

POSITIVE NEUTRALITY AS THE BASIS OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF TURKMENISTAN

BORIS O. SHIKHMURADOV

Boris O. Shikhmuradov is Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkmenistan.

Modern civilisation, standing at the boundary of the third millennium, enters the forthcoming era with great hopes. It is not accidental. The whole second half of the third millenium, especially the last century, was marked by the tensions of peoples' struggle for their independence and sovereignty. The present political panorama of the world is the natural result of the lengthy and difficult process of gaining the independence of whole peoples.

A characteristic of this process is the formation of new geopolitical regions whose internal situations have begun to substantially influence global development. The modern Central Asian region, situated within the so-called zone of contact of civilisations of the West and the East, is such a case. Cultural and geopolitical factors, as well as the presence of great fuel and energy resources, are increasingly concentrating the attention and interests of the world community in this region. This faces the Central Asian states with the need to make a conscious choice about their place in the geopolitical and geo-economic system, and to undertake significant responsibility for elaborating and realising their foreign policy course.

An objective analysis of Turkmenistan's foreign policy, as leading political analysts of major research centres admit, leads to the conclusion that the concept of constructive neutrality that Turkmenistan has taken as a principle of its foreign policy course is the optimal model and without historical analogy. This concept combines the prospects for Turkmenistan's own development with the trends and character of regional and global processes, and national interests with the objective requirements of today; it corresponds to the geographical, historical, and ethno-cultural realities of Turkmenistan, the mentality of its people, and their psychological disposition for good neighbourhood relations, mutual respect and tolerance. That is why Turkmenistan's experience is now of the greatest interest to political and research centres around the world.

Turkmenistan has come to this model logically, realising this policy just after becoming independent.

Since its first days of independence, Turkmenistan has quietly, without any political romanticism, begun to realise a programme of national state construction, of building a system of foreign relations, and of searching for optimal ways of participating in international relations on the basis of its own national interests. The construction of a new state, taking account of unique national characteristics, mentality and traditions led to a close correlation with the requirements of stability in the region and of strengthening international security.

Following this logic, Turkmenistan has chosen as its main priority a course of stable development as outlined in the 'Ten Years of Stability' programme. The strategic tasks of internal and foreign policy of the state were closely connected in this programme. The tasks of guaranteeing internal policy stability were aimed at the creation of conditions for a fundamental reformation of the state structure and economics. Those conditions were vital to the realisation of the great transcontinental, economic, resource and, most importantly, human potential of Turkmenistan. The foreign policy line of the state was bent to securing a stability throughout the state that allowed efficient trade and economic co-operation arrangements with neighbouring countries, and the realisation of systematic integration into the world market.

According to the chosen course of reformation, the new institutions of state authority and regulation corresponding to the traditions, customs and mentality of the people, have been formed in Turkmenistan in a short period. The political system was raised to a new qualitative level and, at the same time, social shocks and splintering into political groupings were avoided.

The strengthening of state principles has led, simultaneously, to the persistent observance of the fundamental security of the population and systematic transition to market economy. It has been promoted by the policy of the state regulation of major branches of the economy and provided the population with a guaranteed minimum of social and welfare provisions. Besides the establishment of a guaranteed minimum of food provision, the population of Turkmenistan was freed from payments for use of electricity, gas and water. Rent was frozen at the initial minimal level. Discipline and public order enforcement were raised to the proper level.

Such a re-orientation of internal policy is not accidental. The world's historical experience witnesses that significant economic success is achieved by those countries which manage to effectively use the state regulation of economic processes, including a transition to a market economy and the widespread development of enterprise. Remembering US history, we can see that during the first 10-15 years of its existence, the Founding Fathers of its democratic structure persistently recognised the policy of state regulation.

All this has promoted civil peace and stability in our country as well as the transition of society to a new level of quality. Thanks to these measures, Turkmenistan's population did not actually feel the consequences of the misfortunes and difficulties many other countries experienced as a result of not properly considering the application of 'shock therapy'.

