

Turkmenistan's Neutral Foreign Policy: Reasons for the Choice

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1. Introduction

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the governments of the former Soviet republics faced the need to develop a foreign policy strategy, where the key question was how to ensure their own political, military, and economic security while advancing their foreign policy ambitions. No one contested the need to preserve something similar to the Soviet Union, and that is why all heads of the republics, which were part of the Soviet Union as of December 1991, signed the Alma-Ata Declaration on the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Despite the agreement on the supposed need, they held different views as to the purpose of the CIS. Some viewed it as the basis of continued integration, preservation of the common market, and a security guarantee of sorts, while others took it as a civilized divorce, whereupon everyone would be free to act according to the "every man for himself" principle.

Moldavia, Turkmenistan and Ukraine declined to participate in the further integration processes within the CIS. In Moldavia, the leadership was motivated by the desire to reunite with Romania. On the other hand, the leadership of Ukraine, one of the most economically advanced and, more importantly, most industrialized Soviet republics, was assured of successful independent development despite the disruption of economic ties and dismantlement of the Soviet common market. Furthermore the imposing arsenal of military equipment, inherited from the Soviet Union, allowed a high degree of confidence in the new country's ability to defend

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itself. Above all, the Ukrainian elite had resented its dependence on Russia for quite a long time.

Unlike Moldavia, Turkmenistan did not have the slightest desire to merge with any of its neighbours, not even those with significant Turkmen minorities. Yet, Turkmenistan had never been anywhere near Ukraine in terms of economic development during Soviet time. Despite this, Turkmenistan chose to be the only post-Soviet state to make full neutrality its strategic policy choice, the cornerstone of its foreign policy, and the foundation of its economic development. This choice has not been fully unanimous within the Turkmen government. Indeed, the independent Turkmenistan's first foreign minister, A. Kuliev, vehemently opposed it, which cost him his job.

This article reviews a number of factors behind the choice of neutrality by one of the poorest Soviet republics. The late President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, had first floated the idea on 10 July 1992, speaking at the CSCE plenary session in Helsinki. Later on, Turkmenistan's permanent neutral status was officially ratified by the UN General Assembly on 12 December 1995. Therefore, the article focuses on the conditions that were in place by the end of 1992. The article specifically reviews the two most cited reasons for neutrality, which comprise of seeking neutral status per se as a solid national security guarantee and as a solution to harmonize Turkmenistan's complex web of bilateral and multilateral foreign relations.

2. National Security

National security concerns are usually cited among the primary reasons that compelled Turkmenistan to opt for a neutral foreign policy. It is claimed that neutrality was the only option for Turkmenistan that would assure its guaranteed independence, integrity and peace with the neighbours.

"The question of neutrality first came up at the beginning of 1991," recalled Turkmen ex-Premier Hudaiberdy Orazov.

At that time, sometimes referred to as "sovereignties on parade," Turkmen top officials got together with the nation's opinion leaders to talk about Turkmenistan's options. One Turkmen scholar, who was nationalistically minded, said "enough was enough": Turkmenistan had been plundered for 70 years, he said, the Republic feeds everyone, it must urgently secede.

Niyazov spoke, saying Turkmenistan was not a big country by population, but rich in natural resources. He said, with the neighbours like ours (he specifically mentioned Iran as an “aggressive neighbour”), he feared many bad things could happen. The scholar went on to say there was an easy solution that would put to rest all those fears entirely: declare the country neutral and the international community will take it under its protection.¹

Turkmen political analyst J. Karajaev agreed with the anonymous “scholar,” saying: “If Turkmenistan is attacked by any state, the UN will send its forces to protect the Turkmenens.”²³

