

Ian Davidson forecasts a European thaw

Community Policing

Europe's disarray in the face of the Gulf crisis has become one of the most frequent topics of ironic comment. In December, you hear people say, the Community was talking loftily about putting together a common European foreign and security policy; but when the war started in January, they all went their separate ways. The Germans opted out of the hostilities entirely, the French sent an ambiguous little contingent, and only the British were fully committed alongside their American allies. As for the Belgians or the Portuguese, the less said the better.

Old-fashioned nationalists and Thatcherites may draw the triumphant inference that the Gulf war has exposed the futility of the Community's foreign policy ambitions. But it would probably be a mistake to draw any such sweeping conclusion, either for the short or for the long term.

For the long term, today's crisis is obviously a poor guide. Defence and foreign policy have long been bedrock attributes of the nation state, and each European nation has entrenched national attitudes and distinct national interests. But economic and commercial policy are also bedrock attributes of the nation state, and the members of the Community have long transferred commercial policy to the Community, while most of them clearly intend to transfer monetary policy to the Community as well. The history of the Community is the history of the pooling of policies previously attributed exclusively to nation states; so the same may well happen to foreign and security policy.

The short term poses questions which are intrinsically more interesting, and to which the answers may be more surprising. It may seem natural to assume that the divergences between different European countries, which we now observe in the war phase of the Gulf crisis, will automatically be prolonged in the postwar phase as well.

One might suppose, for example, that the British would be likely to emerge from the war rejoicing in a warm nostalgic glow as the gallant kid brothers of the American heroes; that the British (and the Americans) would be profoundly alienated from the stay-at-home Germans; and that the French would be left uneasily high and dry in the middle.

There is in fact no compelling logic in any of these assumptions; not merely is there no reason for assuming that Britain and Germany will have opposite policies in the postwar phase, there are real grounds for supposing that the major European countries will then start to have convergent policies.

There are basically three reasons for this prediction. The first is that the principal postwar task will be the search for peace, an idea which will naturally commend itself both to those who have taken part in the war, and to those who have not. And those European countries which have not taken part in the fighting may have peace-making credentials in the Arab world at least as good as those who have.

The second reason is that the ending of the war, like the starting of it, will require the intermediation of the UN; and the Europeans, who progressively voted for all

the Security Council resolutions which opened the door to war, will naturally seek another series of resolutions to close it again.

The third reason is that all the Community countries are collectively committed to the principle of an international conference for handling the Middle East's problems. They have long been committed to the idea of such a conference for dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict; they are now committed to the idea of such a conference for negotiating a Gulf peace; there is no obvious way to keep the two ideas apart.

In combination, these three reasons are likely to draw the members of the European Community closer together in the postwar phase; they are also likely to open up a large divergence of views between Europe and the US.

Throughout the build-up of the Gulf crisis, the US very skilfully used the institution of the UN Security Council to mobilise international support against Iraq. It turns out, however, that the eviction of Iraq from Kuwait by force is not a simple military matter, and that in the process of trying to bring it about, the US has been leading the coalition towards tactical objectives, and perhaps strategic war aims, which are much

wider. This is not a criticism; war is not controllable.

The result is, however, that the termination of the war, and the construction of the peace, will also involve much wider considerations than seemed to be implied by the UN resolutions. The British and the French governments have already started talking, out loud and to each other, about the possible ingredients of a peace process. But one of the unavoidable items on the agenda, in any United Nations process, will be the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Israeli government is firmly opposed to getting

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dragged into any post-Gulf negotiations; having shown enough restraint to stay out of the war, they will claim the privilege of being allowed to stay out of the peace as well. The US appears to endorse this claim. The dilemma for the Americans is that, if they reject the argument that Israel must be part of the Middle East peace process, they may be unable to secure international endorsement for any settlement procedure; so they could be left with the invidious alternatives of an ignominious withdrawal or a long-term military presence.

For the US, a long-term military presence in the Gulf is just about a feasible policy, even if it is not attractive. But no European country, not even Britain, is going to take on the burden of a post-imperial military presence in the Persian Gulf.

The Americans may come round to the idea that the termination of the war must be mediated through the UN; they may even reluctantly come round to the idea that Israel must make a contribution to the peace. But if not, we may find that Britain, which entered the war arm-in-arm with the US, will leave it arm-in-arm with the Europeans. ©

