

## Turkmenistan's Afghan border conundrum

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## PART II Bordering Afghanistan: Threats and Opportunities

### Turkmenistan's Afghan Border Conundrum

*Jan Šír and Slavomír Horák*

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the former Soviet republics found themselves in an entirely novel geopolitical setting. One of the necessary steps in affirming their existence as new, independent states was for these post-Soviet republics to face the need of establishing their international borders. This process included both the creation of new international borders between the republics themselves as well as the transformation of their existing Soviet borders with third countries. In Central Asia, this challenge pertained clearly to Turkmenistan, the southernmost republic of the former Soviet Union that inherited the longest section of the southern Soviet borders with Afghanistan and Iran. In this chapter we focus on Afghanistan as a reference point in regard to this transformation of the former external Soviet border. We examine Turkmenistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan after 1991 and argue that the shaping of relations between the two neighboring countries is a specific case of building transborder ties, the evolution of which derives from the distinct path of Turkmenistan's foreign policy. Our analysis reveals the inner tensions inherent to the making of foreign policy in Turkmenistan, specifically the tensions that arise between the quest for alternative export markets for its most valued, and largely only, assets in energy and the imperative to preserve the newly established regime despite its perception as being largely incompatible with the open and geopolitically exposed international environment in which it is to function.

The chapter begins with an overview of the delineation and constitution of the border between Afghanistan and what traditionally used to be the Turkmen-inhabited tribal areas of Central Asia. The time span of our examination of the historical background extends from the late nineteenth century and the Soviet decades to Turkmenistan's independence. Following this, the chapter continues with four sections that each deal with one area of interaction between the two neighboring states. The first provides an overview of political relations after 1991 and outlines Turkmenistan's

foreign policy towards Afghanistan with a rough periodization up to the present. Next, we focus on trade and economic affairs where major infrastructure projects play an ever-growing role. There follows a discussion of the still rather infrequent people-to-people contacts between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan as seen from the point of view of the regime in Ashgabat. Finally, Turkmenistan's changing border security will be assessed through an analysis of the latest radical Islamist insurgency arising from Afghanistan and the subsequent border clashes that have taken place. We note here that regional affairs will not be in the center of our discussion. Nevertheless, we occasionally digress into the geopolitics of Central Asia so as to highlight the way in which, as we argue, Afghanistan matters most to Turkmenistan, that is, as a possible bridge linking it to its prospective export markets farther to the south.

## Historical Background

Historically, the Turkmen-Afghan border, and the very notion thereof as a border, occurred no earlier than the late nineteenth century, and it came about as a result of the delineation of spheres of influence within Central Asia between the Russian and British Empires. Until that time, Turkmen pastoral areas were under the reign of local tribal authorities, which were subject to constant interference from the rulers of Bukhara, Khiva and Persia. The advance of Tsarist Russia into the region was dictated by both commercial and military strategic interests. The eventual conquest of the Turkmen lands by the Russian army opened up the prospect of consolidating Russia's grip over the vast territories ranging from China to the Caspian Sea. In this sense, the Turkmen-Afghan borderlands became the setting for the final stage of the "Great Game" rivalries between Russia and Britain.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Evgenii Sergeev, *Bol'shaia igra, 1856–1907. Mify i realii rossiisko-britanskikh otnoshenii v Tsentral'noi i Vostochnoi Azii* (Moscow: KMK, 2012), 184. For Russia's conquest of Turkmenistan, see A. Karryev and A. Rosliakov, *Kratkii ocherk istorii Turkmenistana (ot prisoedineniia k Rossii do Velikoi Oktiabr'skoi sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii, 1868–1917 gg.)* (Ashgabat: Turkmengosizdat, 1956); and M. Tikhomirov, *Prisoedinenie Merva k Rossii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vostochnoi istorii, 1960). For recent interpretations of Russia's advance into Central Asia, see Alexander Morrison, "'Nechto eroticheskoe,' 'courir après l'ombre'?—logistical imperatives and the fall of Tashkent, 1859–1865," *Central Asian Survey* 33, no. 2 (2014): 153–69. For a readable account of the Great Game,

The Turkmen-Afghan borderlands once again became unstable following the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, when the Russian civil war hit Central Asia. A local resistance movement, the *basmachi*, emerged and found footholds in the north of Afghanistan in order to rise up against the new Soviet regime from there.<sup>2</sup> Large groups of Turkmens subsequently left for Afghanistan in several waves. The proclamation of the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic in 1920, in effect, pushed out some 40,000–50,000 Turkmens, particularly from the regions of Charjew (today's Turkmenabat) and Kerki (or Atamurat).<sup>3</sup> Another 100,000 moved south from the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic following the water and agrarian reforms and the anti-religious campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Stalin's collectivization of agriculture caused some additional 50,000 Turkmens to flee to Afghanistan and Iran.<sup>5</sup> Migration continued for some years despite the closing of the border in 1932 and the often dire conditions of life on the Afghan side of the border. As a result, substantial parts of the north and north-west of Afghanistan were settled by ethnic Turkmens, and the local economy was enriched by, for instance, the famous *qaraqul* sheep industry.<sup>6</sup>

For most of the Soviet period the border between Soviet Turkmenia and Afghanistan remained closed, both in the administrative and in the physical senses. Border fortifications and barriers were erected alongside the delineation line by the Soviets, thereby making transborder flows

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see the classic by Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (London: John Murray, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> On Soviet-Afghan relations after the Bolshevik revolution, see Petr Novák, "Počátky sovětské politiky vůči Afghánistánu v období let 1917 až 1919," *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Studia Territorialia* 14, no. 1–2 (2014): 11–47. For the Basmachi uprising, see Martha Brill Olcott, "The Basmachi or Freeman's Revolt in Turkestan 1918–24," *Soviet Studies* 33, no. 3 (1981): 352–69; and A. I. Plyev, *Basmachestvo v Srednei Azii: etnopoliticheskii srez (vzgliad iz XXI veka)* (Bishkek: Kyrgyzsko-Rossiiskii Slavianskii Universitet, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Shaw, "Friendship under lock and key: the Soviet Central Asian border, 1918–34," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 3–4 (2011): 338.

<sup>4</sup> Audrey C. Shalinsky, "Islam and Ethnicity: The Northern Afghanistan Perspective," *Central Asian Survey* 1, no. 2–3 (1982): 74–75.

