

Greek-Turkish Rapprochement: *The Impact of 'Disaster diplomacy'?**

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This article challenges the widely held view that the Greek-Turkish rapprochement of 1999 was the direct result of the collaboration following the earthquakes that hit both countries that year. The high-level political and diplomatic efforts which form the basis of the improved relations and which preceded the earthquakes are examined. The article goes on to provide a detailed account of the efforts at governmental and non-governmental levels to mitigate the effects of the disasters and illustrates the impact of the two disastrous events on public perceptions of the 'enemy' and on bilateral relations. In this context, the author warns against the simplistic assumption that diplomatic efforts should be causally linked with the occurrence of disasters. Instead, he asserts that disasters may have a multiplying and legitimising effect on diplomatic rapprochement.

Since the middle of the 1950s, relations between Greece and Turkey have been a source of serious concern for peace and stability in the eastern Mediterranean and have presented the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) with its most protracted internal division. In addition to the seemingly intractable problem of Cyprus, disputes over territorial sovereignty in the Aegean Sea, and Turkish arguments about the negative role Greece has played in Turkish relations with the European Union (EU), have served to make the relationship between these nominal allies a source of constant concern for peace and stability in southeast Europe. However, since March 1999, something almost miraculous appears to have happened: Athens and Ankara seem at last to be willing to place their relations on a cordial footing. At the heart of this new-found relationship is the success of the two foreign ministers, George Papandreou and Ismail Cem, in identifying areas of mutual concern and agreeing measures for bilateral cooperation.

Yet, in the minds of many, there has been a tendency to attribute this enormous change in the nature of Greek-Turkish relations to the earthquakes that struck the two countries in August and September 1999, rather than to focus on

the efforts of the two governments. In the aftermath of these tragedies, the world witnessed an outpouring of emotion between the people of the two countries and was amazed to see that such feelings seemingly altered the whole pattern of relations between these, often hostile, allies. Seizing upon the events of August and September 1999, many commentators took to referring to the change of relations between Athens and Ankara as being a process of 'disaster diplomacy'.

While the earthquakes certainly had a major impact in changing public perceptions of the relationship, to claim that the earthquakes brought about rapprochement is both factually wrong, and indeed weakens the basis for the process. While public opinion is undoubtedly powerful, it is also fickle. And a process built solely upon a popular outburst, such as that seen at the time of the disasters, would be unlikely to stand the significant tests that are inevitably placed upon peace processes. In reality, the current détente is built upon something far more valuable. Namely, a sincere recognition by two governments that in the contemporary international environment a policy of cooperation is far more advantageous than continued confrontation.

This is not to say that 'disaster diplomacy' has not been important; it has played a fundamental role in the development of the process of rapprochement between Athens and Ankara. However, this impact has been most pronounced not in the formulation of policies to foster rapprochement but in the creation of a positive environment in which to implement such policies. Rather than start the process, 'disaster diplomacy' opened the way for the development of greater ties between the people of the two countries and thus allowed for the strengthening of the dialogue developed between the two governments in advance of the earthquakes. Therefore, disaster diplomacy is a process of 'citizen diplomacy' that has legitimised, and generated popular support for, an official process that had already been put in place several months earlier.

I. Greek-Turkish disputes

For almost fifty years, relations between Greece and Turkey have seemingly varied between cold and hostile. Despite the fact that the two countries lived peacefully side-by-side throughout the 1930s and 1940s,¹ the emergence of the question of Cyprus as an issue in the mid-1950s quickly brought the two countries into diplomatic conflict and much of the goodwill which had developed between the two governments was lost as Athens and Ankara worked to secure a solution on the basis of the interests of their respective communities on the island. Although Cyprus was granted independence in 1960, Greece and Turkey continued, by virtue of the Cypriot constitution,² to be involved in the affairs of the island and came close to conflict on several occasions over political developments on the island.³ In July 1974, a major war between the two countries was only narrowly averted after Turkey staged an invasion of the island in response to a coup against the Cypriot President Archbishop Makarios, instigated by the Greek military government of the day.

While Cyprus has continued to play a major part in Greek-Turkish relations since 1974, the two countries have also faced a number of bilateral differences,

most notably over a range of issues in the Aegean. For its part, Ankara has identified a number of areas of contention, such as territorial waters and airspace. Greece rejects these disputes, and recognises the issue of the delimitation of the Aegean continental shelf as the only legitimate point of contention.⁴ The argument that there are significant oil reserves in the Aegean Sea has, however, made this issue particularly important, and the dispute led Athens and Ankara to the verge of military engagement in 1976 and 1987.

Although there have been attempts to address these differences over the years, little has been achieved. While the question of Cyprus continues to remain in the hands of the United Nations (UN), and is essentially regarded as being a matter to be solved by the Greek and Turkish Cypriot political leaderships, and therefore not a direct Greek-Turkish issue, it nevertheless has a significant role in shaping Greek-Turkish relations. As far as bilateral disputes are concerned, a number of attempts have been made to find solutions, all of which have met with little success. Prior to the current process of rapprochement, the most noteworthy attempt by the governments of Greece and Turkey to improve relations was the Davos process, initiated in January 1988, as a direct result of the 1987 Aegean crisis. The most notable success of this process was the signing of the *Memorandum of Understanding*, which set out a framework of interaction in the Aegean. At the same time, it led to the initiation of regular contacts between the Prime Ministers of Greece and Turkey, Andreas Papandreu (the father of George Papandreu) and Turgut Özal. However, the Davos process was brought to an end in 1991, when a new government led by Constantinos Mitsotakis in Greece stated that Cyprus, rather than bilateral differences, should be the primary focus of attention in bilateral relations, and that no overall improvement could take place without a solution to the island's continued division.⁵

