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POLICY BRIEF

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Plenty of Propaganda, Few Concrete Results: 30 Years of Relations between Turkey and Turkmenistan

by Davide Cancarini

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite frequent rhetorical statements from both countries, the full development of Turkish-Turkmen relations has been limited to certain economic sectors, and even then, has excluded the crucial sector of energy. There has also not been any real progress on the political front, such as persuading Turkmenistan, which has staunchly adhered to a strategy of neutrality, to join the Turkic Council. This policy brief will outline a three decades' long international relationship that has been first and foremost propagandistic in nature, especially for the Turkmen government.

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Introduction

Immediately upon Central Asia's independence in 1991, Turkey sought to play a leading role in integrating the once quite isolated region into the international system. Until the end of 1992, Turkey's policies were characterised by a political rush aimed at establishing political, commercial and cultural relations with the four newly independent Central Asian republics that had Turkophonic majorities (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan).¹ Turkmenistan very quickly became one of Turkey's most important bilateral relationships, with Ankara emphasising political and, even more so, economic ties with Ashgabat.²

Ankara also harboured ambitions to leverage Ashgabat's energy resources to make Turkey an energy corridor between East and West, but progress here immediately slowed to a crawl. Three decades later, Turkey still has yet to make significant in-roads into Turkmenistan in this respect. It even appears that, due to its limited economic resources and the greater strategic weight of other players in the region, particularly Russia and China, Turkish-Turkmen relations have largely become superficial, even propagandistic, lacking real geopolitical substance.³

Turkey's Quest for Turkmen Gas

Ashgabat, boasting the world's fourth largest natural gas reserves,⁴ has always been given

special attention from Ankara.⁵ Turkey was the first country to recognise Turkmenistan's independence in 1991 and open an embassy. From the start, Turkey has seen in Turkmenistan a pathway to becoming an energy hub linking producers in the East with the European market in the West. In May 1992, then-Turkish president Süleyman Demirel, together with a group of Turkish businessmen, made an official visit to Ashgabat and proposed an agreement to then-Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov to construct a gas pipeline to Europe through Turkish territory.⁶ This proposal was welcomed by the Turkmen leader, but was not followed up with any concrete decisions – establishing a pattern of promise and lack of action that persists through to today.

This is not to say that Turkey has not repeatedly attempted to bring substance to their project in the years since. Political efforts in this direction persisted throughout the Niyazov era, and continued when Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov came to power in 2007 following his predecessor's death. Indeed, Turkish efforts have continued throughout its own changes in leadership, including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's election to the Turkish presidency in 2014. Erdoğan's first visit to Central Asia took place in Turkmenistan in November 2014, only a few months after his election, a clear sign of the importance still attached by Turkey to its Eastward tilt in its international relations doctrine.⁷ During the visit, a deal was signed for a future supply of Turkmen gas to the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP), although again, no further concrete steps were taken. In addition to the general lack of follow-through, Turkey has also needed to contend with Russia's attempts to prevent Turkmen gas from entering the European market. Europe is by far the main export market for Russian gas,

¹ Philip Robins, 'Turkey's Ostpolitik: Relations with the Central Asian States', in *Central Asia Meets the Middle East* ed. David Menashri (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998): 130-132; Azerbaijan should also be mentioned, for while it is not Central Asian properly speaking, it is nonetheless a Turkophonic post-Soviet state like its Central Asian peers.

² Brent E. Sasley, 'Turkey in Central Asia', in *The New Central Asia. The Regional Impact of International Actors* ed. Emilian Kavalski (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2010): 191-214.

³ Carlo Frappi, 'Central Asia's Place in Turkey's Foreign Policy,' *ISPI Analysis*, N. 225, (December 2013), accessed 30 September 2021, https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_225_2013.pdf.

⁴ British Petroleum, 'Statistical Review of World Energy 2021,' Corporate website, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2021-full-report.pdf>.

⁵ Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Relations between Turkey and Turkmenistan,' corporate website, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-turkmenistan.en.mfa>.

