

Turkmenbashi Rattles Sabre

Author: [Mariam Durdyeva](#)

Build-up of Turkmen armed forces seen as response to growing international criticism.

Turkmenistan's decision to beef up its army and air force is a response to growing criticism abroad of its isolationist regime and poor human rights record, analysts say.

The breakdown in the former Soviet republic's relationship with Russia, compounded by the ousting of another isolated regime, in Iraq, are thought to have accelerated moves to strengthen the military and present a tougher face to the world.

An apparent attempt on Turkmenbashi's life – when his motorcade was sprayed with bullets in November 2002 – is also seen as a factor in the decision to rush through modernisation plans that were first mooted in 2001.

The downfall of Iraq's former leader Saddam Hussein appears to have marked a turning point for President Saparmurat Niazov, who likes to be called Turkmenbashi, or "Leader of the Turkmen".

A source close to Niazov's entourage told IWPR that satellite television images of United States troops toppling a statue of the deposed Iraqi leader last spring made a deep impression on Turkmenbashi, whose statues and portraits line every street and public building in the country. According to this source, the Turkmen president became withdrawn and irritable for a week afterwards, and members his inner circle were afraid to ask him anything.

Turkmenistan has been the subject of mounting international attention for some time, culminating in a damning resolution passed by the United Nations in November 2003, which expressed serious concerns over the country's human rights and press freedom records.

The resolution was supported by majority of UN member states and – most alarmingly for Turkmenistan – by Russia, on which Ashgabat depends as a market for gas exports which bring in the majority of the small nation's foreign currency earnings.

Turkmenistan fell out of favour with Moscow last year by imposing new rules forcing members of the Russian community to denounce their citizenship in favour of a Turkmen passport, or to leave the country.

The international community has been keeping a close eye on Turkmenistan's poor human rights record for many years. The US State Department has voiced concern over the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, the opposition movement and the media, and has not ruled out the imposition of economic sanctions if no improvement is seen.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, of which Turkmenistan is a member, has expressed its concern with developments there on several occasions. The European Parliament passed an unprecedented resolution condemning the regime's policies, stating, "the already appalling human rights situation in Turkmenistan has deteriorated dramatically recently, and there is evidence that this Central Asian state has acquired one of the worst totalitarian systems in the world".

Analysts in Central Asia say that instead of addressing these concerns, Turkmenbashi has instead concentrated on strengthening his army, despite declaring the country neutral in 1996.

They believe recent arms purchases and expanded troop numbers could result in substantial armed forces, perhaps even rivalling Uzbekistan, which has the strongest military in the Central Asian region.

The biggest emphasis has been put on modernising the country's air forces. Georgia has carried out a major overhaul on 22 combat planes as part-payment for Turkmen gas. Two new planes have also been bought from Georgia.

To boost air defences, the government has bought an advanced Ukrainian-made radar system which will allow it to detect intruders both in the air and on the ground, without them realising they have been seen. At the same time, it has declined to join an agreement that Moscow has asked its former Soviet neighbours to sign to ensure controls over the sale of anti-aircraft missiles.

As well as new hardware, the Turkmen army has undergone structural changes, with a number of high-ranking military officers - including chiefs of staff - replaced. Meanwhile, conscription has doubled, leading to an estimated 100,000 new soldiers in the ranks.

Coastal defences on the Turkmen stretch of the inland Caspian Sea have been strengthened with the purchase of dozens of patrol boats, again from Ukraine. In October 2003, the Russian newspaper Novaya Izvestia reported that Turkmenistan had acquired a number of vessels - including a destroyer - from Iran on a long-term lease.

The country's land borders have also been reinforced, a process that began in earnest following the alleged assassination attempt in 2002. The long frontier with Uzbekistan has been fortified with barbed wire, and new buildings to house greater numbers of border troops have been built.

Relations with Uzbekistan worsened after Turkmenbashi accused the neighbouring government of assisting those he said were involved in the plot against him. Unlike Turkmenistan, the Uzbeks have a major patron in the shape of the United States, which has made their country its main Central Asian partner in the "war against terror".

Mariam Durdyeva is the pseudonym of a journalist in Ashgabat.

Location: [Central Asia](#)
[Uzbekistan](#)
[Turkmenistan](#)
[Tajikistan](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/turkmenbashi-rattles-sabre>