

Ambassador of Turkmenistan to the US
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Turkmenistan: Looking Ahead.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would first like to thank Utah Valley State College and personally Dr. R.E. “Rusty” Butler, Ph.D.- Associate Vice President for International Affairs for inviting me to your Conference: “*Women of the Mountains.*”

Along with Mr. Butler, I also especially would like to thank my friend former Ambassador and now a Distinguished Visiting Professor of History & Political Science Department Dr. Baktybek Abdrisaev for his outstanding work in organizing this conference.

Above all, I thank you all for your participation in this event.

1. Central Asia.

Central Asia is a region that is significant in its geo-strategic position. First of all, it is a cultural and a historic center, which includes many layers of different civilizations. Its importance is not only significant with respect to trade, but also with respect to interaction between different civilizations. On the other hand, Central Asia in itself has been a political center of the region far vaster than itself for centuries. The most notable examples could include the Empire established by Timur and the Seljuk Empire, descendants of which helped establish the Ottoman Empire in Asia Minor and the Middle East.

Strategic importance of Central Asia is well analyzed. So I will just briefly get through main characteristics of this importance.

First of all, its geo-strategic location is worth mentioning. It is well-situated on important trade routes and roads that connect East and West, South and West. Its proximity to such important regional powers as Iran, India, Pakistan, Russia and China makes it a region that no politician can afford to overlook.

Second, its natural resources are diverse and rich. The most important among them are, of course, oil and gas.

Third, four major economic powers, Russia, USA, EU and China have considerable economic and strategic interests in the region. Moreover, such significant regional powers as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and India take a high interest in the developments taking place in the region.

Fourth, the majority of the population is Muslim, which connects Central Asia to the wider Islamic world. Muslims of Central Asia have never practiced jihad or any other form of violent extremist or terrorist methods. Their Soviet heritage also makes them very tolerant towards any non-Muslim and their understanding and experience of European culture is much broader than some other Muslim countries have.

The total population of all Central Asian states is 60 million people. One of the positive characteristics of the population is its high level of education, as well as high level of political and economic activity.

2.Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan is one of the less populous of these states with population around 6 million people.

The landscape of Turkmenistan is very diverse and includes the world's second largest desert Kara Kum, vast steppes, rivers, Caspian Sea in the west of the country and several mountain ranges, the biggest of which is Kopet Dag. Despite such natural variety, the most part of population lives in the oases near mountains and thus Turkmenistan is rightfully considered as a

mountain country. History and culture of our people are closely related to desert and mountains. It is hard to find a work of literature or art that does not contain an image of mountains with their magical beauty and eternal composure. Let us take a brief stride into the history of Turkmenistan.

2.1. Turkmenistan's brief historic overview

I would like to briefly dwell on the role our ancestors played in shaping the regional wellbeing as well as establishing its unique cultural, economic, political and other areas of life. At the same time, it is also worth mentioning that the past 15 years of our independence presented tremendous opportunity to different schools of archeologists and historians to visit the country, explore it and even discover it to the outside world, the opportunity which could hardly have been thinkable in the Soviet era. In that sense, we experience an Age of Renaissance.

According to historians' assessments, history of civilizations existing on this land in the past goes back five thousand years.

Turkmenistan is a country of the ancient civilization that made a great input in development of world culture. Starting from the third millennium B.C. ancient Pro-Turkmen state entities Altyn-depe, Margush, Parthia, Urgench and others to a considerable degree determined the character of political, economic and cultural life of the East, the level of relations between East and West, North and South.

The history of the region has been documented in a written form only from the middle of the first millennium B.C., when the Turkmen land was a part of Achaemenians power with Zoroastrianism as the dominating religion. By the end of the 4th century B.C., Alexander the Great crossed the territory with his army leaving the conquered countries to his successors – Seleucides, as a heritage. In the middle of the 3rd century B.C. the Parthian kingdom was founded in the foothills of the Kopet Dagh.

In the middle of the 7 century the Arabs invaded Turkmenistan and brought a new religion with them – Islam. Being part of Arabic caliphate and then subsequently of Tahirid and Samanid states, Turkmenistan nations became pieces of an outstanding cultural synthesis in the Middle East.

The 11th century was commemorated by the birth of a powerful centralized empire founded by the Turkmens-Seljuks resulting from their brilliant military victories. Muhammed Togrulbek the Turkmen, the founder and the first sultan of the state of Great Seljuks, had won the minds of generations forever, as well as his famous successors Alp-Arslan, Melik-shakh and, certainly, Sultan Sandjar, who was canonized in the Muslim world. It was he who turned Merv into a cultural capital of the East and invited Omar Hayam and other eminent scholars and poets of the East to his favorite city.