Neutrality might have sounded like an attractive option, yet neutral status by itself could never guarantee security to any nation, as evidenced by earlier experiences. When the German army occupied Belgium on 3 August 1914, Germany blatantly disregarded Belgium's neutral status. Twenty five years later, on 10 May 1940, Nazi Germany invaded Belgium again and this time also occupied Holland, despite both nations' neutral policy. This was despite the fact that the independence and neutrality of Belgium had been underwritten by the great European powers for perpetuity in 1839. In 1939, England, France and Germany had reiterated their respect for Belgium's neutrality. As a consequence of the failed attempts to attain security by neutrality, Belgium and Holland both gave up their neutral status, entrusting their protection to the NATO. Few neutral countries such as Switzerland were never invaded, but it is reasonable to argue that this was not due to their neutral status, but because of a lack of intent on the part of the potential aggressors. Other states' neutrality is rarely taken into consideration when national interests are at stake. More recently, the US and the NATO resented Turkmenistan's refusal to let allies use its territory for anti-Taliban operations post 9/11. Apparently, it had never

¹ Кадыров Ш. Басмачи и внешняя политика Ашхабада // Независимая газета. 5 октября 2009 г. (Shohrat Kadyrov “Basmachi and foreign policy of Ashgabat,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 5, 2009.)

² Кадыров Ш. Басмачи и внешняя политика Ашхабада // Независимая газета. 5 октября 2009 г. (Shohrat Kadyrov “Basmachi and foreign policy of Ashgabat,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 5, 2009.)

³ Меморандум о дружбе и сотрудничестве между Туркменистаном и Исламской Республикой Иран от 17 февраля 1992 г. Вечерний Ашхабад. 18 февраля 1992 г. (Memorandum of friendship and cooperation between Turkmenistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, on February 17, 1992. *Vechernii Ashkhabad*, February 18, 1992)

occurred to the US or its allies that what they were demanding from Turkmenistan would violate its status as a neutral state. Fortunately for Turkmenistan, it narrowly avoided getting blacklisted as a state sponsor of terrorism.

A short background note on Turkmenistan and Central Asia is warranted before taking a look at Turkmenistan's security conditions and relations with its neighbours in the early 1990s. Before the Bolshevik Revolution, there had never been any nation states in Central Asia. It is no accident that all the states that had ever existed in the region were either named after their capitals (e.g. Khiva Khanate or Bukhara Emirate), or according to their geographic location (Khorasan, Turan, or Khorezm), but never bore the names of the nations that founded them. When the Bolsheviks came to power, the central principle of their policy on ethnic minorities was self-determination of nations. Having repackaged the Khorezm and Bukhara People's Socialist Republics and the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Turkestan as national-state republics in 1924-1925, the Soviet government opened a Pandora's Box.

Once a national state is established, it is almost impossible to draw the borders to include all populations with the same ethnicity under the same umbrella and exclude any others so that the country has an ethnically homogenous population. Things were further complicated by the fact that while some native people of Central Asia were settled farmers, others were nomadic. No wonder that each of the republics, when they finally shaped up, contained large minorities of the ethnic groups, which were the dominant nations in a neighbouring state, right across the frontier, not to mention the enclaves. Intertribal and interethnic antagonisms were about as intense as rivalry over land and water. Thus, when the Central Asian republics became independent states, they had no dearth of unsettled land claims between them.

Turkmenistan was fortunately spared the burden of enclaves or exclaves from the beginning but demarcation of the national frontier with its neighbours, however, was not devoid of difficulties. The least problematic was probably Turkmenistan's relations with Kazakhstan. Historically, there was never any mutual hostility or rivalry between the Kazakhs and the Turkmens, and there was never any bad blood between Niyazov and Nazarbaev on the personal level. The presence of 87,802 Kazakhs in Turkmenistan,

and 3846 Turkmens in Kazakhstan could never be a stumbling block between the two nations. There was no reason for Ashgabat to fear any trouble from Kazakhstan. In the early 1990s, nationalist activists from Kazakhstan had tried to stir up unrest among the Kazakhs in Turkmenistan, inciting them to claim autonomy, but the activists were quickly suppressed, and the issue was never brought up again. The relations remained friendly until Niyazov began making certain disparaging remarks about Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev, which would eventually mar the relations between the two states.

The relationship with Uzbekistan looked much more complicated. There was an ages-long hostility between the Uzbeks and the Turkmens, made worse by long history of Uzbek dominance in the region. All the three state-like formations, having existed in Central Asia before their accession to the Russian Empire - the Khiva Khanate, Bukhara Emirate and Kokand Khanate - were created by the Uzbeks. Even in the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan enjoyed a more privileged status among the Central Asian republics, which put it in a better position economically and made the other republics feel disadvantaged and resentful. All this negative legacy might have created problems for the bilateral relations.