<sup>5</sup> Shokhrat Kadyrov, *Tainy turkmenskoi demografii* (Moscow: Institut vostokovedeniia RAN, 2010), 94–95; and Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 213–20. For the migration processes in the context of political developments in Turkmenistan under the Soviets, see also Rakhim Esenov, *Dukhovnaia oppozitsiia v Turkmenistane 1917–1935* (Moscow: s.n., 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Viktor Korgun, *Istoriia Afganistana: XX vek* (Moscow: Kraft+, Institut vostokovedeniia RAN, 2004), 102.

increasingly more difficult. Due to the fact that the attitudes of the Afghan Turkmens, and in particular of their tribal elites, were far from sympathetic to the Soviet regime, there was little reason for them to maintain close ties with their brethren on the opposite side of the border. Afghan Turkmens were also recruited in large numbers to work for German or Japanese intelligence services before World War II as they hoped for the defeat of the Soviet Union and for a return to their homelands.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan's industrialization between the 1950s and 1970s, transborder contacts intensified again only with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan after 1979. The border crossing in Gushgy (today's Serhetabat, meaning "border town" in Turkmen) became one of the two key entry points for invading Soviet troops and the supplies entering Afghanistan. Moreover, the Turkmens, just as Uzbeks and Tajiks, were contracted in high numbers by the Soviet army, since they could serve as interpreters and possessed knowledge of local social conditions. Due to the increasing number of Turkmens switching sides and joining the Afghan anti-Soviet resistance, however, this practice was soon abandoned.<sup>8</sup>

The relationship of the Afghan Turkmen diaspora to their northern brethren, and to the Soviets in general, was characterized by caution. The historical memory transmitted by the descendants of refugees who had fled the Bolshevik regime in the 1920s and 1930s was largely negative in nature.<sup>9</sup> The Soviets were for the most part concerned about the Central Asian diasporas in Afghanistan, especially that of the Turkmens, because the mood for resistance amongst them was considered to be higher than amongst other minorities.<sup>10</sup> Curiously, this resistance among the Turkmens has not been transformed into a strong national movement on either side of the border.

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<sup>7</sup> Iurii Tikhonov, *Afganskaia voina Stalina. Bitva za Tsentral'nuu Aziu* (Moscow: IaUZA, EKSMO, 2008), 410–25.

<sup>8</sup> M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 183.

<sup>9</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Eden Naby, "Uzbeks in Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey* 3, no. 1 (1984): 1–21.

## Overview of Political Relations After 1991

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a watershed for the Turkmenians and their relations with their neighbors. This was not least because, prior to 1991, a state entity corresponding to the territory of today's Turkmenistan had never before existed. Accordingly, the status of the 800-km-long border with Afghanistan has also undergone change. Turkmenistan's foreign policy has been primarily an extension of the state and nation-building processes that have largely remained unfinished to this day. From the very beginning, the main function of its foreign policy has been the legitimization of the new regime and the securing of its survival.<sup>11</sup> In conceptual terms, since 1992 Turkmenistan's foreign policy has been based on the principles of "positive neutrality" which, in practice, quickly degraded to isolationism in international affairs under Turkmenbashi, the "Head of the Turkmenians," as Turkmenistan's first president Saparmurat Niyazov was called; energy exports, however, remained a notable exception. This explains Turkmenistan's specific approach to, and its very selective engagement in, international affairs, which can be exemplified through its relations with neighboring Afghanistan.

Despite some first tentative steps in the time of late perestroika, the process of establishing direct political ties with Afghanistan began only in the post-independence period. Diplomatic relations between both countries were established on February 21, 1992, on the occasion of the visit of Vice-President of the Republic of Afghanistan Abdul Rahim Hatef to Ashgabat. Voicing a readiness by the Najibullah government to open trading points in the ports on the Amu Darya River, the agenda proposed by Kabul focused mostly on procuring specialists from Turkmenistan to achieve the

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<sup>11</sup> For perhaps the most comprehensive account of Turkmenistan's foreign policy, see the book by Luca Anceschi, *Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy: Positive Neutrality and the consolidation of the Turkmen Regime* (New York: Routledge, 2008), who also convincingly made this case. For the best comprehensive works on post-Soviet Turkmenistan, see Sebastien Peyrouse, *Turkmenistan: Strategies of Power, Dilemmas of Development* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2012); and, from Russian language publications, also Sergei M. Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan* (Moscow: Natalis, 2002); and Shokhrat Kadyrov, "Natsiia" plemen. Etnicheskie istoki, transformatsiia, perspektivy gosudarstvennosti v Turkmenistane (Moscow: Tsentr tsivilizatsionnykh i regional'nykh issledovaniia RAN, 2003).

electrification of Afghanistan's north and north-west.<sup>12</sup> In order to facilitate these contacts, Turkmenistan opened consular missions in Mazar-e Sharif and Herat in 1993. The consulates did not cease their operations even during the fiercest period of fighting in the late 1990s and they remained Turkmenistan's main liaison offices in Afghanistan for nearly a decade.<sup>13</sup> However, the continuing fragmentation of the country was a problem in that control over Afghanistan's provinces in the north and north-west by the central government in Kabul, and hence its ability to ensure compliance with its policies, was contingent on its loose authority over local warlords who, in effect, administrated these territories. For this reason, in order to achieve progress Ashgabat was forced to clear any outstanding issues first with General Abdul Rashid Dostum and Mohammed Ismail Khan, the rulers of, respectively, Mazar-e Sharif and Herat.

In March 1996, President of the Islamic State of Afghanistan Burhanuddin Rabbani visited Ashgabat for a meeting with Turkmenbashi to discuss mostly transborder trade.<sup>14</sup> However, this first bilateral summit was to remain the last meaningful contact between Ashgabat and Kabul for a long time, as the north-west of the country around Herat by then had fallen under firm control of the Pashto-dominated Taliban movement, who proceeded to conquer Kabul later that year.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, by 1995 Turkmenistan had achieved the recognition of its declared neutrality by the United Nations<sup>16</sup>—a success it deliberately used as an ideological rationale for keeping its distance from any foreign policy activities that it deemed to compromise its high international status. Thus, for the following years most transborder

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<sup>12</sup> Turkmen Press, "Priem u Prezidenta Turkmenistana," *Turkmenskaia iskra*, February 22, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Postanovlenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana Ob otkrytii Konsul'stva Turkmenistana v Islamskom Gosudarstve Afganistan (g. Mazari-Sharif), *Sobranie aktov Prezidenta Turkmenistana i reshenii Pravitel'stva Turkmenistana*, no. 8, art. 1476 (1993): 46–48; and Postanovlenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana Ob otkrytii Konsul'stva Turkmenistana v Islamskom Gosudarstve Afganistan (g. Gerat), *Sobranie aktov Prezidenta Turkmenistana i reshenii Pravitel'stva Turkmenistana*, no. 11, art. 1647 (1993): 24–25.

