

Turkmenistan looks to the West

Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, Józef Lang

Due to worsening relations with Russia, its increasing dependence on China and fears of destabilisation, Turkmenistan is adjusting its foreign policy and trying to bolster its cooperation with the West in the field of energy and security. This is indicated by the resumption of its energy cooperation with the European Union, and appeals for more assistance from the United States in the security field.

Turkmenistan's actions are motivated by a desire to diversify international cooperation, especially in the face of Russia's expansionist policy, to which cooperation with China cannot serve as an effective counterweight. As foreign policy has effectively been reduced to gas issues and the geopolitical situation in the region (i.e. the domination of Russia and China), the effectiveness of Ashgabat's efforts may be reduced, at the very least.

Gas as the measure of Turkmenistan's geopolitical importance

Turkmenistan is an extremely authoritarian state in which all power is concentrated in the hands of the president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, and the narrow, non-transparent, clan-based clique surrounding him. The country has no independent institutions such as media, political parties, NGOs etc. The public does not have any aspirations to play a political role in the country, and is limited by the authorities in its dealings with the outside world. Turkmenistan's archaic economy is based on the extraction and export of mineral resources. Turkmenistan's foreign policy is essentially a function of Ashgabat's gas sales and interest in them from abroad. Turkmenistan's political specificity makes it a difficult partner for all the players present in Central Asia.

Turkmenistan's geopolitical importance stems from its energy resources; the country has 17.5 tcm of natural gas, 9.4% of the world's total proven resources (BP Statistical World Review). Over the last decade the directions of gas exports from Turkmenistan have been reversed, and since 2009 China has begun to replace Russia as the main consumers of the country's gas. This has been aided by Chinese investment in the transmission infrastructure (the construction of a gas pipeline to China), loans (approximately US\$10 billion), and China's CNPC gaining access to Turkmen reserves. In 2014, Turkmenistan exported about 30 bcm of gas to China, 11 bcm to Russia and about 7 bcm of gas to Iran. Ashgabad's concerns about Russia and its reluctance to increase its dependence on China (its dominant trading partner) are now the main drivers of change in Turkmenistan's foreign policy.

Back to the gas game

The rise in interest in Turkmenistan's gas talks with the EU has been influenced both by the EU's own increased interest in the field of energy, as well as Russia's policy. Faced by a deep crisis in its relations with Russia against the backdrop of the Ukrainian conflict, the EU has revised its energy strategy, again reviving the strategic importance of the Southern Gas Corridor (a concept based on gas supplies from the Caspian region). The EU sees Turkmenistan as the potential main source of gas to the Corridor, and is ready to take policy measures aimed at encouraging Ashgabat to cooperate (a visit by the EC's vice-chairman Maroš Ševčovič has been announced for this year). Turkey has also been holding active energy talks with Turkmenistan since last November.

The EU's efforts have met with a favourable reception from Berdimuhamedov, after Gazprom unilaterally announced at the start of this year that it would import three times less gas from Turkmenistan in 2015 (up to 4 bcm of gas). Ashgabat took this as a violation of the existing agreements, and stated its intention to supply between 10 and 30 bcm of gas per year to the EU.

Turkmenistan's attempt to increase its cooperation with the West are dictated by a desire to diversify its routes and customers, as well as to maximise profits. The gas Turkmenistan exports to China is counted towards Ashgabat's debt to Beijing, and so it does not bring the ruling elite the financial benefits which they expected. Russia's unpredictability has undermined its credibility as a gas customer (in 2009, the Kremlin unilaterally reduced the level of its imports from about 40 bcm to 11 bcm of gas annually).

Changes as a condition of cooperation with the West

The resumption of talks with the European Union has been accompanied by legislative changes; for example, on 12 March the organisation of demonstrations was legalised, and earlier another, third political party was created. In Turkmenistan's conditions, though, these changes are merely for show; the previously one-party parliament now includes representatives of two parties and several social organisations, but all of them actively support President Berdimuhamedov and are subordinate to him.

In this context, Ashgabat's appeals are primarily designed to facilitate cooperation with the West, in which the issue of human rights violations in Turkmenistan has been a major obstacle to concluding legally binding agreements. An example of this might be the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which Turkmenistan signed with the EU in 1998, but has still not been ratified due to the resistance from the European Parliament and some EU countries, in protest at human rights violations in Turkmenistan.

Military cooperation with the US, and threats from Russia

The rapprochement with the West is also ongoing in the field of security, the result of Turkmenistan's concerns that the destabilisation of neighbouring Afghanistan will penetrate its territory, as well as its fear of Russia's aggressive policy in the post-Soviet area.

On 26 March General Lloyd Austin, the head of US Central Command testified before Congress that, despite its status as a neutral state, Turkmenistan is interested in military cooperation with the US and the purchase of US military equipment. Turkmenistan has so

far received only token American assistance in the security field; in 2014 its total value amounted to just US\$1.3 million. Berdimuhamedov's interest in military cooperation with the United States is rooted in to the situation in the Afghan provinces bordering Turkmenistan (especially Badghis), which has clearly deteriorated over the last year. There were also a number of incidents involving the Taliban on the Turkmen-Afghan border, resulting in the deaths of three Turkmen soldiers. Ashgabat fears that the Turkmen minority in northern Afghanistan – which Turkmenistan has actively supported, and which was to have been an element in neutralising potential threats – may not be strong enough to protect the border.

The military cooperation with the United States also highlights Turkmenistan's reluctance to cooperate with Russia in the field of security. Ashgabat fears becoming dependent on Moscow, especially in the context of Russia's aggressive policy of reintegration in the post-Soviet area. Turkmenistan's attitude has evoked strong reactions from Russia; on 18 March Nikolai Bordiuzha, the secretary of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), sharply criticised Ashgabat (and Tashkent) for not cooperating with the CSTO, including in the fight against terrorism; this can be seen as a veiled threat. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, in contrast to other countries in the region, are not members of the CSTO, an organisation which aids Moscow in institutionalising its influence in the security dimension into the post-Soviet space.

Consequences

Turkmenistan's actions indicate that it does not see either of the two major players present in Central Asia (Russia and China) as a partner which can guarantee the durability of its interests, either in the energy sector or the field of security.

Nevertheless, the measures Turkmenistan has taken so far are only tokens of further changes, and are not signs that Ashgabat is initiating – or making more permanent – cooperation with the West. The plans to import gas from Turkmenistan do not depend so much on the actions of Turkmenistan, as on the effectiveness of the EU itself, as well as a number of other factors, including the attractiveness of the idea for European companies, and the consent of Azerbaijan to the transit of Turkmen gas along the trans-Anatolia pipeline (TANAP) currently under construction. Should it become necessary, Ashgabat and the EU will also meet with resistance from Russia and China, both of whom are interested in maintaining their influence in the region.

Likewise, in the case of security cooperation with the US, key factors will remain outside of Ashgabat's control, such as the political will in Washington to provide substantial military support (as occurred in the case of Uzbekistan) and the determination of Russia. Moscow will try to force Ashgabat to join its sphere of influence in the security dimension (the maximum variant), or to refrain it from trying to strengthen military cooperation with the West (the minimum variant).