

TURKMENISTAN'S STRUGGLE TO CONTAIN NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY THREATS

BY BRADLEY JAMES JARDINE

Turkmenistan's regime has attracted attention over the years by virtue of its foreign policy position, namely, the Doctrine of Positive Neutrality. In this article, Bradley James Jardine explains how this UN-recognized status as a neutral state is being tested by recent events just across the border in Afghanistan.

Militants in Afghanistan's predominately Turkmen populated Faryab Province have [seized more than 100 villages](#) in July alone, with pro-government paramilitary troops retreating across the region. The withdrawal, in Afghanistan, of the [International Security Assistance Force \(ISAF\) mission](#) and the alleged [sightings of IS militants](#) in the country has combined to cause uncertainty in Ashgabat over the state's capacity to protect its borders from non-traditional (i.e. state-to-state) threats.

More menacing is the [growth of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan](#), who view Turkmenistan as a gateway into the region. With a large, disgruntled Uzbek population, under-trained and under-resourced border forces, and significant oil supplies located near the Afghan border, Ashgabat is a tempting target. Turkmenistan, isolated and neutral, is increasingly the weak-link in the Central Asian security chain.

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Multilateral Security Organizations and the Doctrine of Positive Neutrality

Turkmenistan's neutrality is primarily a strategy for balancing external actors and retaining a high degree of autonomy. However, the recent surge in violence in northern Afghanistan has left Turkmenistan vulnerable to an IMU offensive, alarming its neighbors. Rather than rely on Russia, Ashgabat is reaching out to the West, partly to test the waters and see how much the West is willing to invest. But also, to vie for time as the regime attempts to defend its own borders without Russian aid.



Ethnic Turkmen fighters in Northern Afghanistan

Credit: RFE/RL

Turkmenistan’s foreign policy was codified on 12 December 1995, when the General Assembly of the United Nations approved an ad hoc resolution [A/50/80(A)] endorsing the regime’s request for the status of permanent neutrality. The addition of the active component, the adjective “positive,” is innovative, with regime officials arguing that neutrality does not entail “[self-isolation \[but\] it does entail a constructive position.](#)” Indeed, Turkmenistan has been politically active, assuming a status of regional peace-making center. During the Tajik Civil War, [Ashgabat provided a platform for negotiations](#) between rival parties. Additionally, in 2007, the headquarters of the [United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia](#) (UNRCCA) was established in Turkmenistan to assist the region’s stability.

Due to Ashgabat’s worsening relations with Russia over gas disputes, and fears of overdependence on China, Turkmenistan has been actively seeking cooperation with the West in both energy trading and security. The European Union has revived the idea of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline, with plans to have it built by 2019. This resumption of talks was even accompanied by subtle legislative changes in Turkmenistan; for example, on 12 March the organization of demonstrations was legalized and earlier another, third political party was created. Although these moves are cosmetic, they still provide insight into Ashgabat’s foreign policy.

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Turkmenistan has also signaled significant moves towards security cooperation with the West. 2015 marked the 20th anniversary of the UN’s recognition of Ashgabat’s status of

permanent neutrality, with the regime rebranding 2015 as “[the year of neutrality and peace](#).” 2015 also marked the 20th anniversary of NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) program with Central Asia. Turkmenistan’s authorities decided to combine the events by [hosting a conference from March 2-3](#), titled “issues of peace and stability in Central Asia and Afghanistan: a view from neutral Turkmenistan,” which was sponsored by NATO. Ironic, considering the country is suffering unprecedented security problems on its border. Indeed, following this conference on 26 March, General Lloyd Austin, head of U.S. Central Command testified before Congress that Turkmenistan is interested in both military cooperation and the purchase of U.S. military equipment.

These moves are controversial since Turkmenistan, unlike its neighbors, is neither a member of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), nor China’s Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Signaling Moscow’s irritation on March 18, the CSTO’s secretary, Nikolai Bordiuzha, [strongly criticized Ashgabat](#) for not cooperating in the fight against terrorism. The Kremlin is fearful of the IMU’s growing activities in the region, particularly after some of the organization’s [Uzbek members were arrested in 2013 in Moscow](#) for planning to carry out attacks, but also willing to take advantage of the instability to project its power into the region.

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Turkmenistan’s efforts to attract the west are unlikely to bear fruit; after all, American assistance in the field of security [amounted to a measly \\$1.3 million in 2014](#). Ashgabat needs to seriously consider further cooperation with its neighbors as its borders are becoming increasingly unstable, and the regime’s defensive strategies have, so far, largely resulted in failure.

Are the IMU a Threat to Turkmenistan?

The IMU haven’t launched any successful offensive into Central Asia since the [2009 attacks in the Fergana Valley](#). However, since then, the IMU has been trying to establish a foothold in northern Afghanistan by embedding with the Taliban and radicalizing the region’s Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen communities. The group has been fighting in Afghanistan to [form a base from which to project its power](#) into Central Asia, with the explicit aim of destabilizing the secular, authoritarian regimes and establishing an Islamic order. Furthermore, after operating in northern Afghanistan for many years, the group has become a major [stakeholder in Afghanistan’s multi-billion drug economy](#), with aims to open smuggling routes further.

