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Armenia and Türkiye between conflict and cooperation: explaining (with) disaster diplomacy

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Abstract

Over the past 30 years, the relationship between the neighbouring states of Armenia and Türkiye has been greatly influenced by a politicised atmosphere and ongoing debates about their shared history, alongside efforts at reconciliation. It is noteworthy that, in a global context increasingly characterised by both anthropogenic and natural calamities, the phenomenon of (shared) disasters as it pertains to the dynamics of Armenia–Türkiye relations has garnered relatively scant scholarly attention. This study investigates instances of the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic on a global scale and the Kahramanmaraş (Türkiye) earthquakes that occurred on 6 February 2023, which serve as disasters possessing diplomatic and symbolic significance that could facilitate a transition from a state of conflict to one of cooperative peace between these two nations. Utilising a disaster diplomacy framework and incorporating data obtained from Armenia and Türkiye, this paper posits that disasters may function as a substantial catalyst in fostering diplomatic conditions and advancing efforts towards rapprochement.

KEYWORDS
Armenia, conflict, COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019), diplomacy, disaster, earthquake, Türkiye

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, amidst the widespread closure of international borders attributable to the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic, dozens of Armenian labour migrants in Türkiye found themselves stranded. In response, these Armenian nationals were effectively repatriated, exemplifying a commendable instance of collaboration between diverse authorities in Türkiye and Armenia (İçduygu, 2020), notwithstanding the absence of diplomatic relations between them since 1993. In a subsequent crisis, transpiring in February 2023, Türkiye experienced two devastating earthquake events, resulting in extensive devastation and an officially recorded death toll of 31,643 and the displacement of 158,165 individuals from the impacted regions. Furthermore, 9,793 teams from various countries were deployed in the wake of this disaster (AFAD, 2023). Despite its historically tenuous relations with Türkiye, Armenia was among the states demonstrating goodwill during this calamity. Drawing on these instances of cooperative disaster response between longstanding adversaries, this article examines the phenomenon of disaster diplomacy between Armenia and Türkiye in recent years, its significance within the framework of international relations, and its prospective role as a catalyst for rapprochement.

Disasters triggered by natural hazards, including pandemics and earthquake events, have the potential to inflict considerable damage upon nations, leading to major destruction of communities and critical infrastructure, significant fatalities, and economic regressions. Nevertheless, in the midst of disorder and tragedy, such disasters also present distinctive opportunities for nations to transcend political divisions and unite during periods of crisis. It is acknowledged that during and following disasters, animosities between states may be temporarily alleviated, as they redirect their collective attention towards addressing the urgent needs of affected populations (Nelson, 2010; Kelman, 2012). This fleeting opportunity can be strategically harnessed to cultivate trust, enhance communication, and foster collaboration between adversarial parties, thereby establishing a foundation for cooperation centred on common vulnerabilities and the interdependencies present within affected communities. The immediacy and magnitude of the crisis frequently necessitate collaborative efforts and resource-sharing, paving the way for potential conflict resolution and enhanced cooperation (Ganapati, Kelman, and Koukis, 2010).

Certainly, the aforementioned indicators of calamities are highly pertinent to the geopolitical landscape of Armenia and Türkiye, characterised by historically tumultuous interactions, revolving around unresolved and fragmented issues concerning shared histories and conflicts. The prospects for normalisation between these specific nations are further complicated by the absence of diplomatic relations and the prevailing tensions, particularly in the light of Türkiye's recent endorsement of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia (Sayan, 2023).

Nonetheless, in spite of the challenging circumstances, there have been several initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue between Armenia and Türkiye. With respect to the discourse relevant to this article are examples of humanitarian collaboration that have temporarily enhanced bilateral relations. The two significant occurrences of 'disaster diplomacy' that facilitated the potential for diplomatic engagement between the two countries were, as noted, the repatriation of the stranded Armenian labourers in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes in 2023. Accordingly, this paper emphasises the significance of the concept of disaster diplomacy and contributes to pertinent academic discussions by examining how the selected instances of disasters have favourably influenced diplomatic and cooperative endeavours between Armenia and Türkiye. In other words, our investigation aims to analyse how *disasters can catalyse diplomacy* within the context of Armenia–Türkiye relations.

It is argued that the act of solidarity amid historical tensions underscores the potential for disaster diplomacy to bridge divides and foster cooperation. The importance of disaster diplomacy lies in its ability to transcend political differences and prioritise human lives and well-being. In times of disaster, the immediate need for rescue, relief, and rehabilitation becomes paramount, creating opportunities for countries to put aside their differences and work together for the greater good. The case of Armenia and Türkiye demonstrates the transformative power of disaster diplomacy. As will be elaborated upon in the course of this article, the COVID-19 pandemic alongside the aforementioned earthquake events afforded both countries an opportunity to extend humanitarian assistance, exemplifying benevolence towards a neighbour during a critical period of distress. This support not only ensured the delivery of

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substantial aid to the communities adversely affected in these two nations, but it also acted as a significant impetus for enhanced diplomatic relations and the prospect of reconciliation between them.