⁶ Jacob M. Landau, *Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation* (London: Hurst & Co. Publishers, 1995): 219

⁷ Pavel Shlykov, 'Turkey's Strategy for Turkmenistan: What Is Behind Erdoğan's Last Visit to Ashgabat?' Carnegie Moscow Center, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/57249>.

and Moscow has sought to avoid competition from an Ashgabat-Ankara tandem.⁸ In addition to Moscow, Ankara has also needed to contend with an ascendant Beijing, which wields comparatively far greater strategic and economic power.⁹ Turkmenistan's geography has also done the would-be partnership with Turkey no favours, orienting it away from Turkey and toward Iran – which shares a long border with Turkmenistan, and since 1997 has shared the Korpeje-Kordkuy pipeline¹⁰ – as well as further east toward India, most notably in the form of the long endeavour to construct the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline.¹¹

Yet, Ashgabat has not been shy to at least rhetorically sing the praises of cooperation with Ankara. Why? The Turkmen government has crafted a narrative surrounding its large-scale energy projects. This narrative is first and foremost propagandistic, focused less on the realisation of projects than on legitimating the regime itself in the eyes of the Turkmen public. Simply, it instrumentalises the idea, rather than the reality, of Turkish-Turkmen cooperation in natural gas as a means to present Berdimukhammedov (and Niyazov before him) as an indispensable figure in Eurasian geopolitics.¹²

“Building” an economic relationship

In a region closely linked economically and geographically to Russia, and increasingly now to China, Turkey has always faced an uphill battle to curry influence among the post-Soviet Turkophonic states. Nevertheless, Ankara has had some important successes, particularly, if paradoxically, in Ashgabat.¹³

According to the Turkish Ministry of Development, Turkish foreign direct investment (FDI) reached 32 billion USD by 2013, accounting for one-fifth of Turkmenistan's total FDI.¹⁴ A critical portion of this investment has been in the construction sector. In 2006, the US Embassy in Ashgabat estimated that Turkish companies managed 60 percent of construction projects in the country.¹⁵ By 2014, approximately 600 Turkish construction companies had been registered to operate in Turkmenistan.¹⁶ While Turkish involvement in Turkmen construction has not always been rosy,¹⁷ Ashgabat has found a reliable implementer in Ankara for its more grandiose building projects, such as the renovation of the Turkmenbashi International Seaport and the Avaza Resort. The contracts for these have been valued at 1.5 billion USD and 5 billion USD, respectively.¹⁸

Another Turkmen sector in which Turkey has prospered has been armaments. Between 2015 and 2019, Turkmenistan was the top market for Turkish armaments, covering around 25 percent of Ankara's exports in this arena, more

⁸ In 2020 Russia exported over 167 bcm of natural gas to Europe over a total natural gas export of about 198 bcm through pipeline (*Statistical Review of World Energy*, 2021).

⁹ In 2020 China imported about 27 bcm of natural gas from Turkmenistan, Russia about 3.8 bcm. Iran stopped its purchases of Turkmen natural gas in 2017.

¹⁰ Farhad Atai and Hamidreza Azizi, 'The Energy Factor in Iran-Turkmenistan Relations,' *Iranian Studies* v. 45, no.6 (November 2012).

¹¹ Silk Road Briefing, 'Turkmenistan Wants Fast Completion of Turkmen-Afghan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline,' Corporate website, last modified 25 September 2020, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/09/25/turkmenistan-wants-fast-completion-of-turkmen-afghan-pakistan-india-gas-pipeline/>.

¹² Luca Anceschi, 'Turkmenistan and the Virtual Politics of Eurasian Energy: the Case of the TAPI Pipeline Project,' *Central Asian Survey* v.36, no.4 (November 2017):409-429.

¹³ Annette Bohr, 'Turkmenistan: Power, Politics and Petro-Authoritarianism,' Research Paper, Chatham House, March 2016.

