

## WORLD NEWS: EUROPE

# Omens good for Greek-Turkish links

Circumstances have never been so favourable for resolving the differences between Athens and Ankara but it will still take a lot of political effort, write **Leyla Boulton** and **Kerin Hope**

The participation of Turkish marines in a multinational wargames "invasion" of the Greek coast last week was dramatic evidence of the recent *rapprochement* between the two neighbouring countries.

Their joint involvement in the Nato manoeuvres contrasted with their confrontation in 1996 over ownership of a pair of rocky islets in the Aegean, defused only by intervention from Washington.

Yet, in spite of an outpouring of mutual sympathy after earthquakes in both countries last summer, followed by the signing of a host of bilateral co-operation accords, Greece and Turkey remain a long way apart on the fundamental sources of their discord.

Indirect talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriots resume next month to resolve the division of Cyprus. But Athens and Ankara have yet to agree even an agenda for negotiations on boundary disputes in the Aegean Sea.

What has changed is that they face an unprecedented combination of favourable

circumstances to resolve the disputes.

"For the first time, there is a serious downside to saying 'no' to solving their problems, which has always been the default position of both sides," says a western diplomat.

The acceptance of Turkey last December as a formal candidate for the European Union after Greece dropped

Now that Greek elections are out of the way, both administrations have a few years' breathing space between elections to produce results.

Failure to make headway in coming months on either issue could endanger the whole reconciliation drive. "The question is how long this process can survive on good atmosphere alone."

**'If there is no progress, sooner or later we could see a slide backwards, undoing even the positive steps so far'**

its long-standing veto gives Ankara a real incentive for compromise with Athens in order to secure membership.

For Greece, a reconciliation with its biggest neighbour would not only remove a significant obstacle to foreign investment, it would give Athens more credibility as a member of the euro-zone, the EU's single currency inner-core which it is to join in January. Fear of Turkey burdens Greece with the highest per capita defence spending in the western alliance.

warns a western diplomat. "If there is no progress, sooner or later we could see a slide backwards, undoing even the positive steps so far."

Time is particularly short for Turkey. If there is no sign of a settlement on Cyprus by the time the Greek Cypriot government has completed its negotiations to join the EU in a year or two, the EU would face great political pressure to accept a divided island as a member, excluding the northern Turkish Cypriot

state financed and recognised only by Ankara. "This would destroy the Greek-Turkish honeymoon as well as Turkey's relationship with the EU as a whole," warns one EU official.

Mutual suspicion is so deeply-rooted, - going back to the Turkish defeat of Byzantine Greeks in 1071 - that "paradigm shifts are required on both sides," says a western diplomat. "A paradigm shift on one side, total surrender in other words, will not work."

Greeks, having gradually

habit of counting whose turn it is to move.

Greece has delayed a response to Turkish proposals for military confidence-building while waiting for a gesture reciprocating Athens' acceptance of Turkey as an EU candidate.

The reaction to an otherwise encouraging Turkish attempt at such a gesture two weeks ago showed just how sensitive even talk of compromise remains.

Güven Erkaya, retired commander of the navy, said he had the support of the military to propose "abolishing" the 100,000 strong Aegean army, created in 1975 with Greece as its focus.

Partly because it was made public through a newspaper leak, the proposal drew a tepid response from Athens, and some sharp criticism in Turkey. George Papandreou and Ismail Cem, the Greek and Turkish foreign ministers who initiated the closer ties last year, promptly announced that they would launch a new "dialogue" on the issues raised.

They will, however, require a bigger dose of political support from their governments before a historic window of opportunity for reconciliation slams shut.



Turkish marines land on a Greek beach during last week's Nato manoeuvres

AP