

TURKMENISTAN'S POLITICAL CULTURE OF POSITIVE NEUTRALITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Dr. Saima Ashraf Kayani* & Raja Qaiser Ahmed**

Abstract

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, as elsewhere in Central Asia, the process of political transition began in Turkmenistan. The political culture that existed in Turkmenistan did not support a smooth transition from the Soviet-era political system to the configuration of democracy and state or nation-building process. To achieve its de-Russification and foreign policy objectives, Turkmenistan adopted the political culture of neutrality. It is argued that as the post-Soviet state building strategy, the concept of neutrality has promoted Turkmenistan's interests at the national, regional and global level. The research examines the questions: One, how the political culture of neutrality helped Turkmenistan to achieve its post-Soviet stability and post-communist process of democratization. Two, what are the factors that facilitated Turkmenistan to pursue the policy of neutrality. Three, what are the criticisms on the policy of neutrality.

Key words: Turkmenistan, Positive Neutrality, Political Culture, Critique

Introduction

"The status of neutrality is a key factor for the development of Turkmenistan's mutually advantageous and constructive international partnership that meets the national interests as well as the goals to ensure peace, prosperity and sustainable development in the region and throughout the world".

President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov

* Dr Saima Ashraf Kayani is Head Department of Defense and Diplomatic Studies, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi.

** Raja Qaiser Ahmed is Lecturer at School of Politics & IR, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad.

Political culture studies revealed the fact that the phenomenon of political culture is the result of past (history), political system and the socialization of personalities involved in the system, such as the top leadership of any country. Political culture consists of a society's values, beliefs, traditions and political system, which are passed to future generations and are the constituent building block of the characteristics and identity of a nation. It plays its role in the internal and external policies of any country. It is used to create unity in a nation. *Encyclopedia Britannica* equates political culture with political psychology of a country;¹ whereas, *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* relates political culture with attitudes, beliefs, sentiments and rules of political process and system in any country; and all this is manifested in the public and private life of citizens². Political culture, with the passage of time, developed into an important characteristic of a society and this manifests itself in every segment of a society associated with social, economic, political aspects and so on.

After independence, Turkmenistan's leaders opted for a political culture of neutrality to achieve its double-faceted objectives of de-Russification and formulating its foreign policy, so as to be a part of the international community and to counter the threats and pressures of neo-Great Game in the region of Eurasia. To begin with, the concept of neutrality is more related to wars where sovereign states take up neutrality to avoid any kind of involvement in an armed conflict between states.³ Many scholars are of the view that with the introduction of the United Nations Charter, the concept of neutrality becomes archaic and obsolete. However, some are of the view that the concept of neutrality remained enforced during the Cold War period, like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).⁴ Neutrality, as a policy, is defined by Véronique Panchaud in the following words:

1. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1084748/political-culture>. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Sage Publications: London. <http://costa.wustl.edu/teaching/IntroComp/Reading/almond1963.pdf>

2. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 12, (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 218. Cited in Jo Freeman, *The Political Culture of the Democratic and Republican Parties* <<http://www.uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/jofreeman/polparties/polculture.htm>> #footnote1. For concept and history also see Ronald P. Formisano, "The Concept of Political Culture" *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 31, no. 3. (Winter, 2001), 393-426. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/207089><http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/207089.pdf?acceptTC=true>>.

3. Thom M. Armstrong, *Neutrality, Encyclopedia of the New American Nation* <<http://www.americanforeignrelations.com/E-N/Neutrality.html>>.

4. Hersch Lauterpacht, *Oppenheim's International Law*. 7th ed., Vol. 2., 661-663 (1952) cited in <<http://lawofwar.org/Neutrality.htm>>.

The policy of neutrality is the set of political decisions and measures a neutral state freely takes in peace times with the aim of securing the credibility and the efficiency of its legally binding neutrality. The policy of neutrality differs in neutral states and depends on their situation.⁵

Peter Hazelip Lyon, while explaining the concept of foreign policy neutralism, is of the view that this policy is based on hopes, fears and driving force behind such policy is the concept of nationalism. Neutrality is the policy on which neutral states formulate their security and foreign policy.⁶

Currently, Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, Ghana and many other states are designated as neutral states. However, all of them attained neutral status to save themselves from the devastating effects of wars. In addition, many states, to avoid the Cold War politics, followed the neutrality policy during the time of the bipolar world. Turkmenistan opted for neutrality after the end of Cold War, and it is only state that opted for neutrality in peace times. Turkmen are nomad people divided into clans, each clan observing their own traditions and following its own leader. Under Tsarist rule, the process of Russification started in present day Turkmenistan and under Stalin's leadership, nation building began to strengthen territorial cohesion, unity of language, cultural values and economic condition of the country.⁷ Russian leadership promoted Russian norms and values all over the region in order to promote a separate Soviet identity. Former Soviet Union promoted its own institutions, language, culture and political structure. Moscow ruled Turkmenistan by keeping it under the umbrella of central government in Moscow. For about seventy years, Turkmenistan followed a political culture that was given to them by a communist state.

