

## **Turkmenistan Divorces its Neighbours**

**Author:** [IWPR staff](#)

It was no real surprise when the Turkmen leader said goodbye to the alliance of former Soviet states - the only question is what he's hoping to get out of this public demarche.

Turkmenistan's decision to pull out almost completely from the Commonwealth of Independent States, the grouping of former Soviet republics, did not come as a complete surprise, but it has left analysts wondering about the timing.

Turkmenistan announced its decision at a summit held in the Kazan on August 26-27, 2005, saying that from now on it would no longer be a full member of the grouping although it would retain associate membership.

True to past form, President Saparmurat Niazov, better known as Turkmenbashi, did not turn up for the meeting, which was attended even by the leaders of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, all of them the products of revolutions not especially favoured by Moscow and its conservative allies like Belarus.

He sent in his place his ex-bodyguard Aganiyev, who he appointed last month as deputy prime minister (Turkmenbashi is prime minister as well as president.)

The move is seen as purely symbolic, since Turkmenistan was never a particularly willing player in the CIS, announcing early on that it was a neutral country and preferred not to be part in any international bloc. It never really engaged with its closest neighbours in Central Asia, and shunned their attempts to build a regional economic grouping. Nor has it joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which brings the four other Central Asian states together with Russia and China.

"After the CIS was founded in 1991.... Turkmenistan never actually became a full member, as it did not sign the charter documents.... and the Turkmen president did not usually attend CIS summits," said a Turkmen foreign ministry official who asked to remain anonymous. "Niazov could not overcome a sense of alarm that Russia, the dominant element in the grouping, wanted to use the CIS to maintain its supremacy in the post-Soviet space, so he always behaved in quite an aloof and independent manner."

According to this official, Turkmenbashi got away with it because the country's natural gas resources gave him a certain amount of leverage with Russia. "The Turkmen leadership was forgiven a lot," he said.

The latest step is being seen as a calculated step to define Turkmenistan as separate from its neighbours and especially from Russia - and possibly to allow room for manoeuvre with the West.

Excluding the three Baltic states which never joined, all 12 republics of the former USSR are part of the CIS, although not all subscribe to all its components - for example the Collective Security Treaty Organisation has only six members, Russia and its closest allies.

The CIS, which operates through a number of councils and institutions, never developed a strong political force - certainly not into the neo-Soviet Union that some observers feared in the early Nineties. It appears most effective as a structure within which members can hammer out trade issues and other mundane economic concerns.

“The CIS has not proved an effective intergovernmental organisation,” an Ashgabat-based senior academic in the area of political science told IWPR. “Furthermore, the CIS has - especially recently - seen a division into political and economic blocs and unions, with a clear military component sometimes resulting from this. That is neither good nor bad; it is just a fact. And our country with its permanent neutral status did not fit into this system.”

But other analysts believe Turkmenbashi stepped away from his neighbours precisely so that he could put his country’s neutrality on the market.

Uzbekistan’s decision this summer to ask the United States military to leave the Karshi-Khanabad airfield, which it had been using as a base for flights to Afghanistan since 2001, opened up a new and surprising opportunity for Turkmenistan, which promptly signalled that it might offer its own airbase at Mary, just as conveniently located close to the Afghan border.

The head of United States military’s Central Command, General John Abizaid, visited Turkmenistan on August 24, apparently to sound out the idea with government officials.

A locally-based human rights activist thinks that in the end Turkmenbashi will not allow the Americans to set up a base, but that he is definitely angling for their favour.

“It’s unlikely Turkmenistan will agree to have a foreign military base stationed on its territory since that would risk the loss of the neutral status of which they are so proud,” he said. “But Turkmenistan’s withdrawal from the CIS does suggest that it is ready to build closer relationships with other world organisations and countries, especially if this bolstered by the right material and especially political support from the United States.”

Despite the heavily-censored media and lack of public debate in Turkmenistan, the implications of decisions taken at high level swiftly percolate through to many ordinary people.

A woman from Ashgabat expressed disappointment that Russia would be less able to exert pressure to moderate some of Turkmenbashi’s policies. “As long as we belonged to the CIS, we ordinary citizens still hoped that the formerly close relationship with Russia could be re-established. After all, Russia presides in the CIS and it could have had some influence on political and economic developments in our country.”

But a local political analyst said the affair was unlikely to change anything at all - not even the Russian influence.

“It’s hard to predict the possible consequences of this decision right now, but at the end of the day this statement [on leaving the CIS] doesn’t really change anything,” he said. “There will probably be some unobtrusive pressure from Russia, which will definitely retain the influence it has on Turkmenistan.”

Another man, who sits on the annual Council of Elders, a government-sponsored talking shop, said the move was irrelevant since Turkmenbashi ploughed his own course regardless of what anyone thought.

“Ordinary people long ago ceased to care whether our country is in the CIS or not,” he said. “Our president has his own policies and course anyway, from which he will never turn.”

**Location:** Central Asia  
China

Uzbekistan  
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**Focus:** Central Asia

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