

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# THE 1971 RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN GREECE AND ALBANIA: COOPERATION AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITHIN COLD WAR BIPOLARITY?

ALEXANDROS NAFPLIOTIS

### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the re-establishment of relations between two neighbouring countries, residing on opposite sides of the Cold War divide. Officially, Albania and Greece had been at war since 1939. After the end of the second World War, initial grievances caused by the drawing of the border between the two countries were aggravated by the recent and still highly controversial Cham issue, and, most importantly, by Tirana's involvement in the Greek Civil War. When, in the wider context of the Cold War, both countries were governed by authoritarian regimes ("Stalinist" Enver Hoxha in Albania and the "ultra right-wing" Greek colonels in Greece), tensions were extremely high and a military confrontation appeared to be more than probable. However, in 1971, the two regimes decided, quite paradoxically, to establish commercial links and exchange ambassadors.

This study probes why Georgios Papadopoulos, the head of the Greek junta, and Hoxha were interested in resuming relations with a neighbouring state that not only belonged to the opposite camp in terms of Cold War divides, but also with a state with which they had significant, long-standing "national" differences (the issue of southern Albania/northern Epirus, being, of course, the most prominent). It argues that both regimes, feeling isolated from their external environment, relinquished their ideological suspicions in relation to their neighbours, and succumbed to pragmatic policies in order to

enhance their security and financial prospects and to boost their prestige at home and abroad.

The present paper traces the decision-making procedure that took place in Tirana and Athens, and the way in which the process was perceived in major capitals, like London, in order to ascertain the main factors (domestic, international, security, financial and others) that contributed to the relaxation of tension and paved the way for what only a few years before seemed an improbable rapprochement.

### **The multifaceted background**

Ever since Albania's declaration of independence in 1912, Greek-Albanian relations were marred by tensions. After the end of the Second World War, however, a strikingly novel dimension was added to the confrontation between the two neighbouring countries, mainly due to inherent differences and antagonisms of the Cold War. The systemic change that brought about a new era in international relations had a profound effect on how Athens and Tirana viewed each other. Initial grievances caused by the drawing of the border between the two countries (which were closely related to ethnic issues in that "highly sensitive" region) were aggravated by the recent and still highly controversial Cham issue<sup>1</sup>, and, most importantly, by Tirana's involvement in the Greek Civil War through providing support to Greek Communist guerrillas.

The massive ideological divide of the Cold War contributed to a great extent to the consolidation of two opposing poles, the first illustrated by the prevalence of ultra-conservative right-wing governments in Athens, and the other one by the People's Republic of Albania and the authoritarian Stalinist regime of Hoxha. This very polarisation was clearly depicted in Hoxha's rhetoric, which was directed against Greek "monarcho-fascists" and "chauvinists", but also asserted Tirana's desire to normalise relations with Athens.

### **The Colonels come to power**

As soon as the military assumed power in Athens, Hoxha reverted to his common practice, concentrating his fiery rhetoric against "the Greek

---

<sup>1</sup> The bilateral dispute involving the exodus of the Albanian-speaking Muslims in Greek Epirus (known as Chams) in the aftermath of the Second World War.

fascists”,<sup>2</sup> and warning them: “The enemies can do nothing to harm us. If they attack us they will meet their death”<sup>3</sup>. International developments also contributed to Tirana’s view of the Athens regime and 1967 saw a relatively “hot summer” develop insofar as Greek-Albanian relations were concerned. The Six Day War had a considerable effect on Hoxha and instigated a further series of attacks against “the monarcho-fascists” that, according to him, resided in Athens under the protective umbrella of NATO. The leader of “the land of the eagles” accused both the superpowers of imperialism and gunboat policies in the Mediterranean and stated that the Colonels were like dogs barking about issues, such as “Northern Epirus”.<sup>4</sup>

By that time, the Albanian leadership thought that it was in a very good position to defend itself, first and foremost from internal troubles, as well as from external threats. The year of 1967 obviously marked the beginning of the Greek Colonels’ regime, when the so-called “21 April Revolution” took place. However, that was not the only “revolution” to take place in the Balkans. Only one year later, Hoxha declared the “Ideological and Cultural Revolution”, in order to eradicate “popular dissatisfaction and major domestic difficulties”;<sup>5</sup> this was a series of oppressive measures and policies modelled on the Cultural Revolution taking place in China, Albania’s “guardian” after the 1961 split with Moscow. Moreover, it was in 1967 when the “Atheist Revolution” came about, that is when Hoxha decided to ban all religious practises and to close down all worship places, in order to establish what he called “the first atheist state”. Furthermore, a series of “ruthless purges” ensued in all the sections of society, especially in the military, as a result of the Albanian leader’s “intense paranoia”.<sup>6</sup> However, quite unlike the developments in Beijing, Hoxha managed to consolidate his power even more and thus “the Albanian leadership was characterized by a remarkable stability and policy consensus”.<sup>7</sup>

With regard to external threats, the Albanians were quite confident that Chinese aid alone would be sufficient to safeguard their sovereignty. So much so that “at the height of the alliance, a senior Albanian party official, proudly declared that, ‘If someone were to ask us how many people do we have, our answer is 701 million’”.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this belief was not completely

---

<sup>2</sup> E. Hoxha, *The artful Albanian: memoirs of Enver Hoxha*, (London, Chatto & Windus, 1986), 121.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> E. Hoxha, *Two Friendly Peoples: Excerpts from the Political Diary and Other Documents on Albanian-Greek Relations, 1941-1984* (Toronto: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin Institute, 1985), 125-131.