<sup>14</sup> Press-kommuniike po itogam vizita v Turkmenistan pravitel'stvennoi delegatsii Islamskogo Gosudarstva Afganistan vo glave s Prezidentom B. Rabbani, *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 8, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> For the Taliban taking over Afghanistan between 1994 and 1999, see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 31–81.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations. General Assembly. A-B: 90th plenary meeting December 12, 1995. Maintenance of international security. A. Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan. A/RES/50/80.

contacts consisted of illicit trade, in particular drug trafficking and possibly also arms smuggling, which increased in volume after the Russian border guards left Turkmenistan's "outer" borders at the end of 1999.<sup>17</sup> In 1999 and 2000, three rounds of unsuccessful peace talks were held, with great propaganda fanfare, between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance in Ashgabat under the auspices of the UN.<sup>18</sup> After these talks ultimately failed in late 2000, the UN Security Council imposed a nearly total embargo against the Taliban-ruled Islamic Emirate, thereby leaving Turkmenistan with little space for cultivating relations with its neighbor.<sup>19</sup>

The September 11 attacks and Operation Enduring Freedom provided the isolationist Turkmenbashi regime with both opportunities and challenges. Having only hesitantly joined the U.S.-led coalition in its War on Terror, in early 2002 Turkmenistan declined an official request from Berlin to establish a military base on its territory in order to support the German Bundeswehr in its operations in north Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless it made available air and land corridors for the delivery of international humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and received a further incentive to enhance its diplomatic profile

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<sup>17</sup> "Turkmenistan: vlasti stroiat 'zheleznyi zanaves' po retseptam stalinskoi diktatury," *Pravozashchitnyi tsentr Memorial*, July 31, 2001, <http://www.memo.ru/d/183.html>. See also Rustem Safronov, "Turkmenistan's Niyazov Implicated in Drug Smuggling," *Eurasia Insight*, March 28, 2002, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav032902.shtml>. For an overview of the drug trade in the post-Soviet region and the Afghanistan connection, see Uwe Halbach, "Drogenströme durch den GUS-Raum. Symptom und Ursache von Unstabilität," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, November 2004, 22–24, [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2004\\_S47\\_hlb\\_ks.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2004_S47_hlb_ks.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Turkmen Press, "V poiskakh mira i soglasiia v Afganistane. Priem u Prezidenta Turkmenistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 12, 1999; Turkmen Press, "Uspekh ashkhabadskikh peregovorov. Afganskije storony v pervye dogovorilis' po kluchevym voprosam," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 15, 1999; and Türkmen döwlethabarlary—TDH, "V stolitse neutral'nogo Turkmenistana posle dolgogo pereryva sostoialsia ocherednoi mezhafganskii dialog," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 12, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations. Resolution 1333 (2000). Adopted by the Security Council at its 4251st meeting, on December 19, 2000. S/RES/1333 (2000). For Turkmenistan's highly critical stance towards the international sanction regime against the Taliban, see, for instance, Turkmenbashi's speech to the diplomatic corps accredited in Ashgabat from early 2001, published as "My zhelaem mira i blagopoluchiiia dlia vsekh. Vystuplenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana na vstreche s inostrannymi diplomatami (15 fevralia 2001 goda)," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 5, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> TDH, "Prezident Turkmenistana prinial Chrezvychainogo i Polnomochnogo Posla Germanii," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 8, 2002.



there by opening an embassy in Kabul.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, the increased international attention directed at Turkmenistan as an emerging transit hub gave Ashgabat an additional boost in its ambitious development plans, particularly in regard to the expansion of its transport infrastructure. Such infrastructure would become important to Turkmenistan once the foreign policy priorities of the Ashgabat government evolved at a later point in time.<sup>22</sup>

This finally happened under Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, who came to power in late 2006 following Turkmenbashi's unexpected death in office. From the very beginning the new Turkmen leader set an energetic foreign policy agenda. Gradually, and still in a selective and careful manner, isolationism began to be replaced by a diversification of external relations, particularly in the context of the gas industry where Turkmenistan achieved significant progress by opening new export routes to China and Iran. Obviously, regional cooperation plays a prominent role in these endeavors.<sup>23</sup> From the summer of 2007 onwards, when the first official top-level meeting of Presidents Berdimuhamedow and Karzai took place, relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan produced a series of summits as well as a noticeable activation in all spheres of interaction, from business to people-to-people contacts. At the same time, the two countries' cooperation improved also in select multilateral formats, as their most important joint projects are trans-regional in nature.<sup>24</sup> Curiously, Afghanistan also remains at the center of all major international initiatives set forth by Turkmenistan, for ideological reasons, through the United Nations. Berdimuhamedow's calls at

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<sup>21</sup> Ukaz Prezidenta Turkmenistana Ob otkrytii Posol'stva Turkmenistana v Afganistane (g. Kabul), *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 12, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> For an account of transport infrastructure projects in Turkmenistan by the end of Turkmenbashi's rule, see Firat Yildiz, "Turkmenistan," in *The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2007), 141–66.

<sup>23</sup> For the beginnings of Turkmenistan's foreign policy under Berdimuhamedow, see Slavomír Horák and Jan Šír, *Dismantling Totalitarianism? Turkmenistan under Berdimuhamedow* (Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2009), 44–67. For Turkmenistan's geopolitics of natural gas, see Slavomír Horák, "Turkmenistan's Shifting Energy Geopolitics in 2009–2011. European Perspective," *Problems of Post-Communism* 59, no. 2 (2012): 18–30; and Martha Brill Olcott, "Turkmenistan: Real Energy Giant or Eternal Potential?," *Center for Energy Studies, James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, Rice University*, December 10, 2013, <http://belfercenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/CES-Pub-GeogasTurkmenistan-121013-1.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Aigozel' Aramedova, "Turkmenistan – Islamskaia Respublika Afganistan: ukrepliaia traditsii bratstva i dobrososedstva," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 27, 2011.

the UN General Assembly to host a peace conference in Ashgabat in 2010 on confidence-building measures in Afghanistan are an example of this.<sup>25</sup>

## Trade and Economic Affairs

In Turkmenistan it is politics, rather than business, that is the driving force for reaching out to foreign partners through external relations. Therefore, trade and economic relations after 1991 largely followed the pattern indicated above, with its initial upheavals and setbacks. Foreign relations have depended primarily on the changing perceptions within the regime of its own needs for legitimacy and survival. In mid-1993, Turkmenbashi passed a decree that outlined measures for improving economic cooperation with Afghanistan and a provision of technical assistance to its northern provinces. This act reflected proposals submitted to Ashgabat by two Afghan missions earlier in 1992. The measures that were to be adopted ranged from the construction of electric power facilities in Afghanistan, over prospecting and exploratory drilling for oil and gas, to road reconstruction and upgrading, road resurfacing and the reconstruction of a cement production plant; all of these activities were supposed to take place in the country's north and north-west.<sup>26</sup> In 1995 the first direct telephone landline connection was laid between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan's north-west. Furthermore, a new border crossing between Ymamnazar and Aqinah was opened in early 1996 after some delay, thereby complementing the one that already existed between Gushgy (Serhetabat) and Towrgondi.<sup>27</sup> Aside from a small number of local water irrigation projects, however, the presidential directive did not