Even in the light of almost five decades of poor relations between Greece and Turkey, the years 1996-1999 were shrouded in particular tension and mistrust. In January 1996, a major crisis developed between the two countries when Turkey laid claim to the small islet of Imia (known as Kardak in Turkish) in the eastern Aegean. Athens rejected the claim, and a military standoff rapidly developed. On this occasion, a direct conflict was averted at the last minute by the intervention of the United States, which managed to broker an agreement for the two sides to disengage their military forces from around the islet and effectively 'agree to disagree' over the status of Imia.⁶ Over the course of the following eighteen months, relations improved a little, helped by a meeting of the Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis and the Turkish President Süleyman Demirel at the NATO summit meeting in Madrid in July 1997. However, just six months later, a train of events began which brought any hope of an improvement of Greek-Turkish relations to a grinding halt.

The decision of the EU, at the European Council summit in Luxembourg in December 1997, to set as a condition for Turkish entry an improvement of Ankara's relations with Athens, did not lead to more cordial ties, as many had hoped, but, in fact, only served to heighten tensions between the neighbours. Steadfastly insisting that it would not accept conditions that were more stringent,

or wider ranging, than those applied to other potential candidates for EU entry, Ankara made it clear that it would not fall into line and make what it considered to be concessions to its neighbour. During this period, it appeared that Turkey was consciously trying to assert its unwillingness to be seen to be making concessions by taking an even stronger stance than usual *vis-à-vis* Athens so as to ensure that it would not be seen to be giving in to EU demands.

Concurrently with the Luxembourg Summit, the question of the deployment of Russian made S-300 missiles in Cyprus generated a new, more dangerous, and militaristic dimension to the Greek-Turkish relationship. Almost immediately after the January 1997 decision of the (Greek Cypriot) government of Cyprus to order the Russian made anti-aircraft missiles as part of its Joint Defence Doctrine with Greece,⁷ Turkey responded by stating that it would not allow the presence of these missiles in Cyprus and would take all measures, military if necessary, to ensure that they would not be deployed. Over the next months, there were regular bouts of speculation about what would happen if the missiles arrived and there were a number of efforts made by the international community to persuade all the parties concerned to step back from their respective positions. By August 1998, the situation was ready to come to a head. Turkey's restatement of its position led to serious debate in Athens about the consequences of continued support for the Cypriot government's decision to buy the missiles. Following considerable internal debate, the government of Prime Minister Simitis made it clear that it felt that the destabilisation of the relationship between Greece and Turkey would do serious harm to Greece's efforts to enter the single European currency and that, given the military difficulties of defending the island in the event of an attack, the missiles should, instead, be deployed in Crete.

Despite the brief easing of tensions following the decision by the government of Cyprus to accept the Greek offer to place the missiles in Crete, things were still to get worse. This time the cause for instability was the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan. Following his expulsion from Syria in the autumn of 1998, due to military pressure from Turkey, the PKK leader had wandered around Europe looking for asylum. With the support of a number of Greek sympathisers, the PKK leader arrived in Greece in January 1999. Realising the potentially disastrous situation that it had on its hands, the Greek government removed him from the country and placed him in its Embassy in Kenya, while efforts were made to find a safe haven for him in a friendly African state. The Turkish security forces finally captured Öcalan in February, as he left the security of the Greek Embassy compound in Nairobi.

The high profile capture of the PKK leader immediately led to a major diplomatic row between the neighbours as the Turkish government accused Greece of being a state sponsor of terrorism, and Athens responded by highlighting what it saw as Turkey's human rights violations against the Kurdish community. At the level of the two peoples, the effects were just as dramatic. In Turkey there were public demonstrations as thousands took to the streets castigating Greece and declaring it an eternal enemy of the Turkish people. At the same time, the media fanned public feeling by publishing articles stating the 'long

held ties' between the PKK and the Greek government. In addition, several newspapers published accounts of meetings between Öcalan and other senior PKK officials with Greek politicians and military officers.

In Greece, popular feeling was no less strong than that in Turkey. Anti-Turkish feeling reached a peak as public demonstrations of support for Öcalan were staged around the country and the media took to proclaiming Turkey as a barbarian state that trampled the rights of its citizens. As a result of the Öcalan affair, hostility between the two countries, at both the official and the popular level, was greater than at any time since 1974.⁸

II. The path to rapprochement

The tensions between the two governments proved to be relatively short-lived. The roots of rapprochement came just six weeks after the Öcalan incident with the start of the NATO air strikes in Kosovo and Yugoslavia in March 1999. For both Greece and Turkey, the war in Yugoslavia represented both a substantial threat to regional security as well as a real danger to their internal stability. In particular, the vast exodus of refugees became a source of concern for both Athens and Ankara. For the Greek government, the main fear was that many fleeing the region would seek to cross into Greece and join the large number of illegal Albanian immigrants already within the country. For Turkey, the question was more a financial concern. As a policy, the Turkish government did not worry about taking the displaced Kosovars, seeing it more as a duty to a people with whom they felt they had an historical tie. Ankara did nonetheless fear that it would not be able either to house or to feed all the refugees.