<sup>5</sup> E. Biberaj, *Albania: A Socialist Maverick* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 25.

<sup>6</sup> B. Gökyay, *Eastern Europe since 1970*, (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2001), 33.

<sup>7</sup> E. Biberaj, *Albania and China: A Study of an Unequal Alliance*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 64.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

unsubstantiated; in late 1967, when the Albanians thought that the trigger-happy Colonels had secret imperialist designs, which led them to attack their northern neighbours, “Zhou Enlai expressed ‘full support’ for Tiranë”.<sup>9</sup>

On the other side of the Balkan iron curtain, tensions were also high, at least as far as rhetoric and propaganda were concerned. According to Miranda Vickers, the concern in Tirana about Greek neo-imperialism was justified, as “the new Greek regime began uttering numerous, if vague, allusions to Northern Epirus, referring to the inhabitants of Girokaster and Korca as ‘our brethren’”.<sup>10</sup> The most vocal opposition to anything associated with communism came from Colonel Ioannis Ladas,<sup>11</sup> the man who personified the regime’s xenophobia and anti-communist psychosis.<sup>12</sup>

### **The turn of the tide**

Nevertheless, the Greek military regime, quite unlike the one in Tirana, had serious troubles to face domestically, which compromised its ability to take aggressive action against Albania. Apart from the obvious effort needed to consolidate their hold on power and to gain international recognition, tasks with which they coped quite successfully, the Colonels faced the blow of King Constantine’s flee to the West after his failed counter-coup in December 1967 and the implications both within and outside the country. International, or rather regional, developments, like the Six Day War (and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968), certainly had helped the Colonels attain legitimacy as one of the very few reliable and useful governments in the Mediterranean as far as the West was concerned, as well as a bastion against the spread of communism. However, tensions in bilateral relations with Bulgaria and especially Turkey drew attention to the eastern and north-eastern neighbours of Greece, who were perceived in Athens as the most probable sources of threats; this dealt a serious blow to the Colonels’ somewhat tarnished façade, both in terms of military preparedness and capability, as well as in terms of international prestige.

Another significant factor in scaling down the perceived level of threat of Hoxha’s Albania was the decision, taken in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the announcement of the doctrine of

---

<sup>9</sup> Peking Review, 20/10/1967, 9, cited in Biberaj. *Albania and China*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> M. Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 193.

<sup>11</sup> Ladas was General Secretary in the Ministry of Public Order and, later, the Minister of Social Services.

<sup>12</sup> M. Meletopoulos, *The Dictatorship of the Colonels: Society, Ideology, Economy* (in Greek) (Athens: Papazisis, 2000), 184.

limited sovereignty, to withdraw de jure from the Warsaw Pact. The violent crash of the Prague Spring had a profound impact on Albanian foreign policy. It made Hoxha and his advisors (along with their Yugoslav neighbours) realise that the Soviets were not going to sit idly and watch while their position in the countries that were within their sphere of influence was under threat. Additionally, the so-called Brezhnev doctrine had “a great and lasting impact” on the relations between Tirana and Beijing.<sup>13</sup> Biberaj has argued that in the short term it brought the two allies closer together, but in the longer term it actually drove both capitals to “re-evaluate their relationship in particular and their foreign policy posture in general”.<sup>14</sup> That meant that Albania was bound to feel more insecure, as China decided to scale down its military commitment to the Balkan country and to urge the latter to seek alternative ways to defend itself against “revisionist” aggression.<sup>15</sup> In particular, Albania was encouraged not to rely so heavily on Chinese aid and protection and to consider forming a defensive alliance with other Balkan countries that were susceptible to, and feared, a Soviet invasion, namely Tito’s Yugoslavia and Ceaușescu’s Romania.

Persuaded that it “could no longer afford to remain aloof from [its] immediate neighbours”, and despite severe ideological and ethnic differences with its northern neighbour, Tirana decided to quit its prior intransigent behaviour and move in a direction of détente with Belgrade,<sup>16</sup> with the danger of Moscow and, quite interestingly, also Sofia looming. After the dismissal of Aleksandar Ranković,<sup>17</sup> a thorn in Yugoslav-Albanian relations had already been removed, and following the feeling of intimidation caused by the common enemy, also to be found in Belgrade, ideological hindrances were forced to succumb to pragmatic policies. The preservation of sovereignty in the light of the danger posed by Moscow became imperative and overshadowed Albanian concerns of “encirclement by Yugoslav ‘modern revisionists’ and Greek ‘monarcho-fascists’”.<sup>18</sup>

Although some indications that China was in reality neither willing nor able to protect Albania had reached Tirana as early as in 1966, it was the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Sino-Soviet border conflict the

---

<sup>13</sup> Biberaj, *A Socialist Maverick*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> A. Logoreci, *The Albanians: Europe’s Forgotten Survivors* (London Gollancz, 1977), 72-3.