The related scholarly literature agrees on short-lived disaster diplomacy processes. The temporal framework for short-term diplomacy constitutes a complex construct that integrates diverse modalities of international interaction. Such initiatives are typically characterised by their temporary quality, often lasting from a few weeks to a couple of months, and they are carefully planned to achieve specific diplomatic goals. The efficacy and ramifications of these short-term diplomatic endeavours can fluctuate considerably, contingent upon the situational context and the strategies implemented. Accordingly, Kelman (2012) introduces 'tit-for-tat disaster diplomacy' and 'mirror disaster diplomacy' to represent successful cases. The former highlights that the practice of reciprocal support may enable negotiations despite continuing disagreements, whereas the latter relies on the internal policies of the two sides to invest in disaster risk reduction by increasing self-reliance. For long-term and successful disaster diplomacy, Kelman (2016, p. 27) contends that 'disaster-related activities have catalysed diplomacy with the presumption that the catalysis led to a positive diplomatic outcome which could be a peace deal, augmented diplomatic connections, or further talks'. In reality, the primary inquiries within this framework pertain to the degree to which catastrophic events can engender ephemeral openings for collaborative efforts and discourse, as well as the extent to which such events possess the substantial capacity to facilitate enduring solutions to conflicts.

Hence, this paper establishes a framework for examining the significance and evolution of disaster diplomacy between Armenia and Türkiye in recent years. It provides a basis for comprehending the possible ramifications of this humanitarian initiative, not solely in terms of immediate relief operations but also in promoting dialogue, fostering reconciliation, and enhancing regional stability. Through analysis of the case studies, we can acquire valuable insights into the transformative potential of disaster diplomacy and its capacity to transcend historical grievances, thereby contributing to the establishment of a more resilient and collaborative future in the sphere of international relations.

Structurally, the paper is divided into four parts. Scholarly debates on disaster diplomacy are scrutinised first. The second part focuses on the historical course of Türkiye–Armenia relations. This is followed by the analysis of the case studies. The fourth part is the epilogue, presenting some conclusions.

2 | DISASTER DIPLOMACY: IS IT A CATALYST IN DIPLOMATIC CONDITIONS?

Disaster diplomacy is developing in scholarly literature. Kelman and Koukis (2000) presented disaster diplomacy as a distinctive sub-discipline in disaster studies, addressing the social and behavioural aspects of sudden-onset collective stress situations, typically referred to as mass emergencies or disasters (Morton, 2020). Such a definition extended the earlier conceptualisations of disaster diplomacy, which considered it to be the 'common interests of nations at a level of scientific understanding of shared risk' (Comfort, 2000, p. 6). Later, Kelman (2006) suggested four key elements for analysing disaster diplomacy. First, relationality: to what extent do disasters influence diplomatic relations? Second, the novelty: whether they create new ways of diplomacy? Third, legitimacy: whether disasters create a setting for legitimate diplomacy where the parties do not avoid furthering cooperation and do not utilise the events as a tool of public relations. Fourth, the lasting impact: to what extent the length of diplomacy (short or long term) depends on the willingness of parties and other non-disaster elements.

Conversely, the disaster diplomacy literature relies on three main international relations concepts or issues: disasters; diplomacy; and conflicts. Since disasters create 'shock, shared grief and the humanitarian impulse' (Rajagopalan, 2006, p. 454), scholars tend to question the subsequent implication of disasters for international relations. Empirical studies have indicated that disaster-related activities significantly encourage diplomatic relations following an event if the parties had pre-disaster relations. Disasters can catalyse but do not on their own lead to collaboration between countries with disagreements (Ganapati, Kelman, and Koukis, 2010; Koukis, Kelman, and

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Ganapati, 2016). In addition, various case studies of disaster diplomacy focus on conflict situations, mainly referring to the dynamics of relationships before and after disasters at the state and non-state actor levels (Holloway, 2000; Ker-Lindsay, 2007; Kelman, 2012, 2016; Koukis, Kelman, and Ganapati, 2016).

Table 1 shows some selected disaster diplomacy case studies. These relate to Greece– Türkiye relations after the 1999 earthquakes, Cuba–United States collaboration on the climate threat, Iran–US relations after the 2003 Bam earthquake, regional cooperation in Southern Africa, and the role of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami on the conflicts in Aceh and other parts of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. It appears that scholarly work on disaster diplomacy increased after the 1999 earthquakes in Greece and Türkiye (Evin, 2004; Keridis, 2006), when relations between the two countries were tense and conditioned by the continental shelf disputes of Cyprus and the Aegean Sea. Despite these historical differences, the earthquakes afforded them an opportunity for rapprochement and, therefore, an improvement of relations through disaster diplomacy.