Another factor of the conflict that concerned both countries was the possibility of a redrawing of the borders in the Balkans. While most Greeks may have supported the Serbian cause, and most Turks the Kosovo Albanians, both governments were united in their opposition to any changes to the frontiers of the region and the dangers that such a precedent could set in their relations with their various neighbours as well as at the level of bilateral relations with one another. In fact, it was this fear that led the United States and the United Kingdom to state that one of the key reasons for taking action was to prevent the threat of a war developing between Greece and Turkey - a comment that drew heavy criticism from both the Greek and Turkish governments.

Thus, irritation at being presented as a cause for conflict, coupled with mutual concerns over the fate of the large number of refugees streaming out of Yugoslavia and shared fears about any redrawing of territorial boundaries in the Balkans forced the two countries to take action. Rather than approaching the matter through diplomatic channels, the two foreign ministers, İsmail Cem and the newly appointed George Papandreu, took the direct route and spoke to each other directly over the telephone to discuss the matter of Kosovo. Recognising that they could communicate well with one another and that they shared similar views on regional matters, the two held a number of further telephone calls throughout the following weeks, all of which further cemented the development of personal ties between the two men.

However, for Turkey, the question of Greek involvement with the PKK still remained a significant issue affecting the bilateral relations between the two countries. To this extent, on 24 May 1999, Cem wrote to his Greek counterpart and proposed that the two countries discuss the problem of terrorism and that the two Ministries examine ways in which to initiate a plan of reconciliation between their two countries. In early June, Papandreu wrote back congratulating Cem on his reappointment as Foreign Minister. Accepting the need for discussions, the Greek Minister proposed a number of areas of mutual concern such as tourism, the environment, and organised crime that he felt should form the basis of dialogue.⁹ Soon thereafter, the two ministers met at the UN in New York and, during their subsequent discussions, decided to establish a working group composed of senior diplomats from the two Foreign Ministries that would look into practical measures that could be formulated to promote greater bilateral cooperation in non-contentious areas.

The first of these meetings took place in July 1999. And while little overt progress was made, there was a feeling that the actual effort made by the two countries to promote dialogue was a remarkable achievement. Thus, as the talks adjourned for the traditional August break, to be reconvened in early September, most observers welcomed the process but remained sceptical about the chances of concrete results. Such caution was, nonetheless, swept away in the early hours of 17 August, when a massive earthquake, measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale, struck the industrial city of İzmit in northwestern Turkey.

III. The İzmit earthquake and the Greek reaction

Fifteen minutes after the earthquake, the Greek Embassy in Ankara received a call from the Turkish Foreign Ministry requesting Greek assistance. Immediately, a message was sent to Athens, and just half an hour after the earthquake, Cem received a call from Papandreu, the first he received from any country, offering whatever assistance was necessary. Cem informed Papandreu that Turkey would need rescue teams.¹⁰

Given its own experiences of earthquakes, the Greeks had established an emergency rescue team, EMAK, and without hesitation the services of the team were offered to the Turkish government to assist in whatever way possible. Thus, within hours, the Greek government had assembled a team to depart to Turkey under the guidance of the Civilian Protection Secretary General, Dimitris Katrivanos. In addition to a twenty-five strong team of EMAK rescue workers, fully equipped and complete with sniffer dogs specially trained to locate people trapped in debris and wreckage, the group also included Greek seismologists, sent to assist their Turkish counterparts in trying to ascertain the extent and whereabouts of possible aftershocks and two mobile hospital units that had been made available with a team of eleven doctors. Later that afternoon, the group was flown to Istanbul on three C-130 transport planes of the Greek Air Force. Soon thereafter, further teams went to the region including a delegation of fifteen Greek nurses and, following a decision taken by the Parliament, a six-member delegation of Greek MPs with medical training. At the same time, Athens sent two

fire fighting planes to Izmit to help the local authorities in the efforts to put out a major blaze that had occurred at one of Turkey's largest oil refineries.¹¹

While the tremendous efforts of the rescue teams continued, the Greek public also got to work raising money and collecting food, medicines, and other desperately needed items to help the victims of the earthquake. In Athens, the Mayor Dimitris Avramopoulos appealed to all Athenians to give generously to the efforts. At the same time, the Greek media, which had also taken the lead in promoting nationalist, anti-Turkish feelings over the years, took a sudden interest in the situation and most of the major Greek media organisations sent representatives to the region to cover the unfolding events. Indeed, on most of the major television stations, the tragedy of the Turkish earthquakes received round-the-clock coverage. Particular attention was paid to the efforts of EMAK and few in Greece, or Turkey, will ever forget the image of a Greek rescue worker lifting a nine-year-old survivor from the rubble of a collapsed apartment block. As a result of the positive media coverage, the solidarity that the Greek people had started to feel with their neighbours served to increase still further the donations offered from around the country.

Within twenty-four hours of the start of the fund-raising effort, the Greek people had donated 24 million Drachmas (66 billion Turkish Lira, or approximately GBP50,000). At the same time, a number of groups launched appeals of their own, including the Greek Women's Association and the Greek Municipalities' Association, which presented a cheque of US\$100,000 to the Turkish Ambassador in Greece. Perhaps most surprising in the view of the Turkish people was the fact that even the Orthodox Church, which had long been seen as a bastion of anti-Turkish sentiment in Greece, launched a fund-raising drive and that collections were taken after Sunday services in churches throughout the country.