<sup>17</sup> Aleksandar Ranković was a prominent figure among Yugoslav Communists. At the time he was minister of the interior and head of the military intelligence and political police.

<sup>18</sup> P. Prifti, *Socialist Albania since 1944: Domestic and Foreign Developments* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: M.I.T. Press, 1978), 244.

following year that convinced Hoxha that his reliance on Beijing for security was ill-founded. The Albanian leader states in his memoirs that the Chinese, in 1967, “[had] been developing an ill-defined foreign policy”, “present[ed] matters in a distorted way”, that their diplomacy “[had] fallen asleep”, and that “China has shut itself away” with its “embassy in Tirana [being] completely non-existent”.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the Sino-Soviet border clashes, which “reportedly proved very costly to China”,<sup>20</sup> reinforced Chinese impotence and contributed greatly to an already growing disenchantment with Beijing in Albania.

### **The origins of the rapprochement**

The aforementioned reasons accelerated the severance of the “essentially symbolic rather than practical” relationship between Beijing and Tirana.<sup>21</sup> The Albanians were “astonished” to hear from Beijing that they would have to cooperate with those who had been, up to that moment, their archenemies, the Yugoslavs, in order to save themselves from Moscow, and to see that the Chinese “did not display readiness to supply [Tirana] with heavy weapons”.<sup>22</sup> That contributed to Tirana’s exit from its “splendid isolation”, as it tried to develop more extensive relations with some West European countries like Italy, Austria and France, and even with Greece. According to British sources, “Albania appeared to be attempting to instigate some sort of rapprochement with Greece, [...] no doubt through her feeling of insecurity in the face of possible Soviet intervention”.<sup>23</sup> The first positive sign in Greek-Albanian relations came the following year, much appreciated by Athens, and in return for a hijacked Greek Dakota airliner that was forced to land in Tirana in August 1969.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, on 7 October 1969, “the Chinese issued a communiqué in which they announced that they [were] ready to begin talks with the Soviets, at the rank of deputy ministers, in Peking”.<sup>25</sup> Hoxha’s response to that was twofold and quite indicative of the imminent about-face in his foreign policy and the shape of the things to

---

<sup>19</sup> Hoxha, *The Artful Albanian*, 271-274.

<sup>20</sup> Prifti, *Socialist Albania*, 245.

<sup>21</sup> D. Hupchick, *The Balkans: from Constantinople to Communism* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 409-410.

<sup>22</sup> Hoxha, *The Artful Albanian*, 275.

<sup>23</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 51/222 Draft memorandum on “Albania’s foreign relations” by Podolier, 05/01/1972.

<sup>24</sup> See Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 178 and TNA: PRO FCO 28/1256 Letter by R W J Hooper, in Athens to FCO, 18/11/1971.

<sup>25</sup> Hoxha, *The artful Albanian*, 280.

come. He thought that the Albanian press and radio should ignore the communiqué<sup>26</sup> and, on the same day, he decided to give “a positive reply to the proposal which the representative of Greece at UNO [had] made [...] about developing trade”.<sup>27</sup> The prerequisites were for the Colonels to annul the “absurd law about ‘the state of war with Albania’ and establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of Albania”.<sup>28</sup>

Beijing’s new policy initiatives, which were conducive towards a “modus vivendi” with Moscow and resuming diplomatic relations with Tito’s Yugoslavia, had sombre repercussions on Albanian-Chinese and, subsequently, on Greek-Albanian relations, too.<sup>29</sup> As the 1960s drew to a close, Albania was left “not only politically isolated in Europe but with a heightened sense of her military vulnerability”.<sup>30</sup> Hoxha decided to readjust the course of his foreign policy according to the new international circumstances as well as on account of the developments concerning the cohesion and the viability of the alliance with China. The announcement, in 1970, that US President Nixon was to visit China in July 1971, “met with a cool reception in Tirana”<sup>31</sup> and instigated the rapprochement, which was then considered necessary, with the right-wing military dictatorship in Athens. By that year, a substantial share of Albania’s foreign trade was with Western Europe: 10 percent in 1969, more than double the figure of 1962 and three times that of 1960.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, when representatives of the Chambers of Commerce of Albania and Greece met in Paris on 20 January 1970 to discuss the establishment of trade links between Athens and Tirana,<sup>33</sup> the surprise was not unsolicited and, at least as regards Nesti Nashe, the Albanian foreign minister, certainly not unwelcome. Greek officials were quick to emphasise, in contacts with their western counterparts, that this was not a governmental agreement and that the initiative for the “limited in scope”<sup>34</sup> agreement had come from the Albanians.<sup>35</sup> February 1970 saw a series of actions by the two governments that meant to taste the waters for a rapprochement, this time on

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 148.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> See Biberaj, *Albania and China*, 89; and Logoreci. *Europe’s forgotten survivors*, 137.

<sup>30</sup> Prifti, *Socialist Albania*, 245.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 51/222 Research Department Memorandum: ‘Albania’s Foreign Relations’, Annex B: Albanian foreign trade, 14/06/1972.