In the context of the 1999 Taiwan earthquake, a notable reduction in tensions was observed between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. The latter's proposition of aid to Taiwan exemplified the necessity for disaster diplomacy to enhance comprehension of both parties' stances in a contentious scenario. The ramifications of the earthquake, coupled with the offer of assistance, exerted an immediate calming effect on the tensions between these countries; however, it did not lead to substantial advancement in their political bilateral relations. Following the 2003 Bam earthquake in Iran and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake involving India and Pakistan, the outcomes of earthquake-related disaster diplomacy were somewhat mixed, yet not particularly encouraging. In the first instance, in the aftermath of the disaster, the US extended an offer of assistance to Iran; however, Iran declined the proposed aid, potentially owing to the strained diplomatic relations between the two nations characterising the period. An additional factor may have been Iran's perception of the US offer as a strategic manoeuvre rather than a sincere humanitarian initiative. In the second instance, both India and Pakistan encountered substantial obstacles in their response to the earthquake and the provision of relief to the affected regions. Notwithstanding the prevailing political tensions and conflicts between the two nations, they acknowledged the imperative for collaboration in addressing the humanitarian emergency. This recognition fostered a temporary easing of relations, with both parties

TABLE 1 Empirical studies.

Case study	Temporal occurrence of the disaster	Key actors	Duration of diplomatic relations
Taiwan earthquake (Kelman, 2008)	1999	China and Taiwan	Short term
Earthquakes in Greece and Türkiye (Economides, 2005; Koukoudakis, 2005; Ker-Lindsay, 2007; Mavrogenis and Kelman, 2013; Sevin and Jayasinghe, 2018)	1999	Greece and Türkiye	Short term
Bam earthquake in Iran (Kelman, 2007; Ireni-Saban, 2019)	2003	Iran and US	Short term
Indian Ocean tsunami (McGibbon, 2006; Stokke, Törnquist, and Sindre, 2009; Hyndman, 2011; Klitzsch, 2014)	2004	Aceh/Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka	Extension of inter-state conflicts
Kashmir earthquake (Kelman, 2006; Andrabi and Das, 2017)	2005	India and Pakistan	Short term
Famine (Bennett, 1999; Thompson and Freeman, 2009)	Mid-1990s	South and North Korea	Short term
Hurricanes (Glantz, 2000)	2001 and 2017	Cuba and US	Long term
Drought (Holloway, 2000)	1991–93	Southern African countries	Long term

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demonstrating a willingness to collaborate and support one another. Nonetheless, it is crucial to emphasise that the influence of disaster diplomacy on the enduring relations between India and Pakistan was limited (Kelman, 2006). The fundamental political and territorial disputes that characterised their relationship remained unresolved, and instances of disaster diplomacy were ephemeral, failing to engender significant breakthroughs in the resolution of broader conflicts. Yet, the case of disaster diplomacy during the Kashmir earthquake serves as a poignant reminder of the potential for humanitarian crises to unveil avenues for cooperation and dialogue between nations, even in the face of protracted conflicts.

In a manner analogous to earthquakes, when various other forms of calamities transpire, the states impacted by such disasters typically receive offers of assistance from their adversarial counterparts, as evidenced by the North Korean famine of the mid-1990s, hurricanes in Cuba and the US during 2001 and 2017, and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, as well as drought conditions in Southern Africa. These disparate occurrences substantiate the notion that disaster diplomacy possesses the capacity to ameliorate temporarily divisions and cultivate amicable relations among conflicting nations. Furthermore, they illustrate that in periods of catastrophe, humanitarian imperatives can surpass political divergences, thereby engendering prospects for dialogue and collaborative efforts. Despite the potential for such cooperation, challenges and constraints remain prevalent. Historical and political animosities between countries may obstruct effective joint efforts in the wake of disasters. It is vital to acknowledge that disaster diplomacy can represent a multifaceted and politically-sensitive matter, with a myriad of factors influencing the decisions undertaken by nations affected by disasters. Each scenario is distinct, and the motivations for either party accepting or declining assistance can fluctuate based on the particular contexts and the interrelations among the states involved.

As underlined above, research on disaster diplomacy questions whether disasters create a new environment for cooperation between conflicting states and societies (Kelman and Koukis, 2000; Olson, 2000; Pelling and Dill, 2010). Some studies consider disasters as political shocks different from wars (Akcinaroglu, DiCicco, and Radziszewski, 2011; Lee et al., 2022) and tipping points or catalysts for sociopolitical change (Pelling and Dill, 2010). Disasters can pave the way for cooperation through encouraging dialogues (Akcinaroglu, DiCicco, and Radziszewski, 2011; Kreutz, 2012). Overall, disaster diplomacy functions as a catalyst in diplomatic conditions by providing opportunities for countries to come together, build trust, and collaborate in times of crisis. It offers a platform for dialogue and cooperation that can improve diplomatic relations and create engagement between nations.

Disasters become catalysts in diplomatic relations in several ways (Nelson, 2010; Kelman, 2016). First, in the aftermath of a disaster, the provision of aid to the affected country potentially helps to build trust and goodwill between states and initiates further diplomatic engagement. Second, disasters often require a coordinated response involving (for effectiveness) multiple countries, information sources, resources, and instances of expertise-sharing. The process of working together in a crisis can foster cooperation and lead to improved diplomatic relations. Third, disasters can affect countries regardless of their political or ideological differences. The shared experience of vulnerability can create a sense of empathy and solidarity among nations. This can lead to a willingness to set aside differences and work together for the greater good, which can positively impact diplomatic relations. Fourth, disasters frequently receive significant media coverage, both nationally and internationally, so the response of countries to such events can shape public perceptions and opinion. A swift and effective response can enhance a country's reputation and improve its standing in the eyes of the international community. Fifth, in the aftermath of disasters, countries may go beyond short-term exchanges and engage in long-term cooperation to rebuild infrastructure, strengthen disaster preparedness, improve resilience, and even extend their cooperation to other fields.