Realising the need to coordinate the efforts, the mayors of Athens, Thessaloniki, Piraeus, Patras, and Irakleion met on 24 August in order to discuss the best means by which to coordinate the distribution of humanitarian aid to Turkey. At a news conference held after the meeting, Mayor Avramopoulos explained that, following the discussion, the mayors had established a coordinating body, entitled *Operation Solidarity*, in Athens and that this body would oversee the common effort of the five cities to gather and dispatch the humanitarian aid already totalling 10 containers worth of material.¹²

In order to ensure that these efforts being made by the municipalities were put to best use, Mayor Avramopoulos informed the journalists that he was departing that same day for Istanbul, where he would meet with his counterpart Ali Müfit Gürtuna and discuss the setting-up of a 1000-tent settlement for people made homeless by the disaster, which would include a hospital and playground. On his arrival, a few hours later, Mayor Avramopoulos expressed his hope that, 'this will be a step to bring together the Greek and Turkish people. The ditches formed by the quake could turn into a passage-way between two nations'.¹³ For his part, Mayor Gürtuna stated that he hoped that the events could lead to a lasting peace and added that all the people of Turkey were grateful for the efforts being made in

Greece' to help them.

To a country that had long believed that Greece and the Greeks sought to destabilise the Turkish state, the pictures of massive amounts of aid now being collected for their benefit at a time of weakness proved to be a watershed in their perceptions of their neighbours. While one might have assumed that there may have been a tendency to regard such moves with suspicion, this reaction could not have been further from the minds of the people of Turkey. Instead, most people welcomed the help with open arms and praised the Greek people for the generosity at such a time. Nowhere was this feeling of gratitude more pronounced than in the Turkish media, which had for so long been the vanguards of anti-Greek sentiment. It was not long before the newspapers took to proclaiming the everlasting gratitude of all Turks to the Greek 'brethren'. In the days that followed, the significant changes that had occurred in relations became even more pronounced as the Greek SKAI television station teamed up with TGRT, a Turkish television channel, to conduct joint live broadcasts.

IV. Dissenting voices

There were dissenting voices in both countries about the level of cooperation and goodwill that had been developing between Greece and Turkey. For example, in Turkey, the Minister of Health Osman Durmus, a member of the MHP, the nationalist partners of the Turkish government, was reported to have said that neither Greek nor Armenian assistance was required or wanted. Furthermore, the Minister informed a US hospital ship, which had arrived to provide medical assistance, that it was not required, as there was no one to transfer to it. The comments provoked a major outcry in Turkey and were soon being reported internationally. Throughout the following days, the offices of *Hürriyet*, one of the major Turkish newspapers, were inundated with faxes and calls from readers appalled at the comments and calling for the resignation of the minister. Such was the backlash that the minister was forced to apologise, saying that he had been misquoted and that all help was welcome from whatever sources. A few weeks later, Durmus gave an interview to a Greek newspaper in which he responded to the allegations made against him by stating his sincere desire to see peace develop between his country and Greece and noting his willingness to meet with his Greek counterpart to discuss cooperation.¹⁴

In Greece, there were also those who dissented from the new feelings being expressed between the two countries. For example, in an article published under the title, 'Do not extend a helping hand to blood-stained Attila, Georgie' one commentator wrote:

The Greek people are polite, sensitive, benevolent, and unbelievably civilized. They were very distressed and deeply moved and instantly hastened to the side of their Turkish neighbour to lend it a hand in the disaster that struck it...what is happening to the Greeks then? Are we going to do damage to ourselves to show our 'kind hearts'? Are we going to forget the 'Attila 2', which during the same time in 1974 occupied half of Cyprus

and obliged us to leave the military structure of NATO - an error we are still paying for? [...] The earthquakes in Turkey left blood and tears and vast misery. Perhaps this is the opportunity for an opposition movement to rise up in that country too, which would bring about changes. And only then would a rapprochement between the two peoples be welcome, beneficial and useful.¹⁵

In spite of minority views such as this, efforts to support Turkey were continuing throughout Greece and there were numerous meetings now taking place between local officials coordinating micro-humanitarian efforts. On 7 September 1999, the Greek Ambassador in Ankara, Ioannis Korantis, received a delegation from the Women's Commission of the True Path Party (DYP). Speaking to the group, the Greek Ambassador explained the reasons for the emotional Greek reaction:

Many people wonder what happened to the Greek people in the earthquake. The answer is so simple. Greece is in the same seismic zone and faced serious quakes in the past. Some cities were levelled. The earthquake in our neighbour was perceived as a disaster in Greece...the earthquake has destroyed our taboos. From now on, we will follow the path of peace and cooperation.¹⁶

V. The Athens earthquake and the Turkish reaction

Just hours after these words were said, at three o'clock in the afternoon, an earthquake hit Athens. Despite the fact that Turkey was still reeling from the blow of its own earthquake, Ankara was the first country to respond to the news. Within minutes of the news of the earthquake in Athens having been received in Ankara, a member of the AKUT search and rescue team called Korantis to inform him that an earthquake had been recorded in Athens and that they were prepared to offer their assistance. Recalling the conversation later, the Greek Ambassador remembered telling the AKUT representative to stay on the line while he tried to find out more information. The offer was accepted and within two hours the team were ready to depart.¹⁷ For the first time ever, AKUT would be carrying out an operation in a foreign country.

