

EUROPE

In 'Signal of Hope,' Greeks and Turks Take Wary Step to Better Ties

By Celestine Bohlen
New York Times Service

ATHENS — By itself, a joint statement signed by Greece and Turkey at the NATO summit meeting in Madrid amounted to a series of platitudes, including promises to observe existing treaties and not to use force against each other.

But in the context of a feverish relationship that took a turn for the worse in recent years, such language is being read as a breakthrough of sorts.

According to Greeks and foreign analysts, it may even be the start of a new discussion between countries whose history of mutual hostility has been one of NATO's most troublesome problems.

"It is substantial progress, because it allows us to meet," Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos said in an interview. "It is the first signal of hope."

The statement, brokered by the United States and signed July 8 by Prime Minister Costas Simitis of Greece and President Suleyman Demirel of Turkey, came a year and a half after the two nations seemed close to war over a couple of rocky islets in the eastern Aegean Sea.

Those islets are still in dispute and the list of issues that divide Greece and Turkey is as long as ever, including the divided island of Cyprus and Greece's right to extend its continental shelf 12 miles (20 kilometers) into the Aegean.

Behind those questions lurk old enmities that date to the times when the empire of the Ottoman Turks occupied Greece.

But the Madrid document did succeed in blunting the issue of the 12-mile limit, which Turkey no longer regards as a possible "cause for war."

As for the age-old animosities, there

are Greek officials who will now openly discuss what was once unthinkable — the cultural affinities that bind Turks and Greeks, despite the history that has divided them.

"Ironically, many people feel that Greece and Turkey could have common ground, notwithstanding their historical enmity," a foreign diplomat said. "Greece has had a terrible historical experience with Turkey, but they don't have any feelings of cultural or racial superiority."

For several months, there have been hints that the Aegean crisis was beginning to ease.

In Turkey, attention has centered on the collapse of the government headed by Necmettin Erbakan, leader of a pro-Islamic party.

He was replaced as prime minister by Mesut Yilmaz, leader of a center-right party with strong secularist and pro-

European traditions.

In Greece, Mr. Simitis, the low-key successor to the flamboyantly combative Andreas Papandreou, has given Greek foreign policy a calmer tone, with a new stress on international cooperation.

"You have a mood that is different here, and that is really important," a foreign diplomat said. "There is a resolve to solve problems."

The Simitis government has made significant progress in improving its image and its relations with neighbors and allies. The new tone has spread to Greek-Turkish relations, which for Athens more than for Ankara remains the top diplomatic priority.

A year ago, Mr. Pangalos was calling the Turks "international criminals" who lie like "fascists and Stalinists." Now, he talks of a future when, if certain conditions are met, Turkey will be "a

very important partner" for Greece, and Greece will no longer provide camouflage for misgivings of Europeans about letting Turkey into the European Union.

"There are other countries in the European Union that have other problems with Turkey and who are hiding behind my back," said Mr. Pangalos, pointing to his ample girth. "I have a big back, as you can see, but it can't cover all that crowd."

It was Mr. Pangalos who in March defended Turkey's "European vocation" after a group of European Christian Democrats issued a statement challenging the idea that a mostly Muslim country straddling the divide between Europe and Asia could be a valid candidate for membership in the European Union.

"Turkey is very much part of European history, and Islam is already part of

Europe," Mr. Pangalos said. "The conditions for membership should be uniform, and based on whether a country meets the economic, social and political conditions required."

To its dismay, Turkey was not on a list of six countries recommended for European Union membership issued last week by the European Commission. But many analysts have concluded that in softening its position, Turkey — in particular the new Yilmaz government — has signaled a diplomatic effort to win support in Europe.

Still, given the difficulties, few analysts expect quick results from the Madrid statement.

"We didn't solve any problems in Madrid," Mr. Pangalos said. "We established a framework to try to find ways to solve them. Maybe it will take one, two, three or 10 years. I don't know, but I suspect it will be a long process."