

Turkmenistan: Niazov Ponders War Options

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Turkmen president would prefer to play a neutral, peacemaking role in the Afghan crisis

As the Central Asian states get ready for American strikes against the Taleban regime in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan is fortifying its borders and pondering a set of unenviable choices in the coming conflict.

The country's geographical location makes it a key player in the event of US strikes. Without the use of Turkmen airspace, the West's strategic plans will be hampered.

As a Soviet republic, it was a springboard for the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and it has important airbases near the Afghan border, at Kushka, as well as at Ashgabat, Nebit-dag, Serdar. There are civilian airports in Mari and Turkmenbashi.

While the country remains calm, a lack of hard information keeps people on edge. State-run television and newspapers have been reluctant to abandon coverage of the tenth anniversary of Turkmenistan's independence in October and the "golden age" they have been experiencing under President Saparmurat Niazov, known as Turkmenbashi (Father of the Turkmen).

Coverage of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US was minimal, devoted for the most part to reports of the president's expression of condolences to the American people.

The media vacuum has aided the spread of contradictory rumours about Turkmenistan's role in the conflict. Initial reports following discussions between President Niazov and a US envoy suggested Ashgabat would grant Washington access and use of its airspace, airports and bases.

Reports of the evacuation of all foreign embassies in Turkmenistan added to the panic and sparked a rush on airline tickets to Moscow. There were even rumours that well-dressed members of the Taleban had been seen in Ashgabat nightclubs.

The public remains confused. Murad Ovezov, a student, said he fears a nuclear war is round the corner, "If the United States retaliates with tactical nuclear weapons, millions of hungry refugees will rush into Turkmenistan. It's terrifying."

A construction worker, who preferred not to be named, said, "The entire world is facing the possibility of war, but our authorities prefer to keep silent and continue to persuade their people that everything is fine."

Amid the frenzy of rumours, President Niazov finally announced America would not be able to use the country's territory for military purposes after all. And following personal talks with the US secretary of state, Colin Powell, he informed the nation on TV that Turkmenistan had agreed only to act as a base for humanitarian aid.

The first portion of humanitarian assistance destined for Afghanistan, a 40-ton consignment of food and clothing for children, was scheduled to arrive on September 30 in the eastern town of Turkmenabat.

Turkmenistan, which has refused to join any international military alliances since independence, has not ruled entering the anti-terrorist coalition currently being forged, but only if the fight is waged under UN auspices.

Officially, Ashgabat justifies its unwillingness to participate in the US-led anti-terrorist operation on account of its neutral status. Speaking at a government session, Niazov said a special UN mission should be set up to solve the Afghan problem and that neutral Turkmenistan, which has equal and friendly relationship with all its neighbors, was the ideal base for such negotiations. The president said his country could serve as a "guarantor of peace in the region as well as beyond its limits".

In practice, Turkmenbashi's "special relationship" with the Taleban is an important factor in his calculations. The president has relatively good ties with Mullah Omar's forces, who refrain from carrying out hostile operations in Turkmenistan in exchange for a relatively open border.

In the end, Niazov will have to decide whether the US is a partner that can protect his country from the Taleban.

To win over the government, Washington could offer financial incentives in the form of loans, foreign investment and increased access to the IMF and the World Bank. America could also ease Turkmenistan's security concerns by strengthening military ties in return for the use of Turkmen airspace airbases.

If the West does start bombing the Taleban, Ashgabat will have to give up its policy of sitting on the fence and will have to choose one side or the other. Few doubt that in the event of all-out conflict, Niazov will have to back the plans of the Bush administration in the war against terrorism.

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