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The problems have intensified the past year with [a huge influx of Uzbek families](#), allegedly from Pakistan. In June 2014, following the [IMU bombing of the Karachi airport](#), the Pakistani military started large-scale operations in North Waziristan, where IMU militants had been hiding since the outbreak of the 2001 War on Terror, when allied forces forced them to flee into the tribal areas. Since then, the estimated number of IMU fighters currently operating is anywhere [between 5,000 and 7,000](#).

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The Taliban and IMU have been long-term allies, and even today, the two continue to enjoy a symbiotic relationship. [The Taliban’s ties to the IMU](#) – whose rank and file are Sunni Muslims of Central Asian origin – raises its standing among ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen, thus furthering its support base. In return, the IMU enjoys Taliban supported sanctuaries in the north from which it can recruit allies, control smuggling routes, and launch attacks into Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

With the [Afghan government’s recent revelation](#) that Mullah Omar, the leader and founder of the Taliban, is dead, infighting could strengthen the hand of the IMU. Indeed, even prior to the official announcement, tensions have been mounting. Several senior Taliban commanders, having no evidence that Omar was alive, had already defected to the IMU. The loss of field commanders and rank-and-file fighters to splinter groups and rival militant groups could deprive the Taliban of troop numbers and effective leadership, further constraining their



Along the border between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan

Credit: RFE/RL

capacity to restrain radical IMU militants. Furthermore, days after the announcement, [the IMU released a video declaring allegiance to the Islamic State](#). This is likely a move to appeal to more radical elements within the Taliban, and to attract the [small number of Central Asians who have been travelling to fight in Syria](#).

Turkmenistan offers several enticements for an IMU offensive. Firstly, Turkmenistan's neighbors are militarily stronger and receive significant levels of military aid from both Russia and the West. For example, Russia donated military equipment and weapons worth [\\$1.5 billion to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan](#), and Russian troops actively guard the Tajik border. Meanwhile, the sanctions on Uzbekistan for its atrocious human rights record were removed in January allowing the U.S. to make its largest military donation to Central Asia of [300 armored vehicles amounting to \\$300 million](#). Turkmenistan, by contrast, receives very minimal military aid and isn't a part of any defensive organizations. This makes its huge, 744-kilometer border across open desert extremely vulnerable.

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Secondly, Uzbeks are concentrated near the Afghan and Uzbek border in the Lebap and Dashoguz provinces of Turkmenistan. They now constitute the largest minority group in the country, at [nearly 6 percent of the population](#), and they're extremely disgruntled with the central government. The policies of “Turkmenization” have had particularly adverse effects on Uzbeks. In addition to having effectively [banned the use of Uzbek as a medium of instruction in schools](#), the drive for “full-blooded” Turkmen as government employees had, by the end of the 2004, resulted in virtually all Uzbeks being removed or not employed in high and mid-level administrative positions in the areas where they are concentrated. This discrimination could easily boil over with some sustained provocation from Uzbek IMU radicals.

Finally, there is the issue of norm transmission from the Islamic State to the IMU. ISIS consolidated its grip over oil supplies in Iraq and now preside over a sophisticated smuggling empire. These profits helped ISIS pay its burgeoning wages bill with [\\$500 a month for regular fighters](#), and about \$1,200 for commanders. Crucially, Turkmenistan has [significant oil supplies just over the border](#) in the Uzbek populated Lebap province in the Seidi refinery, and would provide the IMU a powerful competitive advantage in their recruitment campaign.

Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Non-State Security Providers

Turkmenistan has been actively seeking allies in Afghanistan to act as a buffer between the state and Taliban occupied areas. Not surprisingly, these potential allies have predominately been drawn from among their ethnic cousins along the border. However, the Afghan Turkmen have reason to view Ashgabat as an enemy, rather than a friend.

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Currently, an estimated 1.5 million Turkmen live in Afghanistan – [making up 3 percent](#) of the country's overall population. They are located primarily in the country's northern provinces of Jowzjan, and Faryab. Seeking a pro-active policy, Turkmen officials reached out to ethnic-Turkmen leaders to stabilize the border against Taliban and IMU attacks. On February 18, 2015, Azatlyk reported that Turkmenistan's Deputy Foreign Minister, Vepa Hajiyev, [met with ethnic Turkmen elders](#) in Afghanistan in secret, to dissuade them from supporting the Taliban. However, the Turkmen authorities have been alienating, to put it mildly.

In February, Afghan Turkmen in northern Faryab, in the Marchak district were in a desperate situation, appealing to Turkmenistan's elites. The area was [surrounded on three sides by the Taliban](#), which had cut the region off from the central government in Kabul. Village leaders had requested that Turkmenistan grant citizen's safe passage in order to circumvent the Taliban and receive aid in Turgundy, in the Herat Province. Their requests were ignored.