The post-Soviet Turkmenistan leader, Saparmurat Niyazov (First Secretary of Turkmenistan Communist Party 1985-1991), trained in the authoritarian system, learned how to centralize power with no opposition to challenge his power and authority. The political culture that has emerged in Turkmenistan revolves around the cult of personality. This was adopted by the first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, and has been followed by the second president of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, with minor variations depending on the

5. Véronique Panchaud, "Neutrality of Switzerland: A Brief Introduction," *Strategic Orientation*, no 15, (October-December, 2009).

6. Peter Hazelip Lyon, *Neutralism: Its meaning and significance in contemporary International Politics*. see abstract. <http://theses.lse.ac.uk/667/1/Lyon_Neutralism.pdf>.

7. Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, "From tribe to Umma", *Central Asian Survey*, 3, no 3, 1985, 21. Cited in Ahmet T. Kuru, "Between the State and Cultural zones: Nation Building in Turkmenistan," *Central Asia Survey* 21, no 1, (2002), 71. <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02634930220127955>>.

socialization and clan affiliation of the post-Soviet leaders in Turkmenistan⁸. However, both the presidents, in a diplomatic manner, used the policy of neutrality in a constructive way to secure interests of Turkmenistan.

Thus, this article focuses on the political culture of neutrality, which Turkmenistan adopted immediately after its independence from the Soviet Union. It is argued here that in the post-Soviet Turkmenistan, the policy of neutrality has been deliberately adopted to facilitate Turkmenistan to achieve its domestic, regional and international objectives. This work tries to analyze the political culture of neutrality, by making use of the constitutional tenets of Neutrality of Turkmenistan. It takes into consideration implications of the policy of neutrality for Turkmenistan at domestic, regional and international level. It also examines the criticism on Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality which most believe has helped country to evade discussion on human rights abuses by categorising them as an internal issue.

Turkmenistan's Policy of Neutrality

The unpredicted and unexpected independence brought Turkmenistan's leaders to a situation where they had to decide either to emerge as a developed nation and responsible member of the contemporary world or hold on to the traditional arrangements and legacy of the former system that is viewed as totalitarian, oppressive and authoritative. It was apparent that the leadership of Turkmenistan, keeping in view the emergent situation (after the disintegration of Soviet Union) opted for the policies which can make them a responsible member of the globe, wash away past tags and help them to build-up reputation and worldwide trust for the country. Domestic and foreign policy related decisions were taken by the leaders, which ultimately resulted in the policy of neutrality. According to Article 1 of the Constitutional law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan:

Within the scope of realizing the integral rights of the sovereign state, Turkmenistan declares voluntarily about its permanent neutrality and will support it and put into practice consistently. The permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan is the basis of its foreign and domestic policy aimed at strengthening the stability and consent in society, developing friendly and mutually beneficial relations with the states of the region and the whole world.⁹

⁸. Slavomír Horák. "The Elite in Post Soviet and Post-Niyazow Turkmenistan: Does Political culture Form a leader?," *The Institute of International Studies*, (Charles University in Prague, 2012).

⁹. "Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan, 1995," <<http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/405ab3d14.pdf>>.

Policy and strategy aiming at nation-building of the country was named as 10 year's stability policy. As a result, a new constitution was passed and the first parliamentary elections were held in Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan's culture was promoted by declaring Turkmenistan as the official language and Islam as the official religion of the state. CIS and United Nations membership was achieved and new infrastructures were given top priority to make Turkmenistan's people proud and satisfied.¹⁰ Thus, during the initial years of independence, the main focus of the leading class was on bringing home stability, maintaining sovereignty, and portraying a positive image of Turkmenistan.¹¹

The economic crisis that engulfed the entire Central Asian states confronted Turkmenistan as well, however, Turkmenistan's government has been able to perform well. In comparison with other states in the region, the living standard of Turkmenistan's people is much better. The natural gas reservoirs, along with the agriculture sector, are given maximum importance because of their usage. Major industries contributing in the economy of Turkmenistan are mainly natural gas and oil.¹² Keeping in view the economic performance of Turkmenistan, Nicola Contessi describes it as the next Central Asian Tiger¹³.

