

Two principles in conflict

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THE long-awaited and predicted collapse of Yugoslavia presents Europe with a double challenge. First, it is a political challenge with the strongest moral overtones.

The European revolutions of 1989 were not only anti-Communist uprisings but assertions of the right to self-determination. As Germany is foremost in now recognising, that right — exercised by its own people of the east — is not lightly to be denied to the peoples of Slovenia and Croatia in the name of the territorial integrity of a state called Yugoslavia whose slender claim to legitimacy is in shreds.

It is a challenge, secondly, because a war is being waged on European soil for the first time since 1945. Unlike the recent Gulf crisis, or the proxy conflicts of the superpowers in the Third World, this one is in our own back yard. We cannot simply settle back to watch it on television.

Deciding what precisely can be done is a lot harder than getting our bearings right. In the revolutionary year of 1989 the right of self-determination was exercised by sovereign states within the meaning of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which put the seal on the territorial outcomes of the Second World War. The only partial exception was in the case of Germany, but there the people of East Germany opted for self-annexation to the Federal Republic. In the process, the disputed German frontier with Poland was finally recognised.

The crisis in Yugoslavia poses the question of territorial adjustment and reopens questions left over from the peace settlement of the First World War. It is easy enough, with the history books open, to envisage the reincorporation of Slovenia and Croatia into the Christendom of which they were for centuries a part, the nearest contemporary equivalent of which is the swathe of democratic societies now extending from the Atlantic to the frontiers of the old Russian Empire.

That would be a convenient solution: here are two small republics that have repudiated communism in free elections and whose potential for economic take-off is not far behind Greece or Portugal, both members of the European Community. But this implies relegating the remainder of what today is Yugoslavia to its Balkan and post-Ottoman fate along the old line of division between Catholic and Orthodox Europe.

Nor is it difficult to dispute the legitimacy or viability of the Yugoslav Federation, especially now that the army — officered predominantly by communists who are Serbians to boot — is no longer under federal or civilian control. Nevertheless, within the meaning of the Helsinki Final Act, and in the eyes of the United Nations, Yugoslavia is — at least, was — a sovereign state and the principle of self-determination is in conflict with the principle of upholding the integrity of sovereign states.

This last may not be a very satisfactory principle for the conduct of international relations in the aftermath of the Cold War, with suppressed nationalisms stirring all around; but it remains one of the pillars of the existing

order and will have to do so until such a time as states can agree on a concept of international co-operation that extends to mutual responsibility for the resolution of internal conflicts and upholding of human rights.

It might be easier to reconcile these two principles in the case of Yugoslavia were it not for the fact that self-determination provides no neat solution to the problem. As in other parts of central and eastern Europe — Hungary and Romania, Germany and Poland, for example — ethnic populations overspill the frontiers of states. In the ethnic boiling pot of Yugoslavia they do so with a vengeance, and either large numbers of people would have to be moved or Serbs and Croats would still have to learn to live together.

Self-determination is not a sufficient principle on which to found the new order in Europe; as a general proposition there may be more future in transnational integration on the west European model than mucking around afresh with frontiers in the manner of Woodrow Wilson.

Nevertheless, the claims of



By
Peter
Jenkins

peoples to self-determination cannot be trampled roughshod under the principle of territorial integrity, as was the initial response to Slovenian and Croatian independence by both the United States and the European Community. The Cold War is ended, but the old rules and reflexes persist; we saw this when the aspirations of the Baltic states took second place to the superpower relationship in the context of the Gulf crisis and, indeed, in the first reactions to the idea of German unification when, for a moment, Britain and France seemed to be the last pillars of the Warsaw Pact.

Europe's interests in Yugoslavia are these. To see self-determination exercised in a manner that does not arouse dormant nationalisms around other old territorial disputes. To avoid the total economic collapse of the region, which would be the result of prolonged civil war. To prevent floods of refugees adding to already acute problems of immigration exacerbated by the Cold War's ending. To hold open the door to the eventual embrace by the European Community of what was Yugoslavia but must somehow find the basis for a new form of Balkan confederation.

We cannot hold the ring in Yugoslavia, put up as arbiter amid such ethnic confusion, political breakdown, and civil war. Our role must be to champion right against might, while persisting in the offer of good offices and the prospect of a European future for nations and peoples who can learn to live in peace and freedom in the European way.