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Issue Brief

Turkmenistan's Neutrality-Based Foreign Policy: Issues and Challenges

Jason Wahlang

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Summary

The Brief examines Turkmenistan's foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, under the leadership of Saparmurat Niyazov, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Serdar Berdimuhamedov, to place in perspective its efforts in following a neutrality-based foreign policy. The current leadership, under Serdar Berdimuhamedov, has engaged with key regional countries like China, Russia, Iran and Afghanistan, and has kept channels of communication open with the United States. The current fluid geopolitical situation arising out of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine has added to the challenges of the country's leadership to navigate regional fault lines while pursuing its stated foreign policy doctrine.

Turkmenistan follows what it terms as a ‘Neutrality-based Foreign Policy’. Aspiring to be the Switzerland of Central Asia,¹ it has attempted to stay out of regional political and economic organisations. In 1995, the United Nations General Assembly even adopted a resolution, A/50/80, recognising and supporting the neutrality of Turkmenistan.² The Ukraine conflict, though, has had significant regional impact, particularly so for Central Asian nations like Turkmenistan. With a strong dependence on Russia, the country’s foreign policy stance of ‘positive neutrality’ will be under the scanner.

Isolationism is broadly a strategy that combines a non-interventionist military posture and state-centric economic nationalism.³ States believe that their national interests are best served by isolating themselves from the external environment.⁴ In a globalised, interconnected, and interdependent world, it is a rare sight to find nations that have decided to exclude themselves from one another. This was, however, not the case in the past. Some of the examples of countries that followed an isolationist foreign policy are 17th century China, 18th century Japan, and 19th century Korea.⁵ During the two World Wars, the United States did not join the League of Nations and refused to be involved in foreign conflicts, in the initial phases.⁶ In current times, North Korea has an isolationist foreign policy.

Neutrality, as against isolationism, is when a state declares non-involvement in a conflict or war and refrains from supporting or aiding any side.⁷ It is commonly practised by small states as a means to opt out of the great power politics. Neutrality, however, has its limitations, particularly during periods of war. Neutrality in the past was quite prevalent in the European context, in conflict management and promotion of non-military security solutions.

The following sections briefly examine Turkmenistan’s foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, under Saparmurat Niyazov, Gurbanguly

¹ Leland R. Miller, **“Courting Turkmenistan”**, *Foreign Policy*, 29 August 2008.

² **“Maintenance of International Security: Resolutions/Adopted by the General Assembly”**, United Nations General Assembly, 12 December 1995.

³ Helga Turku, *Isolationist States in an Interdependent World*, Ashgate Publications, 2009, pp. 6–7; Marion Smith, **“Neither Isolationist nor Noninterventionist: The Right Way to Think About Foreign Policy”**, *The Heritage Foundation*, 5 July 2011.

⁴ Tarik Oğuzlu, **“Isolationism versus Internationalism: Which Course to Take in Foreign Policy?”**, *Daily Sabah*, 30 January 2020.

⁵ Marion Smith, no. 3.

⁶ ***American Government and Politics in the Information Age***, University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016, p. 723.

⁷ Andrew Heywood, *Key Concepts in Politics and International Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan Education, 2015, p. 144; Archie W. Simpson, **“Realism, Small States and Neutrality”**, *E-International Relations*, 5 February 2018.

Berdimuhamedov and Serdar Berdimuhamedov, to place in perspective its efforts in following a neutrality-based foreign policy.

Foreign Policy under Saparmurat Niyazov

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan gained independence, along with the other ‘Stans’. Most of the leadership in the region comprised of local political elites who were former leaders of the Communist Party of Soviet Union. Saparmurat Niyazov, the first leader of newly independent Turkmenistan, was the Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan before its independence. Niyazov converted one-party Communist rule to rule of ‘Democratic Party of Turkmenistan’.⁸ Turkmen nationalism replaced Soviet nationalism, providing space for an authoritarian leadership style. Dissent was suppressed, media was under tight control, freedom of movement and access to the outside world was restricted.⁹ After an alleged assassination attempt on Niyazov’s life, in 2002, stricter border control measures were initiated and dual citizenship of Russian citizens was abolished.¹⁰

The cloud of isolation was not limited to Turkmen domestic affairs. There was a sense of isolation in the international arena too. The nation attained the membership of only a few international and regional organisations like the United Nations (UN), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Organisation for Security and Co-Operation of Europe (OSCE).