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<sup>25</sup> Vystuplenie na 65-i sessii General'noi Assamblei Organizatsii Ob"edinennykh Natsii (N'iu Iork, 20.09.2010 g.), in Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, *K novym vysotam progressa. Izbrannye proizvedeniia*. Vol 4 (Ashgabat: Glavnoe arkhivnoe upravlenie pri Kabinete Ministrov Turkmenistana, Arkhivnyi fond Prezidenta Turkmenistana, 2011), 396–403; *Prioritetnye pozitsii Turkmenistana na 65-i sessii General'noi Assamblei OON*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Secretariat. SEC.DEL/231/10, August 30, 2010. For an official account of this initiative, see Mergen Amanov, "Turkmenistan – Afganistan: s pozitsii neitraliteta i dobrososedstva," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 6, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Rasporiazhenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana, *Turkmenskaia iskra*, August 5, 1993.

<sup>27</sup> Turkmen Press, "Ustanovlena telefonnaia sviaz' s Afganistanom," *Turkmenskaia iskra*, February 3, 1995; and Turkmen Press weekly digest, no. 6 (102), February 5, 1996. A digital file from the authors' personal collection.

produce much activity until the end of the decade, not least due to the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan.

In late 1994 a first truck convoy from Pakistan reached Turkmenistan by way of Taliban-held Kandahar and Herat and returned safely with a shipment of Turkmen cotton, thus pointing to the vast opportunities that could be realized by building an “economic bridge” between Islamabad and Ashgabat.<sup>28</sup> In the 1990s, these multilateral projects were elaborated mostly according to the framework of the Economic Cooperation Organization, in which Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan all have been members. However, the time was not yet ripe for this despite the fact that Turkmenistan exhibited little unease in maintaining relations with the Taliban until their fall in 2001.<sup>29</sup> After the end of the Taliban regime, Hamid Karzai, then Chairman of the Afghan Transitional Administration, made a rare visit to Ashgabat in March 2002 and an important agreement on cooperation in matters of energy was signed, thereby paving the way for supplying north and north-west Afghanistan with electricity on a large scale.<sup>30</sup> Despite this limited progress, bilateral trade stagnated and remained low for most of the Turkmenbashi era.

An intensification in business relations occurred only after Berdimuhamedow took office in 2007 and slowly opened Turkmenistan to the outside world. During the Ashgabat summit in the summer of 2007, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan concluded an agreement on trade and economic cooperation, followed by sectoral agreements on, amongst others, international transit transport. The countries thereby reciprocally granted most-favored-nation status to each other as a first step towards the gradual

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<sup>28</sup> A. Kurbanova, “Po ‘Doroge mira’ otpravlena pervaiia partiia turkmenskogo khlopka,” *Turkmenskaia iskra*, December 10, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> On the Taliban connection, see Murad Esenov, “Vneshniaia politika Turkmenistana i ee vliianie na sistemu regional’noi bezopasnosti,” *Tsentral’naia Aziia i Kavkaz*, no. 1 (13) (2001): 56–63; Sergei Kameney, “Vneshniaia politika Turkmenistana,” *Tsentral’naia Aziia i Kavkaz*, no. 4 (22) (2002): 90–103; and Railia Mukimdzhanova, *Strany Tsentral’noi Azii. Aziatskii vektor vneshnei politiki* (Moscow: Nauchnaia kniga, 2005), 125–34. For a good account of the rule of the Taliban and its fall, see William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002): 218–83.

<sup>30</sup> Sovmestnoe kommiunike po itogam ofitsial’nogo vizita Glavy Vremennoi administratsii Afganistana Khamida Karzaia v Turkmenistan, *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, March 8, 2002. See also TDH, “Turkmenistan – Afganistan: sotrudnichestvo vo imia mira i progressa. Turkmenskie energetiki pristupaiut k stroitel’stvu novykh elektrolinii v Afganistane, stoimost’ kotorykh prevyshaet 520 millionov dollarov SShA,” *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, March 14, 2002.

creation of a standard bilateral trading regime.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, a bilateral commission on trade, economic and technical cooperation was established in 2007, which held four meetings between 2008 and 2013.<sup>32</sup> In the absence of almost any meaningful private business initiatives, this inter-governmental body turned out to be the key instrument for identifying the main areas of future sectoral cooperation in line with the parties' national plans.

At present, trade and economic relations revolve around three strategic areas. First is cooperation in the electricity sector, which became possible due to an apparent stabilization of the security situation in large parts of Afghanistan after 2001. Between 2002 and 2004, Turkmenistan provided for the construction and further upgrading of two high-voltage power transmission lines linking the border settlements of Ymamnazar and Serhetabat, respectively, with Sheberghan and Herat. At the same time, Turkmenistan's power engineer specialists and constructors provided for the establishment of substations and other electric power infrastructure along these lines. This has allowed Turkmenistan to steadily expand supplies of electricity to the territories of Afghanistan's north and north-west, including the region's two most populated cities of Mazar-e Sharif and Herat.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, massive investment projects have been under way in Turkmenistan's domestic power industry since 2011, with the aim of further increasing its power generation capacities and producing electricity for export to the south.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, existing plans to expand the two transmission lines to Kabul and Kandahar and, in a next phase, to link these to Pakistan's power grid remain on paper only.

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<sup>31</sup> Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Turkmenistana i Pravitel'stvom Islamskoi Respubliki Afganistan o torгово-ekonomicheskom sotrudnichestve, *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 6, 2007; and Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Turkmenistana i Pravitel'stvom Islamskoi Respubliki Afganistan o tranzitnykh perevozkakh, *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 6, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Sovmestnoe zaiavlenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana i Prezidenta Islamskoi Respubliki Afganistan, *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 6, 2007; TDH, "Zasedanie mezhpriavitel'svennoi turkmeno-afganskoi komissii," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 12, 2008; and TDH, "Zasedanie Kabinetna Ministrov Turkmenistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 14, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> TDH, "Turkmenistan uvelichivaet eksport elektroenergii v Afganistan," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 6, 2004; and Turkmenistan – Zolotoi vek, "Energiia sotrudnichestva," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 17, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> TDH, "Prezident Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov prinial uchastie v puske gazopererabatyvaiushchego zavoda i elektrostantsii," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 8, 2014. See also Aigozel' Aramedova, "Turkmenistan – Islamskaia Respublika Afganistan: vazhnaia vekha effektivnogo razvitiia partnerstva," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 21, 2012.

