

SEEKING PEACE WITH FOREIGN POLICY CHOICE: TURKMENISTAN AND PERMANENT NEUTRALITY

All the activities of this strategically located country are given as examples of a firm and consistent adherence to the postulates laid down in the philosophy of neutrality itself, such as non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and active assistance to peace processes.

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In 1991, five Central Asian countries declared independence and seceded from the Soviet Union. Even though all of these states were under more or less similar political and legal conditions back then, 31 years later certain differences are visible among them. For example, Kazakhstan believes that Central Asian countries should develop cooperation with other countries, and in this context, it seeks to be the leading power in the region.¹ In January 2018, the United Nations chose the country as the Security Council chairman. With this new responsibility Kazakhstan got a chance to bring the issues related to the Central Asian countries to the agenda of the United Nations. Uzbekistan pursues a similar policy. The country, after President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's coming to power in 2016, has been increasing its interaction with neighboring countries, especially the ones in Central Asia.² When we look at Tajikistan's foreign policy it seems that this country wants to enter into good relations both with the European countries and its Central Asian neighbors.³ Finally, Kyrgyzstan opts for good economic and social relations with the West, in addition to Russia and other Central Asian countries.⁴

In this framework, Turkmenistan is a marked exception with its policy of permanent neutrality. As is sometimes suggested, Turkmenistan has remained the most isolated country in the region for the last three decades due to its foreign policy. Turkmenistan's neutral status has played an important role in establishing cooperation with many states in the political, economic, humanitarian and

other spheres, and in implementing a multilateral foreign policy strategy. All the activities of this strategically located country are given as examples of a firm and consistent adherence to the postulates laid down in the philosophy of neutrality itself, such as non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and active assistance to peace processes.⁵

Turkmenistan's neutral status continues to be a focus of interest. For example, on March 5, 2015, the Embassy of Turkmenistan in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan together with the Institute for Peace Studies and the Pakistani Society of Civilizations, held the international scientific and practical conference entitled "Policy of Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan." At the beginning of the conference, the keynote speech was delivered by Sapar Berdiniyazov, the Ambassador for Special Assignments of the Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan. In his speech, he described in detail the basic principles of Turkmenistan's neutrality, and the implementation of major international projects aimed at strengthening peace, cooperation, and stability in the region.⁶ During the academic session, Muhammed Murat Aydogdyev, the rector of the International University for the Humanities and Development of Turkmenistan spoke about the international aspects of Turkmenistan's neutrality, which contributed to the strengthening of country's image and power in the international arena.⁷ As such, the permanent neutrality status of Turkmenistan was portrayed as an important milestone not only for Turkmenistan but also for the entire world.



The Neutrality Monument (Bitaraplyk Binasy) is a monument located in Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan. The monument was built in 1998 by the command of the first President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov Turkmenbashi, to commemorate the country's official neutrality.

<https://business.com.tm/tm/post/7974/turkmenistan-hemishelik-bitaraplygynyn-26-yylygyny-belledi>

Turkmenistan's Policy of Neutrality

As of 2022, the country celebrates the 27th anniversary of neutrality. On December 12, 1995 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the resolution on “Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan” at its 50th Anniversary Session.⁸ The most important reason for giving this status to Turkmenistan by the United Nations (UN) was the desire to provide peace in this region which had a strategic geopolitical location.⁹ It was also important for the UN that this newly independent country, which is rich in natural resources, should have such a status to be able to take its place on national and international platforms without any outside intervention.¹⁰ The neutral status of Turkmenistan enabled the country to find an effective way to realize its national interests as an independent subject of the international community. The

model of Turkmen neutrality has also been an important factor in ensuring regional stability.

