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The Need and Relevance of Enhanced Security Cooperation between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan

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Afghanistan's location makes it a land bridge between Central Asia and South Asia. A stable and secure Afghanistan can play a vital role in facilitating robust economic development in both regions. To its north and northeast, Afghanistan borders Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (which are all oil and gas rich countries). To its east, southeast and south, it borders Pakistan. And, to its west, south, and southwest, it borders Iran. Turkmenistan, a Central Asian country, is the world's fifth largest producer of gas. And a Turkmenistan will require a stable and peaceful Afghanistan for establishing and expanding its economic ties with South Asian countries and beyond.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan's foreign policy was anchored on its own domestic nation-building priorities and the principle of positive neutrality.² Turkmenistan's first engagement with Afghanistan was in February 1992, for the purpose of establishing economic ties by building trade ports along the Amu Darya River.³

In 2002, Turkmenistan further expanded its relations with Afghanistan by establishing its embassy in Kabul. In 2007, the first summit between Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and Afghan President Hamid Karzai took place.⁴ This resulted in a series of summits in multilateral formats in all

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2. Sir Jan, and Horák, Slavomír. "Turkmenistan's Afghan border conundrum." Social Science Open Access Repository (SSOAR), 2016. https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/47082/ssoar-2016-sir_et_al-Turkmenistans_Afghan_border_conundrum.pdf?sequence=1

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

spheres, ranging from business to people-to-people contacts.⁵ On matters of security too, Turkmenistan has undertaken some initiatives both bilaterally and multilaterally, through strategic partnership and the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process.

This essay examines Turkmenistan's role with regard to peace and security in Afghanistan. To do so, it explores Turkmenistan's security concerns vis-à-vis Afghanistan; assesses whether Turkmenistan's economic relations have an impact on security issues in Afghanistan; and identifies some actions that Turkmenistan can take to facilitate regional cooperation and bilateral relations towards bringing stability in Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan's Security Concerns Regarding Afghanistan

In an interview for this paper, the Spokesperson of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, Ehsan Taheri, said "Mohammad Umar Daudzai the special representative of the country in peace talks is assigned to be in contact with the countries of the region to understand their concerns regarding insecurity in the country. One of the concerns shared by Turkmenistan is continuous war and insecurity in Afghanistan that may spill over Afghanistan's borders."⁶ The issue of potential spillover effects is one of the main security concerns in Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries with regard to the security situation in Afghanistan. Other concerns that Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries share include cross-border terrorism and drug trafficking. Turkmenistan and Afghanistan share borders along the Afghan provinces of Faryab, Jowzjan, Badghis and Herat-all of which have consistently experienced insurgent attacks. In fact, several areas in these provinces are under Taliban control or influence.⁷ In 2014 and 2015, the Taliban made at least three attempts to attack Turkmen border guards in order to steal weapons.⁸ In 2018, between January and August alone, Badghis and Faryab were among the seven

5. Ibid.

6. Taheri, Ehsan. Spokesperson for Afghanistan High Peace Council. Interview by Author. Kabul, Afghanistan. January 22, 2019.

7. Pannier, Bruce. "Is there a terror threat in Turkmenistan?" Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, August 01, 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-turkmenistan-terror-threat-afghanistan-islamic-state/28653368.html>

8. "Turkmenistan: Moscow Courts Ashgabat for Security Support." Risk Advisory Group, July 16, 2016. <https://www.riskadvisory.com/news/turkmenistan-moscow-courts-ashgabat-for-security-support/>

provinces which were mostly affected by insurgent attacks,⁹ making border security the key security concern between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. Since 2013 in particular, the border security issue between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan has intensified. In fact, as recently as early 2019, tens of Afghan security forces were forced to make a strategic retreat into Turkmen territory following heavy clashes with the Taliban in Badghis province, in which the Taliban also captured over 50 Afghan soldiers (who were later released).