<sup>33</sup> Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 165.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Covering items worth \$1.5 million, of which \$800,000 were Greek exports to Albania, and \$700,000 Albanian exports to Greece’, according to British sources (TNA: PRO FCO 28/936 Letter by P. H. Grattan to FCO, 31/03/1970).

<sup>35</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/936 Letter by P. H. Grattan to FCO, 31/03/1970.

an official level. An exchange of cordial statements in the press of Tirana and Athens, mainly through the newspapers that functioned as the mouthpieces of the two regimes, effected a reduction of tension between the two capitals. The Albanian leader's notes are quite interesting, stating that "since [the Greeks] are in favour of trade with us, something is moving in Greece... Trade is not the main thing either for them or for us".<sup>36</sup>

### The Colonels' blues

The situation in the Greek capital was not much different from that in Tirana, in the sense that the Greek Colonels had managed to wrap themselves in the veil of political aloofness, while being ostracised from the rest of Europe. According to ambassadors of Western European countries "the image of the [...] Greek regime abroad [was] very bad, even worse perhaps than [was] actually justified"<sup>37</sup>, and the Colonels were in a "vulnerable international position"<sup>38</sup> that did not leave them much room for manoeuvre.

Furthermore, Georgios Papadopoulos, the Greek premier in 1970, found himself in dire straits, both domestically and internationally. Triggered by the activities of the *National Front* in Cyprus, another crisis was brewing. The same crisis had also caused the hardliners, such as Colonels Ladas, Dimitrios Ioannidis (director of the Greek Military Police) and K. Aslanidis (the secretary general for sports) to lose confidence in the strong man of the regime.<sup>39</sup> The internal troubles peaked in the summer of 1970 when Papadopoulos (who was already both the prime minister and the minister of defence) decided, following Pipinelis' death, to assume the post of foreign minister as well as premier. The casualties of the acute internal crisis, which was resolved in September, were both the head of the government's ability to confront the hardliners, as well as his supposed efforts towards the gradual democratisation of the regime.<sup>40</sup>

Despite nationalistic remarks from both sides, the situation between the two Balkan countries was improving, largely due to both countries' feeling of isolation. The Colonels knew that Albania, in spite of the

---

<sup>36</sup> Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 166.

<sup>37</sup> C. Barkman, *Ambassador in Athens, 1969-1975: the evolution from military dictatorship to democracy in Greece* (London: Merlin Press, 1989), 13.

<sup>38</sup> S. Rizas, *The United States, the dictatorship of the Colonels and the Cyprus issue 1967-1974* (in Greek), (Athens: Pattakis, 2002), 60.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 86.



passionate Marxist-Leninist rhetoric of its leaders, was not on the same page as the Soviet Union (and Bulgaria), and that the Albanian-Chinese alliance was increasingly in the doldrums. Tirana, for its part, was perfectly aware that “the colonels’ regime [did] not feel strong, either internally or abroad, or even with its allies”.<sup>41</sup> Hoxha had noted that it seemed like Greece was going to “alter the absurd stand of hostile relations with the People’s Republic of Albania”, a change to which he was receptive, stating: “we are not opposed to this”.<sup>42</sup> When the *Economist* reported, in August 1970, on Albania’s “startling” rapprochement with its neighbours, it was stated that “tensions have subsided under the present government, which has not echoed the irredentist claims on southern Albania frequently voiced by earlier Greek regimes”.<sup>43</sup> The most plausible explanation for the Albanians’ sudden about-face does not seem to be that they were following the example of Beijing, but that they were mindful of the perceived threat from the Soviet Union.<sup>44</sup> It is clear that Hoxha was not ecstatic about China’s “new diplomacy” and its relinquishment of “the ‘dual adversary’ imagery, according to which the United States and the Soviet Union represented equally dangerous adversaries”.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, even the Yugoslavs, with whom relations were also improving, attributed the Albanians’ change of heart to “their growing consciousness of their isolation in Europe”.<sup>46</sup>

Due to a lack of official government papers from either Tirana or Athens, the best way to trace the negotiations that led to the re-establishment of relations between the two capitals would be to consult accessible foreign sources. In the summer of 1970, British officials in Athens and London were speculating on whether the aforementioned trade agreement would go as long as to entail any further positive developments, this time on an official level. The British embassy in Athens thought that there might have been “some grounds” for believing that might have been the case.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the British were interested to see reports in the Athens press of a statement made by a spokesman for the Albanian Foreign Ministry saying that “the smoothing out of relations between Greece and Albania was in the interests of the two peoples and of peace and security in the Balkans”.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 166.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> ‘Good neighbours make good fences’, *The Economist*, 01/08/1970.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Biberaj, *Albania and China*, 62. See also ‘Albania is reluctant to follow Peking’s example’, *The Guardian*, 11/11/1971.

<sup>46</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/936 Letter by P J. Barlow to Belgrade, 17/04/1970.