The policy of neutrality, in many respects, influenced the post-Soviet development of Turkmenistan. This unique international legal status has become the foundation not only of the successful implementation of large-scale transformational state programs and socioeconomic reforms, but also of the strengthening of world peace and security, as well as the expansion of cooperation with several countries and reputable international organizations.¹¹ Thus, neutrality, which played a significant role in establishing a widespread and fruitful cooperation in the political, economic, cultural, scientific, educational and other spheres, was recognized not only as being of great national value but also as an indisputable asset to all regional countries.

Other Examples and the Uniqueness of Turkmenistan

Some countries in the world, such as Austria, Finland, Switzerland and Malta have the status of neutrality. But Turkmen neutrality is unique from several perspectives. Firstly, the state declared its neutrality status at the international level in the first years of its independence. Secondly, the first time in the history of the United Nations (UN), this status was delegated by a special UN Resolution ("Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan" adopted on December 12, 1995.) Thirdly, the fundamental principles of neutrality were set forth in the special constitutional law on the permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan.¹² However, the recognition of the status of neutrality for Turkmenistan has not been immediate and easy. In order to achieve this status, Turkmenistan had to engage in a serious effort both domestically and internationally.

Undoubtedly, on October 27, 1991, the adoption of the constitution of independent Turkmenistan and the establishment of the new state by the Turkmen parliament was the first phase of adopting the neutrality status, and as stated in the first section of this constitution, Turkmenistan was "independent" in its foreign policy, that is, it would determine this policy without outside intervention.¹³ In May 1992, at the meeting of the heads of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Turkmenistan did not sign the joint defense treaty as it was found to be contrary to the foreign policy understanding specified in its constitution. This attitude could be seen as a sign and that the country was moving towards neutrality as early as 1992.¹⁴

In the early years of independence Turkmenistan's foreign policy priorities were addressed under three main headings. The first one was about the cautious efforts to open up to the world. The second one was security concerns. The last one was establishing good relations with neighbors. The most prominent features of Turkmenistan's foreign policy were shaped by Saparmurad Niyazov, the first president of the republic.¹⁵ He was famed with his cautious attitude towards both multilateral or regional initiatives. One of the main reasons for this restraint was the fear of being swallowed as a small state with abundance of natural resources.¹⁶ Niyazov also perceived neutrality as a way to establish a stable political system which would provide the opportunity to create an economically developed and independent Turkmenistan. All these concerns eventually resulted in the foreign policy choice of permanent neutrality.

On December 12, 1995, the year in which the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the UN was celebrated, Niyazov underlined the following reason for the

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application of his country for having the status of permanent neutrality as follows:

This step of ours will contribute greatly to peace in Turkmenistan and the region. This issue is very important to us. Because Turkmenistan is located in one of the most important regions of the world where natural resources are the richest. This inevitably necessitates the policy of permanent neutrality from our point of view. Turkmenistan is at a geographically important and critical location ... and being aware of its geographical importance, has agreed to act accordingly in the international arena. For this reason, Turkmenistan has tried to pursue an impartial foreign policy. After this, Turkmenistan wants to carry out its foreign and domestic policy as a permanent neutral country. In this regard, we request the approval of both the president and the member states of UN.¹⁷

The justifications given by the President were seen by the UN as logical and Turkmenistan's request was approved without any opposition. From the perspective of the UN, the reasons for the approval are not much different than the reasons of Niyazov. It was one of the missions of the UN to ensure the integration of fifteen newly independent countries into the existing world order. Possible conflicts in the regions that these new countries located, as well as within these countries could turn into unpredictable problems. Furthermore, being a country with critical natural resources in a geographically strategic location, Turkmenistan's request seemed sound.¹⁸ According to the UN, there had to be a neutral state in the region that would create a peaceful atmosphere and at times be a buffer zone. After the approval of the UN on Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality status, the country passed "The Constitutional Law on Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan" in an attempt to integrate this status within its own constitutional framework.¹⁹

The Early Signals of Policy Choice

It is possible to argue that even before independence, Niyazov actually gave the signals that he had this policy in his mind and he tried to achieve it with setting various

targets. According to Niyazov, with the permanent neutrality policy, Turkmenistan would be able to independently resolve all matters related to internal and external security issues. Furthermore, its territory would be free from radiological, chemical, biological weapons and other types of weapons of mass destruction.

