

## U.S. VS RUSSIA: ATTEMPTED COOPERATION WITH TURKMENISTAN IN THE SECURITY AND DEFENSE SPHERE

Maxim STARCHAK

*Head of the International Security and  
Conflicts Group,  
Russian Association of Political Science;  
coordinator of the Russian Youth Association of  
Euro-Atlantic Cooperation  
(Moscow, Russia)*

### America's Military Presence

In the wake of 9/11 Washington stepped up its activities in Turkmenistan which, together with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, opened its air space for the U.S. and coalition humanitarian flights to Afghanistan. American experts described it as “the only one of the five Central Asian states that is not officially a member of the Enduring Freedom coalition.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2002 the two countries signed an agreement on the use of Turkmenian air space by American military-transport aviation and the international civilian airport of Ashgabad for fuelling aircraft moving humanitarian cargoes to Afghanistan. This brings from \$8 to 12 million into the Turkmenian budget every year.

Meanwhile, the Americans initiated and actively promoted talks on the use of other airfields: one of the three military airbases not far from Nebit-Dag, Ak-Tepe, and Mary-2.<sup>2</sup> The latter was selected as the largest of the three able to receive two or more wings of strategic aviation.

This could be described as contradicting the country's neutrality yet the agreement, which never mentioned the offending term “military base,” would have allowed President Niyazov to continue saying that Turkmenistan did not have foreign military bases on its territory.

The rumors enthusiastically discussed by the Russian press about a possible American base in Mary-2 caused a bout of anger from the Foreign Ministry of Turkmenistan, which resolutely refuted them in its statement of 7 September, 2005 as “pure invention that has nothing in common with reality.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: J.K. Davis, M.J. Sweeney, *Central Asia in U.S. Strategy and Operational Planning: Where Do We Go From Here?* IFPA, Washington DC, 2004, p. 53, available at [<http://www.ifpa.org/pdf/S-R-Central-Asia-72dpi.pdf>].

<sup>2</sup> See: I. Kurbanov, “Amerikanskoe voennoe prisutstvie v Turkmenistane, 13 sentiabria 2005,” available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1126591680>].

<sup>3</sup> See: “O telefonnom razgovore ministra inostrannykh del Rossii s ministrom inostrannykh del Turkmenistana. Gundogar. Za demokratiu i prava cheloveka v Turkmenistane, 8 sentiabria 2005,” available at [<http://www.gundogar.org/>].

The American experts were convinced that “in the context of future planning, preparing for a post-Niyazov regime should be given greater thought, as access to Mary would be a high pay-off investment that would impact Persian Gulf and Central/South Asian contingency planning.”<sup>4</sup>

In September 2005 it became even clearer that the Americans needed the base: it was completely reconstructed by UAE construction companies and accepted by a commission of the U.S. Defense Ministry. The Arabs first completely restored the Kushka airfield. However, the talks on the Mary-2 military base reached a dead end—there was no agreement on a permanent American presence. Between 2006 and 2008 the Department of State contributed about \$1.4-1.7 million a year to Turkmenistan’s security sphere.<sup>5</sup> Uzbekistan received more or less the same aid or even less while Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, when there was an American military base on their territory, received several times more.

## American Contribution to Turkmenistan’s Security

In Turkmenistan the United States has limited its contribution to the country’s security to donations and training extended to all sorts of departments. There are seminars for the coastal guards stationed in Turkmenbashi: officers are taught how to search ships at sea, detain them, find secret compartments, use force, and identify drugs. There are similar training sessions for customs services and border guards. In fact, this does not cost the American taxpayers very much: in 2008 the U.S. spent \$286 thousand, less than other countries.<sup>6</sup>

Since 2003 the State Customs Service, the State Service of Court Expertise, and the National Center for Criminal Studies at the country’s Ministry of the Interior received several dozen cars and equipment under the EXBS program.<sup>7</sup>

The Altyn Asyr checkpoint (Etrek etrap, the Balkan velaiat), which cost over \$2.5 million, was a result of the cooperation between the National Guard of Nevada and the Government of Turkmenistan. The U.S. and U.N. invested \$1.8 million and \$650 thousand,<sup>8</sup> respectively, in a checkpoint in Imamnazar, the second on the Afghan border in accordance with the U.S. Central Command Strategy for fighting drugs in Central Asia.

The American aid is not large; 23 percent of the small sums<sup>9</sup> that the country receives goes to the security sphere; the country’s economy receives even less.