A second area of cooperation that has potentially far-reaching consequences for the geopolitics of Central Asia and beyond lies in joint transportation and communications projects. In this respect, Turkmenistan can capitalize on its pivotal geopolitical position and a strong complementarity of interests with the key international players engaged in “reconnecting” Afghanistan through a wide range of transportation and communications networks to the wider Central Asian region.<sup>35</sup> As of writing, the most important infrastructure project in place here is the new joint railway line Atamurat-Yamnazar-Aqinah-Andkhoy, which was launched on the occasion of a trilateral Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan summit in spring 2013.<sup>36</sup>

Third, cooperation in the oil and gas industry is a matter of utmost priority for Ashgabat in the context of its diversification strategy aimed at securing multiple export routes to world markets. These efforts are embodied primarily in the project of a Trans-Afghanistan gas pipeline. Initiated with Pakistan in 1992 and following several unsuccessful attempts at its elaboration in the second half of the 1990s, this major capital investment project of trans-regional significance gained impetus with the trilateral Islamabad summit in May 2002. India eventually joined in 2006.<sup>37</sup> In 2010, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India signed a framework agreement on the gas pipeline, which would carry up to 33 bcm of natural gas annually from Turkmenistan’s richest gas fields in the south-east of the

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<sup>35</sup> For the conceptual underpinnings of the resulting U.S. initiatives of the New Silk Roads, see S. Frederick Starr and Andrew C. Kuchins, “The Key to Success in Afghanistan: A Modern Silk Road Strategy,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper*, May 2010, [http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2010\\_05\\_SRP\\_StarrKuchins\\_Success-Afghanistan.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2010_05_SRP_StarrKuchins_Success-Afghanistan.pdf); and Andrew C. Kuchins, “A Truly Regional Economic Strategy for Afghanistan,” *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 77–91.

<sup>36</sup> TDH, “Turkmenistan, Afganistan i Tadjikistan sviazhets novaia zheleznaia doroga,” *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, March 21, 2013. For the new railway in the context of Turkmenistan’s rail development plans, see also Dovletmurad Orazkuliev, “Masshtabnye plany zheleznodorozhnikov,” *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, February 6, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel’stvom Turkmenistana i Pravitel’stvom Afganistana i Pravitel’stvom Islamskoi Respubliki Pakistan o proektakh gazoprovoda i nefteprovoda Turkmenistan-Afganistan-Pakistan, *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, May 31, 2002; and TDH, “Transafganskii gazoprovod: ot planov k deistviu. Prezident Turkmenistana priinial chlenov Rukovodiashchego komiteta po realizatsii proekta stroitel’sva transafganskogo gazoprovoda,” *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, February 16, 2006. For the beginnings of this pipeline project, see also Evgenii Ogibenin and Pavel Grafov, “Transafganskii proekt: voprosy bol’she, chem otvetov,” *Mirovaia energeticheskaia politika*, no. 5 (2002): 20–24.

country through the territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian border town of Fazilka in Punjab.<sup>38</sup> Upon completion of all commercial contracts between the national oil and gas energy companies in 2013, the four parties proceeded to form the TAPI Pipeline Company, Ltd., which was designed to own, build and operate the pipeline. The Asian Development Bank serves as the transaction adviser in finding a consortium leader.<sup>39</sup>

Economic relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan have seen a steady recovery in recent years. According to official Turkmen sources, trade between these two countries has grown from some \$40 million in 2005 to almost \$1 billion in 2014.<sup>40</sup> Yet, the structure of this exchange is still largely underdeveloped. Trade has mostly consisted of Turkmen exports of electrical power and LNG, agricultural products, textile production, petrochemicals and other primary commodities and goods with low added value, partly as a form of humanitarian aid. Given the structural weaknesses of both national economies as well as the lack of an investment protection and promotion regime, this situation is likely to persist for some time. It must, however, be emphasized that, in the context of Turkmenistan's ambitious development and diversification plans, Afghanistan might not necessarily be considered solely as an actor on its own but rather as a bridge for extending relations with further players in the region, primarily the developing markets of Pakistan and India. In this respect, Afghanistan's role is set to grow yet further.

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<sup>38</sup> TDH, "Dan start novomu energomostu – mostu v budushchee Azii! V Ashkhabade sostoiatsia Sammit Turkmenistan-Afganistan-Pakistan-Indiia," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 12, 2010. For wider ramifications, see Robert Cutler, "Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Gas Pipeline Gets Official Four-Way Go-Ahead," *Central Asia–Caucasus Institute Analyst*, January 19, 2011, <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5479>.

<sup>39</sup> TDH, "TEK Turkmenistana prodolzhaet kurs na mirovuiu integratsiiu," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 17, 2013; and TDH, "Aziatskii bank razvitiia stal Tranzaktsionnym Sovetnikom proekta gazoprovoda TAPI. V Turkmenistane podpisano ocherednoe vazhnoe soglasenie po stroitel'stvu transnatsional'nogo gazoprovoda," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 20, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> TDH, "Turkmenistan – Afganistan: sotrudnichestvo v interesakh mira i sozidaniia. Peregovory mezhdru Prezidentami Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedovym i Mokhammadom Ashrafom Gani," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 22, 2015. Annual trade statistics published by Kabul point to a somewhat lower level of exchange. See Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization, <http://cso.gov.af/en/>.

## People-to-People Contacts

Transborder relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan rest on close historical, cultural and religious ties that traditionally link the peoples of the two neighboring nations. As mentioned earlier, the very concept of a border in the given context is a relatively modern phenomenon. Moreover, as the result of a long common past as well as several migration waves in the early years of the Soviet period, a large Turkmen population exists in contemporary Afghanistan. Estimated at between half a million and, according to Turkmenistan's authorities, three million people, its exact size and composition is impossible to establish. No population census has been carried out in Afghanistan since the late 1970s. Regardless of their exact number they constitute a significant minority in their areas of compact settlement, particularly in the north and north-west of the country, with Turkmen villages dispersed throughout the provinces of Kunduz, Baghlan, Samangan, Balkh, Jowzjan, Faryab, Badghis and Herat; small enclaves of Turkmen diaspora, mostly merchants, are also to be found as far as Helmand and in the capital city of Kabul.<sup>41</sup> This makes the Turkmen diaspora a primary target of any transborder policy for Ashgabat in its relations with Afghanistan.

