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Pragmatism through Earthquake Diplomacy

By Murat Aslan and Tanya Goudsouzian

Introduction

The earthquakes that shook millions of lives in southern Türkiye and reduced some cities to rubble have prompted a worldwide outpouring of humanitarian support and assistance to the region. The country's longstanding antagonists were among the first to appear on the scene with search and rescue teams, truckloads of aid and other humanitarian assistance. Whether Armenia, the Nordic states, Greece or Israel, none hesitated to set aside political disputes and historical animosities to issue statements of compassion and solidarity in support of Ankara. Yet as search and rescue operations

have already ended, what will happen to the political disputes set aside in a moment of shared humanity? Is it reasonable to expect a de-escalation of longstanding tensions following a large-scale calamity? Will the region see another stage of "earthquake diplomacy" similar to 1999 when disasters which hit Izmit and later Athens led to a measure of improvement in Greek-Turkish relations before descending once more into mutual hostility? Before last month's earthquakes, Ankara was facing difficulties on a range of issues. Relations with NATO are fraught by Türkiye's reluctance

to greenlight the accession of Sweden and Finland into the alliance. The centuries-long feud with Greece has brought the two neighbours to the brink of conflict in the past few months alone. In the South Caucasus, the Armenian-Azerbaijani war may have ended in 2020, but a durable peace settlement remains elusive. Finally, US-Turkish relations have yet to recover from Washington's refusal to sell F-35 fighter jets, Ankara's purchase of S-400 missile defence systems, US support for the YPD in Syria and Washington's continued foot-dragging on the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, suspected of masterminding the 2016 coup to overthrow the Turkish government.

With a pivotal election coming up in mid-May, it is fair to assume the administration of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will focus on pressing domestic issues rather than pursue ambitious foreign policy objectives. The earthquakes and floods in southern Anatolia have shifted the priorities of Erdoğan's administration. Given the devastation across 11 provinces with an estimated 103.6 billion usd in damages, the Turkish government has announced plans to house tens of thousands left homeless and rebuild the ruined infrastructure, a colossal challenge in the best of times but certainly complicated by the current economic crisis. Still, if adversarial politicians are banking on concessions from Ankara on contentious

foreign policy issues at a time when it is impacted by domestic matters, they may be disappointed. Ankara too may be disappointed if it expects a free pass on its foreign policy pursuits on account of the compassion shown by the international community. Six items on the Turkish foreign policy agenda will continue to challenge Ankara, including the accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO, the Greek-Turkish dispute, Armenia's acquiescence to a Türkiye-led compromise in the Caucasus, rapprochement with Israel, communication with Washington, and finally the normalisation of Turkish-Egyptian relations.

NATO's newest aspirants

Both Sweden and Finland were quick to respond with humanitarian aid following the earthquake. Sweden pledged 2.8 million usd to Türkiye and Syria while Finland sent over 1 million usd worth of humanitarian assistance, as well as experts to help the rescue effort. Türkiye's position vis-a-vis Sweden and Finland's NATO membership has noticeably shifted from a harsh stance to a more tolerant posture, arguably due to the mood following the earthquake and the rhetoric of NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg. Ankara had accused the two Nordic states of supporting Fetullah Gülen as well as supporting and

harbouring PKK members in their countries, even with the tripartite meeting in Spain to sign a joint memorandum to address Türkiye's concerns. Prior to the earthquake, the Turkish stance appeared more amenable to Finland's accession to NATO, although Stockholm's efforts to fulfil the memorandum's requirements were deemed unsatisfactory. Yet, a Quran-burning incident in Sweden by a radical Danish hardliner derailed the evolving process.

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However, against the backdrop of the Ukraine-Russia war and the eagerness of the two Nordic states to join NATO, Sweden and Finland offered unconditional assistance to quake-hit Türkiye. While Ankara has not altered its prerequisites for Sweden's accession as stipulated in the tripartite memorandum, there was a noticeable softening of the tone and rhetoric towards Finland. On 17 March, Finland's President Sauli Niinistö visited Türkiye to meet President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Finland's NATO bid has proceeded to the relevant commission in Parliament, while the Turkish embargo on Sweden's accession remains in place as Ankara is not satisfied with Sweden's implementation of the terms of the Trilateral Agreement.