As well as the call from AKUT, the Ambassador soon received a call from Prime Minister Ecevit's advisor on foreign policy to convey the Prime Minister's best wishes to the Greek government. He also told Korantis that Ecevit had tried to call Prime Minister Simitis directly, but the lines had been busy.¹⁸ Indeed, President Demirel and Speaker Yildirim Akbulut had also met with the same problem when they had tried to telephone their counterparts to wish Greece well.¹⁹ At the same time, the Greek Consulate in Istanbul reported that its switchboard was being overwhelmed by calls from people wishing Greece a speedy recovery and offering help in whatever way they could.²⁰

The presence of the Turkish team came to be seen as further evidence of the growing relationship that was developing between the two countries, and thus

further cemented the feelings that had become so apparent in the previous weeks. Upon their return to Istanbul on 9 September 1999, Nasuh Mahruki, the head of the AKUT team, noted that he had been pleased to be able to fulfil his duty in Athens and that they had worked non-stop for two days. Another member of the team insisted that they had put just as much effort in their operation to help the Greeks as the team had exerted helping their own people just a couple of weeks earlier.²¹ Speaking about Turkish support for Greece, Prime Minister Ecevit noted that the news of the disaster in Greece had met with immediate reaction in Turkey and the government had worked round the clock to coordinate its efforts to assist Greece.²²

While the scale of the earthquake in Greece was far smaller than the one in Turkey and resulted in around 94 deaths, as opposed to the 15,000 (the most widely accepted estimate) in Turkey, the offer of support was received with gratitude in Greece. By now, the spirit of friendship that had been developing between the people was becoming a tidal force. Even those in Greece and Turkey unused, and unwilling, to see the good in each other started to speak about the benefits that the earthquakes had brought about for both countries. In a statement, Ismail Kose, the Whip of the nationalist MHP, adopted the language of the past to express the spirit of the future, when he stated:

There has been hostility between Turkey and Greece because of the latter's attitude dating back to the Ottoman period, an attitude that was recently manifested by Greece's support for the PKK, which engages in activities against Turkey... However, the aid extended by Greece after the earthquake in the Marmara region and Turkey's attitude regarding the quake experienced in Greece some time after that brought about a rapprochement between the two nations. This is a historic [sic] opportunity. This opportunity must be well utilised and the problems between the two countries must be resolved.²³

In Ankara, Greek Ambassador Korantis gave an interview to one of Turkey's leading newspapers in which he thanked all the Turkish people and the Turkish government for all that they had done for his country since the Athens earthquake. He recalled that, over the previous week, he had received hundreds of calls from people offering words of sympathy for Greece and that the Embassy had received gifts of flowers and offers to donate blood, money, and other necessary items - even referring to one caller who had offered to donate a kidney to a victim in Greece after remembering that a Greek, for a Turkish victim, had made a similar offer. When asked about whether or not the feelings of goodwill that had been generated would last, Korantis answered that the two sides had wanted to improve their relations before the earthquakes occurred. In fact, he noted that they had taken positive initiatives for that purpose even before the disasters but that the earthquakes had strengthened the positions of the two governments with regard to the dialogue as the people and the media are now watching the behaviour of the two governments. In conclusion, Korantis noted that he hoped that there would

not be a return to the previous state of bilateral relations and that, if there were such an adverse change, it would be difficult to explain to the people why that had happened.²⁴

This spirit of the people was caught well in an editorial, appearing in the Greek daily newspaper *Eleftherotypia* on 14 September 1999 in which the paper stressed the extent to which the earthquakes had managed to bring the people together and had served to break down prejudices between the two nations. Calling on the political leaders of both countries to respond to this new atmosphere, the paper called for a non-aggression pact to be signed, without the use of a mediator, between Greece and Turkey - a move that the editorial considered to be the obligation of the leaders because it was, 'dictated by the sentiments and immediate needs of the two peoples, who have been tried and tested by disaster'.²⁵

VI. Post-disaster diplomacy

The public reaction in both countries to these events was overwhelming. Over the following weeks and months, the level of contacts between the citizens of the two countries rose dramatically. Whereas in previous times those Greeks and Turks who had tried to promote greater understanding and communication between their two countries had needed to keep a fairly low profile, following the disaster there was a proliferation of groups established that sought to bring together the two peoples. No longer was participation in such groups viewed with suspicion. In fact, groups started springing up all over the two countries and new efforts were made to develop contacts amongst the academic, business, artistic, professional, and media communities in the two countries as well as amongst a number of municipalities.²⁶ At the same time, a range of new initiatives was proposed to promote improved relations between the two countries. For example, one newspaper article, written by two eminent professors, one Greek and the other Turkish, called for the development of relations between the two countries covering areas as diverse as cooperation between universities, changing school textbooks to delete negative and pejorative stereotypes, defence cuts, and military confidence-building measures.²⁷

By the time the joint Greco-Turkish committee of senior officials from the two ministries of Foreign Affairs reconvened in early September, there was now a new popular impetus to achieve results in the talks. The previous caution attached to the dialogue in the minds of the public in both countries had been pushed to one side and there was not only broad support for the talks, but also the two governments found themselves under significant pressure from the media to achieve results. The work of the two Foreign Ministries became legitimised in the eyes of the wider Greek and Turkish populations. Indeed, the whole atmosphere of the talks had now changed and a new spirit of friendship and work replaced the suspicion that marked the July discussions. It was even reported that among the decisions the two groups had taken, and which would be discussed further in the third round of talks due to be held in October, were the development of a new railway link between Thessaloniki and Istanbul, via Alexandroupolis, with the

introduction of a high-speed train and the ways in which to modernise the customs procedures between the two countries.