<sup>4</sup> See: J.K. Davis, M.J. Sweeney, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> See: site of the U.S. Department of State [<http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/index.htm>].

<sup>6</sup> For comparison: America paid twice as much in Tajikistan and 5 times more in Kyrgyzstan (see the site of the U.S. Department of State [<http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/index.htm>]).

<sup>7</sup> These structures received dozens of UAZ cars, night vision devices, binoculars, search sets, water carriers, GPS devices, Motorola radio equipment, luggage-checking equipment, radiation detection pagers, test sets for identifying drugs and precursors, and a gas chromatograph. In 2006 the Agreement on Cooperation in the Security and Law and Order Sphere received an Appendix under which the government of Turkmenistan would get \$450 thousand more to pay for combating drug trafficking, improving court expertise, fortifying the sea border, and providing English courses (see: *Novosti Posolstva Soedinennykh Shtatov v Turkmenistane*, available at [<http://russian.ashgabat.usembassy.gov/archive.html>]).

<sup>8</sup> See: “Pomoshchnik gosudarstvennogo sekretaria SSHa Daniel Sullivan naneset vizit v Turkmenistan i primet uchastie na tseremonii otkrytiia kontrolno-propuskhnogo punkta ‘Imamnazar,’” *Novosti Posolstva*, OOC No. 190, 10.08.2007, available at [<http://russian.ashgabat.usembassy.gov/archive.html>].

<sup>9</sup> In 2008 the sum was limited to \$7.1 million.

## Russia's Political Priorities

Turkmenistan is a neutral state that cooperates extensively with other countries. As an associated CIS member it is only involved in the discussions of the struggle against narcotics and terrorism as an observer; the same applies to its cooperation with the CSTO and SCO.

The 2002 Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation and the 2003 Agreement on Military Cooperation are two fundamental documents related to the two countries' (Russia and Turkmenistan) bilateral relations. Although there are over 22 agreements and treaties with Russia on a wide range of military contacts,<sup>10</sup> the Russian foreign policy concentrates on cooperation in the fuel and energy sphere.<sup>11</sup>

Russia preferred to avoid political discussions with Turkmenistan (this happened earlier in the case of the base in Uzbekistan) and, in exchange for its tacit agreement, outstripped the United States in the energy resource race. On 10 April, 2003 the two countries not only signed an agreement on cooperation in the security sphere (that did not mention military cooperation) but also a much more important agreement on cooperation in the gas sphere that envisages steadily mounting gas export to Russia until 2028.<sup>12</sup> Disagreements pale into insignificance when there is an opportunity to gain advantages in the energy sphere.

There is no real military cooperation between Russia and Turkmenistan: this is confirmed by the fact that since 2000 none of the Russian military has visited Turkmenistan. During the independence years the united command was dissolved and Russian border guards pulled out of the republic. Russia is concentrating on the energy sphere while Turkmenistan needs a security agreement more than Russia. Art 4 of the Agreement mentions an exchange of operational information about terrorist plans.<sup>13</sup> This exchange is limited to information coming from Russia about terrorist plans against the president of Turkmenistan and probably similar designs nurtured by pro-American bureaucrats. This means that information should be personally transferred. Significantly, reshuffles in the power-related structures of Turkmenistan invariably followed personal meetings between President Berdymukhammedov and President Putin. In April 2007, for example, after his visit to Moscow, the president harshly criticized and dismissed then Minister of the Interior Akmamed Rakhmanov. On 15 May, 2007 (three days after his meeting with the president of Russia at which the Caspian gas pipeline agreement was signed) the president of Turkmenistan removed the head of his personal security, Akmurad Rejepov, from his post.

Until recently Russia was successfully using its involvement in the gas sphere and personal contacts to avoid involvement in the military sphere despite the United States' attempts to invigorate its military cooperation with Turkmenistan. Trade turnover between Russia and Turkmenistan is rising: in 2007 it grew by 38 percent compared with 2006 and reached the figure of \$4.8 billion.<sup>14</sup> In July, 2007 the two countries signed an Agreement on an Intergovernmental Russian-Turkmen Commission of Economic Cooperation.

---

<sup>10</sup> They include the agreements on cooperation between the Main Intelligence Directorate of the RF General Staff and the Intelligence Directorate of the Defense Ministry of Turkmenistan; on training the military of Turkmenistan in Russia's educational establishments, on joint airfield and technical support to aircraft, and on military-technical cooperation. The two countries are widely cooperating in the use of military infrastructure.