Most of Turkmenistan's activities in this area are part of broader international efforts aimed at Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction and have taken shape since Berdimuhamedow came to power in 2007. This involves primarily humanitarian aid; already in 2001 Turkmenistan granted overflight and transit rights to the international community for these purposes. During the harsh winter of 2008, Turkmenistan sent an emergency convoy to Afghanistan consisting of over one hundred trucks carrying flour, fuel, clothes and oil pumps, worth \$2 million in total, alongside the other

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<sup>41</sup> Marat Durdyev and Shokhrat Kadyrov, *Turkmeny mira (istoriko-demograficheskii obzor)* (Ashkhabad: Kharp, 1991), 50–52; and Aina Babaeva, *Turkmeny Afganistana* (Ashgabat: Bilim, 1992), 6–21. For the historical context, see also A. Iagmurov, "Turkmeny Afganistana," in *Turkmeny zarubezhnogo Vostoka: Ocherki o turkmenakh Irana, Afganistana, Iraka, Sirii, Turtsii i Kitaia*, ed. Kh. Ataev et al. (Ashgabat: Turkmenistan, 1993), 101–36. For an introduction to the demography of Afghanistan, see Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 17–65.

emergency supplies which have been provided on a regular basis.<sup>42</sup> In addition, Turkmen specialists have successfully implemented a number of small-scale government development projects in north and north-west Afghanistan. In particular, a fully refurbished health center in the village of Qaramqul, Faryab, and a school facility in Hazara Toghai, Balkh, were opened in the summer of 2009 thanks to Turkmenistan's development assistance.<sup>43</sup> Recent projects, to be commenced in 2015, include the construction and equipping of a maternity home in the border village of Towrgondi, Herat, an orphanage in the district center of Sheberghan, Jowzjan, and a mosque in the town of Aqinah, Faryab.<sup>44</sup>

These activities have been accompanied by efforts aimed at human capacity-building in Afghanistan. Here, cooperation in education has advanced to a certain degree. Since 2002, each year up to thirty Afghan youths are offered free education in Turkmenistan's universities within national quotas in line with an inter-governmental agreement. Upon completion of their schooling as trained agronomists, power engineers, teachers and medical personnel, they will contribute to the painful recovery of the still narrow base of Afghanistan's human resources by providing badly needed professional skills.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, some limited contacts have been established in health care where every year an additional sixty citizens from adjacent areas in north and north-west Afghanistan obtain medical treatment at the health facilities of Turkmenistan's Mary and Lebap regions.<sup>46</sup> In

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<sup>42</sup> TDH, "V dar ot turkmenskogo naroda afganskim brat'iam," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 7, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Gulam Nabi Molla Meret, "Na printsipakh gumanizma i vzaimopomoshchi," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 5, 2009; and Abduleziz Nurkhan, "V podarok afganskim detiam – novaia shkola!," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 6, 2009. For an extensive official account of Turkmenistan's humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, see Begench Karaev and Mergen Amanov, "Turkmenistan – Afganistan: gumanitarnoe izmerenie dobrososedstva," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 31, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> TDH, "Turkmenistan – Afganistan: sotrudnichestvo v interesakh mira i sozidaniia. Peregovory mezhdru Prezidentami Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedovym i Mokhammadom Ashrafom Gani," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 22, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Aliia Bektasova, "Govorit' na iazyke družby...," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 24, 2004; Idem., "Podgotovka spetsialistov dlia družhestvennogo Afganistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 27, 2005; Idem., "Spetsialisty dlia sosednego Afganistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 4, 2009; TDH, "Khronika," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 19, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Sovmestnoe kommiunike po itogam ofitsial'nogo vizita Glavy Vremennoi administratsii Afganistana Khamida Karzaia v Turkmenistan, *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 8, 2002.



theory, framework agreements on bilateral cooperation also exist in the fields of science, culture, art, as well as mass media, sports and tourism.<sup>47</sup>

In regard to the humanitarian sphere, finally, the issue of refugees merits attention, although this issue has not necessarily been an example of a model development of transborder relations. Turkmenistan has been affected by the huge migration flows originating from war-torn Afghanistan, albeit not as much as other countries in the region have been. It has served both as a first transit stop as well as the final destination for refugees seeking shelter and, possibly, a better life. Particularly in the second half of the 1990s, several waves occurred of Afghan migrants crossing the Turkmen border illegally in their thousands, sometimes with yurts, entire households and livestock, and settling, or being interned, in Turkmenistan's hinterland and causing headaches for the oppressive Turkmenbashi regime. As in all previous instances, little aggregate data are available concerning this politically sensitive topic. Still, there have been credible reports of instances where refugees were involuntarily handed back to the ruling Taliban regime from which they had previously fled, much to the outrage of international human rights organizations.<sup>48</sup> In total some 13,000 refugees were officially reported to have been granted asylum in Turkmenistan by 2004,<sup>49</sup> mostly from amongst the ethnic Turkmens of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, whose integration into Turkmen society was reasonably expected to be smoother than in the case of other ethnic and national groups.

Whilst definitely no longer negligible, Turkmenistan's activities in the humanitarian domain still lack one important feature that would make transborder interaction a true people-to-people policy: the existence of spaces in which spontaneous initiatives arise from below. For the moment all activities are limited to those authorized by the government and as such remain rather narrow in both scope and outreach, targeting almost exclusively the Turkmen diaspora in the provinces of Afghanistan's north

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<sup>47</sup> TDH, "Turkmenistan neuklonno sleduet svoei politike mirotvorchestva v regione. Peregovory mezhdru Prezidentom Turkmenistana i Prezidentom Islamskoi Respubliki Afganistan," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 30, 2011; and TDH, "Priumnozhaia sozidatel'nyi i mirotvorchieskii potentsial turkmeno-afganskogo sotrudnichestva. Peregovory mezhdru Prezidentom Turkmenistana i Prezidentom Islamskoi Respubliki Afganistan," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 26, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Nikolai Mitrokhin and Vitalii Ponomarev, *Turkmenistan: gosudarstvennaia politika i prava cheloveka 1995-1998* (Moscow: Pravozashchitnyi tsentr Memorial, 1999), 107–10.

<sup>49</sup> Tamara Molina, "Zdes' bratstvo – obychai i druzhba – zakon...", *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 8, 2004.

and north-west. It is also here that the expected propaganda effect arising from these measures is at its greatest. Thus, for instance, since the early 1990s Afghan Turkmens have regularly been invited to attend the high-profile conferences of the Humanitarian Association of the World Turkmens, a government-affiliated body that strives to cultivate relations with the Turkmen diaspora abroad. Aside from this, Turkmenistan's humanitarian aid supplied to Afghanistan often consists of items such as books about the President (many of which have supposedly been written by him) that are of little practical value to people in need.<sup>50</sup> In addition to this, a very restrictive visa regime is in place that applies to foreign nationals including citizens of Afghanistan and which effectively hampers free transborder contacts. Nevertheless, a solid potential exists, largely as a side-effect of the joint infrastructure projects, which have been part of broader international efforts aimed at Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction that presuppose the integration of both Turkmenistan and Afghanistan within a wider regional context. However, the implementation of these projects is still pending and will depend not only on the political will of all concerned but also on the stabilization of the security situation in Afghanistan, the prospects of which remain unclear.