Ashgabat knew that, from history, Tashkent would continue to assert its regional leadership, and was prepared to deter the neighbour by political and economic means. But the possibility of an armed aggression by Uzbekistan against Turkmenistan was not expected to occur: The grievances between Uzbekistan, on the one hand, and Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, on the other hand, were much worse than they were with Turkmenistan. Therefore, in claiming a neutral foreign policy status, it is unlikely that Turkmenistan's primary objective was to protect itself from the possible aggression on the part of Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan.

As regards Iran, the relations were both easier and more complicated at the same time. Iran was in no hurry to recognize the independence of Turkmenistan, its only next door neighbour in post-Soviet Central Asia. Ankara, Tehran's perennial regional rival, was quicker. Nevertheless, Iran was 6th in the world to set up diplomatic relations with Turkmenistan on 19 February 1992, ahead of Turkey.

In its time, Iran had lost some land to the Soviet Union, such as the Firuza community and the land around it. The lost land became Turkmen territory after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Iran

had recognized the lost land as Soviet territory in December 1954, however this decision was made by the dictatorial regime of the Shah, subsequently ousted by the Islamic Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini, who branded the Soviet Union as “Satan Jr.” had far-going plans to spread the Islamic Revolution. Therefore, Niyazov had his reasons for referring to Iran as an “aggressive neighbour” at the beginning of 1991. Nevertheless, by the time Turkmenistan acquired its independence, Ayatollah Khomeini had died two years ago, and his successors did not make any territorial claims against Turkmenistan. In fact, the fourth president of Iran, Ali Aqbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was much less inclined to export the Islamic Revolution, started his Central Asian tour with Turkmenistan.

Iran started to show evidence of its good-neighbourly intentions regarding Turkmenistan as early as the beginning of 1992. Signed in February 1992, the Memorandum on Friendship and Cooperation between the two countries cemented Turkmenistan’s and Iran’s mutual commitment to economic and technological cooperation, joint enterprise, and the development of reciprocal trade and transport.⁴ From that time on, Turkmen-Iranian cooperation would only improve. Taking a low start at US \$52,000 in 1992, mutual trade would swell to \$1.4 billion by 2006⁵, making Iran Turkmenistan’s 2nd biggest foreign trade partner after Russia. More than one million Turkmen⁶ live in the north of Iran, and this fact augured well for the friendly relations and cross-frontier cooperation between the two countries.

Iran, alongside Turkey and Pakistan, was a co-founder of the Asian regional Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), which invited the newly independent states of Central Asia to join for better access to the world markets. Turkmenistan accepted the invitation, joining

⁴ Меморандум о дружбе и сотрудничестве между Туркменистаном и Исламской Республикой Иран от 17 февраля 1992 г. Вечерний Ашхабад. 18 февраля 1992 г. (Memorandum of friendship and cooperation between Turkmenistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, on February 17, 1992. Vechernii Ashkhabad, February 18, 1992)

⁵ Месамед В.И. Иран-Туркменистан: что впереди (Mesamed V.I. Iran-Turkmenistan: what lies ahead) Accessed Aug 11, 2019. <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2007/09-02-07.htm>

⁶ Соотечественники. Туркмены Ирана. (Countrymen. Turkmeny of Iran) Accessed Aug 10, 2019. <http://asgabab.net/stati/obschestvo/sootchestvenniki-turkmeny-irana.html>

the ECO on 28 November 1992.⁷ Incidentally, ECO was the first international body to officially recognize Turkmenistan's neutral status on 15 March 1995.

Of all of Turkmenistan's neighbours, Afghanistan alone was a serious security concern in the post-Soviet period, swept by a continuous civil war since the Soviet troops pulled out in 1989. In April 1992, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan ceased to exist, but the government of the newly declared Islamic State of Afghanistan did not control the whole country and, therefore, could not promise peace to its neighbours. Although the north of Afghanistan was controlled by the Northern Alliance – a coalition of forces opposed to the Taliban – and the local Turkmen diaspora was a few hundred thousand strong, gangs of militants would continue to infiltrate Turkmen territory all through the 1990s.