In short, disaster diplomacy may create a critical juncture in the relations between states. But many questions remain, such as how disaster diplomacy can be measured, what should be its level of analysis, and should the focus be on public diplomacy or grassroots movements in the conceptualisation of diplomacy, or both. Previous empirical studies show that disaster diplomacy can potentially enhance diplomatic relations between conflicting countries if the pre-disaster relationship and diplomacy attempts are present; however, they highlight short-term collaboration

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and solidarity at diverse scales between such nations because of the prevailing non-disaster factors. Against this backdrop, this paper explores disaster diplomacy in the case of Armenia–Türkiye relations. It concentrates on public and grassroots diplomacy between them to contribute to a new analytical framework for disaster diplomacy and conflict resolution. To understand better the functions of disaster diplomacy, the following section provides an overview of long-established and ongoing disputes between Armenia and Türkiye.

3 | ARMENIA–TÜRKIYE RELATIONS: A QUESTION OF CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

Despite being neighbours with a shared 311-kilometre-long border, Armenia and Türkiye have a history of long, intractable conflict and unsettled relations. This is rooted in several issues: (i) the deportation and mass killings of Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire in 1915[1]; (ii) the sharing of a highly securitised border with the communist regime in Armenia during the Soviet period; and (iii) Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia. Yet, the Armenian-Turkish conflict is unlike other rivalries in several respects: (i) the current border between the two countries is void of violence and is not a ceasefire line; (ii) the past, its legacy, and psychological factors weigh heavy in the conflict (negative stereotypes, collective memory, lack of closure), so reconciliation is 'more about healing a broken relationship, rebuilding trust, and coming to terms with the past' (Çuhadar and Gültekin Punsmann, 2012, p. 10); (iii) the conflict involves recurrent structural barriers, such as a closed border and a lack of contact; and (iv) despite its historical nature, the conflict is constantly influenced by the ongoing regional realpolitik and power asymmetry.

During the period of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (1922–91), relations between the two countries were mostly conditioned by the Türkiye–USSR prism, where the Türkiye–Armenia border constituted the Türkiye–USSR border—'defined by barbed wire and guard towers' (Hakobyan, 2013, p. 209). Despite cold relations, Soviet Armenia exported electricity to Türkiye, and the Doğukapı–Akhuryan (with a Kars–Gyumri train service) and the Alican–Margara checkpoints were operational. The post-1991 course of Armenia–Türkiye relations and the attempts to establish diplomatic relations were marked by numerous challenges and limited progress. Nevertheless, we have examined the key developments in Armenia–Türkiye relations and summarised them in four periods: 1991–97; 1998–2007; 2008–17; and post 2018.

3.1 | 1991–97

Armenia declared its independence from the USSR following a national referendum on 21 September 1991. Interestingly, Türkiye was among the first countries to recognise Armenia's independence, on 16 December 1991, although without establishing diplomatic relations (Hill, Kirişci, and Moffatt, 2015). The first diplomatic visit between the countries happened even earlier, in April 1991, when Volkan Vural, the Turkish Ambassador to the USSR, visited Armenia; Vural and Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan drafted a protocol on establishing neighbourly relations (Ayunts, Köse, and Becermen, 2019).

The USSR's collapse also caused surges of long-suppressed ethnic and territorial conflicts in the region. The people of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast declared independence from the USSR too, with the aim of unification with Armenia. This move resulted in a full-scale war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. During 1992–93, as Armenians advanced in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, relations with Türkiye sharply deteriorated. On 3 April 1993, Türkiye unilaterally sealed its land border with Armenia, in a show of support for Azerbaijan, halted the Kars–Gyumri railway, and closed the H50 air corridor (Gültekin Punsmann et al., 2012). Armenia was also 'excluded from regional energy and transportation projects' (Tol, 2022), such as the cancellation of the fuel transportation project from Central Asia to Trabzon in Türkiye via Armenia (Shirani, 2014). In 1995, Türkiye lifted the air blockade on Armenia, owing

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to pressure applied by the international community and its economic interests (Hakobyan, 2013). Passenger flights between Yerevan and Istanbul were authorised, but the land border remained closed (Sayan, 2023). Nonetheless, several economic initiatives between the countries were undertaken during this period: in 1992, the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation was established in Istanbul, including Armenia as a member, while in 1997, the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council was set up to promote cooperation between the public and private business circles of the two countries (Ayunts, Köse, and Becermen, 2019).

