. The weakness of this

stance was that it put the west in the camp of the still-Marxist Yugoslav army and the proponents of a greater Serbia, putting too much emphasis on order at the expense of self-determination and democracy.

Mr Lawrence Eagleburger, a former US ambassador to Yugoslavia and now deputy secretary of state, signalled the US policy shift at the weekend, making clear that the status quo in Yugoslavia had become untenable.

"It is absolutely essential," he said, "for a different configuration in Yugoslavia, that the sovereignty of those republics and their democratic, market-oriented process must continue, that we are against the use of force to maintain the federation as it now exists. We're against the use of force period, but what we want is a new confederation."

By Tuesday, the State Department was speaking out

much more freely about the desirability of autonomy for Croatia and Slovenia, even declaring that it would accept independence for the break-away republics on condition that it was "achieved peacefully."

European governments at first were as cautious as the Americans, but their perspectives varied with their geographical situation and their own domestic problems. France, Romania and the Soviet Union - all states with a centralist tradition, fearful of separatism among ethnic or linguistic minorities - have been the firmest supporters of Yugoslav territorial integrity, while Austria, with close historical and geographical ties to Croatia and especially Slovenia, has been the most sympathetic to their point of view.

Germany too has been sensitive to the breakaway republics' predicament, partly, but not only, because it is host to a substantial population of Croat

Gastarbeiter. The more fundamental reason was well put by Mr Volker Rühle, chairman of the ruling Christian Democratic Union. "We won our unity through the right to self-determination," he said on Monday.

"If we Germans think everything else in Europe can stay just as it was, if we follow a status quo policy and do not recognise the right to self-determination in Slovenia and Croatia, then we have no moral or political credibility."

Perhaps the most forthright in admitting the reasons for his policy shift has been Mr John Major, the British prime minister.

During the Luxembourg summit last weekend he was still saying publicly that "the first prize is to hold the [Yugoslav] federation together". Yet inside the meeting he was warning that this would probably prove impossible, and that western public opinion would back the Slovenes.