<sup>47</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/939 Letter by A. M. Goodenough in Athens to FCO, 03/06/1970.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

On the other side of the Cold War divide in the Balkan area, the Greek Colonels appeared, through the publication of an article in *The Diplomatic Observer*, to welcome a further rapprochement with the Albanians, but they stressed, once again, that the initiative would have to come from the Albanian side and that special attention would have to be paid to the protection and safe-guarding of the rights of the Greeks in Albania. Even so, as the British observed, the article made only a “passing mention of the ‘Northern Epirus’ question, as being one of the differences between the two countries that will have to be settled if relations [were] to develop”.<sup>49</sup> Two months later, British officials from the embassy in Athens, through talks with top officials in the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, inferred that “there has been a certain opening up in the Greek attitude” since then.<sup>50</sup> Karandreas, who was acting as Director of the First Political Division, “did not exclude the possibility that if [discussions about technical matters<sup>51</sup>] went well and the Albanian government showed itself well disposed, discussions on the establishment of diplomatic relations might be held during the coming months”.<sup>52</sup> The British again thought that the Greek government had already prepared a formula to cover the outstanding points of dispute between the two countries.

### **A Mediterranean ‘powder keg’**

September 1970 was an important month for the Eastern Mediterranean area. Since Turkey was in a state of political chaos, and Libya was under the erratic control of Colonel Gaddafi, the Greek junta could be regarded as practically the only remaining bastion of stability, “apart from Israel”.<sup>53</sup> All these events contributed to a substantial change in Greece’s relations with the superpowers.<sup>54</sup> At the time, Greece appeared, under the Colonels’ control, to be taking some steps towards overcoming its isolation and Palamas<sup>55</sup> was “quite confident and optimistic about Greece’s international position: resumption of US arms deliveries, a lessening of western criticism and *a policy of good neighbourly relations with the Balkan*

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/939 Letter by J. E. Powell-Jones in Athens to FCO, 12/08/1970.

<sup>51</sup> Specifically postal and telegraphic communications.

<sup>52</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/939 Letter by J. E. Powell-Jones in Athens to FCO, 12/08/1970.

<sup>53</sup> C. M. Woodhouse, *The rise and fall of the Greek Colonels* (London: Granada, 1985), 84.

<sup>54</sup> See S. Xydis, “Coups and Countercoups in Greece, 1967-1973 (with postscript)”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 89, no. 3 (1974): 524.

<sup>55</sup> He was the state secretary for foreign affairs at the time.

*countries*”<sup>56</sup> (emphasis added). Three weeks later the Greek government showed to Tirana the green light: the Greek representative in New York informed his counterpart that “he has been charged by his government to beg that it should be transmitted to the Albanian government that it (the Greek government) has taken a very kindly view of the gestures of the Albanian government, such as the release of the aircraft, of boats, etc., and will make efforts to improve relations up till the establishment of diplomatic relations”.<sup>57</sup> Hoxha’s reply is given in his memoirs: “This is positive, we must study it and respond to it positively”.<sup>58</sup> This marked a watershed in relations between the Greek military dictatorship and communist Albania insofar as it demonstrated both sides’ willingness to overcome difficulties and proceed towards a normalisation of relations.

However, relations with superpowers were not so rosy as far as Tirana was concerned. Differences between the Chinese and the Albanian capital were further exacerbated in the first quarter of 1971, and continued to affect Albania’s relations with its neighbours. In February, British sources reported that “the Romanian Ambassador had said more generally that the Chinese had their difficulties with the Albanians who sometimes ran ahead of them in their revolutionary zeal”.<sup>59</sup> Two days later, Tirana home service announced that “the Government of the Albanian People’s Republic and the Government of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia have agreed to raise the level of their diplomatic representations to the rank of embassy and to exchange Ambassadors”.<sup>60</sup> Although the Yugoslav side was less reticent about the conclusion of the agreement,<sup>61</sup> the Albanians were also happy to see it go through, and this marked a highpoint of their efforts to open up to the Balkans and the rest of the world. In addition, few days later, Chen Boda was denounced as a traitor, prompting Hoxha to declare: “This situation is inconceivable to us. Such a policy of taking enemies, placing them at the head, praising them, and then unmasking them, is beyond understanding, however Machiavellian it might be...”<sup>62</sup> In March, British sources in Beijing were reporting that relations between Tirana and the Chinese capital were far from improving.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Barkman, *Ambassador in Athens*, 33.

<sup>57</sup> Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 178.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/1252 Letter by J B Denson in Peking to FCO, 03/02/1971.

<sup>60</sup> Tirana home service, 19.00 GMT, 05/02/1971.

<sup>61</sup> The Yugoslav announcement preceded the Albanian by two hours and also mentioned that the agreement came as a ‘result of the gradual promotion of co-operation between the two countries’ (Tanyug in English, 16.51 GMT, 05/02/1971).

<sup>62</sup> Hoxha, *The Artful Albanian*, 283.

<sup>63</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/1252 Letter by Gordon S Barrass in Peking to FCO, 04/03/1971.

