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THE ‘ENDURING RIVALRY’ BETWEEN GREECE AND TURKEY:

CAN ‘DEMOCRATIC PEACE’ BREAK IT?

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The purpose of this paper is not to provide and evaluate the long list of inter-state disputes between Greece and Turkey. Instead, the paper will focus on how it might be possible to break out of this pattern of conflicts and break or undo a rivalry that has endured half a century of relentless efforts at conflict resolution. The first part of the paper will address the causes or rather the processes that make the rivalry so unrelenting. Why is it that Greece and Turkey can not cooperate? The second part of the paper, on the other hand, will explore the possibility of whether the notion of ‘democratic peace’ might be a possible path towards creating an environment conducive to cooperation. The paper will conclude that though techniques such as confidence building measures, inter-governmental dialogues, mediation, etc., are very important they may not succeed in achieving more than conflict reduction or management. What is really required is a sort of paradigmatic shift allowing a conducive environment for the notion of ‘democratic peace’ to take root.

Greece and Turkey locked in a ‘prisoner’s dilemma’:

‘Prisoner’s dilemma’ is a game theoretic model often used to demonstrate how individuals under certain circumstances fail to take a decision that would ensure the best pay-off for both sides because they simply fail to cooperate. A prevailing sense of mistrust or lack of confidence in the other side leads both individuals to defect rather than cooperate. This occurs even though rational decision making would dictate them to cooperate and be much better off than when they fail to cooperate or defect from cooperation. The classic manifestation of ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ occurs when two criminals are apprehended by the police and are interrogated in isolation from each other. During the interrogation each are given the option of receiving a lighter sentence if they made a confession that would result in the conviction of the other one to a full sentence. Whereas if both criminals remained silent, in other words cooperated with each other, the police would be denied any information that could lead to their conviction and hence both would go free, the best outcome for both. The dynamics of the game as such leads each criminal to confess, in other words to defect, as each on their own fear the other to be cooperating with the police. The fear of the other side leads both sides to opt for a course of action that generates an outcome well short of the best pay-off, that is both going free, that would be dictated by rational decision making.

‘Prisoner’s dilemma’ is frequently used to explain the lack of cooperation between states as each state constantly suspects the other side will defect and leave the side who makes the first step in a worse off situation than if they too had chosen to defect.¹ The temptation to defect on the part of decision-makers becomes clearer if one adopts Putnam’s

two level game approach to diplomatic negotiations.² According to Putnam decision-makers operate with two sets of constituencies. One constituency is their counterparts and the other one is their domestic constituencies (e.g. parliament, public opinion, interest groups etc...). Hence decision-makers are engaged in two-sets of games and often feel the pressure to reconcile both. When this is combined with the 'prisoner's dilemma' a situation emerges where a decision-maker is forced to play a conservative game one that does not involve risks. The worst outcome for a decision-maker would be one where the decision-maker initiates a cooperative action that is not reciprocated or responds positively to the initial cooperative move by the other side to find that back at home powerful domestic constituencies are unwilling to support him. Hence, this complicates the situation for those decision-makers who may be willing to engage in a dialogue or a bargaining process. Furthermore, the decision-makers also find themselves concerned about the international ramifications of "being seen as giving in or compromising" particularly if there exists an environment where cooperative moves are thought to be seen as a weakness. This is seen as leaving the country vulnerable to demands from other countries.

In the case of Greece and Turkey long years of conflict has depleted the goodwill and trust that had once been nurtured by Venizelos and Ataturk in the 1930s and had endured until the late 1950s. Since then, in both countries developed powerful political, military as well as economic constituencies against dialogue and cooperation. Such constituencies also nurtured a whole world view or world map characterised by slogans such as "Turks have no other friends than Turks" and "Greeks do not have a brother nation". These slogans were also accompanied by elaborate conspiracy theories depicting a

