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Turkmenistan

Overview

Turkmenistan is an authoritarian Central Asian country rich in hydrocarbons that borders the Caspian Sea and four other countries, including Afghanistan and Iran. Since becoming independent with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan's government has kept the country largely isolated from the outside world and maintained tight control over the economy. Turkmenistan's constitution establishes "permanent neutrality" as the core principle of the country's foreign policy. History and geography underpin a complicated but important relationship with Russia, and increasing economic dependence drives 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

Authoritarian Rule. Saparmurad Niyazov, a 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, then reelected in 2012 and 2017. Berdimuhamedov followed in his predecessor's authoritarian footsteps, replacing Niyazov's cult of personality with veneration of himself. He uses the title Arkadag (the Protector). Although he was succeeded by his son Serdar as president in 2022, the elder Berdimuhamedov retains extensive powers.

Following 2012 legislation allowing for a multi-party system, Turkmenistan now has three officially recognized political parties. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe describes Turkmenistan's political environment as "only nominally pluralist," as all three parties are aligned with the Berdimuhamedov regime and electoral procedures fail to meet international standards.

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. The legislature, termed a "rubber-stamp body" by many observers, became bicameral with the creation of an upper house known as the People's Council in 2021, with Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov as its chairman. In 2022, Turkmenistan underwent its first presidential transition in 16 years, with Serdar

Berdimuhamedov replacing his father in an election widely seen as a carefully orchestrated succession. In 2023, constitutional changes reverted the parliament to a single chamber and granted the People's Council, still headed by Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov but now separate from the parliament and no longer an elected body, extensive powers superseding those of the president, including the power to change the constitution, oversee all branches of government, and determine foreign and domestic policy.

Figure 1. Map of Turkmenistan



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Human Rights. Turkmenistan has faced regular criticism for human rights abuses from the U.S. State Department and from independent watchdogs. Freedom House, a nonpartisan nongovernmental organization (NGO), describes the country as "a repressive authoritarian state where political rights and civil liberties are almost completely denied in practice." According to the State Department's 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, human rights issues in Turkmenistan include enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, restrictions on freedom of expression, and corruption. 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" under the International Religious Freedom Act since 2014. The State Department regularly waives the related sanctions, citing U.S. national interests.

Turkmenistan has long faced international criticism for engaging in widespread use of state-orchestrated forced labor, particularly in the harvesting of cotton. Public sector employees are reportedly forced to pick cotton, and private businesses are allegedly also forced to contribute labor. 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. In its 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report, the State Department assessed that the government of Turkmenistan had a “policy or pattern of forced labor,” and ranked Turkmenistan as a Tier 3 country for human trafficking.

Virtually all media outlets in Turkmenistan are state-controlled. The Committee to Protect Journalists has condemned the “systematic harassment” of the few independent journalists active in the country, and, in its 2024 *World Press Freedom Index*, Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkmenistan 175th out of 180 countries in levels of freedom available to journalists. The U.S.-funded nonprofit Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) has been one of the few 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, which accounted for an estimated 71% of the country’s exports by value in 2023, with oil comprising another 20%. Soviet-era industrialization policies established a cotton monoculture in the country, and cotton is Turkmenistan’s largest export after mineral and chemical products. The country’s other major crop, wheat, is cultivated for the domestic market. Foreign direct investment is limited outside of the hydrocarbons sector. The opaque nature of Turkmenistan’s government presents difficulties for accessing reliable data on the country’s centrally-managed economy. The Heritage Foundation’s 2025 *Index of Economic Freedom* classifies Turkmenistan as “repressed,” ranking it 162nd out of 184 countries.

Natural Gas. Turkmenistan is estimated to have the fifth-largest natural gas reserves in the world. 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 uncertain. 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 geopolitical and financial obstacles.

Dependence on China. Payment disputes with Russia and Iran halted gas flows to those countries from Turkmenistan in 2016 and 2017, respectively, leaving China as Turkmenistan’s only major export market. China reportedly provided \$12 billion in loans to develop Turkmenistan’s gas infrastructure. Turkmenistan’s government announced in 2021 that it had repaid that debt; analysts speculate that Turkmenistan serviced and repaid the loans in kind with natural gas. Russia resumed gas imports from Turkmenistan in 2019 under a five year-contract that was not renewed. In 2024, Russia overtook Turkmenistan as China’s largest natural gas supplier. Turkmenistan is seeking to diversify its gas exports, including through swap agreements involving Iran.

Domestic Economic Crisis. In recent years, 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. Although Ashgabat states that Turkmenistan’s population is over 7 million, outside observers argue that this figure is not credible; some contend that it could be as low as 2.8 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: 5.7 million (2024 est., disputed)

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

Religion: Muslim 93%, Christian 6%, Other 1% (2020 est.)

GDP/GNI per capita (2019): \$45.23 billion/\$6,970

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 has translated into foreign policy isolationism, and the country is largely closed off from the outside world. Some analysts have noted an increased interest in international engagement on the part of Turkmenistan’s government since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Turkmenistan has not had a history of terrorist attacks, but independent observers have expressed concerns about Turkmenistan’s potential vulnerability to armed Islamist extremists and spillover from Afghanistan. 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.

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. In 2021, Turkmenistan rejoined the National Guard’s State Partnership Program, from which it had withdrawn in 2011, and established a partnership with Montana. U.S. foreign assistance to Turkmenistan historically has been limited and predominantly directed toward promoting border security and nonproliferation. The State Department requested \$5.4 million in assistance to Turkmenistan in FY2024, compared to an estimated \$4.2 million allocated in FY2023.

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