## Border Security

In the long term perspective, border security is the key security problem pertaining to Turkmenistan's policy towards neighboring Afghanistan. Unlike Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the two other post-Soviet states directly neighboring Afghanistan, Turkmenistan has afforded comparably little attention to the security of the border with Afghanistan after 1991. Doctrinal blueprints of Turkmenistan typically define the main threats for national

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<sup>50</sup> For a report from one such early humanitarian mission to north Afghanistan, see TDH, "Turkmenistan – Afganistan: razvivaia traditsii druzhby i dobrososedstva," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 26, 2004. See also the report from Berdimuhamedow's meetings with the members of the Turkmen diaspora during his official visit to Kabul in 2008 by TDH, "Lidera Turkmenistana serdechno privetstvuiut predstaviteli turkmenskoi diaspory," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, April 29, 2008.

security as stemming from within, rather than from the outside world.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, in the light of the civil turmoil in Afghanistan and the possible spread of religious fundamentalism, terrorism and the illicit trade of drugs, border security has always figured high on the Turkmenistan agenda adopted by foreign powers and relevant international bodies. In 2005, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan finally entered into negotiations over demarcation and fortification works on the perimeter of their shared border.<sup>52</sup> Despite some progress, it is apparent that not every effort has been made to address this issue, particularly in the light of the volumes of funds and sectoral cooperation programs made available to Turkmenistan for this purpose by the international community.<sup>53</sup> Since 2013, the situation on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border has gradually deteriorated, and events there have developed into what may turn out to be perhaps the most serious challenge for the ruling Ashgabat regime since independence.

Throughout 2013 militant Afghan groups acting under the umbrella Taliban brand, including allegedly hundreds of Turkmen fighters, spread their operations farther north and approached to within direct proximity of Turkmenistan's border.<sup>54</sup> First violent clashes on the border erupted in February 2014, killing three of Turkmenistan's border guards and several militants. Over the second half of 2014, the security situation in north-west Afghanistan further deteriorated and clashes broke out between militants and newly formed local Turkmen militias. Fighters linking themselves to various radical Islamist groups continued to extend their theater of operations into adjacent border provinces. There were incidental reports that the militants purportedly had some links to the radical Islamists from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL; also known as the Islamic State, IS). Nonetheless it appears that this movement is still only in the process of taking root in Afghanistan. As of early 2015, they were active mostly in the southern parts

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<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, the latest wording of Turkmenistan's military doctrine from early 2009. Voennaia doktrina nezavisimogo, postoianno neutral'nogo Turkmenistana, *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 23, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> TDH, "Turkmeno-afganskije peregovory v Ashkhabade," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 23, 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Authors' conclusions from their working interviews with senior officials of Turkmenistan's State Border Service, Ashgabat, November 18–25, 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Obaid Ali, "Moving East in the North: Transitioned Faryab and the Taleban," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, May 17, 2013, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/moving-east-in-the-north-transitioned-faryab-and-the-taleban>.

of the country.<sup>55</sup> But with the phased transition of authority and the final pullout of the U.S. and NATO forces, this risk may become relevant.

In the case of the Islamic State successfully establishing itself in Afghanistan, Ashgabat could be faced with a real threat as it is reasonable to assume that these militants would not necessarily respect current international borders and would attempt to destabilize Turkmenistan's secular regime from both outside and within.<sup>56</sup> Hypothetically, there is a risk that the radicals could take over the water management facilities in Turkmenistan and thereby shift the water resources away from the Amu Darya River and the main Garagum canal. The border area with Afghanistan is particularly vulnerable in terms of water security because its waters feed into most of the territory of Turkmenistan, which lies farther downstream. For the moment, however, it does not seem likely that the insurgents would be in a position to accomplish technically complex interventions in the existing water flow systems.<sup>57</sup> Facing worsening security along its borders, Ashgabat seems likewise concerned about the safety of the giant gas fields located in the south-east of the country. Unlike in Syria and Iraq, where oil is a major source of income for the Islamic State, however, the groups that operate near the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border could not reliably count on the possibility of similar sales. The transportation of natural gas here depends almost entirely on gas pipeline systems.

Despite the fact that the imminent threat for Turkmenistan is still quite low, the incidental raids conducted by militant groups from Afghanistan have already forced Turkmenistan's leadership to engage in intense dialog with its southern neighbor, with a view of creating a buffer zone along the joint border in order to prevent armed insurgency on the territory of Turkmenistan. After some initial communication with the tribal elders and spiritual leaders in the north and north-west of Afghanistan, Ashgabat seems to have

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<sup>55</sup> Borhan Osman, "The Shadows of 'Islamic State' in Afghanistan: What threat does it hold?," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, February 12, 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-shadows-of-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-what-threat-does-it-hold/>; and Don Rassler, "Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 8, no. 3 (March 2015): 7–11.

<sup>56</sup> Dzhumaguly Annayev, "Turkmen-Afghans confront Taliban on their own," *Central Asia Online*, September 9, 2014; and Dzhumaguly Annayev, "ISIL raises flag on Turkmen-Afghan border," *Central Asia Online*, February 5, 2015, both retrieved from [http://centralasiaonline.com/en\\_GB/articles/caii/features/main/](http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/), March 1, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Alexander Knyazev, "Pod ugrozoi postavki gaza v Kitai iz Srednei Azii," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 2, 2015, [http://www.ng.ru/courier/2015-02-02/11\\_turkmen.html](http://www.ng.ru/courier/2015-02-02/11_turkmen.html).

backtracked from the idea of providing support to the local Turkmen militias. Instead, it adopted unprecedented steps to seal the border.<sup>58</sup> In 2014, in a rare move for unilateral demarcation, Turkmenistan's border troops captured pastures on the Amu Darya islands traditionally used by local Afghan Turkmens.<sup>59</sup> Further reshuffles are taking place within the military forces. Regular border guards are now being complemented and slowly replaced by elite army units. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan's sappers have started digging ditches and erecting additional perimeter protection fences. Here, Turkmenistan relies on the elements of a relatively well-equipped intrusion detection system inherited from the Soviet Union, which has been recently improved to some extent.<sup>60</sup> However, in the event of a concentrated insurgency or raid these border fortifications and barriers will be easy to penetrate, as was demonstrated several times already during 2014 and early 2015. In addition, a complete refurbishment and improvement of the fortification facilities along the entire borderline will take time and remains a challenge for Ashgabat to resolve before an armed insurgency eventually occurs.