Cross-border security is further complicated by the fact that an estimated 1.5 million ethnic Turkmen population live along the Turkmen border in Afghanistan's Faryab and Jowzjan provinces. Due to the Taliban's presence in these two provinces, Afghan Turkmen residing in these areas have set up local militias-led by Gurbandurdy and Emir Karyad, both of whom had previously fought the Soviet troops in Afghanistan-to protect the Turkmen population.¹⁰ Since 2013, the Taliban have inched towards the Turkmen border, posing serious security threats to Turkmenistan.¹¹ In February 2014, the first of the violent clashes took place between the Taliban and Turkmen border guards, which resulted in the killing of three Turkmen border guards and several Taliban militants.¹² The militias linking themselves to Islamist groups too pose a dire security threat to the secular regime in Turkmenistan.¹³ As a response, Turkmenistan initiated a new plan under which male Turkmen citizens under the age of 50 are required to enlist for military service.¹⁴ The security threats have also prompted Turkmenistan to consider changing its policy of neutrality and to engage in the Collective Security Treaty Organization with Russia.

Another key concern for Turkmenistan is drug trafficking, which is one of the

9. Putz, Catherine. "How Concerned is Turkmenistan about its Afghan border?" *The Diplomat*, January 17, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/how-concerned-is-turkmenistan-about-its-afghan-border/>

10. Indeo, Fabio. "Turkmenistan 2015: existing challenges to the permanent neutrality and the strategic development of the multivector energy policy." *Asia Mair*, 2015. <https://www.asiamair.org/the-journal/asia-mair-vol-xxvi-2015/turkmenistan-2015-existing-challenges-to-the-permanent-neutrality-and-the-strategic-development-of-the-multivector-energy-policy.html>

11. Ali, Obaid. "Moving East in the North: Transitioned Faryab and the Taliban." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, May 17, 2013. <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/moving-east-in-the-north-transitioned-faryab-and-the-taleban/>

12. Sir Jan. "Turkmenistan's Afghan border conundrum." *Open Access Repository* (2016): 124. https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/47082/ssoar-2016-sir_et_al-Turkmenistans_Afghan_border_conundrum.pdf?sequence=1

13. *Ibid.*

14. Putz, Catherine. "How Concerned is Turkmenistan about its Afghan border?" *The Diplomat*, January 17, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/how-concerned-is-turkmenistan-about-its-afghan-border/>

main sources of revenue for terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan. A wide range of narcotics are smuggled through Central Asian borders. At present, Afghanistan produces around 75-80% of the world's opiates, and Kandahar, Helmand, Nangarhar, and Herat are among the major provinces where opium cultivation and production take place. Opiates produced in these regions are trafficked through Central Asia via several routes, which include the northern route along the Afghan-Turkmen border.¹⁵ Meanwhile, drug trafficking has become one of the main sources of corruption in Turkmenistan,¹⁶ making it a source of concern for the Turkmen government for its own functioning.

Economic Relations and Afghanistan's Security

In the contemporary world, a country's role in world politics is based on soft power and a strong economy. For a resource-rich country like Turkmenistan, robust economic linkages with other countries, especially those in South Asia, is vital. Undoubtedly, security in Afghanistan is important for Turkmenistan to establish such ties and to enhance economic development.

Afghanistan's economic relations with Turkmenistan encompass three key areas. Foremost of them is the cooperation in Afghanistan's electricity sector in north and northwest, which includes Herat and Balkh provinces. Since 2011, major projects led by Turkmen investments are involved in increasing hydroelectricity generation capacity in Afghanistan.¹⁷ The second area of cooperation between the two countries is communication and transportation projects. These projects can link Afghanistan to the global markets through Central Asia, particularly through Turkmenistan. One example is the recently launched Lapis Lazuli corridor. The third area of cooperation is the oil and gas industry.¹⁸ One of the examples in this regard is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project. Optimal implementation of all initiatives and projects in these sectors as well as advancement and expansion of economic ties between Turkmenistan and

15. Golunov, Sargey. "Border security in Central Asia: before and after September 11." Ministry of Defense, Austria, http://www.bundesheer.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/10_wg_ftc_40.pdf

16. Ibid.

17. Sir Jan, and Horák, Slavomír. "Turkmenistan's Afghan border conundrum." Social Science Open Access Repository (SSOAR), 2016. Open Access Repository (2016): 111-114. https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/47082/ssoar-2016-sir_et_al-Turkmenistans_Afghan_border_conundrum.pdf?sequence=1