Side by side with the creation of the internal political conditions for Turkmenistan's development, active work on the elaboration and realisation of a foreign policy course has been under way, and this work was based on a new concept of peace and regional co-operation.

Careful study of the centuries-old history of our people, who were able to keep their national identity and the territorial integrity of their land for about thousand years after the break-ups of the great empires founded by the Turkmens, showed that the most effective foreign policy course of our state can be realised through the principle of neutrality. The traditions of peacefulness and good neighbourliness, the mentality and cultural originality of our people were also appropriate for this.

Among the obvious factors that have stipulated and made real the embodiment of the political aims of neutrality were the following:

First, as mentioned, there were the specific historical features of Turkmen people, who have always distinguished themselves by their peacefulness, good neighbourliness, diligence and originality. Faithfulness to traditions and religion, respect and reverence to the authority of a councillor or elder (be that the head of a family or of the whole state) are also essential qualities of Turkmen society. Such solidity of the social foundation may be to a great extent explained by the natural and geographic specialities of Turkmenistan--survival in desert areas, where each drop of water is equal to a golden grain, would be impossible without a solid family model and peace between neighbouring peoples.

Second, there was the wealth of minerals given to the Turkmen land by nature. Namely, the great resources of natural gas and oil and unique deposits of non-ferrous and rare-earth metals which are the material basis for the development of national and foreign economic relations. We should also mention the rich agricultural potential of Turkmenistan which provides us with great prospects of entering the world market.

The government of Turkmenistan concluded, after considering the need for stabilisation and development in Central and South Asia and the geopolitical and ethno-cultural situation of the country, that an internationally recognised status of permanent neutrality was the path to follow. That is why since the very first days of independence, when the foreign policy strategy of Turkmenistan was being elaborated, the principles of neutralism were adopted.

The course for acquiring the recognised status of neutrality was supported by practical measures of both a political and an economic character. The idea of neutrality taken as a concept was pursued constantly at the official and working meetings of the president of Turkmenistan with leaders of

other countries, and put logically into bilateral and multilateral documents with the participation of Turkmenistan. For that the definite aim was set--to let the states of the world community form the right understanding of our foreign policy direction.

During more than four years, the leadership of Turkmenistan gradually and consistently advanced towards the accomplishment of this aim.

In July 1992, at the meeting of the heads of the states and governments of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (now OSCE), the president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurad Turkmenbashi (formally with the surname Niyazov), for the first time proclaimed positive neutrality in politics and openness in economics as our key principles.

On 15 March 1995, at the third meeting of the heads of member states of the Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO) in Islamabad, President Turkmenbashi made a declaration in which he stressed that Turkmenistan constitutionally accepted all the obligations of a permanent neutral state and was ready to act as a peace-making centre of the region--with the corresponding international guarantees.

Speaking in Islamabad, President Turkmenbashi made suggestions which at first sight went beyond the limits of the agenda and were extraordinary for the Central Asian region.

As Saparmurad Turkmenbashi mentioned, the Asian continent has never had a centre where it was possible to solve acute international problems without any conventions. Recognising the contributions of the political and peace-making centres of Austria and Switzerland in the history of international relations, he stressed that the new political realities dictate the need to establish such centres in Asia too.

In the Islamabad Declaration adopted at the summit, the member states of the ECO--Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Pakistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Tadjikistan greeted the statement of the president of Turkmenistan by expressing their readiness to support by all means Turkmenistan in its intent. After the ECO countries, the intent of Turkmenistan was seconded by the Russian Federation, France, Great Britain, the People's Republic of China, Germany, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Austria, Romania, Egypt, Israel, Ukraine, Armenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and others.

That the idea of neutrality was put forward in Islamabad is logical: Turkmenistan had first to secure the support of its immediate neighbours before applying to the world community.