The full Taliban takeover, which would threaten all of Central Asia, came a few years later. At this time, Turkmenistan have been a neutral state for years. Turkmenistan needed strong security forces to deter the militants, who were not impressed by the nation's commitment to neutrality. The government of Turkmenistan made it clear that neutrality was not its only bet to preserve its national security as the neutral status could only work when backed by a strong military.

As regards military preparedness, the collapse of the Soviet Union had left Turkmenistan with the same problem that befell most of the other former republics: it had a huge arsenal of military machinery and weapons, but no combat-ready armed forces. It inherited the equipment and weapons of the Soviet military, paramilitary and civil defence units previously deployed in its territory. It had 530 medium and heavy-duty tanks, 1132 infantry combat vehicles, armoured personnel carrier and reconnaissance vehicles, 540 artillery guns, mortars and multiple rocket launchers with calibres greater than 100 mm, 314 warplanes, 20 combat and other helicopters, a few small warships and boats.⁸

⁷ Economic Cooperation Organization. 2019 accessed August 11, 2019, [http:// www.ecosecretariat.org/in2.htm](http://www.ecosecretariat.org/in2.htm)

⁸ Чуприн К.В. Вооруженные силы стран СНГ и Балтии: справочник. (Chuprin K.V. *The armed forces of the CIS and the Baltic States: A Guide*. Minsk, 2009, p. 723.

Turkmenistan did not sell any of the weapons or machinery it had inherited, even though it hoped that, as a neutral country, it was under the protection of the international community. Four years later, Turkmenistan's arsenal consisted of the same 530 tanks, 1146 armoured vehicles, and 389 warplanes and helicopters.⁹ The year when its neutral status was officially recognized, Turkmenistan spent more on defence, in USD equivalent, than all the other Central Asian states taken together.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the combat-readiness of Turkmen soldiers left much to be desired. Although it took time, it was not particularly hard to recruit and train a few dozens of thousands of young conscripts. The bigger problem was lack of national officers' corps as it takes years to train an officer. Ashgabat would not allow foreign troops in its territory, not even temporarily, either. This disinclination may be seen as evidence of how little Turkmenistan really feared an attack from a neighbour.

Not viewing Russia as a diplomatic priority, Ashgabat had ruled out an alliance with Russia, but it couldn't afford to sever defence cooperation ties completely with Russia, knowing well that no one else would be able to give it any security assistance at that juncture. Consequently, on 31 July 1992, Turkmenistan and Russia signed the Agreement on the Joint Action Plan to create the Armed Forces of Turkmenistan. For the duration of the transitional period, before Turkmenistan gets its own armed forces, the former Soviet air force, air defence and border guard units, deployed in Turkmenistan, would remain under Russian jurisdiction, while operational command of the armed forces would pass to the Joint Command. For the duration of the transitional period, Russia pledged military support and technical assistance to the Turkmen armed forces, and was to pay Ashgabat for the privilege of keeping its troops in Turkmen territory. For its part, Ashgabat agreed to pay for the maintenance and supply of the units under Joint Command.¹¹ Former Soviet officers, before they pledged allegiance to Russia,

⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1995)

¹⁰ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook, 1995, p.341.

¹¹ Договор между Российской Федерацией и Туркменистаном о совместных мерах в связи с созданием Вооруженных Сил Туркменистана от 31 июля 1992 г. (Treaty between the Russian Federation and Turkmenistan on joint measures in connection with the creation of the Armed Forces of Turkmenistan of 31 July 1992). accessed August 10, 2019, <http://infopravo.by-ru.info/fed1992/ch02/akt12536.shtml>.

were offered better, higher ranking jobs in the Turkmen armed forces to make them stay, but few stayed. As a result, Ashgabat was compelled to hire Russian officers on contract. However, Turkmenistan did not trust Russia enough to let it train its officers. Not a single Turkmen serviceman received training in Russia in 1993 or 1994, rather quite a few were trained in Turkey. Neither did Turkmenistan show too much zeal when it came to upholding its end of its deals with Russia, which was duly noted as early as 1993.¹²