Turkmenistan was also reticent when it came to joining regional organisations. It is not a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and in 2005, it left the permanent membership of CIS and became an associate member.¹¹ Turkmenistan is the only Central Asian nation not to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).¹² The country avoided multilateral regional organisations and only sought economically advantageous bilateral alliances.¹³ Turkmenistan under Niyazov, though, joined the Caspian Five grouping—made up of Russia, Iran, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan—which had its first summit in 2002. This grouping meets every four years at the Summit-level.

⁸ Paul Stronski, **“Turkmenistan at Twenty-Five: The High Price of Authoritarianism”**, *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, 30 January 2017.

⁹ Toni Michel, **“A ‘Golden Age’ No More? What 2019 Will Bring for Turkmenistan”**, *Voices of Central Asia*, 24 January 2019.

¹⁰ BTI Transformation Index, **“Turkmenistan Country Report BTI 2008”**, *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, 2008.

¹¹ Zhenis Kembayev, *Legal Aspects of the Regional Integration Processes in the Post-Soviet Area*, Springer, 2009, p. 44.

¹² **“Turkmenistan is Ready for Partnership with SCO in Energy Supplies”**, *China Daily*, 6 November 2019.

¹³ BTI Transformation Index, no. 10.

Relations with neighbouring countries like Iran and Afghanistan were amicable, even during the Taliban regime. Whereas relations with its Caspian neighbour, Azerbaijan, were sour due to disputes concerning oil fields (Serdar, Osman and Omar). There was a transactional relationship with Russia and cooperation was limited to the energy sector.

A significant marker of the Niyazov era was the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution of permanent neutrality for Turkmenistan in 1995. The Resolution stated that it recognised and supported the status for permanent neutrality declared by Turkmenistan and called upon states of the UN to respect its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁴ Neutrality is also part of the Constitution of Turkmenistan, adopted by the People Council on 27 December 1995.¹⁵ Article 1 states that permanent neutrality shall be the basis of its national and foreign policy.¹⁶ ‘Turkmenbashi’ Niyazov believed that interdependence threatens sovereignty and nationalism in the era of globalisation and believed that neutrality would eliminate unhealthy competition for the country’s resources.¹⁷ Until his demise in 2006, he ensured that involvement in regional affairs was minimal.

Foreign Policy under Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov

After the death of Niyazov, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov became the president and continued his predecessor’s policies in the domestic sphere but made an effort to improve relations with neighbours.¹⁸ In 2008, the Constitution was amended to state that the foreign policy of the country would be based on the idea of ‘permanent neutrality’.¹⁹ This policy, present till 2013, intended to improve relationships with

¹⁴ **“Resolutions and Decisions Adopted by the General Assembly during its 50th Session: GAOR, 50th Session, Supplement No. 49”**, United Nations, 1995.

¹⁵ Boris O. Shikhmuradov, **“Positive Neutrality as the Basis of the Foreign Policy of Turkmenistan”**, *Perceptions*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 1997.

¹⁶ **“Constitution, 1992 (as of 2008) Türkmenistanyň Konstitusiyasy”**, International Committee of the Red Cross, 26 September 2008.

¹⁷ Mufiza Kenjayeva, **“Have the Plans of Turkmenistan’s Authorities to Become Post-Soviet Kuwait Come True?”**, *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, 1 November 2019.

¹⁸ Gulnoza Saidazimova, **“Turkmenistan: The End Of Isolationism?”**, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 13 July 2007.

¹⁹ Angira Sen Sharma, “Turkmenistan’s Foreign Policy After Niyazov: Looking Beyond ‘Positive Neutrality?’”, in Anita Sengupta and Suchananda Chatterjee (ed.), *The State in Eurasia: Performance in Local and Global Arenas*, Knowledge World, Kolkata, 2013, p. 179.

neighbours with common economic, historical and cultural ties, including countries like Iran, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan.²⁰

The Turkmen Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised conferences like the ‘Great Silk Route Diplomacy: From History to the Future’, wherein delegations from 23 countries, including India, China, the US, Iran and Russia, participated.²¹ This showed the country’s intent to become a major player in the region’s connectivity and trade diplomacy initiatives.

This foreign policy stance of enhanced regional engagement, though, came up against energy dynamics. In 2016, Gazprom ceased importing Turkmen gas into Russia.²² After the Russian exit, Turkmenistan’s dependence on China gained traction. The Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline currently accounts for the lion's share of Turkmenistan’s foreign exchange earnings.²³

In 2017, Gurbanguly decided to make the next big step on positive neutrality. The president stated that for the next seven years, Turkmen foreign policy would be based on multi-format cooperation with international organisations.²⁴ In 2019, relationship with Russia changed for the better, with Gazprom resuming purchase of Turkmen Gas.²⁵ This was considered an important step towards reducing dependence on China.