Additionally, questions concerning tourism were brought up and the Turkish delegation suggested that this could form the subject of a Forum in October drawing together the public and private sectors. Other areas of focus that were reportedly tackled were cooperation in the energy sector, involving technology exchanges and the inter-connection of circuit systems of the Greek and Turkish electricity networks, and education, although questions of minority education were not included.²⁸ However, the subject that undoubtedly sparked the most interest at the time was the decision of Foreign Minister Cem, in a speech made before the UN's General Assembly, to put forward the idea of the establishment of a joint Greek and Turkish disaster relief force.

Over the following months, relations between the two countries flowered. Perhaps the most remarkable event of the whole process came in December 1999 when, at the European Council meeting of EU heads of state and government in Helsinki, Greece supported Turkey's bid to become a candidate for EU membership, a move that finally laid to rest the ill-feelings caused by the Luxembourg decision. It should be noted, however, that Turkey's acceptance of the deal came about only as a result of some quick, but delicate, manoeuvring on the part of the EU to persuade Ankara that the terms of the agreement were no more onerous than terms placed on other candidates for EU membership.

Although many felt that this decision on the part of Athens was a foregone conclusion in the light of the earthquakes of the summer, it was by no means an easy decision for Athens to take. The acceptance of Turkey's candidacy involved delicate negotiations with the government of Cyprus, which regarded Greek moves with a certain amount of suspicion.²⁹ In addition, the decision also required the Simitis government to persuade the Greek public that accepting the Turkish candidacy without a prior show of goodwill from Ankara did not represent a loss to Greek national interests, but was, in fact, a victory insofar as it reconstituted Greek-Turkish issues as EU-Turkish matters, a reformulation that presented Turkey with some concern.

In the period since the Helsinki Summit, there has been a steady improvement of relations. In January and February 2000, the rapprochement between the two countries was further cemented when the two Foreign Ministers visited each other's capitals in order to sign a package of nine initial agreements that had been formulated by the committees of the two Foreign Ministries and which covered areas such as the development of tourism, the protection of the environment and the combating of organised crime. In May and June 2000, for the first time in over twenty-five years, the two countries staged joint military exercises in Greece, under the aegis of NATO, which saw Turkish military aircraft arriving at a Greek airbase and Turkish soldiers landing on a Greek beach.³⁰

VII. The current popular reactions to rapprochement

Since September 1999, there has somewhat naturally been a gradual tailing-off of the impact of the earthquakes on public feeling towards rapprochement. Just as

the images of the earthquakes are becoming a memory, the initial exuberance of the two peoples is starting to fade. Despite this, efforts to promote contacts between the two countries are still underway and there is now a regular flow of visitors between the two countries. At the same time, the passage of time has also allowed the critics of rapprochement, who took cover throughout the period, to become vocal once more. However, as predicted by some observers, there has been little exploitation of mutual enemy images by politicians.³¹ Despite this, inevitable, polarisation, there is no doubt that the wider popular reaction to rapprochement in both Greece and Turkey is now one of acceptance. Activities of groups promoting rapprochement between the two countries are now taken for granted and little or no suspicion exists towards those who engage in such activity.³²

For both supporters and critics alike, there is a palpable sense of disillusionment developing insofar as there has been no movement towards a real, meaningful improvement of relations. In Greece, people are still waiting for a sign of Turkish goodwill. In Turkey, there is a feeling that Greece is not acting with enough commitment, is avoiding discussions on concrete steps towards a solution of the Aegean disputes, and is trying to avoid engaging in dialogue on military confidence-building measures to prevent conflict in the Aegean region. For the supporters of the process, the need to deal with these issues is seen as a way of capitalising on the positive atmosphere in order to bring about a full process of conflict resolution, rather than simply proceeding along a path of tension reduction. Likewise, for the sceptics, the warm feelings mean nothing if they cannot result in solutions to these outstanding points of difference. It now seems certain that in spite of the fact that the basis of the 'peace process' was recognition of mutual interests and the desire for cooperation, efforts to deal with the major issues of the Aegean and Cyprus will now represent the new challenge in the process of rapprochement.

For this reason, there are good reasons to argue that the process of 'disaster diplomacy' - as opposed to the long-standing efforts of contact groups which have played an important role in laying the groundwork over the years for rapprochement - has actually been a threat to the process as first envisaged by the two foreign ministries, and by the two ministers in particular. A slow process unaffected by the earthquakes would have allowed the two governments to shape discretely the course of events and would have allowed for a gradual easing of tensions. Instead, the earthquakes forced the pace of events and have now, as a result, left the two governments in a difficult position with regard to popular opinion.

Yet in defence of the two governments, it is clearly the case that while there are still no immediate grounds to hope for a solution to the Cyprus issue or any clear indication of a move to resolve the Aegean disputes, a solid groundwork of cooperative relations is now in place. To the credit of the current administrations in Athens and Ankara, the two countries are now closer towards a peaceful coexistence than they have been for almost forty years.

VIII. Conclusion

Before drawing conclusions about the impact of 'disaster diplomacy' in the case of Greece and Turkey, it is worth examining the basis of the current process of rapprochement and its potential for further development. Although it is still too early to judge with any certainty the outcome of the dialogue between Greece and Turkey, we can say that for the first time in almost forty years, there does appear to be a real chance for a sustainable and meaningful peace to be established between the two countries. While pessimists venture that similar moves have been made in the past, and have all failed, the current process offers greater reasons for hope than the false starts made in the past. In particular, previous efforts have centred upon addressing areas of difference - either directly or by establishing parameters to reduce the likelihood of conflict. The approach on this occasion, however, is a radical departure from previous practice.