Türkiye and Greece

Türkiye and Greece have long been at loggerheads over myriad issues, including the island of Cyprus, maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean and territorial claims in the Aegean Sea. Tensions reached a boiling point in recent months with both sides threatening armed conflict. Last December, Erdoğan threatened to hit Athens with Türkiye's new ballistic missiles after accusing Greece of violating international treaties. Still, Greece was one of the first responders to the earthquake, as it was in 1999. Truckloads of humanitarian aid from more than 330 Greek municipalities were sent to Türkiye alongside a team of 21 firefighters with rescue dogs and a special rescue vehicle. Greece's Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias was the first EU minister to visit Türkiye and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced in Brussels that Greece would be "at the frontline to organize an EU summit of donors to seek additional funds in order to assist with the reconstruction."

Political attention has diverted to domestic concerns and tensions between two countries have dissipated.

The Greek administration shrewdly recognised the tragedy as an opportunity

to further their strategic communications. In the current climate, it would be highly distasteful for any Greek politician to resurrect contentious suggestions of expanding their territorial waters in the Aegean Sea. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has reacted positively to the recalibration of the rhetoric. “Let’s continue our talks, exploratory talks, Confidence Building Measures (CBM) between the military at the NATO level and at the bilateral level,” Çavuşoğlu told Greek media. The public protests in Greece following the railroad accident, however, have become another factor in the relations between the countries. While Greek politicians traditionally invoke the “Turkish threat” during election campaigns, this time around the state’s ability to provide safe and adequate public services has become a key item on the agenda. Given the fact that the earthquake in Türkiye and the railroad accident in Greece coincided, political attention has diverted to domestic concerns and tensions between the two countries have somehow dissipated. Both Türkiye and Greece head to the ballot boxes this year and lowering the combative tone of the political narrative would likely benefit both sides.

Armenia

Rapid and unconditional assistance from

neighboring Armenia drew much international attention given the contentious historical and political context. The two neighbors are entangled in thorny negotiations over a slew of highly emotive current disputes as well as those going back a century. Even so, Yerevan mobilised a rescue team and five truckloads of humanitarian aid crossed the Alican border gate for the first time in three decades – poignant as the crossing was last used in 1988 to deliver Turkish humanitarian aid to Armenia after a similarly devastating earthquake. Armenia’s conduct and show of goodwill in the wake of this calamity is expected to reset the tone of ongoing negotiations.

Çavuşoğlu expressed gratitude for Armenia’s earthquake relief.

Following a meeting on 15 February in Ankara with his Armenian counterpart, Çavuşoğlu expressed gratitude for Armenia’s earthquake relief, and announced the Armenian-Turkish border would open to third-country nationals and holders of diplomatic passports ahead of the 2023 tourist season. Armenia’s Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan also struck a cordial tone, reaffirming “the readiness and aspiration of Armenia to establish peace in the region and, in particular, to fully regulate relations with Türkiye, to establish diplomatic relations, and to fully open the border between Armenia and Türkiye.”

Israel

Israel's response to the earthquake with the rapid mobilisation of rescue teams made headlines in every Turkish newspaper. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called his Turkish counterpart for the first time in almost a year to offer his condolences, the earthquake appeared to have encouraged momentum in the normalisation process between Israel and Türkiye. Some 450 Israeli rescue workers managed to rescue 19 people from the rubble and brought 60 tons of humanitarian assistance. In response, Türkiye was cautious in wording its condemnation of Israeli attacks in the West Bank city of Nablus, which killed 10 Palestinians and injured 100 others.

Ankara and Tel Aviv exchanged ambassadors for full normalization of bilateral relations.

After many years of strained ties, Ankara and Tel Aviv exchanged ambassadors for full normalization of bilateral relations. Amid the shifting political landscape of the Middle East, Israel and Türkiye share common security concerns and have compelling reasons to rebuild their relationship despite differences of opinion over the Palestinian question. For Israel, Iran represents the gravest challenge

to its security – not only because of the much-touted nuclear allegations, but also due to its influence over Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other groups antagonistic to Israel.

