

Moscow Trusts in Quake Diplomacy

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As the catastrophe in Japan unfolds, officials in Moscow are seemingly setting their hopes on earthquake diplomacy.

That term was coined in 1999, when earthquakes in Turkey and Greece led to an unprecedented rapprochement between the two long-standing adversaries in the Mediterranean Sea.

It was used again in 2005, when a deadly quake in Kashmir was followed by marked improvement in ties between Pakistan and India.

Officials in Moscow are now saying they hope for a rapprochement with Tokyo as Russia is focusing on sending humanitarian aid to its eastern neighbor, which was struck by a massive earthquake and tsunami last Friday and is now facing a growing nuclear disaster.

"Grievous events sometimes show us what is important and what is not," said Arkady Klimov, deputy chairman of the State Duma's International Affairs Committee and a member

of United Russia.

As an example, Klimov pointed to the improvement in ties with Warsaw after last year's tragic plane crash in Smolensk, which killed Polish President Lech Kaczynski and many other top officials.

"This was aviation diplomacy," he said in a telephone interview.

He added that Moscow could and should offer Tokyo more help than Washington, Japan's closest ally since the end of World War II.

"We can lay an underwater electricity cable, we can ship large amounts of gas very quickly, and we are ready to do that," Klimov said.

President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have promised energy shipments and dispatched rescuers and humanitarian aid to Japan.

Despite this outpouring of generosity, both have remained silent about the dispute over a chain of islands - called the southern Kurils by Russia and the Northern Territories by Japan — that has strained relations since Moscow seized them in the waning days of World War II.

Both countries have remained officially at war in the absence of a peace treaty, and relations plummeted after Medvedev visited the islands last November and the Defense Ministry later announced plans to deploy more arms on the remote territory.

Last month, nationalist-charged rallies were held in both Moscow and Tokyo.

United Russia's youth wing, Young Guard, picketed the Japanese Embassy. It also announced grand plans to open an office on the islands and to send former spy Anna Chapman to plant a Russian flag on its Kunashir Island, opposite Japan's north coast.

Chapman said Sunday that she was not going. "To me, the Japanese are a deeply honest nation," she was quoted as saying by Lifenews.ru.

On Monday, Young Guard and other pro-Kremlin youth organizations laid flowers outside the Japanese Embassy.

To some, Moscow's change of rhetoric is a positive sign.

Nikos Papaconstantinou, a Greek diplomat stationed in Turkey in 1998 and 1999, recalled that nationalist activists regularly harassed Greek diplomats when he first arrived in Ankara, the Turkish capital.

"It got scary sometimes," said Papaconstantinou, who now is the spokesman for the Greek Embassy in Moscow.

He said the situation changed completely after Aug. 17, 1999, when Greece launched a huge rescue effort after a massive quake killed at least 17,000 people in Izmit, east of Istanbul.

One month later, Turkey sent aid and rescuers when a destructive quake rocked the outskirts of Athens, the Greek capital.

Papaconstantinou said the emotional gestures following both tragedies were turning points for the good relationship that continues today.

Analysts were reluctant to draw parallels between 1999 and today, saying the friction between the Russians and Japanese was nothing compared with the tensions between Greek and Turkish people following the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-22.

Alexander Konovalov, head of the Institute of Strategic Assessments, a Moscow security think tank, suggested that the island dispute was largely fabricated to score political points for the Kremlin ahead of upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

"Medvedev went to Kunashir just like Putin drove a Lada Kalina through the Far East, with no political or military need," he said.

Vladislav Belov, an analyst with the Moscow State International Relations Institute, pointed out that Turkey and Greece have yet to solve their hottest territorial dispute over Cyprus.

"Such principal issues won't be solved by day-to-day politics," he said.

Indeed, both sides have made it clear that they are not ready to compromise on the Kurils. Speaking to Japanese TV station NHK just hours after the quake last Friday, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [said](#) that dialogue was only possible if Tokio stops supporting "radical extremist views."

Significantly, Japanese officials have signaled that they won't back down in the island dispute amid the tragedy. "This is a totally different topic," Japanese Ambassador Masaharu Kono said Monday, according to Interfax.

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