3.2 | 1998–2007

The second phase of Armenia–Türkiye relations is linked to Robert Kocharyan's presidency in Armenia and the rise to power (in 2002) of the Justice and Development Party (or AK Party) in Türkiye. Despite the absence of a breakthrough in normalisation during this phase, the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission was operational during 2001–04. Within this framework, visa restrictions were lifted reciprocally in 2003, and nationals of both countries could then engage in touristic travel (Ayunts, Köse, and Becermen, 2019). In the same period, the Turkish Embassy in Tbilisi, Georgia, was assigned responsibility to conduct communication with Yerevan, a function previously undertaken by the Turkish Embassy in Moscow, Russia. As for the economy, Türkiye approved Armenia's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2003, but also invoked its rights to apply restrictions on the country (still in force), by not allowing 'entry of Armenian imports to Turkey, including goods for transit, and to use its ports and highways. Turkey also imposed informal sanctions regarding bank transfers to and from Armenia' (Ayunts, Köse, and Becermen, 2019, p. 29). With restricted access to Türkiye's ports, Armenia exports its products through Georgia's Poti port, which is unfavourable because of the high transportation costs and the absence of ocean-type freighters.

3.3 | 2008–17

This phase of Armenian-Turkish relations is often characterised as 'football diplomacy' and is linked to Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan's tenure. In 2008, the Armenian and Turkish national football teams were drawn in the same qualification group for the World Cup, and so Sargsyan invited Turkish President Abdullah Gül to attend the first match in Yerevan. Gül accepted the invite and arrived in the city on 6 September 2008 to watch the match. Gül's arrival and Sargsyan's reciprocal visit for the return fixture brought about a thaw in relations and raised hope for normalisation.

Shared experiences and mutual interests can strengthen relations between nations with a history of discord, as seen in disaster diplomacy. Disasters triggered by natural hazards and relief efforts foster collaboration and dialogue, akin to how football promotes socio-cultural exchange (Jarvie, 2024). Cooperative disaster relief between Armenia and Türkiye showcases their common humanity, fostering trust and goodwill. Disaster response initiatives focus on humanitarian needs, transcending political disagreements and enhancing economic cooperation. Non-governmental organisations, international bodies, and ordinary citizens play crucial roles in disaster diplomacy, laying the foundation for lasting stability.

The 'football diplomacy' and subsequent negotiations on a normalisation roadmap culminated in the signing of two protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations and the further development of relations between Armenia and Türkiye in Zurich, Switzerland, on 10 October 2009 (Hill, Kirişci, and Moffatt, 2015). The protocols envisaged normalisation without preconditions and had to undergo parliamentary ratification. They offered premises for establishing diplomatic relations, opening the border, and creating an intergovernmental commission to address historical issues between the two countries (Dermoyan, 2022). But they were never ratified. On the Turkish side, ratification was conditioned by pressure from Azerbaijan and the 'assurances Ankara had previously given to Baku during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict' (Hill, Kirişci, and Moffatt, 2015), whereas on the Armenian side, the denunciation

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of the protocols within the global diaspora and the ratification delay in Türkiye led to their suspension (Shirani, 2014; Hill, Kirişci, and Moffatt, 2015).

3.4 | Post 2018

The newest phase of Armenian-Turkish relations differs considerably from the previous ones. It is linked to the tenure of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power in 2018 through country-wide peaceful protests and with the popular support of Armenians who rallied to 'reject' the former president (Hakan Yavuz and Günter, 2022). However, the biggest determinant of this phase was Armenia's defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, as Turkish support was crucial for Azerbaijan's victory (in 2020). Although the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict[2] remains unresolved, its dynamics and the balance of power have essentially shifted, meaning that a key issue impacting Armenian-Turkish relations has also shifted (Dermoyan, 2022). In the aftermath of the war, the sides again attempted to negotiate, by nominating special envoys to lead the normalisation talks. The negotiations have since intensified but with no breakthrough. Although there are cautious expectations about normalisation (Hill, Kirişci, and Moffatt, 2015), it is quite possible that realpolitik factors and interests will eventually weigh heavier than normalisation (Ter-Matevosyan, 2021).

Against this background, it is interesting to speculate whether disaster diplomacy, being a catalyser in conflict and cooperation, has any chance to alter the Armenian-Turkish diplomatic landscape.

4 | DISASTER DIPLOMACY BETWEEN ARMENIA AND TÜRKIYE: CASE STUDIES

In this section we present two case studies to illustrate the dynamics and mechanisms of disaster diplomacy in recent Armenian-Turkish relations. The first case study focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, whereas the second one revolves around the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes in Türkiye. In addition, the case of a shared river basin along the border of the two countries is explored, exemplifying both conflict and cooperation dynamics.

4.1 | The COVID-19 pandemic case study

COVID-19 thwarted international human mobility through border closures, travel bans, repatriations, and quarantines. Pandemic-driven states of emergency were declared in both Armenia and Türkiye in March 2020. Armenia banned the exit of its citizens yet allowed their return. Being predominantly a migrant source country, Armenia repatriated around 63,000 citizens from different countries through its diplomatic missions between March and May 2020 (Factor, 2020).