United States

Finally, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken paid a visit to the earthquake zone and pledged 100 million USD in aid. While the visit's agenda was overshadowed by the quake, Blinken did spend another day for talks with Çavuşoğlu and Erdoğan. The scope of the bilateral meetings touched upon US concerns over Greek-Turkish tensions, but there appeared to be some shift in tone in the US Secretary of State's remarks when addressing Greek media as he advocated for patience and goodwill.

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The visit of Turkish National Security Adviser Ibrahim Kalin to the United States for strategic talks with his counterpart, Jack Sullivan, was intended to chart a path toward mending relations. He also held meetings with the undersecretaries of Antony Blinken, Victoria Nuland, and ten Congressmen from both the Republican and Democrat Parties. The

agenda ranged from defence cooperation to political disputes, such as Sweden's bid for NATO membership. Still, a matter of utmost priority was the impact of the earthquake. In this manner, it is evident that the 6 February calamity has softened the rhetoric coming from the American side, paving the way for a more constructive exchange of ideas.

Turkish-Egyptian Normalisation

Egypt's Foreign Minister Samih Shukri paid a visit to Türkiye on 27 February in what appears to have been a promising step to normalize relations between the two countries. Mevlut Çavuşoğlu responded by visiting Cairo on 18 March to discuss how to further the normalisation agenda, such as appointing ambassadors, which were lowered to the level of charge d'affaires.

Compromise between these two countries will have an impact on politics of the Middle East.

The earthquake may have spurred the ongoing rapprochement between Egypt and Türkiye. Both parties have a list of discussion points, including the Muslim Brotherhood members currently in Türkiye, diverging policies on Libya, delimitation of maritime borders in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and Greek counter moves to stop any sort of agreement between Egypt

and Türkiye. The earthquake has emerged as a constructive excuse to scale down any escalation of combative verbal exchanges and instead focus on vital mutual interests. On the other hand, a compromise between these two countries will have an impact on politics of the Middle East in the way to defuse conflicts due to combined energy of joint mediation commitments.

Conclusion: Opportunity from Tragedy?

For Türkiye, and the many stakeholders in its foreign policy agenda, the earthquake has presented a devastation and also an opportunity to recalibrate the rhetoric, leverage diplomacy, temporarily set aside disputes while assisting Ankara attend to the crisis at home. There are few reasons to find hope in the tragedy of the worst earthquake in the modern history of Türkiye. Thousands of lives were lost, thousands of families disappeared in a matter of moments and hundreds of thousands of futures have been destroyed. The response of the Erdoğan government has been under criticism, but the scale of the earthquake demanded an international response and many nations have stepped up to provide much-needed humanitarian assistance, usually in repayment for support provided by Türkiye in their earlier times of need. In many cases, the response not only provided an opportunity to save lives, but also to improve relations between countries.

The American political strategist Rahm Emanuel once said, “You never let a serious crisis go to waste. It’s an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.” For those countries who sought a softening of the Turkish stance on their concerns, the earthquake presented an opportunity to mend the relations and search for common ground to resolve disputes. Türkiye has certainly taken those attempts to heart, leading to an improvement in key bilateral relations, demonstrating that in the midst of sorrow there is a glimmer of hope. While critics may pan the international support as transactional or even conniving, it is clear that the nations who have helped in the humanitarian strategy have also improved bilateral relations within the enduring tragedy of the earthquake.

Still, it is important to note that natural calamities have taken place elsewhere in the world where the intersection of political agendas are not as tense. It may be a consequence of Türkiye’s geography, which has presented the country with a distinct opportunity to achieve some diplomatic progress in resolving conflicts and longstanding disputes. Nevertheless, the

millions now deprived of homes and livelihoods in Türkiye are less bothered by these political developments; their primary focus is understandably on securing shelter and basic daily necessities. Whether or not it is ethical to exploit a calamity for political ends, it remains clear that any effort to build peace and stability will pave the way for recovery for the countless now left with nothing.

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