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All talk and no action. Commitment without clout. European disunity over the Balkan crisis is the symptom of a deeper paralysis, says **Josef Joffe**

IF IT were not such a chilling human tragedy there might be a slight smirk of satisfaction on American faces. Here in Western Europe, potent, prosperous and in place - and demonstrably unable to take care of its own house when it is on fire. The war in Yugoslavia broke out more than a year ago, and Western Europe is still pondering the issue.

Today with sharpened hindsight it is easy to draw up a list of botched opportunities and misplaced steps. On the one hand, London and Paris were too lackadaisical. In peering at the Balkans they thought there was still something there worthy of the name of Yugoslavia, something that could be saved. The Germans, with Austria in tow, committed the opposite sin by making a headlong, "devil-may-care" dash for the recognition of the two breakaway republics of Slovenia and Croatia.

Both sides made a wrong bet. Britain, France and the US thought that using power, coming down hard on Serbia, would inflame rather than calm passions. Germany blithely thought that power was not necessary. If we wave the magic wand of diplomatic recognition, they presumed, Slovenia and Croatia would be safe. But commitment without clout is a poker bluff without the aces: that is the first lesson of the south Slav tragedy. The bluff is easily called and that the Serbs did with a vengeance.

Today we must resist the same temptation. London wants to contribute 1,800 troops, Paris 1,100 to drive a relief convoy to Sarajevo. With the Italians the total would be 4,400 men. The idea is to send a strong signal at last to Mr Milosevic in Belgrade

and his henchmen in Bosnia. But if I were a Slobodan Milosevic, would-be ruler over Greater Serbia, I would not be impressed. I would look at the map, at those 180 miles of winding road through the mountains from the port of Split to the beleaguered town of Sarajevo, each mile a nice place for an ambush and with the tactical advantages on my side.

Would I dare attack the armed emissaries of three mighty European powers? Who, me? I would say those snipers and grenade launchers are angry locals fighting on their own account to protect the minority rights of Bosnian Serbs. And even if the convoys got through they would merely feed the hungry but not stop the fighting.

"Thou shalt not bluff" is a basic rule of warfare. If you start a war you should be able to stop it on your terms. That is the bit-

ter lesson the Americans learned in Vietnam and the Israelis in Lebanon. General MacArthur put it most brutally: "There is no substitute for victory." But if you really want to stop the fighting in the crazy-quiet settlement pattern that is Bosnia you have to do more than just ride shot-gun on relief trucks.

You have to blanket the areas, clear out the snipers in house to house fighting, spike the guns and safeguard an ever-widening perimeter. Muslims and Serbs look alike, whom do you target?

There would have to be a soldier at every road junction with a well trained eye for non-existing ethnic differences. Former British premier Margaret Thatcher's idea of finishing the job with a few well-placed bombs is woefully inadequate. Bosnia, a key redoubt in Tito's defence plans,

is a network of underground depots, arms factories and command posts. This is why those leaders who must make real choices with real consequences have been so hesitant, so unwilling to put up more than a brigade-size force in a place where divisions are needed.

And all the old failings of Europe have become all too evident. Who would command the force? As usual the French want to obey nobody but their own generals. Presumably Western plans, now mullied over and postponed time and again, will yield too little too late. The Serbs already control 70 per cent of Bosnian territory and with the exception of a few Muslim resistance pockets the Croats hold the rest. Perhaps there is nothing more left to do than to sign a few hand wringing resolutions

and to close up shop. If only it were not for the fall out, if the Serbs afterwards train their guns on Macedonia or on Kosovo, Bulgaria and Albania may not choose discretion over valour. What is still an ethnic war may then become internationalised. Will we then still be able to stand by? And if we stood aside in a "small" war would we dare enter a big one.

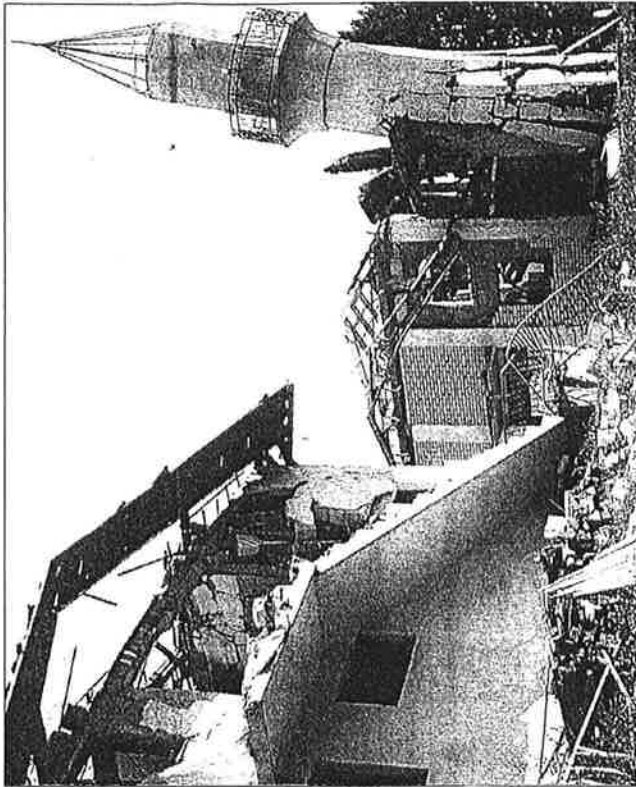
Also there is the fate of "Europe". Remember Maastricht That summit pledged Western Europe not only to a perfect internal market but also to political and diplomatic union. But Europe has already failed the test. For all the marvellous institutions that it turned out, from the Western European Union, to the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, they were incapable of showing a common purpose in the Balkans, let alone a common policy.

The subterranean duel over the recognition of the two breakaway republics, with Germany pushing hard while Britain and France resisted, revealed that renationalisation is not just a Balkan speciality. As the Germans twisted arms the French suspected the making of a "Teutonic bloc" in the Balkans. Though they now all toe a common line, trust has suffered.

WEU and CSCE? Poised to conquer a shiny post Cold war future, these institutions have proven their impotence. A common foreign and defence policy? That is for the time being no more than a will of the wisp.

Lord Acton once mused that power corrupts. But the opposite seems to be just as true: lack of power corrupts too. At a minimum Europe's inability to nuance a common purpose and policy in the Balkans will not corrupt but corrode its institutions, beset as they already are by growing doubts over the wisdom of yielding monetary and economic sovereignty to Brussels. If we cannot act together more and more people may conclude it is just as well that we stay apart. "Balkanisation" may not remain restricted to the Balkans.

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Shattered dream: the London conference is unlikely to be able to put the Bosnian pieces together