The innovation of the Cem-Papandreou process is that it is based upon recognition of mutual interests and centres on trying to find concrete measures to strengthen contact and cooperation in non-contentious areas. More particularly, we can identify the basis for rapprochement as being the recognition that they share the following regional and European aims: the desire for a stable and peaceful Balkans; the wish to ensure the preservation of borders between states (although, in the case of Turkey, this specifically refers to the land borders in Thrace rather than to either the Aegean or Cyprus); the need for the successful integration of their region into the EU; a desire to increase resources available through the EU, so that income differentials with northwestern and central European countries should be reduced as rapidly as possible; the requirement that the EU promote a broad and diverse interpretation of European identity; and the unimpeded and improved land communications with central Europe.

At the same time, the two governments have recognised that at the more specifically bilateral level - although in the case of terrorism, drugs, and immigration there is also a wider regional impact - the following, by no means exhaustive, list of mutual interests exist: the development of bilateral trade; combating organised crime, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration; increasing tourism, particularly marine tourism, to the region; ensuring the protection of the environment; and the promotion and protection of human rights, especially within the context of the obligations of membership of the EU.

While many in both countries have criticised this approach on the basis that it does not deal with the main points of difference, such critics miss the point of the process. The dialogue currently undertaken by Athens and Ankara recognises that for there to be any hope of resolution to the disputes, there must be an underlying recognition that cooperation, and not competition, between the two countries is imperative for their mutual benefit in the future. The old pattern of zero sum thinking is gradually being replaced by a realisation that their foreign policies must now increasingly be governed by their potentially important regional roles in the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean, and their position, real or

prospective, within NATO and the EU.

These new roles are, however, dependent upon their ability to show both NATO and the EU that they can behave responsibly. Up until recently, rather than being seen as important allies, they were often regarded as almost childlike by their partners and, consequently, were not accorded the importance that they each felt they were due. More than any identifiable internal pressure to address the difficulties between the two countries, the external imperative of being taken seriously as forces for stability in a turbulent region brought about a change at the official level. As a result of this change of thinking, it is already possible to foresee real movement in those areas of substantial difference.

To return to the critics, it is possible to counter their claims by stating that for the two governments to have tried to approach discussions of substance in the atmosphere that previously existed would have been almost useless, perhaps even worse than useless. The eventual purpose, as stated by the two governments, is to develop an atmosphere within which areas of difference will, eventually, become easier to resolve. As the process develops further, this will become increasingly apparent.

What, therefore, has been the impact of disaster diplomacy in bringing about this positive development of relations? In this study, the first conclusion that clearly emerges is that there has been far too much emphasis on the role of disaster diplomacy. This is not to say that disaster diplomacy has been unimportant in the development of ties between the two countries; it has had an enormous impact. The problem is that, in both Greece and Turkey as much as the outside world, there have been far too many people who have attributed the entire process of rapprochement between Athens and Ankara to the earthquakes. Such a popular analysis is both factually wrong and is also damaging.

It is factually wrong because, as has been shown, the process of rapprochement clearly predated the events of August and September. It is damaging insofar as to accord legitimacy to this thesis would substantially weaken the process of rapprochement should events lead to a renewal of hostility between the two countries and result in a hostile public reaction in both countries against the other. While such an occurrence would weaken rapprochement in any case, it would prove disastrous for a process that many see as being built solely upon popular feeling - what the people have given directly, the people can take away. The true impact of disaster diplomacy should, therefore, be seen in terms of the development, and not the initiation, of ties between the two governments. Importantly, as we have seen, these ties are based on a wholly more substantial set of propositions centred on mutual interests rather than on following a popular will expressed at a particular time.

Thus, the true impact of the earthquakes in Greece and Turkey has to be seen at the level of the ordinary citizens of both countries. As a result of the earthquakes, previously held fears seemed to pale to insignificance and a bond of understanding developed. The result was the rapid formation of contacts between groups and individuals in the two countries. Many Greeks and Turks immediately put past prejudices aside, and such was the power of the shift in relations between

the two, that those who had previously been at the forefront of criticism of the other country became strangely silent. While they have started to become more vocal once again, the hold they have in society in both countries is certainly weaker than at any time in the past three decades.

Thus, in the case of Greece and Turkey, the term 'disaster diplomacy' should not be used as a broad brush to describe the rapprochement that has taken place between Athens and Ankara. Instead, it should be seen as a way in which two peoples came to a point at which they wished to understand one another far better and put aside past prejudices. In doing so, this mutual recognition among Greeks and Turks of the equality and humanity of the other allowed the two governments to strengthen, and deepen, a process that had already been put in place. 'Disaster diplomacy', in the case of Greek-Turkish rapprochement, should therefore be seen as a process that allowed for a popular legitimisation of official diplomacy based on mutual interests, rather than be seen as a term to describe the initiation of that policy.

Although 'disaster diplomacy' cannot therefore be seen as the root cause of rapprochement, there can be little doubt that the popular will for rapprochement that developed as a result of 'disaster diplomacy' will be an important contributing factor in the further development of any process between the two countries. The question now facing Athens and Ankara, and more specifically, Cem and Papandreou, is whether this popular will for improved relations will be enough to overcome any disappointments, or even crises, that almost certainly will arise in the course of the development of lasting peace between Greece and Turkey.

