14. Turkmenistan and Central Asian regional security

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I. Introduction

The emergence of new states in Central Asia drastically changed the political landscape not only within the region itself but also outside. Whereas Central Asia as part of the Soviet Union was basically on the periphery of a unified geopolitical area, after the breakup of the USSR it took centre stage in the political processes across the vast Eurasian area, becoming an object of geopolitical confrontation between world and regional centres of power.

Under the new set-up the states in the region began, virtually from nothing, to search for a new identity, a form of internal political order reflecting the interests of society; to set foreign policy priorities designed above all to put in place a credible state and regional security system; and to define their places and roles within the system of international relations.

The past decade has shaped in general outline an internal political order and development model for states in the region, which have already made their choices, but the main task—establishing foreign policy priorities and putting in place a credible regional security system—has yet to be addressed. None of the attempts made within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Central Asian Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization[1] and other vehicles of integration to put in place a regional security system that would guarantee the military–political and socio-economic stability of the region has yet produced a result.

It is fairly unlikely that a result will be achieved in the foreseeable future. The main reasons for this are the competing economic potentials of states in the region and their mutually exclusive tactics and strategies for achieving economic prosperity. This to a great extent is propelling the states in the region towards an independent search for foreign economic and political partners. They are ignoring the interests of regional geopolitical unification and the importance of concerted efforts on such matters as regional security. Furthermore, there are differences between them in their assessments of security threats, with all the ensuing consequences.

A case in point is Turkmenistan with its policy of 'positive neutrality', as manifested in its distancing or sometimes even completely isolating itself from other countries of Central Asia.

[1] On the Central Asian Union (CAU) see chapter 1 in this volume; on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (previously the Shanghai Forum) see chapter 5, section V.

II. The neutrality concept

Turkmenistan's foreign policy raises a number of questions. Why does it aspire to political neutrality? Just how neutral in fact is the policy line followed by the country's leadership? How does Turkmenistan's stance reflect on the overall situation in the region, above all in the sphere of regional security in Central Asia and in Turkmenistan itself?

Turkmenistan became an independent state quite unexpectedly. Neither its leadership nor its population was prepared for such a development. The results of the all-union referendum of 1989 are very indicative in this respect: at the time more than 90 per cent of the population favoured the preservation of the Soviet Union and of Turkmenistan remaining a union republic. When the Soviet Union broke up, the only characteristics of a state that Turkmenistan had were a distinct territory and a rather feeble administrative structure. None of the other important characteristics that constitute a state, such as a unified socio-cultural area, a national identity, an awareness of the law on the part of the general public and a self-sufficient economic and institutional infrastructure, existed. They are still evolving.

The country's territorial integrity is not as yet recognized by neighbouring states on the official level, and to judge from some unofficial statements (for instance, in the press), its neighbours even have some territorial claims on Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan has made no particular secret of its claims to border areas in the Tashauz and Chardzhou regions, which are populated mainly by ethnic Uzbeks. The leadership of Turkmenistan is also concerned about the political instability in some CIS member states, which could under certain circumstances have spilled over to Turkmenistan's territory.

In addition, according to some estimates, Turkmenistan is among the richest countries in the world in terms of hydrocarbon resources, while its population is just 4.5 million.

In that context, any ill-considered move on the part of the political leadership in building an independent state could have led to its becoming an object of discord between regional centres of power or a raw materials appendage to any of those power centres, which would have been entirely unacceptable to Turkmenistan.

All these factors prompted the country's leadership to search for some unorthodox ways to help achieve the following objectives: (*a*) preserving the country's territorial integrity; (*b*) guaranteeing its security; (*c*) establishing favourable conditions for vital political and economic reforms in the country; and (*d*) realizing its raw materials potential without becoming politically dependent on countries via whose territory export routes would pass.

The leadership thought that all this could be ensured by adopting neutral status recognized by the world community, whereby Turkmenistan would not be affiliated with any political or military blocs but would develop equal-to-equal relations with all the states of the world.