<sup>11</sup> See: "Otvety ofitsialnogo predstavitelia MID Rossii A.V. Yakovenko na voprosy RIA 'Novosti' po rossiisko-turkenskimi otnosheniam, 10 aprilia 2003," available at [www.mid.ru].

<sup>12</sup> See: *Soglasenie mezhdru Rossiei i Turkmenistanom o sotrudnichestve v oblasti bezopasnosti*, Moskva, Kreml, 10 aprilia 2003.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> See the site of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Turkmenistan [http://www.turkmenistan.mid.ru/rus-tm.html].

## Cooperation with NATO

In 1994 Turkmenistan was the first among Central Asian members to join NATO's Partnership for Peace program. Cooperation remained on paper because President Niyazov preferred to enter into bilateral agreements on training officers for the republic's armed forces. The gas-rich republic either exchanges gas for cooperation programs or pays for them with gas-related Ukrainian and Georgian debts. In this way it has established contacts in the military-political, military, and military-technical spheres, as well as in communication and automatic control and command systems and in the maintenance and modernization of armored vehicles and other military equipment. Georgia repaid its debt of \$340 million by repairing 43 assault planes and six MI-24 and MI-8 helicopters. Ukraine, in turn, repaid its \$400 million debt with services of its military-industrial complex.<sup>15</sup> This made Turkmenistan the most important of Ukraine's partners in the military-technical sphere. In 2003-2004 Ashgabad bought military equipment from Kiev totaling over \$280 million.

The neutral state is using its ramified connections to train officers: there are over 200 Turkmenian military trained in Turkey, 200 in Ukraine, and small groups in Russia and Pakistan. There is a newly-established Military Institute of the republic's Ministry of Defense that trains about 600 people.<sup>16</sup>

America helped Turkmenistan maintain and supply cutters within the U.S Export Control and Related Border Security Program. Since late 2003 the republic has been renting seven cutters and a destroyer from Iran. Several more cutters came from Ukraine and one from the United States. Turkmenistan buys military equipment in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Rumania, and Belarus.

Russia had no gas-related reasons to enter into military-technical cooperation with Turkmenistan. This is also prevented by the absence of donation programs and a corresponding bilateral military agreement, and the fact that the republic does not belong to the CSTO. On rare occasions the republic dealt with Russian enterprises. The Urals Optical Mechanical Plant signed an agreement with the Defense Ministry of Turkmenistan on servicing onboard electronics of the Turkmenian Air Force.<sup>17</sup>

The new president of Turkmenistan has already displayed much more interest in foreign policies than his predecessor: he paid a visit to NATO Headquarters in Brussels where the sides agreed to deepen their practical cooperation in the key spheres. The talks with NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer added vigor to the dialog between Turkmenistan and the Alliance. A U.N. Regional Preventive Diplomacy Center was opened in Ashgabad.

## New Interests in Turkmenistan

The Turkmenian leader's obvious desire to activate international contacts in the gas sphere inspired the leaders of the NATO countries to reach better cooperation in the security sphere under the pretext of protecting the pipelines against terrorists.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> See: M. Vignanskiy, "Gruziia prodala Turkmenii modernizirovanny shturmovik SU-25," *Vremia novostei*, 27 October, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> According to KISI under the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

<sup>17</sup> See: V. Koziulin, "Gosudarstva Tsentralnoi Azii: razvitie vooruzhennykh sil i perspektivy voenno-tekhnicheskogo sotrudnichestva s Rossiei," *Indeks bezopasnosti*, No. 3 (83), 2007.

<sup>18</sup> From the speech of R. Simmons, NATO special representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, during his visit to Ashgabad in May 2008 (see: "V ob'iatiakh NATO," *Voenna-promyshlennyi kurier*, No. 20, 21-27 May, 2008).

On an initiative by Robert Simmons, NATO Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, President Berdymukhammedov attended the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008. "In the Rumanian capital Berdymukhammedov announced that he was prepared to extend his cooperation with the Alliance and offered auxiliary peacekeeping services, in particular, training camps for NATO Blue Helmets as well as storage facilities and bases for NATO forces. He also agreed to railway transportation of the Alliance's cargoes across Turkmenistan to Afghanistan. With the help of the Turkmenian railway the Alliance would be able to bypass Russia by moving its cargoes from Turkey via Georgia and Azerbaijan across the Caspian to the Turkmenian coast and further on to Kushka."<sup>19</sup> This probably means that the president intended to demonstrate his openness and readiness to cooperate, to invite foreign investors for the new gas pipeline project Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India,<sup>20</sup> and to develop contacts with Afghanistan, its nearest neighbor.