world ganging up on them. In the case of Turkey, Greece was depicted as a country longing to achieve the ‘megali idea’ and conquer Istanbul while in Greece Turkey came to be seen as wanting to revive the Ottoman Empire and bring back at least a good part of Greece under its control. (Until the recent Galatasaray-PAOS game, any basketball or football match between teams from both countries were ideal grounds to see posters carrying these slogans and hear them being exchanged with considerable vigour).³ Powerful and influential ‘mind-guards’ also ensured that any attempt to question the validity of these slogans and conspiracy theories were punished at best by labelling their advocates as ‘naïve’ or at worst by calling them ‘traitors’. This deep mistrust and finely nurtured suspicion of the other side created an environment where decision-makers had their hands tied even if they in person may have sought cooperation in an effort to address and hopefully solve conflicts between the two countries. On the other hand, where decision-makers, such as for example the efforts for dialogue of January 1988 led by Andreas Papandreu and Turgut Ozal known as the ‘spirit of Davos’, did break away from the established taboos, these efforts did not bear significant fruits. Similarly, until very recently efforts at introducing ‘confidence building measures’ did not yield major breakthroughs either. The example of Imea/Kardak crisis in 1996 demonstrated how a group of self-declared mind guards (on this occasion journalists) could simply destroy any progress that might have been achieved and then even bring the two countries to the brink of war.

How to break out of this ‘prisoner’s dilemma’?

The logic of ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ suggests that after repeated ‘games’ the players will go through a learning process and recognise that the best pay-off, getting off the hook,

can only be arrived at by cooperating, in this case by remaining silent under police interrogation, and not defecting. In other words the nature of the game associated with 'prisoner's dilemma' is such that in the long run rational thinking will prevail. Furthermore, in 'prisoner's dilemma' third parties can play an important role too by encouraging the two parties to better communicate and help them cooperate by changing their cost-benefit calculations. Hence, in the case of Greece and Turkey one would have expected that after almost half a century of conflict both sides would have discovered that cooperation promises better pay-offs for both sides. Furthermore, a long string of third parties such as the United States and the European Union have tried to mediate and nudge the parties towards cooperation. Neither process have worked in the case of Greece and Turkey. Why?

A number of interrelated reasons could be cited. Firstly and most importantly, 'prisoner's dilemma' assumes the nature of the conflict to be a 'non-zero sum' game. That is a conflict where both sides could win, that is 'get off the hook'. In the case of Greece and Turkey the socialization process of decision-makers and often the society at large is such that the conflicts between the two countries are seen as part of a 'zero-sum' game. If one side wins the other side inevitably loses. This has also been reinforced by the fact that as the nature of the 'game' between the two countries forced decision-makers to defect, they have justified the defection by blaming the other side for not giving in, in other words for not accepting to 'lose'. This has had the effect of reinforcing mutual mistrust and lack of confidence as well as seeking evil intentions in any positive move (in terms of breaking out of the 'prisoner's dilemma') that the other side might make. Such a process in turn has prevented a constructive 'communication' to develop. A kind of communication that could

first help to transform the game from a 'zero-sum' game to a 'non-zero sum' one but also one that would help both sides appreciate that cooperation could benefit both sides. Simultaneously, this also has a tendency to strengthen the socialisation process that creates constituencies that depict the game as a 'zero-sum' game and police anyone who might attempt to defect from their ranks. The behaviour of the other side is always filtered through the lenses that this socialisation process creates.

The involvement of third parties to break the dead-lock has not worked either for similar reasons. Often such an involvement aiming to alter the pay-off matrix in a manner to encourage cooperation at best has not been credible or at worst has had the effect of aggravating the conflict. The United States has been an ally of both countries at least since the days of the declaration of the Truman Doctrine in 1947. Both during the Cold War as well as after it American foreign policy makers have considered the conflicts between Greece and Turkey to be detrimental to U.S. interests. They have initiated many efforts to reconcile both parties but the most they seem to have achieved is to keep the two parties from becoming actually involved in a war. One major reason is that the two parties have not seen the U.S. as an 'honest broker'. Greece has often viewed the U.S. with suspicion and feared a U.S. bias for Turkey because of the strategic importance attributed by U.S. decision-makers to Turkey and its military capabilities. Likewise Turkish decision-makers have also suspected the U.S. for favouring the other side. They have viewed the U.S. executive as being controlled by the 'Greek lobby' in the American Congress.

The European Union too has attempted on numerous occasions to play the role of an 'honest broker' however so far has failed to achieve much. Primarily, because Turkish

decision-makers and the public at large have viewed the EU to favour Greece. The fact that Greece is a member of the EU and is actually part of its decision-making process has reinforced this view. Many in Turkey have seen Greece using the EU against Turkey. Hence, the EU rather than having a positive role is seen as being a co-conspirator with Greece. This in turn has an effect of aggravating the situation as the pressure to close ranks against a perceived threat from a world in which ‘Turks have no friends other than Turks’ mount. Therefore both in the case of the U.S. as well as the EU third party intervention has not had the effect of altering pay-off calculations in a manner that gives cooperation a chance. On the contrary it could be argued that it has had the opposite effect of making the parties even more suspicious of each other and become even more entrenched in their positions.