## The 1971 rapprochement

From the above, it becomes evident that the Albanians were feeling quite insecure insofar as China's military and economic aid was appearing to be less than forthcoming. The difference in Sino-Albanian relations in 1971 was that, by then, it was not merely the assurances regarding Albanian security that did not seem to be coming from Beijing, but there was also a decrease in the necessary financial assistance. This had an immense effect on Greek-Albanian relations as well. Furthermore, as Kentrotis has argued, "the channel, through which bilateral relations were improved, was financial relations".<sup>64</sup> The economic situation in Greece was no longer very promising and the inefficiency of the Colonels' fiscal policy had started to show.<sup>65</sup> Greece's trade with Eastern Europe in general was growing as a result of the leadership's supposed "reorientation" towards the Third World and Soviet bloc countries.<sup>66</sup> After the rapprochement, trade between Albania and Greece grew impressively; Albanian exports to Greece in 1972 were six times higher than in 1971, and in 1973 and 1974 almost 14 times higher. Greek exports followed the same increase, peaking in 1974, when they were 26 times higher than in 1971, the year relations were re-established between the two countries.<sup>67</sup>

In March 1971, Papadopoulos decided to ease the tensions inside and outside of Greece. On the domestic front, he initiated his policy of limited liberalisation by making "soundings among the former politicians in the hope of enlisting their support", and, later, he announced his decision to abolish the system of "certificates of social conscience", which were designed to prevent Communists from infiltrating significant positions within the Greek state.<sup>68</sup> He also appeared more "tolerant of Communism abroad". According to Woodhouse, "this policy could have a dual purpose: to assert a degree of independence of the United States, and also to neutralize the left-wing opposition".<sup>69</sup> Consequently, the "awareness of Greece's deteriorating economic and financial situation from 1971 on,

---

<sup>64</sup> K. Kentrotis, "Der Verlauf der Griechisch-Albanischen Beziehungen nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg und die Frage der Muslimischen Tschamen", *Balkan Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2 (1993): 275-6.

<sup>65</sup> Although in 1969 and 1970 economic development continued its prior course, in 1971 and, especially 1972, the structural problems of the economy became apparent as the first signs of the recession of the Greek economy that was just around the corner (Meletopoulos, *The dictatorship of the Colonels*, 405-409).

<sup>66</sup> In 1971 income from Greek exports to Eastern Europe amounted to 14.4% of Greece's total exports [P. Anastasiades, "Greece and the EEC, *European Review*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1973): 15].

<sup>67</sup> H. D. Topp, "Die albanisch-griechischen Beziehungen", *Wissenschaftlicher Dienst Südosteuropa*, vol. 2 (1978): 50, cited in Kentrotis, "Der Verlauf", 276.

<sup>68</sup> Woodhouse, *The Greek Colonels*, 91.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

external political pressures from both Europe and America, and a need for change” were not merely “responsible for the Papadopoulos-Markezinis experiment of 1973”, as Xydis has argued,<sup>70</sup> but also for the rapprochement between Athens and Tirana.

Another top-level meeting between the representatives of the two Balkan countries at the UN, Sami Baholli and Dimitris Bitsios, took place in January 1971. Baholli communicated to his Greek counterpart that his government was “ready, as it always [had] been, to establish diplomatic relations with Greece, relations which, in [their] opinion, should be at ambassadorial level, and that ambassadors should be exchanged”.<sup>71</sup>

In late March, the Albanians received the Greek request for the establishment of diplomatic relations, through Bitsios.<sup>72</sup> Two weeks later, a “lightning” struck the Albanian capital; April 1971 marked the start of the so-called “ping pong diplomacy” through the unexpected Chinese invitation, asking the American ping-pong team to visit China. Hoxha realised immediately that “this event has the importance not of a normal sports activity, but of a new political event”,<sup>73</sup> and he added, “thus, as can be seen, the ice is being broken. There is more to this than meets the eye”.<sup>74</sup> Beijing’s decision to turn over a new leaf was not very welcome in Tirana.

Only a month later, the Colonels’ regime informed Tirana, again through Bitsios, that it had decided to agree to the re-establishment of relations. Hoxha noted in his diary: “thus, an absurd situation comes to an end. Now the situation will be normalized”.<sup>75</sup> The next day he gave instructions for an article to be prepared. The article, entitled “A Marked Event in the Relations Between Albania and Greece” was published in *Zëri i popullit* on 14 May 1971, and described the event “as a sound basis to enhance the friendship and collaboration between our two neighbouring peoples and countries”.<sup>76</sup>

The British ambassador in Athens reported on 5 May that Palamas told him in confidence of the decision to exchange ambassadors with Albania. The purposes of the move were a) “to contribute to the Greek government’s policy of improving relations with Balkan countries; b) to help NATO in the present unstable situation in the Mediterranean; and c) to enable problems between the two countries to be discussed rather than for

<sup>70</sup> Xydis, “Coups and Countercoups”, 533.

<sup>71</sup> Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 179.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>73</sup> Hoxha, *The Artful Albanian*, 283-4.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>75</sup> Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 183.

