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Earthquakes, Diplomacy, and New Thinking in Foreign Policy

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After three crushing wars since 1947 between India and Pakistan, it has taken a devastating act of nature to bring the two antagonists a step or two closer together. On October 8, 2005, a powerful earthquake, centered in the Hindu Kush mountains of Pakistan, sent tremors throughout South Asia, killing an estimated 90,000 people, mainly in the Pakistani-administered portion of Kashmir.

As the earthquake wreaked havoc on both sides of a contested border, bitter rivals struggled to find ways to cooperate to relieve some of the suffering—a situation reminiscent of the earthquakes that shook Turkey and Greece in 1999. At that time, these two countries' responses to each other's calamity set the stage for a spectacular rapprochement between former enemies. Outsiders quickly termed what followed as "earthquake diplomacy."

Through earthquake diplomacy, a humanitarian disaster can have a positive impact, providing the framework for new thinking in foreign policy and a breakthrough in long-standing bilateral stalemates. By analyzing the Greek-Turkish example, this short paper aims to explore some of the dynamics of earthquake diplomacy and speculate as to whether they could be applicable to the Indian-Pakistani case as well.

The roots of the conflict between India and Pakistan are deep. The two neighbors have fought intermittently ever since their independence from British colonial rule in 1947. There have been three wars—two fought

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over Kashmir—and numerous clashes, infiltrations, and mobilizations. Muslim-majority Kashmir has been central in the dispute and was forcefully partitioned between India and Pakistan in 1949 along a contentious ceasefire line. To this day, the Line of Control (LoC) remains one of the most heavily militarized and dangerous borders in the world. A promised referendum, mandated in 1948 by a United Nations resolution that would have allowed the people of Kashmir to freely decide their future, was blocked by India and never took place. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, war and the rise of militant Islamism had a profound effect on the radicalization of Pakistani politics. As a result, after 1989, Pakistan lent its support to Kashmiri separatists fighting Indian rule.¹

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border to assist in rescue and relief operations. In a national TV address, Pakistan's president, General Pervez Musharraf, spoke of his gratitude and thanked India for its assistance—an action that would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier. However, suspicions still run deep: Pakistan does

not want to appear to be at the mercy of Indian aid and India worries that weakened border controls might cause unrest in its side of Kashmir. An Indian offer to deliver aid by helicopter foundered because Pakistan insisted on the pilots being Pakistani. More recently, however, India restored telephone links between India and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, enabling people to contact their relatives after the earthquake, and has welcomed Pakistan's offer to open the LoC to help families find loved ones.

GREEK-TURKISH EARTHQUAKE DIPLOMACY

This is not the first time that an earthquake has assisted diplomacy. A powerful precedent of rapprochement exists in the recent history of Greece and Turkey, where diplomatic efforts were facilitated by devastating earthquakes in each country.

Earthquake diplomacy was put to good use when Greece helped

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Turkey, its historical rival, in recovery efforts after an earthquake in northwestern Turkey killed thousands on August 17, 1999. To the astonishment of many nationalists on both sides of the Aegean, the government and the people of Greece seized the initiative and participated generously in international aid operations. Greece dispatched well-equipped rescuers, fire department disaster workers, doctors, quake damage experts, medical supplies, tents, and food, while Greek NGOs mobilized to collect funds for the victims. Following immediate relief operations, Greek donors rebuilt some schools and hospitals in the hard-hit region. Turkey happily reciprocated by sending its experienced rescuers to Greece three weeks later, when Athens itself was hit by an earthquake. These humanitarian interventions generated considerable goodwill and boosted reconciliation efforts undertaken by the leaders of the rival nations.

In fact, rapprochement had started earlier with changes at the Greek foreign ministry. In February 1999, the foreign minister, Theodoros Pangalos, was forced to resign and was succeeded by his deputy, George Papandreou, who strongly favored rapprochement. Athens then pressed for agreement with Ankara. This push was most notable in the Balkans during the Kosovo crisis in the spring of 1999. The two countries were of one mind, both firmly committed to the inviolability of borders and the protection of rights of ethnic minorities.² In other words, the earthquakes did not initiate the rapprochement, but they did boost the process and opened avenues of reconciliation to the peoples of both nations.

Despite a history of border disputes, the natural disasters in August and September 1999 demonstrated that the two nations share a common geological vulnerability; the enormous rescue and relief operations that followed proved that the two peoples can work together. Papandreou and his Turkish counterpart Ismail Cem seized on the opening and began a rapid improvement in their countries' bilateral relationship. In a brief period of time during the fall of 1999, a series of bilateral agreements, mainly on economic cooperation, were signed. The crowning achievement of these efforts came at a European Council Summit in Helsinki in December, when Greece abandoned its long-held objections and lent its support to Turkey's aspirations for full membership in the European Union.