Could ‘democratic peace’ break the dead-lock?

There is a growing body of literature arguing that democracies do not fight each other. The reasons are complex and multifaceted. Furthermore, it is difficult to say that there is a complete consensus in the academic literature as to whether and why ‘democratic peace’ occurs.⁴ Nevertheless, two important reasons can be cited which make war less likely while enhancing the chance of cooperation.⁵ First, norms and practices that liberal democracies have developed as a part of their political culture when dealing with domestic conflict help them to manage and resolve conflicts among themselves without resorting to force. Second, structural and institutional factors play an important role in restraining democratic leaders from moving their countries towards war. These leaders have to mobilise broad support, including that of government bureaucracies, the legislature and

many interest groups. This provides time as well as arguments to seek resolve conflicts through cooperation rather than force.

Greece's democracy since 1974 has come a very long way. Accession and eventual membership to the European Union have played a critical role in consolidating Greek democracy. Government in Greece is becoming fast transparent and increasingly accountable. Greek political culture is changing too as old 'taboos' are weakened if not challenged. A good example in point might be Yorgo Papandreu's remarks about Turkish speaking Muslims in western Thrace. Greek policy for a long time had been the denial that there were any Turks in western Thrace (somewhat reminiscent of the Turkish policy of calling Kurds 'mountain Turks'). Papandreu was highly criticised by conservative circles but the fact that he did not have to retract his remarks is an important test of how far Greek pluralism and democracy has evolved. The recent massive humanitarian response to the earthquake in Turkey may well be product of a Greece that has become so much more open, plural and transparent, a Greece where established opinions are more easily challenged and where civil society is much more capable of expressing and organising itself. Developments in Greek politics since the earthquake seems to point at an interesting dynamics where to be seen as helping Turkey seems to be making political bonus encouraging politicians to ride the wave of sympathy for Turkey.

In terms of progress of democracy, Turkey is less promising. Turkey has been trying to democratise since 1946 with three major interruptions caused by military interventions in 1960, 1971 and 1980. There is no doubt that in terms of parliamentary democracy Turkey is well advanced. However, in terms of a pluralist democracy with a strong civil society and

transparent governance Turkey still has room for improvement. In the last few years civil society has been expanding and making its voice increasingly heard. The earthquake has brought civil society to the forefront especially in terms of its effectiveness and efficiency in organising a response to the crisis. Furthermore, the government has been criticised for its sluggishness in responding to the crisis but also for having failed to prevent violations of building regulations that aggravated the crisis. This has led to ever growing calls for greater transparency and accountability from the government. The search and rescue assistance together with relief assistance that flowed into Turkey from the international community may have undermined the strong grip that conservatives have enjoyed over Turkey's relations with the external world. For decades they had advocated a world-view where Turkey is surrounded by evil enemies and the external world could not be trusted. The response to the earthquake has simply shattered the validity of this view and even forced many politicians to acknowledge this assistance as well as recognising the role and importance of the contribution made by civil society. Yet, clearly time will show whether these 'gains' will be consolidated particularly considering that within the government there were circles that did try to block international assistance as well as criticise civil society groups. Massive public calls for their resignation went simply unheeded.

It is at such a juncture that the issue of membership to the EU becomes critical in terms of assisting in Turkey a transition towards pluralist democracy. The Luxembourg summit decisions of December 1997 that did not include Turkey among the list of prospective candidates for membership came as a great disappointment to many. Furthermore, the fact that this was accompanied by arguments that made the EU look like a

club of Christian countries aggravated the despair of many. Advocates of civil society and greater democracy felt let down and argued that the EU's decision only helped groups in Turkey that did not want to see Turkey neither become more democratic nor become part of Europe. Interestingly, the Turkish state elite (the military, bureaucracies such as the foreign ministry) as well as the leadership of mainstream secular political parties have always been supportive of membership to the EU. They have actually seen it as a natural outcome of Ataturk's westernisation project. However, a deep sense of insecurity in respect to the Kurdish problem as well as political Islam has made this elite shy greater political liberalisation. Yet, it is highly likely that a signal from the EU that could be interpreted as opening the way to an eventual membership would help to weaken the resistance from this elite to greater pluralism and democracy in Turkey. The timing is particularly critical not only because of the positive political climate resulting from the earthquake but also because of the point that the Kurdish problem in Turkey has come. The apprehension of Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, and his decision since his trial to end armed struggle opens a possibility to address the Kurdish problem. Here too how the membership issue is played out can be critical. Undoubtedly, a resolution of the Kurdish problem would remove one of the most important obstacles in the way of greater democracy and pluralism in Turkey.