Protection of the national frontier was another defence priority Ashgabat had to handle with Russia's assistance. Turkmenistan did not feel secure enough with its frontier protected by Turkmen guards alone and eventually decided to deploy Russian guards on its borders with Afghanistan and Iran. The pertinent agreement was signed on 23 December 1993.¹³

It was clearly not Ashgabat's intent to put all its eggs in one basket by making Russia its only national security partner. Ashgabat remained in touch with the NATO leadership, and sent its officers for training in Germany as well as Turkey. Turkmenistan was the first Central Asian state to join the NATO's Partnership for Peace program. And yet neither Moscow, nor Tehran seemed to mind all this active to and fro between a neutral Turkmenistan and the NATO.

Although national security concerns are usually put forward as the most important reasons that pushed Turkmenistan to opt for permanent neutrality, the above considerations and security arrangements seem to suggest that Turkmenistan never trusted that its neutral status per se would guarantee its national security, despite the earlier expectations that international community would support Turkmenistan in the case of aggression. It is therefore necessary to look for other reasons behind the choice.

¹² Туркмения – печальный мой приют. Армия, 1993, № 15, С. 15-20 ("Turkmenistan - my sad shelter." *Armiya*, no. 15, (1993): 17).

¹³ Договор между Российской Федерацией и Туркменистаном о совместной охране государственной границы Туркменистана и статусе военнослужащих Пограничных войск Российской Федерации на территории Туркменистана от 23 декабря 1993 г. (Treaty between the Russian Federation and Turkmenistan on the joint protection of the state border of Turkmenistan and the status of military personnel of the Border Troops of the Russian Federation on the territory of Turkmenistan of 23 December 1993) accessed August 3, 2019, http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/spd_md.nsf/0/7057F8F101865FA9C3257D8D0026D804

3. Foreign Policy

Turkmenistan's favourable economic prospects and higher growth figures among the CIS put it high in the running for regional leadership. Apart from prospects, regional leadership would also require commitments to the former "brotherly" republics, which Ashgabat was not inclined to assume. This decision was not due to solely economic costs such leadership may require. Turkmenistan had high hopes of following in the footsteps of Qatar, the state sometimes referred to as the "barking mouse of the Middle East," and yet a contender for regional leadership, challenging Saudi Arabia and Iran, no less. Unlike Qatar, however, Turkmenistan never had ready access to the international energy utilities market. All its attempts to set up direct gas exports to Europe were restrained by Russia's Gazprom. Turkmenistan never got too close to becoming a new Kuwait.

Ashgabat could not offer a lot to its partners in its quest for regional leadership, except its vision of future prosperity as a raw commodity exporter. It cannot boast a favourable geopolitical location, unlike Uzbekistan, which has common borders with all the other Central Asian states. Moreover there are strong Uzbek minorities in every Central Asian state, which Uzbekistan can rally to boost its regional dominance. The Uzbek community in Turkmenistan numbered over 317,000 in 1989.¹⁴ Turkmenistan, on the other hand, cannot rely on an equally strong diaspora anywhere in Central Asia. There were 142,000 ethnic Turkmens in Uzbekistan the same year.¹⁵ The population of Uzbekistan is six times the population of Turkmenistan, which is not conducive to realization of the latter's leadership ambitions.

Turkmenistan was never as industrially advanced compared to Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan in Soviet time, continued to be so in the early 1990s, and still remains far behind its neighbours today. Even as a commodity exporter Turkmenistan is not the unconditional

¹⁴ Всесоюзная перепись населения 1989 г. Национальный состав населения по республикам СССР. Узбекская ССР. (All Union Population Census of 1989 National composition of the population in the republics of the USSR. Uzbek SSR.) accessed Aug 16, 2019, http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_89.php?reg=4.