As for Türkiye, although the country has a mixed migration profile, its major cities are largely migrant-hosting hotspots. The pandemic particularly aggravated the vulnerabilities of irregular labour migrants who were often restricted to the most precarious jobs within the least-regulated segments of the economy (İçduygu, 2020). The pandemic-driven economic restrictions in Türkiye put many irregular labour migrants in peril: businesses were abruptly and indefinitely closed; many migrants experienced loss of employment or a reduction in wages; and daily-wage workers were challenged by having no savings or contingency measures for health, food, or shelter. Like other migrant groups in Türkiye, Armenian labour migrants also experienced employment losses, wage cuts, social vulnerabilities, and restricted mobility. Yet, despite the similarities, the absence of an Armenian diplomatic mission in Türkiye to 'provide direct assistance and service as well as their identity put them in a more vulnerable position' (Ayunts, Köse, and Becermen, 2019, p. 27) as compared to other migrant groups.

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Armenian labour migration to Türkiye has persisted for a few decades already; however, the unsettled relations between the countries have created a limited research environment to study this flow. Nevertheless, a small number of studies on Armenian migrants in Türkiye (Ozinian, 2009; Körükmez, 2013; Salomoni, 2014; Teke Lloyd, 2015; Grigoryan, 2018; Erdoğan and Uyan Semerci, 2018) claim that the number of Armenian-citizen migrants in Türkiye is around 15,000–20,000, and that they are predominantly female and have undocumented status. They are concentrated in Istanbul and are mostly employed in domestic and care work, the suitcase trade, and service sectors.

When COVID-19 escalated global emergency evacuations of stranded citizens by their respective governments, Armenian migrants and suitcase traders in Türkiye found themselves in limbo. While a return through consular channels was an option for many other migrants, Armenians lacked a consular door on which to knock during emergencies. Nevertheless, despite the precarity of the Armenian migrants stranded in Türkiye during the pandemic, small-scale 'crisis diplomacy' took place and a goodwill gesture was enacted for the repatriation of migrants. This would require considerable efforts even in a non-emergency context, or, perhaps, would be completely infeasible.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia provided a hotline for its citizens abroad to reach out (MFA of Armenia, 2020). Reportedly, many Armenian migrants in Istanbul contacted the ministry and requested assistance to return home. Organisation of the repatriation was not an easy task to accomplish owing to national and international mobility restrictions. Furthermore, repatriation in the absence of diplomatic ties necessitated extensive negotiations among all of the involved parties, which created a setting for 'disaster diplomacy' and, fortunately, yielded positive outcomes on the matter of evacuation. Yerevan sought the assistance of Tbilisi to establish an evacuation corridor through Georgia for buses transporting Armenian migrants from Türkiye (İçduygu, 2020). Ankara also expressed its willingness to support the repatriation during discussions with the spiritual leader of Türkiye's Armenian community[3] (İçduygu, 2020). It is noteworthy that a group of Armenian migrants in Istanbul were also involved in the organisation of the evacuation, volunteering to aid and inform their compatriots about the repatriation. As a result of these unprecedented arrangements, around 250 Armenian migrants left Istanbul for Yerevan by bus in April–May 2020 (MFA of Armenia, 2020). The Turkish police accompanied them to the Türkiye–Georgia border (Sarp), where a corridor was provided by the Georgian authorities for the buses to drive to the Georgia–Armenia border (Bagratashen). On the territory of Georgia, the Armenian Embassy coordinated the reception of migrants and their transfer to the Armenian border checkpoint.

While there is limited information about the negotiations, it is obvious that the evacuation of Armenian citizens from Türkiye was a small but significant humanitarian act within the diplomatic history of the countries. Consequently, this case can serve as a commendable example of good governance and cooperation and effective enactment of 'disaster diplomacy' across countries, despite the absence of diplomatic ties. At this point, it is important to highlight that non-state actors have also been instrumental in disaster diplomacy between Armenia and Türkiye, promoting cross-border cooperation and goodwill through humanitarian efforts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Richard Giragosian, the Director of the Yerevan-based Regional Studies Center and an expert on Armenia–Türkiye relations, noted[4] that the repatriation efforts were symbolically significant. He expressed optimism that this crisis could potentially create an opportunity for renewed diplomatic engagement between the two countries, and stressed the positive reactions of non-state actors.

4.2 | The Kahramanmaraş earthquakes case study

After the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes devastated large areas of Türkiye and Syria on 6 February 2023, the Armenian government decided to send rescue teams and humanitarian assistance to both countries (Grigoryan, 2023). In international circles, many people described the move as 'disaster diplomacy' given that it offered hope for strained Armenia-Türkiye relations.

Yet, the 2023 move was not the only instance of 'earthquake diplomacy' between the countries. The earliest known rescue effort happened in 1988 when northern Armenia (Spitak region) was hit by a devastating earthquake

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that killed some 60,000 people and destroyed nearly 1.5 million buildings (Harutyunyan, 2005). While there is no well-documented evidence of Turkish relief assistance to Armenia, eyewitnesses from those days recount how Türkiye sent tons of food, blankets, helicopters, and lifting cranes to Armenia (Martirosyan, 2012). In the early 1990s, Türkiye had also acted as a corridor for critical grain supplies to Armenia when the latter was facing an economically disastrous situation and infrastructural collapse (Hakobyan, 2013). Hence, in 1992, Armenia and Türkiye negotiated the passage of grain from Europe to Armenia via the Kars–Gyumri railway (Ayunts, Köse, and Becermen, 2019). In that same year, Türkiye allowed the transportation of 6,000 tons of wheat to Armenia, sent by Syria through its territory.