What lessons may be learned from the Greek-Turkish earthquake diplomacy? Natural disasters can remind quarrelsome neighbors of the importance of what unites them rather than what divides them. After all, neighbors share a common region that often requires joint management.

From time to time, nature has a way of making a mockery of the artificial borders drawn by competing nations.

By its very nature, humanitarian aid is nonideological and underscores the fact that humans, irrespective of their differences, belong to the universal community of mankind. This does not mean, however, that foreign humanitarian aid does not have significant political implications, especially when juxtaposed with the inadequacies of a domestic infrastructure.

Tremors often shake old mentalities as well as physical structures, and they can strike a devastating blow to the prestige and legitimacy of

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ossified state apparatuses and their supporting nationalist ideologies. In the aftermath of the earthquake in Turkey, the state machinery was paralyzed and for days remained unable to provide adequate assistance to victims. Instead, it was foreigners and foes who effectively offered much-needed help. The façade of a “strong” state, authoritarian at

home and nationalist abroad, suffered a serious blow. The social contract between Turkish citizens and the state, upon which the regime’s political legitimacy had rested, was placed in doubt because the state had failed to honor its end of the bargain.

In sum, natural disasters test the efficiency of state mechanisms and often unmask serious shortcomings and lopsided priorities. They question an overimposing state, exposing the basic developmental needs that, for too long, have remained unmet.

A PARADIGM SHIFT

Natural disasters can shake one’s confidence in old paradigms. Undoubtedly, 1999 marked a paradigm shift in Greek-Turkish relations.³ Until then, realism reigned supreme. The Greek-Turkish problem was fundamentally perceived as a question of balance of power. On both sides of the Aegean it was thought that, in order to address this question, there was a need for credible deterrence through increased armaments and diplomatic antagonism in search of allies. This resulted in a continual arms race and a waste of valuable financial and diplomatic resources in an irresolvable and ever-expanding security dilemma. Relations focused on high poli-

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tics and neglected low politics and interaction on the societal level. They were a zero-sum game where every gain for Greece was necessarily a loss for Turkey and vice versa. Thus, the idea that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" led Greece to misplay the Kurdish card and Turkey to antagonize Greece in its Balkan neighborhood. Greek-Turkish relations were dominated by an uncompromising discourse emphasizing "inalienable rights" embodied in a series of ossified claims and counterclaims. In international forums, Greek and Turkish representatives maintained a well-rehearsed list of grievances, rendering their diplomatic positions marginal and making them appear as an irrelevant, repetitive, and boringly quarrelsome couple.

Since 1999, relations have improved markedly. The old realist paradigm, state-centric and antagonistic, is being replaced by a new liberal paradigm focusing on engagement and cooperation. At last, the two countries understand that in today's increasingly competitive and globalizing world, rivalry between Greece and Turkey impedes the modernization of their

respective economies and politics. In order for Greece to join the European Monetary Union in 2001 and Turkey to begin accession negotiations toward full membership into the European Union, it was necessary for each country to explore new approaches and ways of thinking. Relations could be a non-zero-sum game where, for instance, growth in Turkey would mean increased trade and investment opportunities for Greece. Greece has every interest in having a democratic, prosperous, stable, peaceful, and European Turkish neighbor and much to lose from instability, nationalism, underdevelopment, and adventurism on its borders.

Both the Greek and Turkish leadership moved away from a discourse on non-negotiable rights to one of interests in an effort to disentangle the two and find a degree of common ground. Indeed, when long-held claims were abandoned, shared interests and possible compromises emerged. Greece abandoned its traditional opposition to Turkey's European vocation and became a fervent supporter of Ankara in Brussels. Turkey, for its part, abandoned its traditional opposition to UN efforts to resolve the

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Cyprus issue and lent its support to a reconciliation plan put forward by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

In this spirit, the lingering dispute between Greece and Turkey over the Aegean continental shelf ought to be a fairly uncomplicated affair. Joining the European space should mean, first and foremost, that Ankara would accept jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICJ has experience in adjudicating border disputes, such as the Aegean continental shelf, and can relieve weary politicians from the political costs of a compromise. Cyprus is another matter, however. In Cyprus, there is a need for a renewed political, rather than legal, process to bring the two communities closer together, build confidence, and pave the way for the complicated power and territory sharing arrangements of a final resolution.

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To date, neither the Aegean nor the Cyprus problem has been resolved, although much has been achieved. Trade and investment have increased tenfold. Tourism between the two neighbors is booming. Cultural and educational

exchanges have expanded dramatically. Greece and Turkey support each other internationally and in the search of regional solutions. In 2004, Greece was elected a member of the UN Security Council, and Ankara and Athens now work closely together in the Balkans and in Kosovo in particular.