<sup>76</sup> *Zëri i popullit*, 14/05/1971. See also Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 184.

them to go by default”.<sup>77</sup> After the official announcement of the re-establishment of relations on 6 May, Palamas gave a press conference, stating, in relation to the Northern Epirus issue, that “no change has occurred in Greece’s basic position. The only difference is that absence has been replaced by presence, indifference by interest and silence by dialogue”.<sup>78</sup> The British thought that Greece did not have very high expectations in turning “[those] sentiments to practical use”.<sup>79</sup> They based that assumption on information they had obtained through private conversations with officials in the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which revealed that the Greek ambassador’s instructions were of a general character and that “a negotiation of any general settlement outstanding points [was] not envisaged at [that] time”.<sup>80</sup> It seemed that the main priority for Athens was to reopen the frontier, which had been closed in 1938. Responding to this evident priority, the British ambassador commented that it was the “sort of problem which is most readily susceptible to settlement between two countries of such radically different political ideologies”.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite some initial difficulties,<sup>82</sup> and as early as one and a half years later, the relationship between Greece and Albania was characterised as “increasingly warm”, with Hoxha declaring from Avlona/Vlorë that his government “would never permit evil to be done against the ‘fraternal People of Greece’”, and Cavalieratos, the deputy foreign minister at the time, “express[ing] satisfaction at [that] statement”.<sup>83</sup> British officials again remarked that an impressive change in attitude had taken place, manifested

---

<sup>77</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/1256 Letter by R W J Hooper, in Athens to FCO, 18/11/1971.

<sup>78</sup> “aucun changement n’est intervenu dans les positions fondamentales Grecques. La seule différence est que l’absence est remplacée par la présence, l’indifférence par l’intérêt et le silence par [l]e dialogue” TNA: PRO FCO 28/1256 Gauvin in Athens to Paris, 13/05/1971.

<sup>79</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/1256 Letter by R W J Hooper, in Athens to FCO, 18/11/1971.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> The Greeks told the British that relations had not developed as they had expected because “the Albanians had proved suspicious and difficult to deal with and no substantial progress had been made regarding the frontier, communications or other subjects”, and that “the diplomatic corps in Tirana was isolated and demoralised” (TNA: PRO FCO 28/1523 Letter by J E Powell-Jones, in Athens to FCO, 19/01/1972). See also S. Rizas, *Balkans and Greece in transition: from Cold War to Détente, 1967-1974* (in Greek) (Athens: Pattakis, 2006), 187-8.

<sup>83</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/1523 Letter by J F R Martin, in Athens to FCO, 21/12/1972. The exact phrase from Hoxha’s speech, given on the occasion of the anniversary of the proclamation of independence of Albania (on 28 November 1972), was “No, our Party and government would never allow evil to come to the fraternal Greek people from the land of olives!” (Hoxha, *Two friendly peoples*, 202). See also Rizas, *Balkans and Greece in Transition*, 190-191.

by the Albanian leader's language, and that this was a sign that the Northern Epirus issue could, for at least the time being, be "laid to rest as a serious bone of contention between the two countries".<sup>84</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) officials affirmed that relations between Athens and Tirana were established "on the basis of respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, although it appear[ed] that the Greeks did not agree to renounce their claim to Northern Epirus".<sup>85</sup> The British also added that "the Albanians seem[ed] to have taken account of Greek demands for better treatment for their minority in Albania, because in a speech in the Albanian 6<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 1971, a delegate condemned the discrimination to which this minority was formerly subjected and claimed that they [then] ha[d] full, equal rights".<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, "the Greek territorial claim to Northern Epirus [was] thus in practice relegated to the deep-freeze, though it [was] not formally abandoned",<sup>87</sup> leading scholars to assume that "in the Balkans, Albania, China's wei ch'i"<sup>88</sup> pebble in Europe, gained by concluding that Athens had tacitly dropped its long-standing claim to Northern Epirus, a part of southern Albania, during the secret negotiations that resulted in the resumption of diplomatic relations with Greece, announced in a communiqué issued on 6 May 1971".<sup>89</sup>

Although substantial improvements in Greece's relations with Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria appeared at the time to be of greater material benefit to Greece than the renewal of relations with Albania,<sup>90</sup> the re-establishment of relations between the Greek military regime and Hoxha's "socialist maverick" was an extremely important, even groundbreaking event for the Balkans, and especially for the two countries. Koliopoulos and Veremis have noted that "Sofia's favourable response to th[e] overtures [made by the Colonels vis-à-vis their communist neighbours] signified Soviet willingness to exploit Greek isolation, but it also reflected the spirit of international détente".<sup>91</sup> A Balkan détente sprang up, as the East European ambassadors in Athens started "praising, to the disappointment and disenchantment of a large part of the Greek public, the stability of the Greek regime", and seemed to be "rather satisfied with the [then] state of

---

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 51/222 Draft memorandum on "Albania's foreign relations" by Podolier, 05/01/1972.

<sup>87</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/1256 Annual review 1971 by R W J Hooper, in Athens to FCO, 31/12/1971.

<sup>88</sup> Wei ch'i or weiqi is a Chinese board game usually known in English as Go.

<sup>89</sup> Xydis, "Coups and Countercoups", 534.

<sup>90</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/1256 Letter by A E Palmer, 03/12/1971.