Turkmenistan further encounters the problem of lacking well-trained border guards and army units that would be able to cover the entire perimeter of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border. Poor organization of military recruitment as well as corruption and hazing are the main reasons for the persistently low combat readiness of Turkmenistan's border troops.<sup>61</sup> In order to reverse these trends, Turkmenistan implemented an acceleration of recruiting conscripts from among secondary-school graduates, university students and those studying abroad during the summer season of 2014.<sup>62</sup> Later that year, Turkmenistan's Defense Ministry began to mobilize reserves and launched a campaign designed to attract volunteers to serve in the

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<sup>58</sup> Bruce Pannier and Muhammad Tahir, "Turkmenistan's New Afghan Border Policy," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 10, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmenistan-afghanistan-border-policy/26631200.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Bruce Pannier and Muhammad Tahir, "Local Hopes Raised After Turkmen-Afghan Border Meeting," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 5, 2014, [www.rferl.org/content/turkmen-afghan-border-dispute/25374099.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmen-afghan-border-dispute/25374099.html).

<sup>60</sup> Ruslan M., "Turkmensko-Afganskaia granitsa: Problemy i perspektivy," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, May 7, 2014, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2014/05/turkmensko-afganskaya-granitsa-problemyi-i-perspektivy/>.

<sup>61</sup> Arkadii Simakov, "Taliban sozdaet novye ugrozy na turkmeno-afganskoi granitse?," *Centrasia.ru*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1422825480>.

<sup>62</sup> "Oborona ili obrazovanie," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 27, 2014, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2014/08/oborona-ili-obrazovanie/>.

army.<sup>63</sup> All in all, Turkmenistan's border guards and intelligence services, in close interaction with the elite brigades of Turkmenistan's army, might yet be able to prevent or suppress attacks stemming from within. However, it is unclear whether they would be able to counter a massive armed insurgency staged from beyond its borders. It is in this context that we can read the still-unconfirmed reports from spring 2015 that state that Russia's border guard officers have returned to Turkmenistan as military instructors so as to train Turkmenistan's forces in guarding Afghanistan's border.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

The way in which Turkmenistan approached Afghanistan in the context of establishing itself on the world scene is illustrative of the evolution of Turkmenistan's foreign policy as a whole after 1991. Conceptually labeled as neutrality, Ashgabat's foreign policy following the Soviet collapse effectively evolved into an isolationism in internationally affairs. As a consequence, relations with its neighbors suffered. Foreign policy was largely understood as an extension of domestic policies aimed at the regime's legitimization and survival. This helps to explain the prevalence of Turkmenistan's rather restrained approach in reaching out to Afghanistan. Despite the fact that Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are historically close neighbors, the level of relations remained generally low for the entire initial period following independence, and their intensity and scope, as well as prime areas of interaction, were limited. A warming of relations, while still taking place rather selectively and targeting a small number of chosen areas, became apparent only with the change of power in Turkmenistan following Turkmenbashi's death in late 2006 and is part of Turkmenistan's gradual opening to the outside world. Under Berdimuhamedow, Turkmenistan has shifted away from isolation towards a diversification of external relations,

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<sup>63</sup> "Vsekh pod ruzh'e," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, February 9, 2015, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2015/02/vseh-pod-ruzhe/>. For relevant legislation changes, see also *Zakon Turkmenistana O vnesenii izmenenii i dopolneniia v Zakon Turkmenistana O voinskoi obiazannosti i voennoi sluzhbe, Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 22, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> "Inostrannye voennye pomogaiut okhraniat' granitsu Turkmenistana," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, March 23, 2015, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2015/03/inostrannyye-voennyye-pomogayut-okhranyat-granitsu-turkmenistana/>.

including to the states of wider Central Asia. Still, this opening of Turkmenistan, just as was the case in its former isolationism, seems to be a result of a deliberate decision on the part of its ruling elites rather than a possible by-product of a complex interplay in the dynamically changing geopolitics of the region. Hence, this may change once again should the regime's perceptions of its need for legitimization and survival further evolve.

While regional affairs have not been the primary focus of this chapter, they nonetheless are important for an understanding of Turkmenistan's select priority areas of its engagement. Turkmenistan has been traditionally most active in areas of interaction that form the financial backbone of the regime. Obviously, this concerns primarily energy and the gas exports that critically depend on safe and stable transportation routes to world markets. In this context, for Ashgabat Afghanistan is not a matter of interest merely as a trading partner per se. Rather, its importance lies in its position as a natural and logical transit country for Turkmenistan to reach out to potential customers on the Indian subcontinent who, from Ashgabat's point of view, present a welcome alternative in overcoming its inherited dependence on Russia. In this respect, the pilot project likely to have the biggest impact on Turkmenistan's international standing to date is the TAPI gas pipeline jointly developed by four countries that aims to transport Turkmenistan's natural gas through the territory of Afghanistan to the fast-growing and unsaturated energy markets of Pakistan and India. Its importance for the bilateral relations of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan is comparatively meager. Yet, a stable and viable bilateral link is absolutely vital for the successful implementation of this infrastructure project; without this link the project will remain only on paper. Framed predominantly in humanitarian terms in domestic public discourse, that is, as Turkmenistan's contribution to Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction, this "pipeline of peace" will not only give impetus to increased trade but also provide Afghanistan, as the transit country, with a source of income, create new jobs and attract investments along the planned route and, in this way, prove key to the future stability, security and prosperity of the entire region.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, Afghanistan is an indispensable element in the vast majority of

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<sup>65</sup> Vystuplenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedova na Sammite Turkmenistan-Afganistan-Pakistan-Indiia (Ashkhabad, 11 dekabria 2010 goda), *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 12, 2010.

Turkmenistan's international initiatives which have been raised under the aegis of the United Nations. It lends ideological credence to the declared peace-loving nature of Turkmenistan's neutrality.

Unlike other Central Asian republics, Turkmenistan has until recently not perceived neighboring Afghanistan primarily through the prism of potential security threats arising from within this largely failed state. However, the latest Islamist insurgency and recent border clashes appear to have changed this perception of Afghanistan and induced the Ashgabat regime to take decisive measures in order to counter these threats and improve the security of its border. How serious a danger this poses is difficult to assess at present. Yet, doubts remain about the ability of Turkmenistan to withstand major external shocks such as a large armed insurgency, in particular given the bad governance, low institutional performance as well as other features of the ruling regime, the legitimization and survival of which its foreign policy seeks to achieve. Therefore, much still remains to be done in the field of border security so as to make the border between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan a true "border of friendship and peace," as most bilateral documents in this area claim in the language of institutional foreign policy.