New thinking has led to deeper insights. In the past, each country viewed the other as a monolithic entity opposed to the *status quo*, with a revisionist national interest and a readiness to use force. Today, there is an appreciation of the internal infighting and competing constituencies that constantly struggle to define the national interest. This interest is not God-given and immutable, but the product of domestic political struggles and intense negotiations. Reformers on both sides of the Aegean have a common interest in isolating nationalist, populist, traditionalist, statist, and anti-European forces and working together peacefully to meet the daunting challenges of globalization and European integration and enlargement.

The non-sustainability of old politics and Europe laid the groundwork for the change that followed the earthquake. The costs of tensions had increased significantly and managing crises had become more difficult. In 1996, the Greek and Turkish navies confronted each other in the south-

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eastern Aegean. Provocative TV journalists in search of hot stories and local mayors in search of votes manufactured a dispute by planting competing national flags on an uninhabited rock. The emergence of such new constituencies has broadened the foreign policy playground beyond the easy control of cool-headed governments. Small incidents could now rapidly escalate into major bilateral crises that require the intervention of the United States, whose focus and resolve to intervene cannot be guaranteed. Europe, on the other hand, has provided the framework for a new paradigm in neighbourly relations, created incentives for cooperation, and generated the security and trust needed to manage the risks associated with change.

The combination of the failure of old politics and the increased presence of Europe in the international community provided the framework for visionary leaders to seize an opportunity for change and cooperation. The earthquakes of August and September 1999 presented such an opportunity. They provided the stage to demonstrate new thinking in action. They powerfully popularized what some elites on both sides were already thinking and advocating. The earthquakes happened on fertile ground ready for change. Much hard work preceded them, but the earthquakes provided a new impetus and brought societies and the media into the process of rapprochement.

INDIA AND PAKISTAN

Relations between India and Pakistan have been mismanaged for too long. The developing nuclear arms race proves that war between the two neighbors is not winnable and that escalation can lead to mutual destruction. The high cost of continued antagonism distracts both sides from what should be their primary focus: development. As China's influence looms larger every year, India and Pakistan need to reach a compromise in order to compete successfully in the global market.

Pakistan's President Musharraf candidly acknowledged that "this tragedy is much bigger than the capacity and capability of the government as a whole,"⁴ but he refused to admit that he and the leaders of Pakistan before him did not do much to enhance that capacity. Having chosen to spend billions of dollars in a nuclear and conventional arms race with India, instead of investing in much-needed public infrastructure, it should come as no surprise that Pakistan is unable to cope with the challenges posed by the recent earthquake.

Natural disasters do not solve political problems; visionary and courageous political leaders do. Earthquakes can set the stage for grand public gestures, delegitimizing hostile rhetoric, building confidence, and promoting new thinking, but it is the leaders who need to boldly seize the initiative and transcend decades-long stagnation in response to the pressing needs of their societies. The recent Greek-Turkish thaw could provide some inspiration.

For too long, Kashmir has been allowed to impede the progress of both India and Pakistan, poison their relations and political cultures, and divert valuable resources to a futile and unwinnable arms race. Musharraf himself came to power in 1999 in a coup in defense of Kashmir and against the civilian government. Kashmir continues to have a stranglehold on the Pakistani national imagination, easily exploitable by extremists. It is inexorably linked to the radicalization of Pakistani politics resulting from the state's chronic underperformance and the rise of militant Islam.

Kashmir is a difficult and complicated problem that involves sharing territory and power over millions of people. But after half a century of false starts, an accommodation could be reached. In 2001, the earthquake in the Indian state of Gujarat was followed by a cautious offer of help from Pakistan. Now, the stakes are high. Indian and Pakistani leaders should not wait for a third disaster to reconcile. Reformers on both sides have a strong common interest in weakening religious militancy and nationalist antagonisms. Peace would transform South Asia and create the necessary conditions to lift millions of people out of extreme poverty. Leaders in both New Delhi and Islamabad, strongly supported by the international community, can and should work together to realize this vision. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Thousands of Afghans and Pakistanis trained in Pakistani Deobandi *madrassas* for *jihad* against the Soviets. Following the Soviet withdrawal, fighting continued. According to Ahmed Rashid, between 1994 and 1999 as many as 80,000 to 100,000 Pakistanis fought in Afghanistan (Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting Extremism," *Foreign Affairs* 78(6) (Nov/Dec 1999): 22-35). After completing their tenure in Afghanistan, many Afghans and Pakistanis returned to Pakistan, armed with battlefield experience and in search of a new *jihad*: defense of Muslims. Kashmir easily became their new cause.
- 2 See Niels Kadritzke, "Greece's Earthquake Diplomacy," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2000.
- 3 For a full discussion of this shift, see Dimitris Keridis and Dimitrios Triantafyllou, eds., *Greek-Turkish Relations in the Era of Globalization* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2001).
- 4 As reported by BBC News on October 12, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4335986.stm> (accessed December 1, 2005).

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