

The EC's role in Yugoslavia

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THE PRECARIOUS Yugoslav peace plan, brokered by the European Community on the island of Brioni, can hardly bring more than a temporary respite in the conflict between the country's rival republics. Though the plan provides a breathing-space for the federal authorities and the republics to try to solve their disputes, no one can be in any doubt that the slightest incident could again trigger off a civil war.

For the EC, however, there is some cause for satisfaction. It has acted with commendable speed in offering its services as a mediator, thus partially erasing the impression made by its failure to agree on a joint response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. If there is no question, at the moment, of any EC military contribution to solving the Yugoslav conflict, the Community has at least shown that the implementation of a joint foreign policy is not the chimera that it has often seemed.

In many ways, the Yugoslav crisis has offered the EC with the ideal test case for its nascent foreign and security policy. It is a quintessentially European problem, affecting not only the stability of the Balkans, but that of Europe as a whole. Quite apart from the threat to the security of southern and central Europe of a conflagration in Yugoslavia, the resulting influx of refugees into countries such as Italy, Greece, Austria and Germany would be a further destabilising factor. The interests of many EC member countries are thus involved more directly than they appeared to be in the case of the Gulf crisis.

European link

On the Yugoslav side, both the federal authorities and the dissident republics are anxious to underline their European credentials and to further their chances of closer links with the EC, which already provides them with substantial economic aid. Moreover, there appears to be no clash between the policies pursued by the EC and the US.

After the energetic, but ill-advised intervention of Mr James Baker, the US Secretary of State, in support of the Yugoslav federal government at the beginning of the latest

crisis, Washington has been only too happy to let the EC assume the mediator's burden. That, too, is the position the 35-nation Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe adopted at its meeting in Prague last week.

The group of EC foreign ministers was thus endowed with a strong, if informal international mandate and the confidence of all the feuding Yugoslav parties. It is most unlikely that a conference of the warring factions would have taken place at all at this juncture in the absence of an EC initiative.

Cautionary note

Nor does the Community's role end there. An EC mission of up to 50 observers will be sent to monitor the agreement under which all federal troops in Slovenia and the Slovene militia will return to their bases and the arrangements for the control of Slovenia's external borders.

If that is more than the Community has achieved in the field of foreign policy than before, a cautionary note needs to be sounded. The EC has been able to act swiftly and effectively because its offer to mediate has been based on a consensus of member states and the support of the US, Soviet Union and most of the other countries concerned.

That consensus is unlikely to survive if the truce in Yugoslavia breaks down, and the question of recognising the breakaway Yugoslav republics becomes an issue for immediate decision. Germany's attempts to persuade its Community partners to recognise the rebel republics if the federal Yugoslav army intervenes again has already provoked accusations in France that Bonn and Vienna are attempting to resurrect a German zone of influence in the region.

However good the start it has made, the real test of the Community's capacity to help resolve Yugoslavia's long-term problems is therefore still to come. Its success or failure on this concrete issue is much more likely to determine its future status as a player on the world stage than any theoretical decisions on a common foreign policy that might be taken at the end of this year.