* The author would like to thank the many people in Greece and Turkey who assisted in the preparation of this article by contributing views. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect either the opinions of the Greek-Turkish Forum or its participants.

- ¹ Following the end of the Turkish War of Independence and the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, in 1923, relations between the governments of Greece and Turkey started to improve. In 1930, a treaty of friendship was signed between the Turkish President Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and the Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos which subsequently led to the formation of a defensive alliance between the two countries. Although relations suffered somewhat as a result of Turkish neutrality for much of World War II, which Greece said was contrary to the terms of the alliance, relations quickly improved after 1945. In the early 1950s, both Greece and Turkey contributed troops to the United Nations in the Korean War, and were rewarded with NATO membership in 1952, an event that was seen as the peak of their bilateral relations.
- ² Under the terms of the Treaty of Guarantee, signed at the time of Cypriot independence, Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom were given an explicit right to intervene in the affairs of the new state in order to maintain the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the Republic of Cyprus.

- ³ In particular, one can identify December 1963 (when the initial outbreak of fighting between Greek and Turkish Cypriots occurred), August 1964, and November 1967 (both of which were the result of attacks by the Greek Cypriot National Guard on Turkish Cypriot enclaves), as being times of heightened tension.
- ⁴ For the Greek and Turkish official positions, see the websites of the two Foreign Ministries at www.mfa.gr and www.mfa.gov.tr.
- ⁵ Suha Bolukbasi, 'The Turco-Greek Disputes', in Clement H. Dodd, ed., *Turkish Foreign Policy: New Prospects*, Huntingdon, The Eothen Press, 1992, p. 48.
- ⁶ An analysis of the competing legal views of Greece and Turkey over Imia can be found in Evangelos Raftopoulos, 'The Crisis over the Imia Rocks and the Aegean Sea Regime: International Law as a Language of Common Interest', in Aldo Chircop, Andre Gerolymatos, and John O. Iatrides, eds., *The Aegean Sea after the Cold War: Security and Law of the Sea Issues*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000.
- ⁷ Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou initiated the Joint Defence Doctrine in 1993 as a means by which to formalise the security relationship between Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. Under the terms of the Doctrine, Greece would treat any attack on Cypriot territory as an attack on Greece and would respond accordingly. For its part, the government of Cyprus started to upgrade its military hardware and constructed an airbase near Paphos, on the western coast of the island.
- ⁸ Theodore Couloumbis and Thanos Veremis, 'Greece and the Balkans: A Critical Review', *The International Security Review 2000*, Royal United Services Institute, London, 1999, p.153.
- ⁹ The text of the two letters can be found at www.greekturkishforum.org.
- ¹⁰ *Athens News Agency*, 25 August 1999.
- ¹¹ *Athens News Agency*, 18 August 1999.
- ¹² *Athens News Agency*, 25 August 1999.
- ¹³ *Anatolian Agency*, 25 August 1999.
- ¹⁴ *Kyriatiki Eleftherotypia*, 19 September 1999.
- ¹⁵ *Eleftheros Typos*, 20 August 1999. *Eleftheros Typos* is a right-wing, nationalist newspaper that has traditionally taken a particularly strong, and often aggressively, anti-Turkish position.
- ¹⁶ *Anatolian Agency*, 7 September 1999.
- ¹⁷ *Milliyet*, 10 September 1999.
- ¹⁸ *Anatolian Agency*, 7 September 1999.
- ¹⁹ *Milliyet*, 10 September 1999.
- ²⁰ *Hürriyet*, 9 September 1999.
- ²¹ *Anatolian Agency*, 10 September 1999.
- ²² *Hürriyet*, 9 September 1999.
- ²³ *Anatolian Agency*, 10 September 1999.
- ²⁴ *Milliyet*, 10 September 1999.
- ²⁵ *Eleftherotypia*, 14 September 1999.
- ²⁶ Some indication of the range of activities undertaken between the two countries in the months following the earthquake can be found within the news report section of the Greek-Turkish Forum's website at www.greekturkishforum.org.
- ²⁷ See Thanos Veremis and Duygu Sezer, 'Greek-Turkish Peace: Fantasy or Possibility?', *Kathimerini*, 11 September 1999.
- ²⁸ *Eleftherotypia*, 22 September 1999.

- ²⁹ The relationship between Athens and Nicosia was made more difficult over this issue following the death of the Greek Alternate Minister for Foreign Affairs, Yiannos Kranidiotis, in an air crash in September 1999. Kranidiotis, a Cypriot by birth, had played a key role as an interlocutor between the two governments and had been one of the architects of rapprochement. Indeed, it is a testament to his importance in the process that, upon news of his death, the Turkish government sent its condolences to the Greek government and praised the minister for his work to improve relations between the two countries. For an account of his views of the necessity of Greek-Turkish rapprochement, see his commentary in *To Vima tis Kyriakis*, 11 July 1999.
- ³⁰ For example, see *Eleftherotypia*, 20 May 2000.
- ³¹ Thanos Veremis and Duygu Sezer, 'Greek-Turkish Peace: Fantasy or Possibility?', *Kathimerini*, 11 September 1999.
- ³² This was made clear to the author during conversations with individuals from Greece and Turkey who have had a long-standing involvement with such groups.