¹⁵ Всесоюзная перепись населения 1989 г. Национальный состав населения по республикам СССР. Туркменская ССР. (All Union Population Census of 1989 National composition of the population in the republics of the USSR. Turkmen SSR.) accessed Aug 17, 2019, http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_89.php?reg=4.

regional leader. Enormous natural gas reserves do not immediately translate to large hard-currency earnings: the gas has to be delivered to customers. Before 2006, Turkmenistan had exported its gas to other CIS member states, which, with the exception of Russia, could not pay, and to Iran, which purchased only one third of what Ukraine purchased. Export to China commenced in only 2006 and China was Turkmenistan's unattainable dream customer in the 1990s. Going out of its way to bring international investors into its oil and gas industry, Ashgabat nonetheless set pretty tough conditions on income sharing. Consequently, the first foreign company to win the Caspian fields tender was Argentine's *Bridas*, which settled for 31% of the profit. Compared to Turkmenistan, other countries such as Kazakhstan offered better deals for investors. *Chevron*, for example, got 50% of the profits on the *Tenghiz* field in 1992.

Regional leadership may also include an "ideological" component, which Turkmenistan might have initially sought after. After the signing of the *Belavezha Accords* by the leaders of Russia, Belorussia and Ukraine, *Saparmurat Niyazov* hosted a summit of the Central Asian heads of state on 12 December 1991. *Niyazov's* idea of a "Muslim Alliance" was rejected outright by the top-ranking guests, who instead adopted a joint declaration stating their willingness to join the Commonwealth of Independent States as its equitable co-founders. Arguably, *Niyazov* was not guided by religious feelings when he proposed a "Muslim Alliance." What happened in Minsk on 8 December was viewed as the formation of a "Slavic Alliance" and *Niyazov* was trying to offer a cooperation scheme to counteract it. This could not be done with a Turkic alliance: *Tajikistan* could not be part of it as *Tajiks* are not a Turkic ethnic group. Back in 1991, today's Central Asian states were described as "Republics of Central Asia and Kazakhstan," which meant that a "Central Asian Alliance" would not automatically include Kazakhstan. So it was also out of question. The only remaining common ground to unite upon was considered to be religion, hence the concept of "Muslim Alliance."

It is worthy of note that the final CIS formative document, signed by the heads of state of all the republics then in the Soviet Union, was sealed in *Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan* (later renamed *Almaty*). From then on, all CIS integration initiatives would come out of *Moscow* or *Alma-Ata*, then *Almaty*, then *Astana* (the new capital of *Kazakhstan*).

Having abandoned its regional leadership claims, Turkmenistan never gave up its active foreign policy, aiming to build balanced and equitable relations with other nations near and far. But very soon Ashgabat encountered numerous problems, both in and outside the region. After the dissolution, Russia, became preoccupied with establishing and maintaining closer relations with the West, and allocate less time and energy to its affairs with Central Asia. Putting the Central Asian states on the back burner, Moscow might have considered that these republics would nevertheless stay in close proximity to Russia, being too economically dependent on Russia. Failing to come up with a workable regional strategy for Central Asia, Moscow witnessed other strong powers building up their clout in the region, which, unlike Russia, made an effort to win the hearts and minds of the regional states.

Turkey was the quickest to recognize the newly independent Central Asian states on 16 December 1991, before the official break-up of the Soviet Union. Turkey set up a department dedicated to Central Asia within its Foreign Ministry at the beginning of 1992. Ankara's bet was the ethnic and cultural kinship of the Turks and the dominant ethnic groups in Central Asia. Pan-Turkism, an ideology conceived in the 19th century, experienced a resurgence towards the end of the 1900s.

Turkey moved in swiftly also on the economic front, offering loans to every Central Asian state, as well as 2000 scholarships per nation for students wishing to enroll in Turkish universities. Turkey trained officers for the future national armed forces. Turkish universities educated the nascent political and economic elites of Central Asia.

It wasn't out of altruism that Turkey did all this and more. Working to boost its regional leadership, Ankara was trying to expedite Turkey's progress towards EU membership. Hikmet Cetin, then Foreign Minister of Turkey, actually proposed that Turkey represent the Central Asian states vis-à-vis third countries. In October 1992, Ankara tried to persuade the Central Asian states to recognize the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus, but they declined.