At last, on 20 October 1995, at the meeting of the heads of states and governments of the Non-Aligned Movement in Cartagena, Colombia, not only did Turkmenistan become the 114th member with full rights of the Movement, but also its neutral course was seconded by all its members.

As a result of painstaking work, Turkmenistan proved to be in keeping with the status of a neutral state. Evidently, having the necessary characteristics allows the country to declare seriously its neutral status.

First of all, peace and internal stability is maintained in Turkmenistan; reliable social guarantees are created as one of the key components for conducting a neutral course. Only such a policy of stability (even the first social and political programme in Turkmenistan is called '10 years of stability') is supported by all the Turkmen people, and it received a positive reaction from the world community.

Second, it is notable that the infrastructure for holding all kinds of different international fora is being created and constantly developed. The international airport, a network of comfortable hotels and business centres were built in the country; transport communications, modern according to world standards, and telephone communications are being created.

Third, after becoming a full member of the UN, OSCE and other international organisations in 1992, Turkmenistan's foreign policy followed the generally accepted principles and norms of international law. Primarily, they are the principles of peaceful coexistence, repudiation of the use of force, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, etc.

Fourth, Turkmenistan was among the first countries to sign unconditionally a number of international treaties and conventions for the non-proliferation of nuclear and other kinds of weapons of mass destruction. In particular, Turkmenistan has ratified the treaty of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, the convention prohibiting the development, production and stockpiling of bacteriological (biological) and toxic weapons and for their destruction. Turkmenistan has signed the Geneva Conventions of 1949 on humanitarian issues, etc.

And fifth, Turkmenistan does not have on its territory any military bases and military units of foreign countries, blocs and alliances. Our country has not joined military and political unions or alliances, other organisations with strict regulating functions. In particular, being a member of the CIS, Turkmenistan did not enter the Council for Collective Security of the Commonwealth. Being free to make decisions in the areas of politics, economy and other spheres, Turkmenistan does not have territorial or any other kind of arguments with any states, including its neighbours.

These kinds of internal and external factors and measures taken in advance according to our foreign policy, allowed Turkmenistan to put forward a proposal for recognition of its neutral status to the UN.

The global importance of such a precedent and the maturity of this concept were recognised by the international community when 185 UN members unanimously voted for a special resolution on the permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan on 12 December 1995.

Here comes a very reasonable question: How did the Turkmen phenomenon of neutrality draw the attention of the world community? The idea of neutrality of a state itself is not new. For example, the neutrality of Switzerland began in 1815 with the adoption of the 'Helvetic Union Affairs Declaration'. The neutrality of Belgium was defined in 1831 and existed till 1919. The neutrality of Luxembourg had a similar destiny. During the following historical period there was a number of projects to recognise the neutrality of several states, for example Greece, Afghanistan, Egypt and a group of Scandinavian countries. But all of them were only ideas, or unsuccessful projects. In fact, only Switzerland succeeded in keeping its neutral status. Additionally, Austria gained neutrality in 1955.

As a rule, historical precedents of state neutrality, including Switzerland's, were based on the famous so-called 'right for war'. The recognition of neutrality of any state was usually initiated not by the country in question but by a group of countries at war. The imbalance of powers was bringing to naught the idea of neutrality.

The Turkmen model of neutrality radically changes the existing views on neutrality and, first of all, is based on modern international law, which is a law of peace. It may become the basis of a new concept of co-operation and progress for peace in the region. The proposed formula of stabilisation is vital for any society where human beings are declared to be of the highest value. For each individual, it means family and personal security, peace among friends, and peaceful labour. For the family it means peace in every house, a peaceful life and a succession of generations, the continuation of fathers' work and respect for parents. For social strata and population groups it is mutual social understanding and support, absence of conflicts and of tension. For nations it means inner- and inter-ethnic consent and mutual understanding. For the state it means stability, guaranteed development, and the absence of wars and civil disasters. For the region it means geopolitical co-operation, reliable partnership, territorial immunity and security of borders.