¹⁴ Chris Rickleton, 'Even for Favored Turks, Turkmenistan a Risky Investment,' *Eurasianet*, last modified 20 May 2015, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/even-for-favored-turks-turkmenistan-a-risky-investment>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Catherine Putz, 'Turkish Company Complains About Turkmenistan's Empty Pockets,' *The Diplomat*, last modified 04 June 2018, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/turkish-company-complains-about-turkmenistans-empty-pockets/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Q.v., Rickleton 2015.

than double than what was sent to Oman and Pakistan (12 percent each).¹⁹

As with the energy sector, Turkish involvement in the construction and armaments sectors, especially the former, serves a propagandistic function for Ashgabat. The construction of large-scale projects symbolises a regime capable of ensuring domestic prosperity. Unlike in the energy sector, however, this time Turkey has been able to use the rhetoric to its advantage, going so far as to exploit the Turkmen government's need to nurture the cult of personality surrounding its presidents to obtain lucrative contracts for its construction companies.²⁰

Authoritarian cooperation

The relationship between Turkey and Turkmenistan could be considered not only economic and propagandistic in nature, but also an authoritarian cooperation.²¹ While Turkmenistan has since its independence always been considered authoritarian, Turkey has experienced a slow but steady decline in various democratic parameters since Erdoğan rose to power in 2014, and especially since the failed coup in July 2016.²² Their cooperation extends not only to legitimisation, but Turkey and Turkmenistan also increasingly work together to repress opponents within their respective territories.

The detention of Dursoltan Taganova, a Turkmen activist whom Turkey has been planning on deporting to Turkmenistan for nearly a year, is a clear example of how Ankara assists Ashgabat with enforcing the latter's agenda.²³ Indeed, with approximately 500,000 Turkmen citizens working within its territory,²⁴ Turkey is a key destination for those who have been permitted to leave Turkmenistan for economic and educational opportunities abroad,²⁵ putting it in a unique position to repress Turkmen dissidents.²⁶ The repression of the 'Hizmet'²⁷ religious movement in Turkmenistan in 2016 following the coup, for which the movement was blamed, is an example of how Ashgabat repays Ankara for its assistance. While Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan refused to go along with Turkey's demands

¹⁹ Alessandro Marrone and Ester Sabatino, 'Defence G2G Agreements: National Strategies Supporting Export and Cooperation,' *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, n.17, (September 2020).

²⁰ Jan Sir, 'Cult of Personality in Monumental Art and Architecture: The Case of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan,' *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, v. 25 (2008): 203-220.

²¹ Gero Erdmann, André Bank, Bert Hoffmann, and Thomas Richter, 'International Cooperation of Authoritarian Regimes: Toward a Conceptual Framework,' Working Paper no. 229, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, July 2013.

²² Zafer Yilmaz and Bryan Turner, 'Turkey's Deepening Authoritarianism and the Fall of Electoral Democracy,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, v. 46, is. 5 (2019): 691-698; Antonio Castaldo, 'Populism and competitive authoritarianism in Turkey,' *SouthEast European and Black Sea Studies*, v. 18, is. 4 (2018): 467-487.

²³ 'Turkmen Activist Says 'Don't Be Afraid' As She Faces Deportation From Turkey, Risk Of Torture,' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified 28 September 2021, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-taganova-turkey-turkmenistan-/31481371.html>; 'Outspoken Critic Of Turkmen Government Says She Is Under Pressure In Turkey,' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified 21 April 2021, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-activist-taganova-pressure-turkey/31215597.html>; 'Turkey: Turkmen Activist Faces Deportation,' *Human Rights Watch*, last modified 12 October 2020, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/12/turkey-turkmen-activist-faces-deportation>.

²⁴ Sher Kasymov, Zhibek Aisarina, Kymbat Nurlanova, and Raushan Zhandayeva, 'Introducing the Central Asia Migration Tracker,' *The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs*, last modified 15 December 2020, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://oxussociety.org/introducing-the-central-asia-migration-tracker/>.

²⁵ The Turkmen government has long imposed restrictions, formal and informal, on its citizens leaving abroad. At its most extreme, between 2003 and 2004, the government required exit visas – a practice Ashgabat is considering to reinstate. See: 'Turkmenistan Mulls Imposition of Exit Visas,' *Turkmen.news*, last modified 11 August 2021, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://en.turkmen.news/news/turkmenistan-mulls-imposition-of-exit-visas/>.

²⁶ "Turkmen Authorities Slammed For 'Threatening' Relatives Of Exiled Dissidents,' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified 13 May 2021, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-threatening-relatives-of-exiled-dissidents/31252951.html>.