It was clear that Niyazov wanted to stay away from all wars outside the borders of his country. However, he also believed that in the case of a possible attack, the country should be able to protect itself for defense purposes only. Therefore, as stated in Article 13 of the Constitution of 2008, which is the amended version of the 1992 Constitution, the army of Turkmenistan would only be used to protect the sovereignty of the country in case of an outside attack.²⁰

Such ideas were also emphasized among the principles declared in the Military Doctrine of Turkmenistan (adopted right after independence) according to which the country would not enter into any collective military alliances and possess military forces within its own borders.²¹ Similarly, the Law on Turkmenistan's Defense, adopted on October 1, 1993, stipulated that Turkmenistan would adopt internationally accepted rules regarding its defense. The law also stated that the country would be bounded by international agreements and treaties regarding collective defense as well as military and technical assistance with other states.²² This law was an indication that Turkmenistan would not on its own enter into any military alliance that would jeopardize its future foreign policy goal of permanent neutrality.

As a direct reflection of permanent neutrality policy, Niyazov was careful in choosing the institutions and organizations that his country would become a member. For example, Turkmenistan did not sign the Collective Security Treaty, adopted at the Tashkent Summit of the Council of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Heads of State on May 15, 1992.²³ Similarly, Turkmenistan did not sign the Treaty of Military Observers and Common Peacekeeping Agreement in the CIS,²⁴ which was adopted at the meeting of the Council of Presidents held in Kiev on March 20, 1992, as well as the Treaty of the Protection of the Outside Borders of the Member States adopted by the Council of Presidents on May 26, 1995.²⁵

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It must however be pointed out that Niyazov did not see permanent neutrality important only as a foreign policy goal for independent Turkmenistan. He also believed that this policy would have a positive impact on the domestic developments of the country. According to him, certain domestic problems that may potentially threaten stability such as unemployment, tribalism and regionalism may be more effectively dealt with a neutral status.²⁶ His main domestic goals of providing national unity (Ağzybirlik) and economic wealth and prosperity (Abadançylyk) for the purposes of integrating with world economy²⁷ could be more easily achieved with this policy.

In line with such an attitude, Turkmenistan became member in organizations that had only economic goals. For example, the country joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation (ECO) in February 1992 in the Tehran Summit. In addition to ECO, it became a UN member on March 2, 1992, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) member on August 17, 1993, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) member in 1995, and World Health Organization (WHO) member in November 1995.¹⁴⁹ All the institutions and organizations that Turkmenistan was a member in this period were passed through the filter of neutrality policy, a choice made by Niyazov in early 1990s.²⁸

Berdimammedov's Way: Opening the Door Further

When Niyazov died of a sudden cardiac arrest on December 21, 2006, Gurbanguly Berdimammedov became the acting president of Turkmenistan. Berdimammedov pursued a more relaxed policy in domestic issues as compared to Niyazov, especially in the fields of education and social life.²⁹

In terms of foreign policy, Berdimammedov affirmed his commitment to the policy of permanent neutrality right from the beginning, notwithstanding the predictions that the country would give up this policy which resulted in the isolation of the country.³⁰ The newly accepted constitution of the country (the 2008 Constitution) clearly stated that the foundation of foreign policy of Turkmenistan would be based on the policy of permanent neutrality.³¹

In addition, in 2010, during the 15th anniversary celebrations of the permanent neutrality policy of Turkmenistan, Berdimammedov made a speech under the title of "Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan: Cooperation for Peace, Security and Development." In this speech he stated that:



<https://gadebate.un.org/en/73/turkmenistan>

These days we celebrate a big holiday - the 15th anniversary of the international recognition of the neutrality of Turkmenistan. This is a truly significant date for our people and also an important event in the independent history of the Turkmen state... We chose a model that we called positive neutrality, and formulated its fundamental principles: peacefulness, non-interference in the affairs of other states, respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-participation in international military organizations and treaties. What dictated us such a choice? Of course, first of all, we were guided by national interests. The young Turkmen state wanted to live in peace and harmony with its neighbors, maintain friendly, equal relations with all countries, and develop mutually beneficial economic and trade relations with them. We were convinced that only under such conditions would it be possible to ensure our people peace and tranquility, to fulfill plans for economic and social development.³²

This general foreign policy framework that Berdimuhamedov adopted did not change over the course of the next 10 years. In his presidential inauguration speech on 17 February 2017, Berdimuhamedov presented his 7-Year Foreign Policy Plan 222, which indicated a clear continuity of the permanent neutrality policy of the country.

Yet, as compared to the Niyazov era, in the Berdimuhamedov era, Turkmenistan adopted a more active attitude in terms of developing its ties with international organizations. In this era, the country became more involved in the activities of the UN, the NATO, and the SCO although it continued to remain within the general framework of its neutrality policy. Berdimuhamedov acknowledged the UN to be a leading and supreme organization of international politics. The country hosted some seminars and conferences organized by the UN, such as the one in 2012 held in Ashgabat. This was a seminar, organized by the UN Economic Commission for Europe, entitled Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) Policy and

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Legal Issues for Ministers and Agencies of Turkmenistan.³³

Another example of Turkmenistan's developing relationship with the UN is the speech Berdimuhammedov made at the regular UN meeting in New York in 2015. In this speech, Berdimuhammedov explained the reasons why he considered the UN an important and successful organization in global politics. Berdimuhammedov expressed his gratitude especially to the president of the organization because according to him the UN realized positive achievements in the international arena, sometimes under difficult conditions. Berdimuhammedov also stated that:

Turkmenistan has applied the knowledge and guidance of the UN in everything it did and in all decisions, it took since the day it has become independent. Cooperation with the UN will successfully be continued, and new areas of collaboration will be developed.³⁴

When he was making his speech about the 7-Year Foreign Policy Plan, Berdimuhammedov drew attention to his determination to continue this collaboration. Making a reference to the first article of the plan, he stated that Turkmenistan would give priority to the UN in its foreign policy. He mentioned that neutral Turkmenistan would always accept the UN as a guiding organization and that the recognition of Turkmenistan's neutrality policy by the international community made his country very proud,

although bringing in many responsibilities. Berdimuhammedov also mentioned about the second article in which it is stated that Turkmenistan would act together with the UN in those issues that will negatively affect the region, such as environmental problems and epidemic diseases.³⁵

The opening of the UN House in Ashgabat in 2016 is another important indicator of the increasing interaction between the UN and Turkmenistan. During the opening ceremony, Berdimuhammedov gave a speech signaling that the cooperation between UN and Turkmenistan would develop. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who took the floor after Berdimuhammedov, stated that they are very pleased to establish close relations with Turkmenistan and to have opened such a center and stated the following words:

"The new UN House is more than a structure. It is a symbol of our strong partnership. It is a hub where we will work together to realize a better future for this country and for its people. Let us resolve to strengthen this partnership even more as we advance towards achieving a better future for all".³⁶

Conclusion

Although neutrality does not mean isolation in international relations, during the Niyazov era the country de facto remained isolated. Niyazov had preferred limited bilateral relations with selected few countries and stayed totally away from all international alliances and organizations. Berdimuhammedov, contrarily, wanted to put an end to this isolation and took active steps for that purpose. This is basically related to the concern of the new president for the isolation of the country observed in the period between 1991 to 2006. As a result, during the Berdimuhammedov era, we see a much more active, more moderate and more open foreign policy. Despite the differences between these two presidents however, Turkmenistan remained loyal to its neutrality policy and did nothing that was against it. The country presented a very consistent attitude and made efforts to contribute to regional peace and stability.

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