As for Armenia's relief for Türkiye, it has essentially manifested as humanitarian support after several earthquakes in the country. Armenia deployed assistance and rescue teams following two devastating earthquakes that hit the cities of Düzce and Izmit in 1999 (ReliefWeb, 1999). It also sent humanitarian assistance to the Turkish Red Crescent Society (Contributor, 2011) in the wake of the 2011 earthquake in Van.

On 6 February 2023, two catastrophic earthquakes occurred in Türkiye, affecting 11 provinces with an estimated population of 15 million and causing more than 50,000 deaths (World Health Organization, 2023). Armenia's humanitarian intervention was, perhaps, this time the most politically-charged. After the conveyance of condolences on the highest state level, Armenia deployed a rescue team to Türkiye, followed by trucks of humanitarian assistance that passed through the Margara–Alican interstate checkpoint which had been closed since 1993 (Kucera, 2023).

The reaction in Armenia towards the deployment of aid to Türkiye was either muted and more concentrated on the affected areas of Syria, or sceptical and critical. The Armenian public viewed events through the bitter prism of 'moral dilemmas' (Azadian, 2023). On the one hand, they empathised with the suffering of the Turkish people and endorsed the importance of sharing human grief and upholding humanitarian values in all circumstances, but, on the other hand, they could not fully sympathise, because they saw Türkiye as a factor in the recurrent offensives of Azerbaijan towards Armenia and the ongoing blockade of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, the authorities of Armenia announced that lending a hand during humanitarian catastrophes is righteous and underlined that 'regardless of what kind of relations there are between Armenia and Türkiye, or what kind of relations there were in the past, it is a fact that our countries are neighbours and neighbours should help each other in times of disaster' (Freedom TV, 2023).

Public and political reactions in Türkiye towards the assistance provided by Armenia were generally positive, and people were highly appreciative. Yet, a few manipulative perspectives were also observed. For instance, while one of the pro-government and right-wing newspapers referred to the Armenian rescuers as 'people's heroes who established a throne in the hearts with their great help' (Sabah, 2023), there were also misleading news reports claiming that some Armenian deputies opposed sending aid to Türkiye, which were later allegedly denied and described as 'lies and slander' (Independent Türkçe, 2023).

This instance of 'disaster diplomacy' had political reverberations. In the aftermath of the earthquake, in a 'historic move', the delegation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia visited Ankara to offer condolences and reaffirmed the 'readiness and willingness of the Republic of Armenia to build peace in the region, especially for the full normalisation of relations with Türkiye, the establishment of diplomatic relations, and the full opening of the border between Armenia and Türkiye' (MFA of Türkiye, 2023). In response, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs expressed appreciation for the 'hand of friendship in the difficult time' and stated that 'progress in the normalisation process of Armenia with Türkiye and Azerbaijan will contribute to the peace and prosperity of our region' (MFA of Türkiye, 2023). While the statements made by the ministers were protocoled and highly indicative of the 'disaster diplomacy' manoeuvres, they still contained elements of reconciliation. The positive interactions and cooperation between Armenia and Türkiye during the rescue and relief operations provided both governments and the public with a significant premise for developing future dialogue and negotiations.

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4.3 | Add-on: shared waters of conflict or cooperation

While not a traditional disaster setting, the case of the Akhuryan/Arpaçay River between Armenia and Türkiye presents an opportunity to explore the dynamics of disaster diplomacy. The river, located in the borderland region, serves as both a source of conflict and cooperation, with the potential to lead to disastrous situations such as flooding, drying up, or water scarcity. This subsection analyses this example within the framework of disaster diplomacy.

Being conflicting neighbours that cannot 'elude geography' (Gültekin Punsmann, 2010), Armenia and Türkiye should be aware of the shared risks of natural hazards that can potentially affect both countries, and, consequently, alleviate cooperation or aggravate conflict. As a shared natural resource, the Akhuryan/Arpaçay River, together with its dam and reservoir, extends for 116 miles along the border between the two countries, and thus appears to be a source of cooperation and conflict.

Several scholars (Kibaroglu, 2015; Altingoz and Ali, 2019; Gabrielyan, 2019) have studied the 'water diplomacy' between Armenia and Türkiye triggered by this transboundary river basin. The current framework regulating the joint management of transboundary waters stems from a protocol signed as early as 1927, providing water allocation rules between the parties—to share the water on 50–50 basis (Kibaroglu, 2015). In 1964, the countries constructed a dam across the river and signed a protocol on equitable sharing of the dam's water and the creation of a joint commission for infrastructure (Kibaroglu, 2015). Despite 'many stress factors, such as the dissolution of the USSR and the diplomatic impasse between Armenia and Türkiye' (Altingoz and Ali, 2019, p. 323), these agreements are still valid, and the countries hold monthly Permanent Water Commission meetings on both sides of the border.