President Saparmurat Niyazov first proposed that Turkmenistan should adopt neutral status in March 1995 at a conference of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).[2] The proposal received full support from the participants. In October 1995, a meeting of the heads of state of the Non-Aligned Movement also backed the initiative. On 12 December 1995 the UN General Assembly adopted a special resolution calling on UN member states to recognize Turkmenistan's status as a neutral state.[3]

The newly acquired neutral status considerably facilitated the process of nation-building. It also enabled Turkmenistan to revise its military doctrine and by doing so restrict defence spending, funnelling the resources thus saved to the national economy.[4] However, it would probably not be correct to say that neutral status has freed the country from the influence of external forces or that Turkmenistan has been pursuing a policy of 'pure neutrality', adhering to the principle of 'equal distance and equal rapprochement' with respect to all countries in the region and in the world alike. Considering its economic situation and its geographic location, the adoption of neutrality was rather unexpected. Turkmenistan has an economic potential that has yet to be tapped, which in its turn requires large-scale investment, the choice of convenient export and import routes, and so on. It is no secret that behind any large investment, especially in building large oil and gas pipelines, lie the political interests of particular countries or groups of countries.

III. The Taliban connection

When it became independent, Turkmenistan placed its bets on the export of raw materials by building new oil and gas pipelines, roads and railways. Several alternative routes for the transport of raw materials and the export of natural gas were developed, the country's leadership favouring the idea of a gas pipeline to Pakistan via Afghanistan.[5]

Geographic factors, low costs and good market prospects do indeed make the Afghan route for the transport of natural gas an attractive option. The only shortcoming of this route is its political inexpediency in the light of the sanctions imposed on Afghanistan by the world community and the lack of security guarantees for the construction and subsequent operation of the pipeline. The attractions of the route rather misled the Turkmen political leadership, not only resulting in deviation from the proclaimed political neutrality but also disturbing the emerging regional security system in Central Asia.

The idea of using the Afghan route to carry Turkmen raw materials to Pakistan and further on to world markets was born in May 1992, in the course of business consultations between President Niyazov and Pakistani Prime Minister

[2] The ECO was established in 1985. The current members are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

[3] UN General Assembly Resolution no. 50/80, 12 December 1995.

[4] See also chapter 5, section IV in this volume.

[5] See also chapter 13 in this volume.

Nawaz Sharif at a working meeting of ECO heads of state in Ashkhabad. The outcome of the meeting was an agreement to build a gas pipeline and a highway connecting the two countries, via Afghan territory. Subsequently, similar meetings were held on 6–7 February 1993 in Quetta and on 28 November 1993 in Islamabad.

In April 1994, in the course of a visit to Ashkhabad by a delegation of the Pakistani Air Force led by Vice-Marshal Farug Usman Haider, a bilateral agreement on military cooperation between the two countries was signed. Under the agreement Pakistan is to help organize an Air Force Academy in Turkmenistan and to train military specialists for Turkmenistan's armed forces at its military training establishments.[6] In March 1995 in Islamabad Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and Turkmen President Niyazov signed a memorandum on building a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and on reopening a road between the town of Haman in Pakistan and the town of Turgundi on the Afghan–Turkmen border.

Such intensive meetings and the resulting accords showed the two sides' determination to achieve their objectives.

All the agreements reached between Turkmenistan and Pakistan relied on the use of Afghan territory to promote bilateral cooperation. However, representatives of Afghanistan itself were not parties to these accords. Moreover, on 5 March 1995, the then President of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani, speaking on Kabul Radio, sharply criticized the agreements that had been reached between Pakistan and Turkmenistan and the intentions behind them. In particular, he described these plans as 'attempts by the Pakistani leadership to help the opposition Taliban movement'.[7]

Practical implementation of the Pakistani–Turkmen accords began in the autumn of 1994, when cargo convoys started shuttling between Turkmenistan and Pakistan across Afghan territory and preparations got under way to set up an international consortium on a gas pipeline construction project. It is noteworthy that the emergence of the Taliban movement on the Afghan military–political scene was directly related to an active phase in this Pakistani–Turkmen cooperation. In the late autumn of 1994 a group of Afghan Mujahideen seized a caravan moving from Pakistan to Turkmenistan. To secure its release, the Pakistani Interior Ministry tapped a small and little-known religious sect, led by Mullah Muhammad Omar, based in the south of Afghanistan. Before long that sect had evolved into the Taliban movement, which subsequently began its triumphant march across Afghan territory, turning round the entire military–political situation in the country.[8]

The Turkmen leadership immediately established contacts with the leadership of the Taliban, an obscure movement at the time—in fact, Pakistan and Turk-

[6] During President Niyazov's official visit to Pakistan in Aug. 1995 this accord evolved into an official bilateral agreement on military cooperation between Turkmenistan and Pakistan. Hussein, R., 'Pakistan and Central Asia', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Luleå), no. 7 (1997), pp. 72–73.