After stabilizing the country's internal situation, the leaders moved towards maintaining a proactive foreign policy, which is based on the following codes.

- Safeguarding the sovereignty of Turkmenistan and emerging as a significant actor in the international system.
- Creating all the basic conditions for the development of the country.
- Giving importance to the interest of the general masses.
- Safeguarding the security of Turkmenistan by various means.
- Working with foreigners and bringing mutual cooperation projects which will promote equality, justice and respect for each other.
- Ensuring that all activities and policies should be according to the international law and the UN Charter¹⁴

¹⁰. Heiko Schmid and Joachim Langbein, "Turkmenistan- Nation Building and Economic Development since Independence," <<http://www2.geog.uni-eidelberg.de/anthropo/mitarbeiter/schmid/pdf/turkmenistan.pdf>>.

¹¹. Ibid.

¹². Ibid.

¹³. Nicola Contessi, "Is Turkmenistan the next Central Asian Tiger?," *The Diplomat*, July 15, 2014. <<http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/is-turkmenistan-the-next-central-asian-tiger/>>.

¹⁴. "Foreign policy of Turkmenistan," <<http://www.turkmenemb-sa.org/ForeignPolicyENG.html>>.

In July 1992, Turkmenistan's president, in the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe, illustrated the strategy of Positive Neutrality. President Saparmurat Niyazov defined the major characteristics of the policy of neutrality as under:

- Sovereignty and integrity of all should be maintained.
- No interference in the internal affairs of any other states.
- Use of force should be avoided in inter-state conflicts.
- Role of United Nations in maintaining peace worldwide should be recognized.
- Promotion of cooperation in different sectors.¹⁵
- Alliances should be avoided including both military as well as political.
- Develop relations for maintaining good ties.
- National interest to be achieved at fair grounds.
- Promote international cooperation.¹⁶

The president of Turkmenistan listed the neutral status obligations for Turkmenistan as follows:

- Turkmenistan will not join any political, economic or military alliances.
- Military power will be restricted to safeguarding freedom and stability
- Manufacturing or presence of lethal weapons would be avoided.
- Turkmenistan will not be forced by anyone to join any political or military alliance.
- UN should play an effective role to end all clashes.
- Moral values should be uplifted.
- Good relations with all states regardless of their size would be maintained.
- Policies should be made while maintaining the international humanitarian organization's aims.¹⁷

The policy of neutrality emphasized on friendliness, respect for each other, equality, justice, mutual benefit and loyally satisfying all responsibilities and vows. The policy became a part of the constitution of Turkmenistan and is internationally recognized. Constitutional law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan consisted of

15. "The World Recognized Turkmenistan's Neutrality 9 Years Ago," <<http://presidentniyazov.tripod.com/id33.html>>.

16. "Foreign policy of Turkmenistan," <<http://www.turkmenemb-sa.org/ForeignPolicyENG.html>>.

17. "Neutrality is the Greatest Achievement of our people," <<http://presidentNiyazov.tripod.com/id49.html>>.

12 articles and it became operational in 1995. General Secretary of the UN, Kofi Annan said on October 23, 2002:

Your country contributed to the process of finding a solution to the civil war in Tajikistan, having held three rounds of inter-Tajik talks here, in Ashgabat, which was a turning point in the peaceful process, simultaneously giving a shelter to thousands of Tajik refugees. In the same manner Turkmenistan actively assisted the UN in its efforts on the establishment of peace in Afghanistan hosting a number of meetings between the Afghan sides. Today, one of the most important corridors to provide the Afghan people with so much needed humanitarian assistance runs across Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan's strong commitment to international order, trust put in it by the UN, also led us to implementation of joint preventive actions with a view of bringing down the regional tensions.¹⁸

To begin with, Turkmenistan's diplomatic missions were involved in getting international support and recognition for the policy of neutrality. The policy was introduced to the domestic and foreign public. Government officials tried to convince the audience that neutrality does not mean isolation, rather it means positive, active and supportive contribution in regional and international affairs by Turkmenistan.¹⁹ According to Luca Anceschi, the policy of neutrality is based on three aspects: political, economic and humanitarian.²⁰

The political aspect of neutrality helps Turkmenistan establish bilateral relations with respect and assurance with all countries. According to Article 3 of the Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan, "Turkmenistan pursues a peaceful foreign policy, makes its relations with other states on the principles of equality of rights, mutual respect and non-interference to internal affairs of other states"²¹. This provided acceptance of Turkmenistan among the community of nations. It established bilateral relations with US, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, China, India, Pakistan, and many others, keeping aside the clutches of new Great Game in the region.