Turkey's political system, a secular polity with Muslim population and a fast-growing economy appealed to the Central Asian states. Closer ties with Turkey were good for Central Asia, particularly since it was also promoted by the United States. US Secretary of State James Baker toured Central Asia from 1 to 5 January 1992,

visiting every regional state. Discussing mutual cooperation issues with the Central Asian heads of state, Baker made it perfectly clear that all-round US support would be given to those countries that are friendly with Turkey, not Iran.

For Ashgabat, closer ties with Turkey were certainly an attractive proposition, but Turkmenistan simply couldn't afford to ignore its next-door neighbour, with which it has a nearly 1000-km common frontier and which is home to over a million-strong Turkmen diaspora. A hostile policy toward Iran would not be viable for Turkmenistan, unlike to follow the example of Kazakhstan and renege on all its ongoing commitments to Iran. On the other hand, Ashgabat could not afford to disregard the world's strongest power. Therefore, the only solution Ashgabat could try in order to retain its good relations with Iran and not incur US wrath was to convince Washington that its friendship with Tehran would not extend beyond economic and cultural ties, and cite its neutral status as the guarantor.

Turkmenistan's neutral status helped it forge close ties with both Iran and Turkey, long-standing rivals for supremacy in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East. Turkmenistan's commitment to neutrality alleviated Iran's and Turkey's suspicions that Ashgabat might favour one country or the other. One more benefit of neutrality included Turkmenistan's ability to cooperate with Israel. Turkmenistan sought Israeli contribution for its agricultural development, and managed to befriend both Tehran and Tel-Aviv, their mutual animosity notwithstanding.

It is, therefore, understandable why Ashgabat came to view its neutral policy as the key to solving all international problems, as neutrality gave Turkmenistan plenty of room for manoeuvre in balancing the interests of the leading global and regional powers.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Turkmenistan's choice of a neutral foreign policy was mainly conditioned by foreign policy considerations rather than strict security concerns. Economic issues did not play much of a role in the decision as a nation's foreign policy status is unrelated to its economic performance or its external economic ties.

It is important to note that integrative processes happened only on paper in the CIS. The Board of the CIS Inter-parliament Assembly

admitted that, of the 108 CIS documents signed by the beginning of 1998, only 6 had taken effect with binding force for all the signatory member states.¹⁶ In the end, Turkmenistan's policy of emphasizing bilateral relations instead of the CIS, paid off.

One way of looking at Turkmenistan's neutral policy choice would be to view it as an international attention-getting move. Even in the Soviet Union, where geography was an important part of the curriculum, not every person could readily tell where Turkmenistan was on the map. By suddenly claiming a neutral foreign policy status, Turkmenistan put itself on the world map, at least for a short time, and made it into all the pertinent directories as a neutral country, one of perhaps ten or fewer neutral nations in the whole world. From the moment Turkmenistan became neutral, it positioned itself as a possible forum for the settlement of diverse international or interstate issues, which would be another way for it to step into the international limelight.

Declaration of neutrality is not, and never was a good response to national security threats. As Vladimir Lenin wrote: "A state is only worthy of the name when it is able to defend itself." That is why, while propagating friendly relations with its neighbours, Ashgabat worked consistently to shore up its defence.

As to the various bilateral and multilateral issues that arose in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan found it easier to handle those when it declared neutrality. Having Iran as its immediate neighbour also contributed. Iran, Turkey's perennial regional rival, had by then fallen foul of the US and Israel. All in all, Turkmenistan's neutral foreign policy assured its tranquil existence in a region torn up by rivalries between Russia, Iran, Turkey, China, India, Pakistan, Japan and South Korea, allowing it to focus on its domestic political and economic issues.

¹⁶ Рекомендации Совета Межпарламентской Ассамблеи государств – участников Содружества Независимых Государств "Об усилении взаимодействия Межпарламентской Ассамблеи с уставными органами Содружества Независимых Государств". (Recommendations of the Council of the Interparliamentary Assembly of States - members of the Commonwealth of Independent States "On strengthening the interaction of the Interparliamentary Assembly with statutory bodies of the Commonwealth of Independent States") accessed August 17, 2019, <http://old.iaicis.ru/html/?id=22&pag=279&nid=5>.

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