[7] Open Media Research Institute (OMRI), *OMRI Daily Digest*, 7 Mar. 1995.

[8] For further detail see Dubnov, A., 'Stolknoveniye tsivilizatsii? Net, interesov' [A clash of civilizations? No, of interests], *Tsentral'naya Aziya i Kavkaz* (Luleå), no. 7 (1997), pp. 73–75.

menistan were the Taliban's only foreign partners at the time the movement was formed. In the winter of 1994, after advance groups of Taliban appeared on a section of the Afghan–Turkmen border, a railway link was opened from Kushka in Turkmenistan to Turgundi in Afghanistan with intensive trade exchange. It is still not known what sort of cargo the freight trains were carrying at the time, but Turkmen officials maintained that the Turkmen side was 'providing humanitarian assistance to the fraternal Afghan people'.[9] At the time the population of Turkmenistan itself was in acute need of economic, including humanitarian, assistance. The country was going through an unprecedented crisis. There are therefore serious doubts about the humanitarian character of the shipments.

Prior to September 1996, when Taliban units began rapidly to take control of the eastern provinces of Afghanistan and then the capital, Kabul, few paid attention to developments there or to the role of Turkmenistan's political leadership in Afghanistan's internal affairs. It was not until the Taliban seized Kabul and the forces of Ahmad Shah Massoud and General Abdul Rashid Dostum had to retreat to the north of the country that the leaders of the Central Asian states began to take steps to strengthen and consolidate the regional security system.

On 4 October 1996 an emergency consultative meeting of the Central Asian and Russian heads of state was held in Almaty to consider the situation in the region following the seizure of Kabul by the Taliban. Taking part were the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and the Russian Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin. President Niyazov ignored an invitation from the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and did not take part in the meeting, citing his country's neutral status. The meeting adopted a joint statement expressing concern at the ongoing events in Afghanistan. It was stated that any actions that undermined stability on the borders between Afghanistan and any of the CIS states would be dealt with accordingly. The CIS Collective Security Council was directed to set up an ad hoc group to study the situation and prepare proposals on measures to stabilize the situation near the border with Afghanistan, and the CIS Council of Defence Ministers was instructed to work out proposals to ensure the security of the CIS southern borders. In addition, participants in the Almaty meeting recommended the UN Security Council to hold an emergency session on the Afghan problem.

Commenting on the results of the Almaty meeting and explaining the reason for his non-participation, Niyazov said: 'Being a neutral state, Turkmenistan does not intend to take part in such meetings. All that is happening in Afghanistan is the internal affair of the Afghan people while we do not see the Taliban movement as a threat to our security. For more than a year now, a part of the Turkmen–Afghan border has been controlled by representatives of this movement and this section of the border is by far the quietest today'.[10]

[9] *Turkmenskaya Iskra*, 25 Nov. 1994.
[10] From Niyazov's statement on Turkmenistan television, 6 Oct. 1996.

While President Niyazov's position on the matter is open to interpretation, it could hardly be attributed to the country's neutral status. The meeting was of a consultative character, devoted to a problem affecting the interests of all states in the region not only in the military but also in the humanitarian sphere. Further Taliban advances to the north of Afghanistan, populated by ethnic minorities related to ethnic groups living in Central Asia countries, could have led to mass migration to bordering countries, including Turkmenistan. Discussion of those matters and the elaboration of measures to avert a humanitarian catastrophe not only would not conflict, but would in fact be in conformity, with Turkmenistan's declared neutrality.