Related to the political dimension of the policy of neutrality is the economic aspect; this helps Turkmenistan to integrate its national economy into the global economic system. This economic aspect is

18. "Neutral Factor of Turkmenistan," <http://presidentniyazov.tripod.com/id26.html>.

19. Luca Anceschi, *Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy: Positive Neutrality and the Consolidation of the Turkmen Regime* (New York: Routledge 2009), <http://books.google.com.pk/books?id=OSCEd71ld9QC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

20. Ibid.

21. "Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan"

stipulated in Article 7 and 8 of the Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan.

Article 7

Turkmenistan develops the international economic co-operation on the basis of equality of rights, mutual benefit and accounting for the interests of the parties involved into this process, considering such cooperation as an important means of strengthening trust between countries and regions, and maintaining peace and stability.

Article 8

Turkmenistan provides its financial and economic space openly, cooperates with all states, international economic and financial organizations, promotes the world community efforts when solving economic problems. Turkmenistan considers the economic pressure of one state on another one unacceptable as a means of gaining political objectives, and doesn't participate in economic blockade announced by them.²²

Similarly the policy of neutrality also highlights Turkmenistan's commitment to human right issues with commitment to support the human rights organizations' efforts.²³ Article 11 says:

Turkmenistan joins the basic international legal acts providing the rights of refugees, displaced persons and compelled migrants, maintains the efforts of the states and international public relating to rendering help to countries suffering from wars, conflicts, natural calamity, catastrophes, epidemics and their consequences. Turkmenistan collaborates actively with world and regional humanitarian organizations.²⁴

Different reasons persuaded Turkmenistan to go for the policy of permanent neutrality: Firstly, norms, principles and beliefs that give a sense of belonging and pride like respect for religion, neighbors, elders, family, and traditions. Secondly, geographical location and conditions, that teaches the strategy to survive and the importance of peace. Thirdly, natural wealth like oil, natural gas, minerals and agricultural are an important wealth to improve relations. Fourthly, international politics, to

²². Ibid.

²³ Luca Anceschi, *"Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy: Positive Neutrality and the Consolidation of the Turkmen Regime"*

²⁴. "Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan ..."

avoid joining any specific political block or ideology. Finally, to promote national interest by maintaining neutral status.²⁵

These factors for maintaining neutral policy have been further heightened by Turkmenistan's internal stability, economic and infrastructure development, devotion to international law and treaties, commitment for nuclear non-proliferation, commitment not to produce and stockpile biological and chemical weapons and decision not to allow any foreign military presence on its territory.²⁶

Policy of Neutrality: Implications for Turkmenistan

Neutrality policy benefits Turkmenistan to achieve its policy goals at three levels: domestic, regional and international. Turkmenistan started developing at the national level by overcoming national challenges only because of its policy of neutrality, which helps Turkmenistan to concentrate on its domestic restructuring and get its own house in order. An expansion plan was carved out in the Ten Years of Stability Program in 1992. This program interlinked the national policy with foreign policy by induction of democratic principles and institutions. As per requirement, new legislation was passed so that all citizens are considered equal before law and should be treated equally.

After independence, "Turkmenification" process started in the newly independent state of Turkmenistan²⁷. The main aim was to stabilize the newly independent country keeping in view the unexpected emergent scenario due to demise of the Soviet Union, domestically, regionally and internationally. Sapamurat Niyazov was elected president of Turkmenistan. He founded a new political party named Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT). Soviet era administrative divisions, 'oblasts' of Turkmenistan, were redrawn into five velayats.²⁸ Reforms were introduced in politics, economy and culture.²⁹ For domestic stability, political reforms were introduced. Importance was given to constitution making and in 1992, a constitution based on western principles of division of power with a strong position for the president was drafted. In 1994,

25. Boris O. Shikmuradov, "Positive Neutrality as the Basis of the Foreign Policy of Turkmenistan", <<http://www.sam.gov.tr/perceptions/Volume2/June-August1997/volII2POSITIVENEUTRALITYASTHEBASISOFTHEFOREIGNPOLICYOFTURKMENISTAN.pdf>>.

26. Ibid.

27. Schmid and Langbein, "Turkmenistan: Nation Building and Economic Development Since Independence".

28. Law on Constitution's Implementation (Ashgabat: Turkmenkayalyskra, May 19, 1992), 1,3., as reported in Foreign Broadcast Information Service [FBIS], Daily Report: Central Eurasia, 24 June 1992., 101,102. Cited in *Turkmenistan Political Conditions in the Post-Soviet Era*, February 1993. INS Resource Information Center Washington DC., 7. <<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/ins/turkme94.pdf>>.