18. Ibid.

Afghanistan can only take place when the latter is secure. The TAPI project is a prominent example of a project with immense potential whose prospects have been hampered by insecurity for a long time. The gas pipeline project was conceptualized in 1995 but due to civil war and insecurity, progress on it was stalled for several years, before moving forward. At present, the TAPI pipeline is proceeding, albeit slowly, and is set to pass through three Afghan provinces—Helmand, Kandahar and Herat. Both Turkmenistan and Afghanistan have concerns regarding the security of the pipeline,¹⁹ and in 2011, the Afghan government deployed 5000 to 7000 security personnel to guard the pipeline.²⁰

Meanwhile, Turkmenistan has signaled its readiness for security cooperation to activate the three areas of cooperation and trade. For instance, in its 2017 document, titled, “Concept of the foreign policy line of Turkmenistan for 2017-2023”, Ashgabat emphasizes that “Cooperation with the states in the region on the principles of mutual understanding and mutual trust is the main condition for maintaining and strengthening peace and security in Central Asia.”²¹ In this regard, projects like TAPI can also play a significant role in facilitating security and development in the country. It can contribute towards development by creating job opportunities, and also aid in reducing corruption which too is among the key sources of insecurity and instability.

Turkmenistan’s Role in Regional Cooperation Initiatives for Afghanistan’s Security

Security cooperation between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan can be pursued through both bilateral and multilateral frameworks in this regard. The recent “Strategic Partnership Agreement” between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, which was signed in February 2019, is an example of a bilateral framework. This agreement entails security cooperation and

19. Foster, John. “Afghanistan the TAPI pipeline, and Energy Geopolitics.” *Journal of Energy Security*, March 23, 2010. http://www.ensec.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=233:afghanistan-the-tapi-pipeline-and-energy-geopolitics

20. Sadat, Sayed Masood. “TAPI and Casa-1000: Win-Win Trade between Central Asia and South Asia.” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, May, 2015. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311716684_TAPI_AND_CASA-1000_WIN-WIN_TRADE_BETWEEN_CENTRAL_ASIA_AND_SOUTH_ASIA

21. “Turkmen-Afghan relations: the example of good-neighborliness and regional integration policy.” *Turkmenistan Today*, April 13, 2017. <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/en/articles.aspx&article6210&cat35>

joint efforts towards countering terrorism, among others.²² Although this bilateral arrangement is a relatively new agreement and it will be tested over time for efficacy, it does offer a solid platform for security cooperation between the two countries.

At the 2014 UN General Assembly Meeting, the Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Rashid Meredov, stated that Turkmenistan had, under the auspices of the UN, hosted a broad-based dialogue among various political parties of Afghanistan.²³ Furthermore, in June 2015, Turkmenistan hosted a workshop organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on international co-operation in criminal matters between the law enforcement agencies, prosecutorial and central authorities of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, in Ashgabat.²⁴ This is another example of Turkmenistan's willingness to engage with Afghanistan on security issues.

Additionally, the Kabul Process for Peace and Security in Afghanistan is among the various multilateral platforms that provide avenues for security cooperation. In the declaration issued post the second meeting of the Kabul Process held in February 2018, the participating members, including Turkmenistan, committed to security cooperation and counter-terrorism.²⁵ The declaration also stresses on the resolve among the participating members to jointly address the threats posed by Transnational Terrorist Networks, as well as Transnational Criminal Organizations. It is important to note that these two issues are among Turkmenistan's major concerns with regard to Afghanistan and consequently, provide potent avenues for bilateral cooperation.

22. Amanat, Hayatullah. "Afghanistan-Turkmenistan Sign Strategic Partnership Agreement." Tolo News. February 21, 2019. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/afghanistan-turkmenistan-sign-strategic-partnership-agreement>

23. "The Fasten Seat Belt Light is Illuminated", Warns Secretary-General, Summoning World Leaders at Start of Annual Debate to 'Find and Nurture Seeds of Hope.' United Nations, September 24, 2014. <https://www.un.org/en/ga/69/meetings/gadebate/24sep/turkmenistan.shtml>

24. OSCE workshop aims to enhance co-operation between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in fighting terrorism and organized crime." Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe., June 15, 2015. <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/164286>