²⁷ Also, popularly known as the 'Gülenist' movement and officially called the 'Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation' ('Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü') by Turkish authorities.

to expel the movement from their territories, Turkmenistan acted as requested, arresting and torturing dozens of teachers and students from Hizmet-affiliated schools.²⁸

Still, one is often left with the impression that Ashgabat has the better side of this deal. In 1995, Turkey supported the United Nations' recognition of Turkmenistan's 'permanent neutrality' status. This policy has been used by both Niyazov and Berdimuhamedov to reinforce, from an ideological point of view, their country's isolation, and through it, the unassailability of their regimes. Turkey's stance in 1995 has come to haunt its other initiatives, such as the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States, also known as the Turkic Council. Despite diplomatic pressure from Turkey,²⁹ Ashgabat has not yet joined the Turkic Council. Although rumours exist that accession may finally take place by the end of 2021,³⁰ that Turkmenistan has been the only independent Turkophonic country with full diplomatic recognition who has not yet been a member has hurt the legitimacy of the body.

Turkey nevertheless persists in the charade, possibly in the hope that the situation will eventually turn around in its favour. Is this hope misplaced, or could change be coming in the near future? The apparent rise to power of Berdimuhamedov's son, Serdar, may be a

harbinger of reform given his youth.³¹ However, it can also be counter-argued that the internal logic of Turkmen governance, coupled with Russian influence, makes change unlikely.³² Indeed, were one to wager, it would be that after 30 years of relative stagnation, the relationship between Turkey and Turkmenistan will continue more or less along established lines.

Recommendations

- Turkey should use what economic influence it does have in Turkmenistan to persuade authorities to genuinely open their country's economic system, including encouraging the adoption of more transparent practices in line with international standards. This is in Turkey's own best interests to increase its investment opportunities and protect its citizens involved in the Turkmen market.
- Turkey's desire to involve Turkmenistan in regional and international cooperation organisations such as the Turkic Council should be concrete and not remain a public messaging tool. This is ultimately in Turkey's own best interests, as doing so would bring greater legitimacy to its diplomatic efforts and real prestige to its status as the world's most economically and politically influential Turkophonic country.
- Turkey should ensure the protection of opponents of the Turkmen regime on its territory, allowing them to continue their activities in safety. This would assist their own credibility to their Western partners, while helping to crack open Turkmenistan from its current isolationism which inevitably will create more and better opportunities for Turkish FDI.

²⁸ 'Turkmenistan: 18 Men Tortured, Sentenced in Unfair Trial,' *Human Rights Watch*, last modified 9 June 2017, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/09/turkmenistan-18-men-tortured-sentenced-unfair-trial>; Nick Ashdown, 'Turkmenistan Cracking Down on Gülen Followers,' *Eurasianet*, last modified 8 December 2016, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-cracking-down-gulen-followers>.

²⁹ Kaan Bozdogan, 'We hope to see Turkmenistan in Turkic Council: Erdogan,' *Anadolu Agency*, last modified 12 December 2020, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/we-hope-to-see-turkmenistan-in-turkic-council-erdogan-/2074546>.

³⁰ Paul Goble, 'Turkmenistan Appears Set to Move Away from Neutrality, Giving Turkey a Major Boost,' *Window on Eurasia*, last modified 17 September 2021, accessed 30 September 2020, <https://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2021/09/turkmenistan-appears-set-to-move-away.html>; 'IA Report: Turkmenistan will become a full member of the Turkic Council,' *Turkmenportal*, last modified 15 September 2021, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/39680/ia-report-turkmenistan-will-become-a-full-member-of-the-turkic-council>.

³¹ 'Turkmenistan: Time for a change?' *Eurasianet*, last modified 21 September 2021, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-time-for-a-change>; 'Turkmen leader names his son a deputy prime minister,' *Reuters*, last modified 12 February 2021, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkmenistan-president-son-idINKBN2AC0VI>.

³² 'Turkmenistan: A Russian bear hug,' *Eurasianet*, last modified 25 May 2021, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-a-russian-bear-hug>.

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