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Turkmenistan

Overview

Turkmenistan is a strategically situated country with significant energy resources, making it a potential partner for governments, including the United States, interested in advancing regional stability and economic development. Since becoming independent with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan's authoritarian government has kept the country largely isolated from the outside world and maintained tight control over the economy. While Turkmenistan's constitution establishes "permanent neutrality" as the core principle of the country's foreign policy, its history and geography underpin a difficult but important relationship with Russia, and increasing economic dependence is driving closer ties with China. In recent years, U.S. cooperation with Turkmenistan has focused primarily on border security issues, particularly with neighboring Afghanistan.

Political Background

Government. Turkmenistan's constitution defines the country as a secular, democratic presidential republic with a tripartite separation of powers between the executive, the judiciary, and the legislature. In practice, executive power is largely unchecked and President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov dominates the country's political structures. The president has extensive powers that include presiding over the Cabinet of Ministers, as well as appointing and dismissing regional governors and mayors. Although the constitution stipulates the independence of the judiciary, the president also appoints and dismisses judges.

The legislature comprises a 125-seat unicameral parliament (the Mejlis), elected to five-year terms. Following 2012 legislation allowing for a multi-party system, Turkmenistan now has three officially recognized political parties: the Democratic Party (established in 1991 as the successor to the Soviet-era Communist Party), the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (registered in 2012), and the Agrarian Party (registered in 2014). The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe describes Turkmenistan's political environment as "only nominally pluralist," as all three parties are aligned with the president and electoral procedures fail to meet international standards.

Authoritarian Rule. Saparmurad Niyazov, former first secretary of Turkmenistan's Communist Party, became the country's first elected president after an uncontested 1992 race. A 1994 referendum extended his term to 2002. In 1999, amendments to the constitution proclaimed him president for life. Niyazov, known as Turkmenbashi, or Leader of the Turkmen, was an autocratic ruler who created a cult of personality around himself and his family, isolated the country, and suppressed dissent. Following Niyazov's unexpected death in December 2006, former Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers Gurbanguly

Berdimuhamedov was elected in a 2007 election widely seen as fraudulent. He was reelected in 2012 and again in 2017 (in 2016, the presidential term was extended from five to seven years). There is no constitutional limit on the number of terms a president can hold office, and with the introduction of constitutional amendments in 2016, there is no longer an upper age limit for presidential candidates. Although he initially introduced modest reforms, Berdimuhamedov has largely followed in his predecessor's authoritarian footsteps. He has moved to dismantle Niyazov's cult of personality, replacing it with veneration of himself. He uses the title Arkadag (the Protector). Many analysts assess that Berdimuhamedov is positioning his son Serdar as his successor.



Map of Turkmenistan

Source: Graphic created by CRS

Human Rights. Turkmenistan faces regular criticism for human rights abuses from the U.S. State Department and from international organizations. Freedom House, a nonpartisan non-governmental organization (NGO), describes the country as "a repressive authoritarian state where political rights and civil liberties are almost completely denied in practice." Citizens are subject to widespread surveillance, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture. The government also imposes severe restrictions on freedom of movement. Because of its violations of religious freedom, Turkmenistan has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act since 2014. The Secretary of State re-designated Turkmenistan as a CPC in 2019, although the Trump Administration waived the related sanctions in light of U.S. national interests.

By most accounts, Turkmenistan engages in widespread use of state-orchestrated forced labor, particularly in the harvesting of cotton. Tens of thousands of public sector employees are reportedly forced to pick cotton annually. Similarly, private businesses are allegedly forced to contribute labor. There are also reports of child labor in the cotton harvest. In 2018, U.S. Customs and Border

Protection responded to concerns about forced labor by issuing a Withhold Release Order banning the importation of all cotton from Turkmenistan, as well as all products produced using cotton from Turkmenistan.

Virtually all media outlets in Turkmenistan are state-controlled, and nonpartisan NGOs identify significant abuses: the Committee to Protect Journalists has condemned the “systematic harassment” of the few independent journalists active in the country, and, in its *2020 World Press Freedom Index*, Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkmenistan 179th out of 180 countries in levels of freedom available to journalists. The U.S.-funded nonprofit Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) is one of the only independent news outlets that reports from within Turkmenistan. Internet censorship is prevalent, and the government blocks access to many websites.