Foreign Policy under Serdar Berdimuhamedov

On 12 March 2022, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, son of the former president, was elected as the President of the Central Asian republic, at a time when the entire region is in turmoil due to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. He was the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs under his father’s leadership.

In the first few months, Berdimuhamedov has upped the ante regarding diplomatic engagement with regional and international actors. In April, he sought financial

²⁰ Mehmet Seyfettin EROL, **“Turkmenistan Foreign Policy and Permanent Neutrality Status on the 30th Anniversary of its Independence”**, *Ankasam Ahkacam*, 4 October 2021.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Catherine Putz, **“Russia’s Gazprom Stops Buying Gas from Turkmenistan”**, *The Diplomat*, 6 January 2016.

²³ Dante Schulz, **“China-Turkmenistan Bilateral Relations”**, *Caspian Policy Center*, 9 March 2022.

²⁴ President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, **“Foreign Policy of Turkmenistan is Aimed at Creating Favourable Conditions for Internal Development and Promotion of National Interests in the Global Arena”**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 18 February 2017.

²⁵ **“Russia’s Gazprom Resumes Buying Turkmen Gas After Three-Year Halt”**, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 16 April 2019.

assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).²⁶ Due to the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the resultant sanctions on Russia have had a trickle-down effect on the Central Asian economies as well. According to the World Bank, the Central Asian economy is forecast to shrink by 4.1 per cent this year, compared to the forecast of 3 per cent before the crisis.²⁷ Moreover, Turkmenistan’s economic infrastructure has already been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with inflation being a major concern.²⁸

The Turkmen President visited Russia on 10 June 2022, his first foreign visit since taking charge. Prior to the visit, Berdimuhamedov had called up President Vladimir Putin, on the occasion of 30 years of bilateral relations (both countries established relations on 8 April 1992). The two leaders then had pledged to enhance cooperation in regional formats, like the Caspian Five.²⁹

During his June visit, both sides signed the Declaration of Deepening Strategic Partnership, setting out priorities with respect to trade and investment. One of the significant details of the statement was the collaboration on gas and oil.³⁰ As noted earlier, Gazprom revived its cooperation with Turkmen Gaz in 2019. Apart from Gazprom, Lukoil is also focusing on its 2021 joint venture along with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan on the Dostluk oil field in the Caspian Sea. Another company which seeks to gain is Russian company Tatneft which, since 2020, has been responsible for the repair and maintenance of oil wells in Turkmenistan.

Russian company, United Shipbuilding Corporation, will also assist in the construction of a multipurpose bulk carrier. The need for close cooperation with Caspian littoral states on aspects relating to security, economic partnership and preservation of natural resources as well as cooperation in both bilateral and multilateral formats was stressed. Russia is one of the largest trade partners for Turkmenistan and the new Declaration will enable both countries to diversify their economic cooperation and not just limit it to the energy sector. Turkmenistan wants to diversify its energy exports also and not be dependent on the Chinese market.

The second nation that Berdimuhamedov visited since taking over was fellow Caspian nation, Iran, on 14 June 2022. He met President Ebrahim Raisi and

²⁶ Akhal-Teke: **“A Turkmenistan Bulletin, Turkmenistan: Berdymukhamedov Passes the Mantle (and phone)”**, *EurasiaNet*, 22 March 2022.

²⁷ **“Emerging Economies in Europe and Central Asia to be Hit Hard by Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine”**, *The Tashkent Times*, 18 April 2022.

²⁸ Catherine Putz, **“What’s the Impact of Turkmenistan’s COVID Delusion?”**, *The Diplomat*, 1 June 2020.

²⁹ **“Telephone Conversation with President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov”**, President of Russia, 8 April 2022.

³⁰ **“High-Level Turkmen-Russian Talks Were Held in Moscow”**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 10 June 2022; **“Press Statements following Russian-Turkmen Talks”**, President of Russia, 10 June 2022.

Supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Nine Memoranda of Understanding were signed, focusing on various spheres of cooperation including trade, economic, scientific, and cultural areas.³¹ One of the major topics during this meeting was the clearing of the gas debt which was accumulated in 2018. In 2017–18, Turkmenistan and Iran were embroiled in a bitter dispute, with Turkmenistan accusing Iran of faltering on payments that it had to pay for receiving natural gas. Gas supplies to Iran were cut off and both nations approached the arbitration court. During Berdimuhamedov’s visit, it was decided that gas debts would be cleared through the payments Iraq needs to pay Iran.³² Iran has strong historical linkages with Central Asian countries, particularly with regard to the language.

The Turkmenistan President also sent a letter to President Joe Biden expressing his intent to expand and strengthen positive engagement. The letter stressed on the need for expanding cooperation, including in fields like aviation, agriculture and banking.³³ Turkmenistan has not voted in favour of UN resolutions on Ukraine.

As for the country’s relations with Afghanistan, with which it shares a land border, on 22 March 2022, Turkmenistan became the first Central Asian country to recognise the Taliban envoy to the Afghan Embassy in Ashgabat. Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov earlier visited the Islamic Republic in November 2021. During this visit, discussions were held on the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) pipeline. Defence Minister Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob assured his country’s protection to the TAPI pipeline in the Afghanistan region.³⁴ The project was expected to be completed by 2020 but due to political turmoil in Afghanistan, construction has been delayed.

Areas of tension between the two countries do remain. There was a clash between the Turkmen border guards and the Taliban on 3 January 2022 in the Jowzjan province bordering Turkmenistan. The clash according to the Taliban was due to the Turkmen guards killing a civilian prior to the incident and when the Taliban went to investigate, the Turkmen guards fired at them. The Turkmen side did not make any statement with regard to the clash.

The presence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) further complicates the situation between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. The ISKP had recently threatened

³¹ **“Negotiations between the Presidents of Turkmenistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran”**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 15 June 2022; Kazem Sarabi, **“Iran, Turkmenistan Sign Nine Cooperation Documents”**, *Caspian News*, 16 June 2022.

³² **“Turkmenistan Seeking more Gas Swap to Azerbaijan, Neighbouring Countries”**, Shana News Agency, 14 June 2022.

³³ **“The President of Turkmenistan Congratulated the President of the United States of America on the 30th Anniversary of Bilateral Diplomatic Relations”**, Turkmenistan Golden Age, 10 April 2022.

³⁴ Catherine Putz, **“TAPI, Turkmenistan, and the Taliban”**, *The Diplomat*, 3 November 2021.

the government in Turkmenistan on 23 June 2022, stating that it should be destroyed. The ISKP, through various social media outlets, has poured scorn over the TAPI gas pipeline and has charged that the Taliban, being supportive of the project, is protecting the interests of the enemies of the religion in Afghanistan. These threats to the Turkmen government and its interests in Afghanistan coupled with the recent attacks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan ensures that it is even more important for the Central Asian nation to maintain peaceful relations with the Taliban-led Afghan government.

Over the past decade, there has been a rising dependence of Turkmenistan on China, a main export market for Turkmen gas.³⁵ This became more visible after the crisis with Russia and Iran which ensured that China became the dominant partner for Turkmenistan in the field of gas. The gas exports to China from Turkmenistan annually are an estimated 40 billion cubic metres (bcm).³⁶ This makes Turkmenistan the third largest natural gas supplier to China, accounting for 40 per cent of its natural gas imports. In 2021, Turkmenistan exported 34 bcm to China, which is a reduction from the annual 40 bcm. This was in the aftermath of the restart of Russia–Turkmen gas relations in 2019. This does indicate that Turkmenistan has managed to reduce its dependence on the Chinese export market and in the long run, can be expected to further diversify its exports.

As for political interactions, Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe visited Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in April 2022, with the focus of discussions pertaining to cooperation in the military field, including on provision of equipment and personnel training. In recent years, Turkmenistan–China military relations have been developing steadily, an equation which could generate tensions given the traditional security role played by Russia in these Central Asian republics.

Conclusion

Berdimuhamedov’s limited time in office demonstrates that he has engaged with key regional countries like China, Russia, Iran and Afghanistan, while keeping channels of communication open with the US. It remains to be seen the manner in which Turkmenistan’s new leadership maintains the country’s stated foreign policy doctrine of Greater Neutrality Policy, in the current fluid geopolitical situation arising out of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine.

³⁵ Paul Stronski, no. 8.

³⁶ **“Russia Doubled Imports of Natural Gas from Turkmenistan in 2021, Envoy Says”**, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 December 2021.

About the Author



Mr Jason Wahlang is Research Analyst at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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