



THE ROLE OF ETHNIC TURKMENS IN THE FORMATION OF A SAFE BUFFER ZONE BETWEEN TURKMENISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

In the 19th century, the “Game on the Roof of the World”, in which the three great empires of Russia, Great Britain and China fought for dominance in Central Asia, led to the fact that it was customary to draw borders in accordance with the sphere of influence of one of the empires, and not with the actual location of individual nations, peoples or tribes. Thus, the Turkmens found themselves in large numbers living not only in the territory of Turkmenistan and the former Soviet Union (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), but also in neighboring Iran and Afghanistan. The success of the October Revolution and the Civil War in the USSR led to the growth of the Turkmen population in the border countries at the expense of refugees and ideological schismatics. In the middle of the 19th century, this territory, in addition to having no access to the sea (even to the Caspian Sea), was considered relatively unsuitable for human settlement and the development of a civilized society, and therefore was left exclusively by Pashtun Persians and Turkic-speaking inhabitants of the north [1.167-172]. Thus, it was a natural barrier for various political forces. Border lines were drawn between the warring parties, and at that time no one was particularly interested in where this or that ethnic group would end up.

KEYWORDS: Turkmenistan, Great Game, Pashtunization, active neutrality.

INTRODUCTION

Turkmen tribes live in Afghan Turkmenistan - small ethnic groups called Ersari, Tekin, Alili, Salih and Salil [2.198-207]. It is also noteworthy that more than half of the Turkmen living in Afghanistan today are descendants of refugees who feared collectivization in the Turkmen SSR in the 1920s. There is no exact data on the number of Turkmens in Afghanistan, since no census was conducted due to the civil war. Moreover, many Afghan Turkmen now consider themselves Pashtuns due to the active Pashtunization of the Persian and Turkic-speaking population under the rule of the Taliban (although in the north of the country it was less active and provoked strong resistance). It is estimated that up to 400,000 Turkmen live in Afghanistan (while the population of Turkmenistan now barely reaches 6 million) [3.132-133].

Turkmenistan is a state that has a 744-kilometer border with Afghanistan. It has the largest reserves of natural resources and a population of just over 5 million people. After gaining independence in 1991, Afghanistan was one of the first countries to officially recognize the independence of Turkmenistan [4]. For over 30 years, Afghanistan has been a full-fledged international partner of Turkmenistan, and relations with Afghanistan, the maintenance of which is a matter of national security and the realization of geo-economic interests, is a key

agenda. Saparmurat Niyazov, who served as president of Turkmenistan until his death in 2006, called Turkmenistan's foreign policy "active neutrality". The fact that Turkmenistan is less involved in Afghanistan's internal conflicts than its other neighbors is due to a number of specific factors. As mentioned above, the policy of active neutrality of Turkmenistan allows it to establish bilateral friendly and good neighborly relations with all countries, with little concern for external forces. Turkmenistan was one of the few states that supported the Taliban movement. Ashgabat has also become a venue for direct talks between delegations from two warring Afghan factions, the Taliban and Ahmad Shah Massoud's forces. The position of Turkmenistan towards the Taliban may have caused a negative reaction from other international partners of Ashgabat, but it did not have a significant impact on the development of economic relations between Turkmenistan and these countries. The policy of active neutrality allowed Turkmenistan to develop business relations with the Taliban, while avoiding involvement in the "Afghan issue". Vakil Ahmad Motawakil, Afghanistan's foreign minister during the Taliban regime, said: "I think Turkmenistan was in favor of establishing a business relationship and their foreign policy was carefully coordinated and planned. So they had a very good relationship with us. We were also satisfied with our relations with Turkmenistan and neighborly relations" [5]. Maheb Modassar, who has published a number of articles on Central Asian countries, says Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality has allowed it to maintain good relations with Afghanistan at various points in its political history, always with a cautious approach. Afghanistan is geographically a transport corridor for Turkmenistan for the supply of natural gas to South Asia. The gas pipeline project (later called TAPI) connecting the territories of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India was developed in response to the interest of Turkmenistan in expanding its international relations and ensuring the access of its energy resources to world markets, while a large part of Afghanistan was under the control of the Taliban. It was first formulated in the 1990s. It is believed that Islamabad, under the auspices of the Taliban, played an important role in maintaining good relations between the Taliban and Niyazov during Niyazov's rule as well. A stable and sustainable system of international economic relations with the states of Central Asia ensured the economic security of Pakistan and allowed it to realize its geopolitical ambitions in the region.

Continued instability along the Afghan-Turkmen border will negatively affect major trade and energy routes (Akina, Turgundi) and freeze or halt all bilateral projects and economic growth prospects. However, Turkmenistan does not have the military capability to counter instability along its borders. To maintain domestic political stability and his political leadership, the President of Turkmenistan should consider deepening military cooperation and security partnerships with Russia and China, the two largest players in the region, but should carefully weigh these initiatives against the principles of a policy of neutrality.

CONCLUSION

Currently, Turkmenistan (and other Central Asian republics) does not perceive the Taliban terrorist movement as a threat to national borders or internal political stability, but rather as a necessary condition for the implementation of Afghanistan-oriented energy and infrastructure projects and regional cooperation, as well as a reliable factor in regional security. It views it as a reliable political partner that contributes to regional security, as a necessary condition for the implementation of energy infrastructure projects and regional cooperation focused on Afghanistan. One of the key points of the Doha "Afghan Peace Agreement" between the US and

the Taliban is to combat terrorist groups associated with Daesh and al-Qaeda, and aims to achieve cross-border goals by ensuring that the Afghan territory they control is not used to threaten neighboring countries. This will be a test of the political authority of the Taliban.

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