29. Ibid.

first elections for parliament were held. While, after a period of five years in 1999 second parliamentary elections were held. Later, President Sapamurat Niyazov was declared life time president by the same house (Majlis). He ruled absolutely from 1985 till 2006 and declared himself the leader or head of all Turkmen known as Turkmenbashi. President is head of state as well as government, making Turkmenistan a presidential republic. Only one political party, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, has the right to contest elections with no opposition candidate. It was in 2012 that political parties got the right of registration in Turkmenistan. After Sapamurat Niyazov's death, Deputy Prime Minister Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow became the president of Turkmenistan.

The first president of Turkmenistan, very diplomatically, carved the policy of neutrality to achieve internal stability, economic development and a sense of self-reliance. National revival of Turkmenistan was based on revival of language, education, media, and history.³⁰ Policy of neutrality has been mentioned in the book *Ruhnama* (written by President Sapamurat Niyazov). Turkmen was declared as the official language, Russian language was discouraged and Russian names (of places; administrative units; political institutions) were replaced by Turkmen words. Arrangements were made to encourage citizens to speak and write in the Turkmen language.³¹ Medium of instruction in educational institutions was declared to be the Turkmen language. Latin alphabets were replaced with Cyrillic alphabets.³²

Religion was considered as an important element to revise Turkmenistan's culture and national identity. New mosques were opened. The role of Islam in consolidating the national identity of Turkmenistan has been depicted by President Niyazov in his book *Ruhnama*.³³ The book depicts Turkmenistan's culture, art, literature, history, Sufism; and portrays Turkmenistan as a nation in a constructive way. The Book is divided into different sections: Turkmen, the Turkmen's Path, the Turkmen Nation, the State of Turkmen, the ancient Oguz State, and the spiritual world of the Turkmen.³⁴ The book is strongly recommended for preserving the national identity of Turkmenistan.

Media played an important role in developing nationalism among the tribal Turkmen people. As mentioned by Ahmet T. Kuru:

30. Ahmet T. Kuru, "Between the state and cultural zones: nation building in Turkmenistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 21, no. 1, (2002) 21(1), 74. <http://grad.sdsu.edu/~akuru/docs/Kuru_CAS.pdf>.

31. Ibid.

32. Schmid and Langbein, "Turkmenistan: Nation Building and Economic Development Since Independence"

33. Ibid.

34. Suparamat Niyozov, *Ruhna*. <<http://intersci.ss.uci.edu/wiki/eBooks/Asia/BOOKS/Ruhnama%20Niyozov.pdf>>.

Turkmenbashi shows respect for other national symbols, e.g. he kisses the flag on some memorial days and architectural structures, such as the Neutrality Arch, the Earthquake Memorial and the National Museum have been constructed as tangible symbols of national identity. They are shown in TV broadcasts as the symbols of independent, permanently neutral and rapidly developing Turkmenistan. The Turkmenbashi Palace, for instance, is regularly represented on TV programs.³⁵

Historical figures are given respect and slogans are used to inculcate the spirit of nationalism. Most popular slogans are: 'the 21st century will be the golden age of Turkmens', and 'people, Motherland, Turkmenbashi'. Emphasis was on rewriting the history of Turkmenistan; the country's history has been re-written to glorify the past and future.³⁶

Turkmenistan was the most neglected republic in the former Soviet Union with least support from Moscow. In 1989, 45 percent of its population lived below the poverty line with low per capita income,³⁷ high inflation rate and unemployment. Cotton and natural gas dominated the country's economy. The industrial sector was not well developed. To overcome its economic problems, the government in Ashkhabad gave top priority to economic development of the country which is based on the strategies of "pipelines, extraction of hydrocarbons and electricity generation."³⁸ In 1992, the government introduced "Ten Years of Prosperity Program" which was termed as "Ten Years Stability Program." Manat, a new currency, was introduced in 1993, and the privatization process started. Electricity, water and fertilizers were subsidized. Foreign firms were encouraged to operate in the country. New roads and rail links were constructed. Currently the export of gas and oil is hampered because of pipelines directed to former Soviet markets and mainly dependent on Russia. New markets are to be searched for export of gas and oil, but with construction of a new pipelines network.³⁹ Foreign companies from US, Iran, Russia, China, EU, Japan and Israel are allowed to explore oil and gas, along with their contribution in other sectors. Thus, policy of neutrality helped Turkmenistan to keep the Great Game out of its borders. It entered into a number of agreements to transport gas and oil from Turkmenistan

35. Ahmet T. Kuru, "Between the state and cultural zones: nation building in Turkmenistan", 75.

36. Ibid.

37. Steven Sabol, "Turkmenistan: Permanent Transition or Elusive Stability?" *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 8, no. 3 (2010), 13.

