

Dutch minister hones diplomatic skills

By Ronald van de Krol in Amsterdam

IN NEARLY 10 years as Dutch foreign minister, Mr Hans van den Broek, 54, has gained more experience attempting to bind Europe and the US than in holding together the feuding peoples of south-east Europe.

But his central role in recent European Community efforts to mediate in the Yugoslav crisis has changed that, giving the minister an opportunity to hone his diplomatic skills in a new arena, beyond western Europe and Nato.

For Mr van den Broek personally, the EC's shuttle diplomacy in Yugoslavia could not have come at a better time. The declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia

were made a week before the Dutch assumed the rotating six-month presidency of the EC on July 1, and Mr van den Broek has been in the international spotlight ever since.

Even without the threat of war in Yugoslavia to worry about, a successful Dutch presidency of the EC was always considered essential for the future of Mr van den Broek, who for the past year has feuded with Mr Ruud Lubbers, the Dutch prime minister, about who should reign supreme in foreign policy.

The foreign minister, who complained last year that Mr Lubbers was gradually straying into his field of competence, must be delighted that,

so far at least, the external face of the Dutch presidency has been his own rather than that of the premier.

Mr van den Broek was born in Paris, where his father was a foreign correspondent for the Dutch daily newspaper *De Telegraaf*. Trained as a lawyer, he first practised law in Rotterdam and then spent seven years working for Akzo, the Arnhem-based chemicals group.

He entered parliament in 1976, serving briefly as state secretary for foreign affairs in the early 1980s before joining Mr Lubbers' first government in 1982 as foreign minister. Now in his third consecutive term at the Foreign Ministry,

Mr van den Broek is the only cabinet minister to have served Mr Lubbers from the beginning.

Both the premier and his foreign minister are expected to make their current terms in office their last, with Mr Lubbers widely tipped as the next president of the EC Commission and Mr van den Broek rumoured to be interested in the top Nato job.

Ironically, the increasing rivalry between the two men at home may hinder them in finding new challenges beyond the Netherlands' borders: the likelihood of two Dutchmen being awarded top posts in Brussels is considered slim.