Soon after the Taliban increased their presence in the north of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan was indeed confronted with such problems, although the leadership tried hard to hide the fact. In the summer of 1997, ethnic cleansing began in two villages on Afghan territory, populated by Taliban 'friendly to Turkmenistan'. As a result, on 20 June about 1500 refugees crossed the border into Turkmenistan, and in the subsequent week the number increased to 8000.[11] Turkmenistan refused to accept these refugees, using its border guards to push them back into Afghanistan.

The facts also belie statements by Turkmen officials concerning 'stability on its borders following the advent of the Taliban'. In 1995, there were more than 50 armed clashes on the Afghan–Turkmen border, 1800 Afghan citizens were detained as a result and about 2 tonnes of drugs were seized.[12]

The situation did not change even after the Afghan–Turkmen border on the Afghan side came under the control of Taliban units: in fact it became even worse, aggravated by the fact that drug trafficking across the border was on the rise. For example, in 1996 more than 14 tonnes of drugs were confiscated from smugglers, and in 1997 approximately 42 tonnes. In 1999 alone, 50 tonnes of hashish, 2.3 tonnes of heroin and 7.7 tonnes of opium were confiscated and destroyed. Taking into account that according to the statistics of the UN STOP Program only 10 per cent of the total volume of 'commodities' shipped is usually detained, it is not difficult to imagine the real situation. According to Western experts, Turkmenistan was turning into one of the main transit routes for transporting drugs from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the CIS counties and via Russia to Europe. Some of the 'poison' also remained in Turkmenistan, aggravating the drug situation in the country.[13]

In the light of this, Niyazov's refusal to take part in the Almaty meeting could have been due to an entirely different reason. In this context, few would disagree with the following comment: 'The fact that the Taliban movement controls the southern part of Afghanistan could be advantageous for Turkmenistan. It could finally enable President Niyazov to see his dream come true: build an oil and gas pipeline to Pakistan and India for Turkmenistan to export its mineral

[11] NEGA (Moscow), citing sources in Abu Dhabi, 27 June 1997.

[12] Interfax, 23 Nov. 1995, citing the press service of the Russian border forces in Turkmenistan.

[13] Komissina, I. and Kurtov, A., 'Narcotic "glow" over Central Asia—a new threat to civilization', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Luleå), no. 5 (2000), p. 122.

resources'.[14] On 7 October 1996, two days after the Almaty meeting, Iglal Haider Zaidi, a special envoy of the Pakistani Prime Minister, met President Niyazov. After the meeting the sides noted that 'the views of Turkmenistan and Pakistan on the situation in Afghanistan fully coincide'.[15]

The subsequent course of events showed exactly why Pakistan and Turkmenistan were so interested in the Taliban expanding their presence on Afghan territory. On 27 October 1997 President Niyazov signed a protocol with the head of the US oil company Unocal granting the latter exclusive rights to set up a consortium to build a Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan oil pipeline. Tellingly, when commenting on the security of the Afghan section of the gas pipeline, President Niyazov said: 'There is no reason to worry. We have reached accords with representatives of all groups based along the route of the future gas pipeline'.[16] All the Afghan territory through which the pipeline was to pass (via the towns of Turgundi, Great, Kandahar and Spin Buldak to the Pakistani town of Quetta) was at the time already controlled by the Taliban.

A year later, Unocal suspended its participation in the project. It made that decision following growing hostilities between Taliban and the opposition Northern Alliance forces and in the context of a serious aggravation of relations between the Taliban and the USA following US missile strikes on terrorist training bases in Afghanistan.[17] In addition to Unocal, Russia's Gazprom stated that it would not be involved in the project.

The withdrawal of the main participants in the project did not in any way affect Turkmenistan's plans. Commenting on Unocal's decision, President Niyazov observed that his country would not seek to hold anyone against their will, would continue to look for partners and believed that the project would in the end be successfully implemented. Significantly, he chose not to mention the reason for Unocal's refusal—the presence of international terrorist training camps on Afghan territory.