38. Nicola Contessi, "Is Turkmenistan the next Central Asian Tiger?"

39. Richard Pomfret, "Turkmenistan: From Communism to Nationalism by Gradual Economic Reform", *Economic Reform in Central Asia*. (2001 Kluwer Academic Publishers. Netherlands) <http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/421/art%253A10.1023%252FA%253A1012202313876.pdf?auth66=1394768434_d977511fcf1bbdafc3afdf41c0bdb9e6&ext=.pdf>.

like Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline, Trans-Caspian gas pipeline to central Europe, Central Asia oil pipeline, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline etc.

A number of problems such as: inadequate power distribution, economic challenges, resource scarcity, security issues, instability and ethnic issues were common after independence in the Eurasia region. Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality turned out to be the "pole of peace"⁴⁰ in the region and enhanced bilateral relationships through cooperation in different sectors, bringing an end to different conflicts and disputes.⁴¹ An important role has been played by Turkmenistan to deal with problems in Afghanistan, as well as climate change and environmental scarcity in the region. Conferences and summits were arranged to address important issues such as arms control, disarmament, collective defense, collective security, preventive diplomacy, and other issues related to regional states of Eurasia.⁴² The Silk Road has been made useful to bring East and West closer and this is evident in foreign relations of Turkmenistan.⁴³ The neutrality policy played an important role as all the conflicting groups of the civil war going on in Tajikistan decided to join the inter-Tajik negotiations held by Turkmenistan. It also provided humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.⁴⁴ Further, Turkmenistan became a member of IMF, World Bank, UN, ECO and many other regional and international organizations. However, Turkmenistan's leaders avoided being part of any such initiatives in the Eurasian regional organizations, which gave Russia any dominating position. Furthermore, in 2005 Turkmenistan became an associated member of CIS.

The region of Eurasia is rich in energy resources and is strategically located, which attracted major actors of the international community like the US, China, EU, India, Turkey, Iran, etc., all trying to keep their influence in the region. This resulted in the New Great Game. After the death of Turkmanbashi, the new president Berdymukhamedov, carefully developed relations with USA, Germany, Iran, Azerbaijan, China and even Russia- any country which could contribute in the development of Turkmenistan. Also, Turkmenistan attended the meetings of SCO and CAREC as an observer.⁴⁵ Presently, Turkmenistan is enjoying good relations with about one hundred and twenty five countries, besides, it is a

40. "The Year 2010 in the chronicle of the Epoch of new Revival: Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy," <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/_en/?idr=2&id=110119a>.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid. Turkmenistan developed friendly relations with Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Belarus.

44. "Regional strategy of Ashgabat," <<http://presidentniyazov.tripod.com/id41.html>>.

45. Richard Pomfret, "Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 6, no. 4 (2008).

key member of more than forty international organizations serving humanity at their best, including NAM.⁴⁶

In 1994, Turkmenistan became a part of NATO under the Partnership for Peace (PFP).⁴⁷ The PFP played an important role in strengthening cooperation in areas such as border control and security, civil emergency planning, defense planning, coastal narcotics training, disaster relief, humanitarian and search and rescue operations.⁴⁸ Military courses such as control and disarmament, non-proliferation, the laws of armed conflicts, combating terrorism, defense planning and budgeting were offered to Turkmenistan soldiers and they participated wholeheartedly.⁴⁹ Turkmenistan also participated in Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and Science for Peace and Security (SPS) programs.⁵⁰ Turkmenistan did not take part in any military operation of NATO as it decided not to use its forces outside Turkmenistan.⁵¹ Consequently, the policy of neutrality minimized the Neo Great Game competition in Turkmenistan and also protects the country from outside interference in its domestic affairs.

President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, while showing his commitment to follow the policy of neutrality, also accepted that the world is rapidly changing. For this reason, in February 2017, President Berdimuhamedov approved seven years concept of foreign policy of Turkmenistan for the period of 2017-2023,⁵² which provides the following framework for Turkmenistan:

1. To cooperate with the United Nations and follow its principles.
2. To work for environmental issues. For this Turkmenistan will follow its environmental and water diplomacy.
3. To work with UN for energy security and a sustainable energy system.
4. To work with UN for transport system and corridors.
5. To expand its relations with regional and international organizations.