The relations between the two countries go back into history; it is common among the Turkmen to have relatives across the border; early in 2001 the Turkmenian capital hosted an inter-Afghan dialog initiated by Turkmenistan. In May, according to *Der Spiegel*, President Berdymukhammedov instructed the customs services and border guards not to interfere with freight transit of the counter-terrorist coalition to Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

It was standard procedure for representatives of the U.S. Central Command to visit Turkmenistan<sup>22</sup> about once a year: the Pentagon hopes to establish cooperation with Ashgabad. In June 2008 Commander of the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Vice-Admiral Kevin J. Cosgriff and Vice-Admiral William Gortney (who had been appointed to the post but not yet taken it by that time) visited Ashgabad where they met the defense minister and chairman of the State Border Guard Service of Turkmenistan. It seems that Ashgabad is still apprehensive of the regime's stability and is shying away from military cooperation with the United States.

In July 2008 Russian Minister of Defense Anatoliy Serdiukov counterbalanced American efforts with his first visit to Ashgabad on the eve of Russian president's visit. He met his Turkmenian colleague General of the Army Agageldy Mamedgeldyev. The media reported that the Russian defense minister "pointed out with satisfaction that the two ministries had stepped up their cooperation and raised it in the past two years to a qualitatively new level."<sup>23</sup> The Russian defense minister referred to the fact that in 2007, on Turkmenistan's instructions, the Russian scientific-research institute of special communication systems, automation, and control started working on a unified system of command and control of the national armed forces. In the latter half of 2007 Russia began deliveries of military motor vehicles under the presidential program of technical modernization of the republic's power-related structures.<sup>24</sup>

The RF Minister of Defense confirmed Russia's readiness to continue cooperation in the sphere of reform and modernization of the National Armed Forces of Turkmenistan. The sides have already outlined the spheres of their bilateral communication. Anatoliy Serdiukov pointed to the training programs that had resumed for the Turkmenian military in the RF Defense Ministry's educational establishments offered free of charge as a pertinent example.<sup>25</sup> In June 2008 the two countries, for the first

<sup>19</sup> See: "Turkmenia rasshiriaet sotrudnichestvo s NATO," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 13 May, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> He discussed this idea with President George W. Bush at the Bucharest summit.

<sup>21</sup> "Der Spiegel: Turkmenia peredast NATO voenno-vozdushnuiu bazu v Mary?" *Fergana.Ru*, 20 May, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Admiral W. Fallon, Commander of the U.S. Central Command, visited Turkmenistan in June 2007 and January 2008. Before that Commander of the U.S. Central Command General John P. Abizaid has come to the republic twice (in July 2004 and August 2005). The deputy commander visited Turkmenistan in September 2004.

<sup>23</sup> "Turkmenskiy voennyi muskul," *Voенно-promyshlennyi kurier*, No. 28 (244), 16-22 July, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> The Ministry of the Interior of Turkmenistan has already received about 150 new Hunter high mobility vehicles from the Ulianovsk Car Plant totaling \$1.5 million. See: V. Paramonov, O. Stolpovskiy, "Dvustoronnee sotrudnichestvo Rossii i Turkmenistana v voennoi sfere," site of the Institute of Strategic Studies and Forecasts at the KRSU, Bishkek [http://www.easttime.ru/analitic/1/2/541.html].

<sup>25</sup> "Turkmenskiy voennyi muskul," *Voенно-promyshlennyi kurier*, No. 28 (244), 16-22 July, 2008.

time in recent years, signed a contract on deliveries of six Russia-produced Smerch multiple launch rocket systems totaling \$70 million.<sup>26</sup> This was predated by the visit of Turkmenian Defense Minister Agageldy Mamedgeldyev to the Russian exhibition of armaments, military equipment, and ammunition—Nizhniy Tagil-2008. During his visit the minister declared that his country wanted to buy Russian military equipment and weapons and needed Russia's modernization services. The minister signed an agreement on servicing the already used military devices.<sup>27</sup> Russia agreed to provide the Turkmenian naval forces with long-term lease of one latest Molnia-type missile boat.