Furthermore, Turkmenistan's efforts to seal its borders have provoked ethnic Turkmen on the Afghan side. The village of Karkin came [under fire from Afghan police](#) on March 16, 2015, after residents protested against the Turkmenistani border guards' decision to expel villagers from a small island on the Amu Darya River, which had been essential for grazing cattle. The border guards had [built barrier lines and wire entanglements](#) on the island, considering it to be part of the border-zone. Many reports from Afghan Turkmen mention imprisonment and torture by Turkmenistan's border guards, and some even revealed they'd had their ears cut off.

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These moves have genuine implications for President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov's regime. According to the exiled chairman of the banned Republican Party of Turkmenistan, many dissidents from Turkmenistan have been leaving to collaborate with ethnic Turkmen in the IMU to recruit in the bordering regions and destabilize Ashgabat.

Turkmenistan has also been hoping to build a relationship with the Taliban to keep the radical IMU in check, largely by relying on the same methods it used in the 1990s, when it supplied oil to Taliban government in exchange for détente. Indeed, during Afghanistan's rule by the Taliban, Turkmenistan – unlike the other Central Asian republics – enjoyed a close, unofficial relationship with the government in Kabul. Ashgabat infamously instructed its state-media service [not to portray the Taliban regime](#) in a negative light. Turkmenistan even cooperated with the Taliban on security issues. For example, when ethnic Turkmen from Afghanistan fled into Turkmenistan's territory during their insurgency against the Taliban, [Ashgabat's authorities returned them to Afghanistan](#), where a significant number were subsequently executed. Today, Turkmenistan lacks a positive relationship with the Taliban.

On March 18, 2014, Berdymukhammedov met with Salahuddin Rabbani, the chairman of the



Turkmen soldiers

Credit: RFE/RL

High Peace Council of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan – a body appointed by the former Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, to negotiate with elements of the Taliban. At the meeting, Turkmenistan agreed to [supply electricity to Afghanistan's Faryab Province on favorable terms](#), as well as deliver humanitarian aid to facilitate the region's recovery. Ashgabat also offered itself as a platform for negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban.

Since then, relations between Ashgabat and the Taliban insurgents have gone from bad, to worse. On February 26, 2015, militants crossed into Turkmenistan from Afghanistan's Baghdis province [killing three border guards](#). The firefight was allegedly in retaliation to Turkmenistan's border guards killing a Taliban insurgent and arresting two others. Furthermore, on July 26, 2015, Taliban militants [cut Turkmenistan's electricity supply cables to Faryab](#), plunging the region into darkness.

With these proactive attempts at diplomatic, “positive” outreach failing, Ashgabat has fallen back into a habit of isolation, fortifying its borders in a last ditch attempt to defend its territory. In the long run, such attempts are foolish at best.

Turkmenistan's Manpower Shortages

Turkmenistan's border forces lack rigorous training and the state's non-commitment to external security alliances has caused the state to re-organize and squeeze as many resources as possible to sustain its insufficient border security force. A key initiative has involved the mass mobilization of military reserves along the Afghan border.

At present, 60,000 young Turkmenistanis enter prime draft-age each year, but Ashgabat has been struggling to fulfill its quotas. Firstly, some [800,000 young men work as migrant laborers](#), with more seeking to join their numbers amidst the economic uncertainty caused by the January 2015 currency devaluation. In addition, many Turkmen boys receive military deferments if they go into higher educational institutions. According to a [leaked government census from 2012](#), over 42,000 Turkmen students study abroad each year.

In response to the exodus of labor, migration and border services have closed the borders to prevent males of recruitment age from leaving the country to seek work abroad. Students are also facing difficulties. On July 15, RFE/RL's Turkmen service, known locally as Azatlyk, reported that boys above the age of 18 who have not yet served in the military will [no longer be entitled to study outside the country](#). Furthermore, *the Chronicles of Turkmenistan* reported that in response to shortages, military units near the border [were not demobilized](#) during the recruitment cycle in November, meaning they haven't been serving far longer than their two-year requirement.

The government's crackdown on draft evasion has also caused the black market to flourish. [The cost of a bribe for documentation](#) proving a recruit to be "medically unfit" for service has risen to \$600. Another bribe, certifying that the bearer has already performed military service, when he has not, can command as much as \$4,000.

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Drug-use and drug trafficking provide an additional threat to units along the Afghan border, and many of the problems arose as a result of Niyazov's "known unknown" tolerance of trafficking. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimated that the use of opiates experienced a [17-fold increase in Turkmenistan from 1991-2002](#). The agency added by stating that 1 percent of the country's population could be considered regular users of injected drugs. Such patterns have been associated with the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in the country. Although Berdymukhammedov has genuinely curbed drug-use, problems still remain near the border, and the IMU's resources and connections could easily undermine security.

Finally, the Turkmen military suffers from a critically low state of morale. As of January 2015, due to both horrendous living conditions, and abusive officers, [eight recruits committed suicide](#) and another 45 suffered serious health problems, becoming permanently disabled. Desertion is also a prominent problem with over [100 officers leaving their rank](#) since January in response to being assigned to dangerous districts on the Afghan border.

Ashgabat is dangerously positioned and the regime is running out of options. Turkmenistan needs to co-operate with its neighbors if it's to effectively defend itself.

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