Economy

Key Sectors. Turkmenistan’s economy is largely dependent on hydrocarbons, especially natural gas; hydrocarbon exports account for about 25% of GDP. Although the agricultural sector accounts for about 8% of Turkmenistan’s GDP, it employs almost half of the country’s workforce. Soviet industrialization policies established a cotton monoculture in the country, and Turkmenistan remains among the world’s top ten producers of cotton, which is primarily grown for export. The country’s other major crop, wheat, is cultivated for the domestic market. Foreign direct investment is limited outside of the hydrocarbons sector.

Natural Gas. Turkmenistan is estimated to have the fourth largest natural gas reserves in the world, accounting for about 10% of the global total. The country’s export capacity is limited by infrastructural deficiencies, however. The planned Turkmenistan-Pakistan-Afghanistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, first proposed in the 1990s, would open new markets for Turkmenistan and improve South Asia’s regional energy security, but its completion remains highly speculative. The proposed Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) would enable Turkmenistan to supply gas to European markets, providing an alternative to Russian gas, but the project has been hampered by opposition from Russia and Iran as well as unresolved questions concerning the delimitation of seabed rights.

Dependence on China. Payment disputes with Russia and Iran halted gas flows from Turkmenistan in 2016 and 2017, respectively, leaving China as Turkmenistan’s only major export market. Turkmenistan is China’s largest natural gas supplier, accounting for over 60% of pipeline imports in 2019. China is also Turkmenistan’s primary international lender, having provided over \$8 billion in loans to develop Turkmenistan’s gas infrastructure (Turkmenistan’s total foreign debt is approximately \$9 billion). Analysts speculate that Turkmenistan services its Chinese loans through discounted gas sales. Although Russia resumed gas imports from Turkmenistan in 2019, the volume is relatively minor compared to Turkmenistan’s exports to China.

Domestic Economic Crisis. Declining revenue from gas exports has put pressure on Turkmenistan’s economy,

driving down living standards. High inflation, currency devaluation, tight foreign exchange controls, and import restrictions mean that the country faces chronic shortages of food and cash. Corruption is pervasive, and foreign companies have reported problems collecting payments for government contracts. The Heritage Foundation’s *2020 Index of Economic Freedom* classifies Turkmenistan as “repressed,” ranking it 170th out of 180 countries.

Although Ashgabat states that Turkmenistan’s population is over 6.2 million, outside observers argue that this figure is not credible; some contend that it could be as low as 3.3 million, as the country’s dire economic situation has prompted many citizens to emigrate.

Turkmenistan at a Glance

Land area: 188,457 sq. mi.; slightly larger than California

Population: 5.5 million (2020 est., disputed)

Ethnicity: 85% Turkmen, 5% Uzbek, 4% Russian, 6% other (2003 est.)

Religion: Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, Other 2%

GDP/GNI per capita (2018): \$40.76 billion/\$6,740

Data from the World Bank and the CIA World Factbook

Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Neutrality. Turkmenistan’s constitution outlines the principle of “permanent neutrality” as the basis for the country’s foreign policy. The United Nations officially recognized Turkmenistan’s neutral status in 1995. In practice, Turkmenistan’s neutrality translates to foreign policy isolationism, and the country is largely closed off from the outside world.

Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Turkmenistan has not had a recent history of terrorist attacks, but independent observers note significant deficiencies in the country’s military capabilities and equipment, giving rise to concerns about Turkmenistan’s potential vulnerability to armed Islamist extremists. According to a 2015 estimate, some 360 citizens of Turkmenistan traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight for the Islamic State between 2011 and 2014. Some have reportedly returned to the country. Additionally, there is a significant Taliban presence in the districts of Afghanistan that neighbor Turkmenistan, and border security is a major concern for both Ashgabat and Kabul.

U.S. Relations. While Turkmenistan’s geography and energy resources make it a potential strategic partner for the United States, the development of U.S.-Turkmenistan ties is hampered by the country’s uninviting investment climate and generally closed nature. Bilateral engagement to date has focused primarily on regional security issues. U.S. foreign assistance to Turkmenistan is limited and predominantly directed toward promoting border security and nonproliferation. The Trump Administration requested \$200,000 in appropriations for foreign aid to Turkmenistan in FY2021, which would be down from \$3.96 million allocated in FY2019.

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