It seems that the river has so far served as a source of cooperation rather than conflict. Adhering to 'water diplomacy', both countries have recognised their shared interest in managing and utilising this vital resource sustainably. By engaging in collaborative efforts, such as joint water commission meetings and information-sharing, the countries have potentially overcome conflicts and engaged in cooperation that benefits both sides. Emphasising the importance of water as a common resource can pave the way for constructive dialogue and mutually beneficial solutions. Yet, it should be noted that the transboundary river case, despite being a good example of cooperation, entails many drawbacks that can turn 'diplomacy' into conflict. These include the lack of agreement between the states about water quality and pollution risk management, especially given the growing water shortage globally and climate change (Gabrielyan, 2019).

5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the main argument of this paper is that disasters naturally unite states and communities to allow them to overcome the devastating effects, scholarly literature on disaster diplomacy primarily focuses on four key questions. The first pertains to the extent to which disasters influence diplomatic relations. The second concerns whether disasters evoke a new paradigm of diplomacy. The third relates to whether disasters create an environment conducive to legitimate diplomacy, where the parties involved prioritise reconciliation instead of using the events for public relations purposes. The fourth question centres on the duration of diplomacy, whether it is short or long term, conditioned by the willingness of the parties involved and other factors unrelated to the disaster.

One must consider the following four key elements when analysing disaster diplomacy: relationality; novelty; legitimacy; and lasting impact. In the case of disaster diplomacy between Armenia and Türkiye, we can observe the presence of these elements to varying degrees. The influence of disasters on diplomatic relations, the creation of new diplomatic approaches, and the establishment of legitimate diplomatic settings are apparent in this context; however, the lasting impact of these diplomatic endeavours appears to be relatively weak, as it depends on the willingness of the parties involved and other non-disaster-related factors.

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Despite the historical impasse and continued lack of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Türkiye, there are several instances where these elements have come together in the face of different disasters. This article elaborates on two such cases, together with the additional example of shared natural resource management. The first case of 'disaster diplomacy' enactment happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when numerous Armenian labour migrants appeared to be stranded in Türkiye due to the closed borders. What transpired here was coordination of public diplomacy alongside various grassroots initiatives, resulting in the successful repatriation of these workers. In the other case, 'disaster diplomacy' was activated as a response to the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes in Türkiye, when Armenia extended assistance and sent a rescue team. Türkiye, in turn, welcomed this gesture and, remarkably, opened its border with Armenia for the first time in 30 years to receive the aid convoy. Apart from these two recent instances of disaster diplomacy, we have also highlighted the example of the shared river along the border of these two countries. While the river potentially presents natural hazard risks that could impact the populations of both countries, it appears that joint coordination of the basin is essential for overseeing them in the future.

What is evident from this article is that disaster cases point up significant conclusions about the relationship between Armenia and Türkiye. First, the disasters became showcases for a positive shift in bilateral relations. Second, despite the historical animosity between the two countries, they indicated a willingness to engage in dialogue and build bridges. Both countries recognise the importance of setting aside differences during times of crisis and working together for the greater good. Furthermore, the disaster diplomacy observed in these situations can be seen as a catalyst for future reconciliation efforts. It opens up the possibility of addressing long-standing issues and finding peaceful resolutions to conflicts. Yet, it is important to note that the disaster diplomacy observed in these specific situations may not automatically resolve all of the underlying tensions between Armenia and Türkiye. While the diplomatic endeavours delineated in this paper show promise, it is imperative to recognise the critical role of non-state actors in bolstering these efforts during times of disaster. Although not discussed extensively here owing to the limitation of scope, the involvement of non-state actors is very important. Their collaboration with state actors is vital for maintaining the current momentum and advancing moves towards reconciliation.

In this context, it is now essential for both countries to capitalise on the positive momentum and work towards sustainable peace and understanding. Overall, though, given the delicate nature of the normalisation process between Armenia and Türkiye and the atypical nature of the conflict between them (with psychological, cognitive factors weighing quite heavy in it), 'disaster diplomacy', with its smaller, symbolic, and sensitive nature, can offer good support for dialogue and the building of trust on the state and society levels.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper reports analysis of secondary sources.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The events of 1915, commonly referred to as 'genocide' by Armenians and in other, mostly Western circles, concern the forced relocation and deportation of Armenians in Anatolia by the Ottoman government, as well as the mass killings they faced during this period (Akçam, 2023). Conversely, the Turkish government asserts and the prevailing sentiment within Türkiye is that these events were characterised by mutual killings, and there is strong opposition to the use of the term

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'genocide' (Hill, Kirişci, and Moffatt, 2015). Regardless of the terminology employed, the events of 1915 and the ensuing debates surrounding genocide continue to pose a significant memory issue for both Armenia and Türkiye, profoundly impacting their collective consciousness and historical narratives.

[2] This article was written prior to the September 2023 developments concerning Nagorno-Karabakh and, therefore, does not reflect on their influence on the bilateral relations of Armenia and Türkiye.

[3] As an immediate measure, the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul provided emergency food support to many Armenian migrants under its community assistance programme.

[4] For details, see Kucera (2020).

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