Lastly, for the international community it means a pledge to peaceful and evolutionary progress on a global scale.

From the first, the Turkmen people have realised that the new status is the guarantee of stability and prosperity, civil consent and social concord in the country. Turkmen mothers praise peace that gives confidence that their sons go to military service only for the purpose of defending their motherland, not for fighting in some other place.

It may be considered nothing but appreciation of their national leader that the day of recognition of permanent neutrality became a national holiday and is now celebrated every year. If Independence Day is the most important holiday for the Turkmen people then the Day of Neutrality is the second most important holiday in Turkmenistan.

After the adoption of the UN resolution on the permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan the new reality required legislative consolidation of the international status of the country. The appropriate amendments to the Constitution were adopted by the People's Council on 27 December 1995. The Council approved the decision to adopt the appropriate Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan 'About the Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan', a declaration of international obligations of neutral Turkmenistan in the area of human rights, and also the concept of the foreign policy of Turkmenistan as a neutral state. These basic documents became the basis, the foundation, defining clear guidelines for the foreign policy course of Turkmenistan.

The legislative consolidation of Turkmenistan's neutrality at the level of a special UN resolution and the adoption of the appropriate constitutional law provides a full guarantee of the neutral status of the country. The guarantees of the international community include the observance by all the UN members of the obligations related to Turkmenistan and unity in their actions for keeping and strengthening its neutral status. Therefore, there is an important point here that this status cannot be changed or cancelled without the agreement of all UN members.

According to its neutral status and the obligations reflected in its law on neutrality, Turkmenistan does not participate in military blocs and alliances, does not allow the creation of military bases on its territory or its use by other countries for military purposes. The armed forces of Turkmenistan serve the purpose of defending its independence, sovereignty and territorial unity.

The significance of the permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan is expressed in the pursuance of a peaceful policy and when our country undertakes peace-making functions in the region. Not accidentally, for example, the UN officially authorised Turkmenistan to host an uninterrupted round of inter-Tadjik negotiations. An international forum on humanitarian aid to Afghanistan was held in Ashkhabad on January 1997.

The constitutional law of Turkmenistan on permanent neutrality also envisages that Turkmenistan develop international economic co-operation on the basis of the equality of rights, mutual benefit and the taking into account of the interests of all sides involved in this process. It considers this co-operation to be the most important instrument for strengthening mutual trust between countries and regions, keeping peace and stability.

First of all, in such circumstances permanent neutrality is an important guarantee for foreign investment and international bank capital flows into the economy of Turkmenistan. Such status in many cases consolidates the world's financial and industrial elites' trust in the country. It is worthwhile remembering that for the short period since independence, five billion dollars has been invested in the economy of Turkmenistan, much of which is from the country's own sources.

A Human Being is declared under the Constitution to be of the highest value in the society and state in Turkmenistan. The appropriate provision is reflected in the constitutional law on Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan too. Turkmenistan recognises and respects human rights and freedoms, accepted by the world community and adopted as norms of international law, and creates political, economic, legal and other guarantees for their effective realisation. Besides that, Turkmenistan, having as its base generally accepted legal documents, takes an active part in international humanitarian actions.

In realisation of the above-mentioned obligation, Turkmenistan effectively uses its membership in such international organisations as the UNICEF, the World Health Organisation, UNESCO, the International Labour Organisation, and others.

The Institute of Democracy and Human Rights was created by presidential decree for the purpose of the effective realisation of the social and economic reforms programme, fulfilment of the international obligations in the field of human rights, and conducting scientific research in this area.

The further we go on the way of development, the wider new opportunities get. The same happens with the potential dynamics becoming elaborated and realised under the leadership of Saparmurad Turkmenbashi's policy of permanent neutrality, which is the pivot of the modern foreign policy of our country.