

Cyprus Limits Greece-Turkey Warming

By Douglas Frantz
New York Times Service

ISTANBUL — Accelerated by “seismic diplomacy” as they helped each other through devastating earthquakes, and soothed by Greece’s decision to drop opposition to Turkish membership in the European Union, the thorny relations between Turkey and Greece have improved rapidly in the past 18 months.

A dispute during NATO exercises in October that could have turned nasty was swiftly defused without lasting damage to the reconciliation; tourism will double this year and two-way trade will vault to \$1 billion from \$630 million.

But that, it turns out, was the easy part. Progress made by the two countries’ foreign ministers, and brought to the popular level when first Turkey and then Athens suffered bad earthquakes in 1999, was maintained by concentrating on incremental matters and shelving the tough questions.

In the end, the historic enmity between Greece and Turkey — awkwardly locked together in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization — can be turned into durable peace only if the two countries can agree on the fate of Cyprus and settle territorial disputes in the Aegean Sea.

Interviews with both foreign ministers,

Ismail Cem of Turkey and George Papandreou of Greece, and with other officials in the two countries revealed that despite optimism about short-term prospects, the new relationship remains fragile. Key substantive differences remain.

Sitting in his ornate office in Athens earlier this month, Mr. Papandreou sounded convincing when he said the countries were closer than at any time in 40 years and that he expected more progress. But at some point, Mr. Papandreou made clear, there must be a solution on the divided island of Cyprus.

“There are big issues that have not been solved and it’s going to be painful,” he said. “Issues like Cyprus will either unite us or divide us.”

A few days later, overlooking the Bosphorus at the Ciragan Palace Hotel in Istanbul, the Turkish foreign minister, Mr. Cem, was equally upbeat in his prognosis.

But he rejected his Greek counterpart’s stance on Cyprus, saying the island’s ultimate fate should be determined by the Greeks and Turks who live there in an uneasy peace.

“Cyprus is an issue that has to be dealt with primarily by the two parties on the island,” Mr. Cem said. “I told the Greeks at the start that Cyprus was not an issue that I would address with them.”

The ministers were similarly divided on the quarrel in the Aegean, where the ownership of hundreds of islands is in dispute and Greece says its continental shelf extends 19 kilometers (12 miles). Greece insists the matter be handled by mediation and the International Court of Justice at The Hague, while Turkey maintains that there are other international and Greek-Turkish mechanisms.

The fact that Mr. Papandreou and Mr. Cem differ on these important issues is significant, for these two men almost single-handedly provided the momentum to bring their countries closer together.

Mr. Cem began the process with a letter to Mr. Papandreou in June 1999. Since then, they have negotiated a pragmatic course forward.

“They have made a strategic decision for rapprochement and I think that decision holds today, despite the problems of the last two months,” Nicholas Burns, the American ambassador in Athens, said in an interview. “What we’ve seen now is what you often see in diplomacy — it takes more than a year and a half to bridge profound historical divisions.”

Neither Mr. Cem nor Mr. Papandreou could probably withstand a headline in his national newspapers saying that he had given away Cyprus, which embodies too much of the past for both peoples.