In Middle Ages, Turkmens and other Asian nations were involved in a powerful migration process. On the boundless areas from present Turkey to India tens of independent Turkmen principalities and emirates emerged and vanished. One of them was founded by Turkmen chief Ertogrul Ghazi who left his native borders for remote Anatolia in the 13th century, whose son Osman 1 Ghazi gave the name to the empire that was formed later on the frontiers of Europe and Asia. There the mixture of the Turkmen tribes with the nations of Byzantine Empire had occurred, giving a way to the emergence of a new ethnic group – the Turks.

2.2. Modern Turkmenistan

If you look at Central Asian states today you can easily understand that Turkmenistan has served as a factor of stability in Central Asia for fifteen years of its independence. Let us take a closer look at the contribution that Turkmenistan creates in the establishment of stable and secure Central Asia. From our point of view, the defining characteristics of Turkmenistan's significance as a stabilizing factor are the following:

- the status of neutrality of Turkmenistan and its policy of positive neutrality;
- political and economic stability of the country;
- active participation in and support of Turkmenistan of the efforts of anti-terrorist coalition, as well as its counter-fight against religious extremism;
- energy politics of Turkmenistan.

Stability in the region can be well enhanced by vast economic cooperation. Economy and trade is the best way to promote mutual interests without touching upon sensitive political issues that may involve regional competition. In this framework, Turkmenistan's attempts in economic developments and trade can't be overlooked. The country has a well developed infrastructure, strong agricultural sector, new plants and developing economic sectors, such as textiles and energy.

After the death of first president of Turkmenistan S.Niyazov in December 2006 the country has entered in a new era. The National Security Council has appointed Kurbankuli Berdimammedov as the Interim Head of State and on February 11, 2007 he was elected as the new President of Turkmenistan.

From the first day of assuming his office, the New President has vigorously started fulfilling a number of reforms he announced during the course of the election campaign. On February 18th during the ceremony of opening of a new university building, he stated: "We have planned on conducting several large reforms in various sectors of the economy of Turkmenistan, social and cultural spheres. I hope that all graduates, professors and students of the Turkmen State University of Makhtumkuli will actively participate in accomplishment of new work ahead of us."

I would like to mention here just some of these reforms.

Massive changes are targeted for education, medical care, and social life. From September 1, 2007, the country will once again have a compulsory 10-year primary education and a 5-year university education. Turkmen, Russian and English become must courses in all schools around the country. Infrastructure for Internet usage will be available. A new program of building schools, new universities and specialized colleges is being planned.

Keeping in mind the subject of our conference, I would like to mention that rights and opportunities for education for men and women are equal.

In the field of medical care, the now ongoing process of new hospital building will be supplemented by a deeper reform of the medical staff education and specialization, including cooperation with international medical centers.

Of great importance is the further development of culture and arts. There are several examples of progress in this field – opening of a new cultural center in Ashgabat, a decision to open a Turkmenfilm movie studio and two art schools in the regions of the country. Restoration works on a unique architecture of Aksaray-Ding of 11th-12th century in Dashoguz region also show consideration given to cultural heritage of Turkmenistan.

And finally, social sphere has been under a scrutinized control from the first days of the new presidency of K.Berdimukhammedov. Several various benefits are being planned. We can mention gas, electricity, low tariffs for other services, pension reform and other. There are also many benefits for women with small children.

2.3. Oil and gas complex.

There is no need to explain the importance of the energy sector of Turkmenistan. Several statistics of our oil and gas

reserves are well known. The magnitude of wealth is very high and the 40% of GDP of the country has been fed primarily from this source in the past years. Such wealth is a positive feature in itself. However, the fact that it constitutes 40% of the economy has a potential to lead to the “Dutch syndrome”, if not taken care of. Our leadership has and I am sure will take active measures to diversify the economy. There is a long way ahead of us and we must accomplish a lot on this matter.

2.4. International position of Turkmenistan.

International position of any country is a broad theme. Therefore, I will only touch it in the context of international energy cooperation and regional security of Central Asia.

First of all, I would like to mention that during the years of independence, Turkmenistan has recommended itself as a reliable partner that fulfills its international obligations. It is characteristic of both large gas contracts and various international agreements that Turkmenistan participates in.

It is important to underline that Turkmenistan is the stronghold of stability in the difficult region of Central Asia through its policy of neutrality. Turkmenistan is also a member of international coalition for struggle against terrorism. Our country has been at the forefront of transporting international humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. We also developed our own programs of aid for our neighbor. Other examples are numerous. We also understand the interests of major powers in the region in general and in Turkmenistan in particular in the sphere of security and in the sphere of energy. We are ready and eager for cooperation on the basis of mutual benefits. Some of the factors that must be considered to form the basis for successful partnership are the following.

- Not a single major power is interested in destabilization of the region.

- All political and economic players will benefit from the economic growth and prosperity of the region. The wealth of Central Asia is very substantial and it can be transformed into an advantageous economic relationship among many countries.

- Long term interests of Central Asia and Turkmenistan for growth and development are in full harmony with the interests of international progress and stability.

Thank you for your attention.