The Taliban leadership came out with a similar statement. Speaking at a news conference in Kabul, Amir Han Muttaki, Taliban Information Minister, said that 'several other large foreign companies were interested to get a contract to build the gas pipeline while all countries concerned—Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Pakistan—will likely make their final choice in the foreseeable future'.[18]

Subsequently, Turkmenistan stepped up its diplomatic efforts to expedite the project and to ensure its security. In late February 1999, Boris Shikhmuradov, Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan, visited Kandahar where he met Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban spiritual leader, to discuss only one problem—starting construction of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan gas pipeline. On 29 April of the same year, energy ministers from the three countries met in

[14] Interview with Shirin Akiner of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, BBC Russian Service, 6 Oct. 1996.
[15] Interfax, 7 Oct. 1996.
[16] ANI, 30 Oct. 1997.
[17] ITAR-TASS, 2 Sep. 1998.
[18] RIA-Novosti, 20 Sep. 1998.

Islamabad and adopted a joint declaration reaffirming their intention to take part in preparation and implementation of the gas pipeline project. They also agreed to hold government-level negotiations every three months on setting up a joint working group of senior officials to maintain regular contacts between the sides.[19] On 10–12 May 1999, Abdur Rahmad Zahid, Deputy Foreign Minister in the Taliban administration, visited Ashkhabad. During the course of the meeting, the Taliban administration signed official economic agreements—for the first time since it emerged on the political scene—with a foreign state, and that state was Turkmenistan. Accords were also reached on opening an air corridor to flights by an Afghan airline to Turkmenistan, shipments of natural gas to Afghanistan and participation by Turkmen specialists in rebuilding two electric power stations in Afghanistan.[20]

In November 1999, a Turkmen military delegation, led by Deputy Prime Minister Sardzhayev, made a five-day visit to Pakistan. The main objectives of the visit were to discuss the security of a future gas pipeline from Pakistan to Turkmenistan and to expand military cooperation between them. The delegation was received by General Pervez Musharraf, head of Pakistan's military/civilian administration, and by its air force and navy chiefs of staff.[21]

It is noteworthy that this diplomatic activity on the part of Pakistan and Turkmenistan, aimed at using Afghan territory for commercial purposes, basically coincided with the military and terrorist activity of the Taliban movement. Before long, Taliban armed groups took control of large cities in northern Afghanistan. The foreign media produced incontrovertible evidence of the Taliban's involvement in acts of terrorism, the operation of international terrorist training bases on Taliban-controlled territory, drug trafficking and so on. Meanwhile, activism by various terrorist groups in Central Asian countries was growing. Those groups were based in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan while their actions were coordinated by the Taliban leadership. Charges of sponsoring international terrorism were made against the Taliban not only by the leaders of Central Asian states, whose statements could often be seen as rather subjective, but also by the world community at large.

In July 1999 the USA imposed economic sanctions against the Taliban movement following its granting of asylum to Usama bin Laden, the 'number one international terrorist'. A written statement by President Bill Clinton released in this connection stressed that the sanctions would deepen the international isolation of the Taliban movement, thus limiting its potential for maintaining a network of terrorist groups, and highlighted the need to observe the generally accepted norms of conduct on the international arena.[22] In October of the same year sanctions against the Taliban were introduced for the same reason—the sponsoring of international terrorism—by the UN Security Council in a special resolution.[23]

[19] ITAR-TASS, 30 Apr. 1999.
[20] ITAR-TASS, 13 May 1999.
[21] ITAR-TASS, 29 Nov. 1999.
[22] ITAR-TASS, 6 July 1999.
[23] UN Security Council Resolution 1267, 15 Oct. 1999.

IV. The reality of Turkmenistan's neutrality

These facts and their dynamics show that Turkmenistan's political leadership to a certain extent remains hostage to its idea of using Afghan territory to create alternative routes for the export of its mineral resources, thus ending up involved in dubious political games. Moreover, the leadership has been acting in defiance of the emerging political situation in the region and ignoring the position of the world community with respect to the Taliban movement.

The country's foreign policy has in fact turned out to be rather remote from the declared policy of neutrality. In reality that 'neutrality' added up to unilateral, one-sided activity aimed at isolating Turkmenistan from the other Central Asian states and at rapprochement with dubious forces pursuing objectives that are far from peaceful. There is no doubt that this policy conflicts with the security interests of other states in Central Asia and carries the risk of a confrontation with them.

