



George Papandreou, the Greek foreign minister (left), with Costas Simitis, the veteran prime minister EPA

F.T 1/7/03

Greece's time at helm widely seen as success

Athens managed to contain damage caused by the Iraq crisis, writes George Parker

The Iraq crisis helped Europe's leaders to confront their problems and move the European Union on to "a different level", according to George Papandreou, Greek foreign minister.

Mr Papandreou, speaking at the end of a tumultuous six-month Greek EU presidency, admitted his country had taken risks in bringing the feuding 15 member states together at the height of the crisis.

But he said last month's Thessaloniki summit, which saw EU leaders agree a new security strategy and a common approach on weapons of mass destruction, showed lessons had been learnt. "I think we have reached a different level after the Iraqi crisis."

On a micro-level, the Greek stewardship of the EU confirmed many of the national stereotypes held by Brussels diplomats, one of whom said: "Chaos is a Greek word."

Meetings were cancelled, rearranged and cancelled again; summits were held in remote Greek locations with few hotels; decisions were

often left to the last minute.

Some diplomats complained that big decisions had to be triple-stamped in Athens: by Costas Simitis, the veteran prime minister, Mr Papandreou, the Socialists' rising star, and Tassos Yiannitsis, the Europe minister.

But on a macro-level the Greek presidency is being widely viewed as a success, not least in the way it managed to contain the damage of the Iraqi crisis.

The emergency EU summit in February, called when Europe was descending into bitter recrimination over Iraq, drew some of the venom and ended up producing a communiqué which, although bland, was supported by all 15 leaders.

"It was a risk, and everyone wondered if there was a basis for a common position," said Mr Papandreou. "This was the first time we have had such difficult decisions internally and some difficult transatlantic questions too."

Greece, a small country with its own ambivalent relationship with the US,

found itself well placed to act as "an honest broker" in the crisis, according to Mr Papandreou. While the Iraq crisis grabbed most of the headlines, the Greek presidency managed to pull off some crucial deals on EU reform which transcended the acrimony in the national capitals.

Farm ministers yesterday praised the Greek handling of the epic talks on reforming the Common Agricultural Policy, which reflected a close working relationship with the European Commission. Deals which proved elusive for many years have also been clinched during the last six months, including the outline of an agreement on an EU savings tax, an energy tax and an EU patent.

There was also political agreement on an aviation framework with the US, and progress was made on an asylum framework and the improvement of relations with countries in the western Balkans.

However, the high point of the Greek presidency was the signing ceremony of the accession treaty for 10 new members of the EU in the shadow of the Acropolis on April 16.