Prospect of transition towards greater democracy is not the only reason why the EU ought to give a serious consideration to Turkey's membership. A Turkey that achieves its transition to greater democracy and pluralism would also be a Turkey that would be much more likely to solve the 'prisoner's dilemma' and help break the 'enduring rivalry' with Greece. However, the dear assumption here is that the recent outpour of goodwill from

Greece will enable those circles in Greece who prefer to cooperate rather than defect in the search for solutions to the many conflicts between the two countries to prevail. The 'magic' here seems to depend on ensuring that decision-makers willing to cooperate find domestic constituencies that will support their efforts but as a corollary also encounter a greater number of constituencies that demand from them cooperation rather than defection. This situation would also benefit the EU for four reasons. It would smoothen decision-making within the EU on issues concerning Turkey. Secondly, it would also relieve the pressure of constant likelihood of conflict and war on its south-eastern flank. A pressure that has a high political and economic cost attached to it. Thirdly, the reconciliation of Greece and Turkey can contribute as much to southeastern Europe security and prosperity as the French-German reconciliation has done to western Europe. Fourthly, by anchoring Turkey in a zone of 'democratic peace' the EU together with Greece would be in a much better position to encourage regional cooperation in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions.

Conclusion:

The desire to solve the conflicts between Greece and Turkey has attracted many academic, civil society and diplomatic efforts. With the end of the Cold War, references have been made to mechanisms aiming to reduce tension and increase confidence between the two countries and especially between their decision-makers.⁶ However, the 1990s have probably been characterised as a period during which conflicts between the two countries have intensified rather than be resolved or let alone be reduced. The nature of the relations between the decision-makers of both countries has forced them into a game that can best be described as a modified version of the classic 'prisoner's dilemma'. The best way to come

out of this dilemma may actually be to encourage the development and consolidation of an environment that is conducive to the notion of 'democratic peace'. This would bring about a paradigmatic shift in the manner in which decision-makers and the public actually see the relationship and relate to the conflicts between the two countries. It is in this context that the EU has a critical role to play in its capacity to consolidate democracy and pluralism. It has helped Greece come a long way in this respect. It could also have a similar impact on Turkey. Margarita Papandreu had recognized this at a seminar at Princeton university when she remarked that "Greek politicians are making a big mistake. If there is one country that should try to help Turkey join the European Union it is Greece".⁷ The earthquake in Turkey followed by the one in Greece appears to have unleashed a surprising degree of mutual solidarity, generosity and goodwill between the two countries. Greek government officials and politicians have been actively riding the wave while in Turkey some politicians have been desperately trying to hang on to old habits and ways. Hence, consolidating democracy and pluralism in Turkey may well be the critical factor to support the forces of 'democratic peace'. The earthquakes for all the damage and pain they have inflicted may also have brought some good. They seem to have unleashed tremors that could bring the needed paradigmatic shift to resolve the conflicts between the two countries. Opening the way to eventual Turkish membership to the European Union might well be the key to sustaining this paradigmatic shift needed to achieve 'democratic peace' between the two countries.

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Notes:

¹ For a definition of 'prisoner's dilemma' and discussion of its use in analysing international relations see J. E. Dougherty and R. L. Pflanzgraff, *Contending Theories of International Relations* (Harper and Row Publishers, N.Y., 1990).

² R. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two Level Games" *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 427-460.

³ See reporting by Yorgo Kirbaki in the Turkish daily *Radikal* 3 September 1999.

⁴ For a critical review see S. Chan, "Mirror, mirror on the wall ... are freer countries more pacific?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 28, pp. 617-648; W. J. Dixon, "Democracy and Management of International Conflict", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 42-68.

⁵ B. Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 45 and 39.

⁶ See for example the review and suggestions by T. A. Coulombis "Greece in a post-Cold War environment" <http://www.greekturkishforum.org/articles.htm>.

⁷ Quoted in commentary by S. Alpay in *Milliyet*, 24 February 1998.