It is also important to remember that the Taliban movement is seen by the world community as a sponsor of international terrorism and is a main producer of and trafficker in drugs. At the present stage, when the policy followed by the Turkmen leadership in effect corresponds to Taliban interests, Turkmenistan may be harbouring the illusion that its security will not be jeopardized by a future Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan. Yet can there be any guarantee that this situation will last and that the Taliban will not want to impose their ways in Turkmenistan? Given Turkmenistan's military and political weakness, it is unlikely that it would be able to safeguard its security under such a scenario. Furthermore, its security has in fact already been violated, as is evidenced by the growing volume of drug trafficking from Afghanistan across Turkmenistan.

Assertions by the Turkmen leadership to the effect that neutral status automatically ensures the country's security since it is guaranteed by the world community appear to be rather misguided. First, the structures that pose a threat to the security of the country and the region as a whole—the drug mafia, religious extremists, international terrorists and so on—have never observed the norms of international law and will never do so. Second, the international community—if by this is meant the West as a whole and NATO in particular—will never get involved in conflicts in this part of the world. Its official representatives have long been making open statements to that effect. S. Neil MacFarlane, for example, does not believe that NATO forces are likely to be used to settle conflicts in the Caspian region. He quotes from an article by Anatol Lieven to back up his assessment: 'If you go to a senior Pentagon official, or the great majority of congressmen, and suggest the deployment of US troops to the Caspian region—to bases or as peacekeepers, let alone in conflict—they look at you as if you had sprouted a very large pair of hairy ears'.[24] Further comment would be superfluous.

[24] Quoted from MacFarlane, S. N. (Professor at the Centre for International Studies, Oxford University), 'What the international community can do to settle the conflict', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Luleå), no. 4 (2000), p. 155.

The character of threats in the world has changed. Whereas in the past the main threat was direct aggression and violation of the territorial integrity of sovereign states, now the main security threats are the various forms and manifestations of terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. The countries of Central Asia are no exception in this respect. The main threat to their security is not Russia's 'imperial ambitions', as is assumed by many politicians in the region itself and beyond. The events of recent years in the region show beyond any doubt that the main threats are religious extremism, the spread of drugs and terrorism. It is also clear that all these negative developments gained ground just as the Taliban movement emerged as a major force on the political arena.

The intrusions of Islamic radicals into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 1999 and 2000, the bomb attacks in Tashkent in February 1999, the penetration by religious fanatics of Uzbekistan's Syr Darya Region in the summer of the same year, the highly explosive situation in Tajikistan and the endless armed skirmishes on the region's southern borders were the direct result of religious extremist activity, coordinated by the Taliban movement and other terrorist organizations standing behind it.

The policy of the Turkmen leadership—whatever the good intentions behind it—was ultimately the main factor in the rise of Taliban activism. No one questions Turkmenistan's sovereign right to follow a policy that it deems fit—one that corresponds to its own national interests. No one is urging it to go to war with Afghanistan—a country with which it has an 840-km border. At the same time, however, the country's political leadership should be aware of its responsibility for the policy it pursues and anticipate its possible negative fallout, also taking into account the interests of other countries in the region.

Turkmenistan should also realize that it is an inalienable part of Central Asia which constitutes a unified geopolitical area. The peoples living on its territory have historically related connections and a common history and culture, and are at the same level of development. Moreover, the countries in the region are faced with the same security threats. In this context it is important to stress that Turkmenistan's withdrawal from the unified geopolitical area in itself jeopardizes regional security.

Turkmenistan should aim to work out, jointly with other countries in Central Asia, a well-defined line of conduct in adjusting conflict situations and protecting its own borders. This does not involve the creation of new military blocs or bloc-related confrontation with its southern neighbours. It is basically a question of the country's civilized choice. It is vital to decide in which direction the people of Turkmenistan will look in the future—towards the related ethnic groups and peoples of Central Asia or towards the Taliban, who are imposing medieval ways across Afghan territory. The course currently taken by the Turkmen leadership under the cover of neutrality provides no guarantee that the first scenario will in fact be chosen. This prospect would hardly be in the interests of the Turkmen people.

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