46. "Foreign policy of Turkmenistan," <<http://www.turkmenemb-sa.org/ForeignPolicyENG.html>>.

47. "NATO's Relations with Turkmenistan," <<http://www.nato.int/issues/nato-turkmenistan/index.html>>.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. "Turkmenistan defines domestic and foreign policy directions for 2017-2023. 20 February 2017," News Central Asia <<http://www.newscentralasia.net/2017/02/20/turkmenistan-defines-domestic-and-foreign-policy-directions-for-2017-2023/>>.

6. To develop close and multilateral relations with its closest neighbors
7. To cooperate for solving Caspian Sea related issues.
8. To accept Russia as a strategic partner of Turkmenistan.
9. To develop bilateral and multilateral relations with the states of Caucasus, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova.
10. To develop strategic relations with China and to strengthen relations with other countries in the Asia-Pacific region
11. To further cooperate with European countries and the US in combating threats and restore peace to Central Asia and cooperate in the field of energy security.
12. To develop political cooperation with Latin American countries.
13. To develop relations with African countries and the African Union.
14. To cooperate with major economic and financial international institutions and to join the WTO.
15. To develop and fully utilize the cultural diplomacy.
16. To use sports diplomacy.

By careful analysis of the above mentioned text it seems as if Turkmenistan has compartmentalized its relations with other countries and specified the role of the mentioned countries: Russia as a strategic partner, China as a trade partner, USA and EU as security partners, peace with neighboring countries, UN role for energy and transport system, and relations with monetary organizations. It seems as if from now onward Turkmenistan is not going to strictly follow its neutrality policy and will adapt the policy that helps Turkmenistan to achieve its domestic goals and objectives.

As the President of Turkmenistan had declared:

No matter the final direction of our foreign policy, it must always be balanced and consistent. It must pursue one main goal – to create an enabling international environment for domestic development of Turkmenistan, as well as help to ensure the legitimate interests of our neutral state in the global arena serve to improve its credibility as a reliable and stable partner.⁵³

Scholars are of the view that the main shift in the foreign policy of Turkmenistan is to minimize the international isolation of Turkmenistan, as mentioned by Slavomír Horák and Jan Šír: “In foreign policy, the new leadership’s major task was to overcome Turkmenistan’s international

⁵³. Ibid.

isolation, which was the result of Türkmenbaşy's isolationist policy pursued under the rhetorical guise of 'permanent neutrality'.⁵⁴ The new president developed and expanded relations with Russia, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Persian Gulf countries, Japan, US and European Union countries.⁵⁵ It's a clear shift from the policies of former president and it seems as if Turkmenistan is moving from isolation to cooperation and an active role for Turkmenistan as far as the international arena is concerned. However, it must be kept in mind that this shift in the foreign policy of Turkmenistan is meant to achieve the domestic or national objectives of the country.

Criticism on the Policy of Neutrality of Turkmenistan

After independence, the political culture that Turkmenistan followed was based on the cult of personality and authoritarianism and all this was skillfully wrapped in the policy of neutrality in peace time. This policy does not have explicit objectives and strategy. According to Luca Anceschi, the policy of positive neutrality "has lacked clarity and complexity. Stated objectives were generally vague and there was little evidence of operational strategies to achieve them"⁵⁶ It has been criticized that President Niyazov deliberately kept the neutrality policy vague and this helped the President to consolidate his power at home and circumvent international criticism on human rights violations in Turkmenistan such as restrictions on religious performances, media, freedom of expression and movement and restrictions on the role of civil society activities, women rights, and political authoritarianism. David Lewis is of the view that, "Neutrality [became] a useful disguise for a policy of isolation from the rest of the world, and a rejection of international norms on human rights and every other part of international law."⁵⁷ Some scholars are of the view

54. Slavomír Horák Jan Šír, "Dismantling Totalitarianism? Turkmenistan under Berdimuhamedow," Silk Road Papers, March 2009, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program., 44. <http://isdpc.eu/content/uploads/publications/2009_horak-sir_dismantling-totalitarianism.pdf>.

55. Ibid.

56. Luca Anceschi, *Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy: Positive Neutrality and the Consolidation of the Turkmen Regime* (London: Routledge, 2008), 31. cited in Kathrin Hamm, Nate Rawlings, Tsuyoshi Shiina, Natalia Vazhenina, Jesse Walter, Jared Williams, *Turkmenistan Natural Gas Outlook 2020: The Chinese Connection. How will U.S. security policy Adapt to the Evolving Sino-Turkmen Relationship?* <<http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/academics/workshops/documents/RANDTheFinalCopyIII.pdf>>.