Late in August 2008 the republic organized military exercises in its western area that involved all the types of weapons and equipment the republic had at its disposal. Analysts believe that they were prompted by the five-day war in South Ossetia and were, therefore, anti-Russian.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the same analysts deemed it necessary to point out that the Gvozdika and Akatsia self-propelled howitzers, Grad and Uragan multiple launch rocket systems, Skad operational-tactical missile complex, Osa antiaircraft missile system, Shilka self-propelled antiaircraft gun, and Luna-M tactical missile involved in the exercises belong to the weapon type of the 1960s-1980s,<sup>29</sup> which means that the Georgian and Turkmenian armies were worlds apart and that the latter had nothing with which to scare Russia.

It is worth noting that some time later, in September, local mafias or well-trained Islamic extremists fought in the streets of the republic's capital against the law-enforcement forces.<sup>30</sup> It is not known whether the president knew about these imminent actions. One thing is clear: the republic's military might did not make any impression on the illegal formations. The very fact that there was shooting in the capital speaks volumes: the power-related structures were caught napping. This casts doubt on the security of the Turkmenian-Afghan border and, as a result, on the effectiveness of American aid (several hundred thousand U.S. dollars) extended to meet the needs of the republican border guards.

To sum up the developments in the capital President Berdymukhammedov demanded that the power-related structures open a police school; it was also decided to set up a training center for drug fighters and launch republic-wide operations on its basis. The republic will receive specialized anti-terrorist units equipped with the latest weapons and trained by the best instructors. It was announced that the special services would receive more money and that twelve border posts would be equipped with latest devices and weapons.<sup>31</sup> The republic cannot cope with this on its own; it will look elsewhere for equipment and training. Border issues are a traditional American concern while Russia can supply equipment and training. Certain preliminary agreements have been reached. According to the media Russia is trying to incorporate Turkmenistan into the CSTO<sup>32</sup> or, as the author believes, into Russia's political orbit. Since 2007 the republic has been actively cooperating within the experimental project of the Russia-NATO Council for training anti-narcotic fighters in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> See: M. Berdyev, "Turkmenskiy bronepoezd," *Oasis*, No. 16 (84), August 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> RusEnergy.com refers to its own sources, which said that everything started as provocations. Armed people rode around in cars, approached police posts, and, frightening policemen and police patrols, demanded a meeting with the minister of the interior. One of the posts was fired at, a policeman was killed. On Friday some of the terrorists captured a drinking water plant in the north of Ashgabad not far from the international airport and the Karakum canal (an extensive area of Khitrovka) and took about 50 hostages. The extremists demanded that the president, the medjlis, and Khalk Maslakhaty (the higher representative structure) declare the formation of an Islamic State of Turkmenistan at the sitting of the Popular Assembly scheduled for 26 September that had been expected to adopt a new Constitution describing Turkmenistan as a secular state. See: B. Seidakhmetova, "Tanki v Ashkhabade," *Novoe pokolenie* (Kazakhstan), 19 September, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> See: S. Arbenin, "Turkmenistan: V kapkane neitraliteta," *Ferghana.ru*, 24 September, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> See: "Turkmenistan prisma trivaetsia k ODKB," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 19 December, 2008.

The above suggests that the new president's more active contacts with Russia, the West, and China and the foreign policy of equidistance inherited from his predecessor notwithstanding, cooperation with Russia in various, including military, spheres has produced practical results and will probably continue. Cooperation with the United States is progressing yet the Pentagon is not involved in weapon supplies or training programs. China, on the other hand, delivered military equipment and uniforms totaling \$3 million on a military credit base to Turkmenistan in 2008. The republican budget, however, will force the Turkmenian leaders to seek better, and cheaper, equipment on better conditions that can be found in Moscow.

Russia will not desist from trying to incorporate Turkmenistan into military structures (the CIS United Air Defense System, of which it is formal member since 1995, or the system of mutual information about the movement of MANPADs). Ashgabad has finally awoken to the threats emanating from its neighbor—Afghanistan, the main source of danger to the world. The Turkmenian leaders are resolved to preserve the authoritarian system, which needs a strong army—something that shapes Russia's interests. The country cannot modernize its armed forces on its own; it needs at least a predictable partner, if not an ally. Russia is prepared to ensure security if not of the regime then of the gas contracts (it blends its energy and security policy just as successfully as or even better than NATO). The past history of a common army as well as the extensive official and unofficial ties give Russia a good opportunity to increase its influence in Turkmenistan's military sphere.

---