<sup>91</sup> J. Koliopoulos and T. Veremis, *Greece: The Modern Sequel: From 1831 to the Present* (London: Hurst, 2002), 306.

affairs”.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, according to FCO sources, “the Greek regime [was] able to pursue their policy of improving relations with their Balkan neighbours the more effectively since the Communist Balkan countries seem[ed] motivated by a desire to compete for Greek favours”.<sup>93</sup>

After the fall of the military junta, Greek-Albanian relations very slowly but steadily improved. The 1970s saw another trade agreement, Hoxha asserting that relations were good,<sup>94</sup> and the decision to establish a flight connection between Athens and Tirana (twin cities today).<sup>95</sup> As Mazower has noted, “from the mid-1970s onwards the contrast between capitalist Greece and socialist north became much more marked”.<sup>96</sup> In the case of Albania, 1978 is an important watershed, as it marked the split from China and the withdrawal of Chinese financial and military aid, which left the small Balkan country more isolated than ever before.<sup>97</sup> A new era in Greek-Albanian relations was inaugurated with the advent of the Socialist government in Greece, which became Tirana’s only gateway to the rest of the world and which, after a series of cultural and trade agreements, took the bold decision in 1987 to lift the state of war.<sup>98</sup> The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe marked a significant development in relations between the two neighbouring countries, affecting the range and nature of issues. The opening of the border and its concomitant illegal immigration problem<sup>99</sup> (exacerbated by the 1997 financial crisis and the Kosovo war), the question of the Greek minority in Albania and the Cham properties in Greece, along with economic cooperation between Athens and Tirana and investing possibilities in Albania, all became (and still are, to a large extent) the key issues to discuss and confront.

Today, more than 35 years after the resumption of diplomatic relations, Greek-Albanian relations are “very good”, according to the

---

<sup>92</sup> Barkman, *Ambassador in Athens*, 49.

<sup>93</sup> TNA: PRO FCO 28/1523 Letter by W. R. Tomkys, in Athens to FCO, 21/11/1972.

<sup>94</sup> L Zanga, “Albanian Foreign Policy in the Wake of 7th Party Congress”, in *Eastern’s Europe’s uncertain future*, ed. R. King and J. Braun (New York: Praeger, 1977), 88-89. See also Hoxha, *Two friendly people*, 235-237.

<sup>95</sup> See Hoxha, *Two friendly people*, 238-9.

<sup>96</sup> M. Mazower, *The Balkans: From the End of Byzantium to the Present Day*, London: Phoenix, 2001), 136.

<sup>97</sup> See A. Biagini, *Storia dell’Albania: dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, Milano: Bompiani, 1999), 145; and A. Sherman, *Albania, the fallen eagle of the Balkans* (in Greek) (Athens: Indiktos, 2000), 109.

<sup>98</sup> For the Albanian view of the new era in Greek-Albanian relations that developed after PASOK came to power see Hoxha, *Two friendly people*, 353-430.

<sup>99</sup> According to Konica, Greece was the largest recipient of Albanian emigrants between 1990 and 1996, with over 72% choosing to cross the southern border (mostly illegally) and enter a country which was also a member of the European Union (N. Konica, “The emigration experience and its impact on the Albanian economy in early transition period” in *On Eagle’s Wings: The Albanian Economy in Transition*, ed. D. Bezemer (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2006), 55.



Albanian foreign minister,<sup>100</sup> while economic cooperation between the two Balkan countries is constantly improving, with Greece being close to being Albania's major trade partner and major source of foreign direct investment (FDI).<sup>101</sup> According to US sources, Greece is host to 600,000-800,000 Albanian immigrants;<sup>102</sup> which means that there is one Albanian for every 13-15 Greeks. Against this backdrop, the study of the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two neighbouring countries appears both interesting and enlightening.

Although the international and domestic situations in both countries are very different now, the challenges that Greece and Albania have to face are somewhat familiar to the ones their governments encountered in 1971. Both countries have to demonstrate to their European and Atlantic family of friends that they are mature enough to be considered credible allies and legitimate members of those groups. Albania, in its relations with its neighbouring countries, and especially Greece, has to prove that it has relinquished its imperfect past and irredentist ambitions, and that it is determined to create a better, safer and more prosperous, future for itself; Greece should show that it is a reliable partner that does not merely wish to promote its national interests disregarding collective decisions, and that it is a fully integrated member of the European Union that has a sturdy immigration policy and that treats its citizens (native and foreign) respectfully. The main vehicle through which to achieve these primary objectives, is, as in 1971, economic relations between the two countries. The legacy of the Greek-Albanian rapprochement of 1971 is the proof that it is definitely not an easy process (although completely feasible as the Hoxha-Colonels rapprochement during the Cold War shows), but it certainly is worth trying for, as the results are most likely to be rewarding for all parties involved.

---

<sup>100</sup> "Minister of Foreign Affairs received the Greek Ambassador in Tirana, 16/6/2006", <http://www.mfa.gov.al/english/lajm.asp?id=4202>, accessed on 21/02/2007.

<sup>101</sup> Greece was the second biggest (Italy being the biggest) import and export partner of Albania, with 28 percent and 13.1 percent in 2002, respectively (Investment Guide for Southeast Europe 2004, 24 – accessed at <http://www.seeurope.net/files2/pdf/ig2004/albania.pdf>). Also, according to 2004 Bank of Albania figures, FDI with Greece as country of origin amounted to 34.2 percent, thus being the second bigger country to invest in Albania after Italy that accounted for almost 48 percent (*The Albanian Echo*, no. 2, September 2004, 5 - accessed at [http://www.mfa.gov.al/echo/albanianecho\\_1.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.al/echo/albanianecho_1.pdf)).

<sup>102</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Background Note: Greece", <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3395.htm>.