25. "The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration." U.S. Embassy Kabul, March 01, 2018. <https://af.usembassy.gov/kabul-process-peace-security-cooperation-afghanistan-declaration/>

Another multilateral framework which provides avenues for security cooperation between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan is the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, which was initiated by Afghanistan in November 2011, and in which Turkmenistan is a member.²⁶ The first declaration of this multilateral process, titled ‘Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan’, was issued in November 2011,²⁷ and Clause 13 of the declaration states that “We declare our readiness to engage in sincere, result-oriented cooperation at all levels, which will not just help Afghanistan, but will also be beneficial to security and prosperity in the region as a whole.”²⁸ Other declarations of the process that emphasize on security and counter-terrorism cooperation include the Beijing Declaration, titled ‘Deepening Cooperation for Sustainable Security and Prosperity of the “Heart of Asia”’ (October 2014); the Islamabad Declaration, titled ‘Emphasising Enhanced Cooperation for Countering Security Threats and Promoting Regional Connectivity’ (December 2015); the Amritsar Declaration, titled, ‘Addressing Challenges, Achieving Prosperity’ (December 2016); and the Baku Declaration, titled, ‘Security & Economic Connectivity Towards A Strengthened Heart of Asia Region’, (December 2017).²⁹

Moreover, Turkmenistan has also demonstrated its interest in playing a role in the Afghan peace process in an effort towards facilitating security in the country, and has announced its support for Afghan-led peace talks.³⁰ In 2011, when the issue of peace talks with the Taliban was being discussed, Turkmenistan was one of the countries that offered to host such talks.³¹ More recently, in March 2018, Turkmenistan participated in the Tashkent Conference, which was a key multilateral gathering aimed at fostering consensus towards peace and security in Afghanistan. The declaration of the Conference emphasized on cooperation in the areas of

26. The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process official website. <http://hoa.gov.af>

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Erfanyar, Ahmad Shah. “Turkmenistan reaffirms support for Afghan peace process, mega projects.” Pajhwok, November 07, 2018. <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/11/07/turkmenistan-reaffirm-support-afghan-peace-process-mega-projects>

31. Muhammad Tahir. “Peace talks with the Taliban in Turkmenistan?” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty. May 27, 2011. https://www.rferl.org/a/peace_talks_taliban_turkmenistan/24207460.html

peace and reconciliation, counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics.³²

Conclusion

Turkmenistan has always had a keen interest in developing economic relations with Afghanistan. However, the seemingly never ending conflict and terrorism in Afghanistan has resulted in apprehensions in Turkmenistan with regard to two key issues: cross-border terrorism and cross-border narcotics trafficking. However, this state of insecurity also provides an arena for cooperation among the two countries, such as through joint efforts to secure common interests pertaining to economic ties, stability and security.

For various reasons, Turkmenistan can play a vital role in contributing towards security and stability in Afghanistan. The existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation frameworks provide solid anchors for security cooperation between the two neighbors. The February 2019 “Strategic Partnership Agreement” provides a framework for security cooperation and joint efforts for fighting terrorism; and multilateral platforms including the Kabul Process for Peace and Security in Afghanistan, the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, and declaration of the 2018 Tashkent Conference, provide additional avenues and opportunities for security cooperation between the two neighbors.

Policy Recommendations

- Sustainable and inclusive development is an important factor in preventing and ending conflict and then sustaining peace. As an immediate and energy rich neighbor, Turkmenistan can play a significant role in Afghanistan in this regard, and for that regional cooperation initiatives must be given utmost priority.
- The geographical, historical and cultural linkages between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan offer enormous potential for mutually beneficial joint projects, trade and exchanges. Turkmenistan should ease visa provisions for Afghans, especially for merchants; this will pave the way for robust cultural exchanges as well.

32. “Declaration of the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan: Peace Process, Security Cooperation & Regional Connectivity.” The Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations, March 30, 2018. <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/declaration-tashkent-conference-afghanistan-peace-process-security-cooperation-regional>

- Poverty and lack of job opportunities are among the factors that enable drug production and drug-trafficking. Thus, the Turkmen government along with the Afghan government should provide support to aid programs to develop alternative crops. This would help weaning poppy cultivators away from poppy production and towards licit crops that also generate sufficient revenue.