57. David Lewis, *The Temptations of Tyranny in Central Asia*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 98. Cited in Kathrin Hamm, Nate Rawlings, Tsuyoshi Shiina, Natalia Vazhenina, Jesse Walter, Jared Williams, *Turkmenistan Natural Gas Outlook 2020: The Chinese Connection. How will U.S. security policy adapt to the evolving Sino-Turkmen relationship?*, <<http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/academics/workshops/documents/RANDTheFinalCopyIII.pdf>>.

that the neutrality policy of Turkmenistan has nothing to contribute except that it didn't support military blocs. The Doctrine of Positive Neutrality is intentionally vague and simultaneously all encompassing. As a policy, it is designed to steer the direction of the entire country, but it has no specifics, only that military force is not an acceptable solution for disputes."⁵⁸ Further, some scholars believe that Turkmenistan, by its neutral position, tries to save itself from the post-Soviet turmoil that engulfs the region of Central Asia: security issues, energy crisis, economic disorder, political institutionalization, social mobilization, rise of nationalism, world powers' competition and instability.⁵⁹ Steven Sabol is of the view that:

Beset by domestic economic concerns, limited military capabilities and fragile neighboring states, Turkmenistan decided to base its foreign policy on an unusual principle described as "positive neutrality."⁶⁰

Positive neutrality has hampered the multilateral approach in Turkmenistan's foreign policy and bilateral diplomacy has gained importance. This slows down any useful role Turkmenistan can play in international affairs. Najia Badykova is of the view that Turkmenistan does not take active part in regional organizations, international coalition against war on terrorism and drug trafficking. It also did not cooperate regarding the regional issues of water, energy, transportation, trade and ecology. Further, there is corrupt political and economic system in the country. The policy of neutrality helped Niyazov to consolidate his control domestically and isolate the country from the external world.⁶¹ This policy also provided a shield to Turkmenistan to close off the country from any kind of international evaluation and assessment on the internal situation in Turkmenistan. It was considered a violation of the policy of neutrality as the policy respects the internal sovereignty of the state and as Turkmenistan does not interfere in the internal affairs of other states, thus other states have no right to interfere in the internal matters of Turkmenistan. The policy did not achieve its stated objectives.⁶² Therefore, Turkmenistan has to re-examine its policy of neutrality.

⁵⁸. Kathrin Hamm, Nate Rawlings, Tsuyoshi Shiina, Natalia Vazhenina, Jesse Walter, Jared Williams *Turkmenistan Natural Gas Outlook 2020: The Chinese Connection. How will U.S. security policy adapt to the evolving Sino-Turkmen relationship?*

⁵⁹. Rajan Menon, *The Dynamics of Security in Post Soviet Central Asia*, Lehigh University, 1995. i-viii, <www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceer/1995-808-08-2-Menon.pdf>.

⁶⁰. Steven Sabol, "Turkmenistan: Permanent Transition or Elusive Stability?," 17.

⁶¹. Najia Badykova, <<https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/Badykova%20Testimony.pdf>>.

⁶². Steven Sabol, "Turkmenistan: Permanent Transition or Elusive Stability?," 17-18.

Conclusion

Whatsoever criticisms are leveled against the policy of neutrality, this facilitated Turkmenistan in three areas: firstly, at the national level Turkmenistan set its own house in order and didn't allow any other state to interfere in the internal affairs of the country, which helped Turkmenistan to be stable politically and economically. Further, state and nation building processes started simultaneously under the same policy. Secondly, the neutral foreign policy assists Turkmenistan to minimize the new Great Game competition on its territory and develop its gas and oil pipeline projects on its own terms and conditions. And finally, at the regional level, it developed cordial bilateral relations with all countries of the region.

Although, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov showed his commitment to adhering to the principles of neutrality, but on the other hand one can notice that the present government in Turkmenistan has shown signs of a more active foreign policy. This is a clear shift from the policies of the former President Niyazov. Ashgabat gave priority to developing new gas and oil pipelines to export its energy resources, develop its infrastructure, reconstruct the modern Silk Road, develop trade and business and focus on the emerging security scenarios in the neighboring countries of Turkmenistan and this indicates that in future Turkmenistan will play an active role in global and regional affairs. Additionally, this means Turkmenistan has to skillfully make use of the policy of neutrality, which does not stand for isolation now, rather it gives an edge to any government in Ashgabat to follow their policies and engage with the world on its own terms and conditions.

