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AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT OF AFGHANISTAN-TURKMENISTAN RELATIONS



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INTRODUCTION

The speed of developments in the field of the international system and the phenomenon of globalization as well as the intensification of the dependence of countries on each other at the regional and global level forces the foreign relations officials of the countries to always evaluate the position of their country in the international system in order to realize their national interests, and formulate appropriate strategies and solutions.

At the current stage, Afghanistan's relations with neighboring countries and the region, especially with Turkmenistan, are of special importance, because the major part of the relations between the two countries is economic and commercial relations. Although Afghanistan does not have a long-standing official relationship with Turkmenistan, because the latter gained its independence from the former Soviet Union after 1991 as an independent political entity. However, long-standing historical, religious and cultural ties between the people of the two countries provide the possibilities of expanding and consolidating relations in various dimensions albeit with new content.

Turkmenistan is one of the important countries rich in natural resources in Central Asia and has a foreign policy of "positive neutrality". After independence, the country adopted a policy of neutrality, which was approved by the United Nations in 1995. Neutrality means that it refrains from joining military alliances and interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. Therefore, Turkmenistan has played the least role in Afghanistan's internal conflicts compared to other neighboring countries.

Since Afghanistan is a landlocked country and on the other hand it is trying to increase its role in regional connectivity, in this article the relations with Turkmenistan have been examined with regard to the opportunities to improve bilateral relations.

BACKGROUND OF BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan became one of the republics of the Soviet Union in 1924. But due to the strong resistance that the Russians faced in Turkmenistan, the Soviet government adopted a stricter policy in Turkmenistan compared to other Central Asian republics. Afghanistan did not have diplomatic relations with Turkmenistan until 1991, as the Soviet policy at that time was such that republics affiliated to the Soviet Union could not freely establish relations with neighboring countries and the region.

Afghanistan's relations with Turkmenistan after the declaration of independence from the former Soviet Union are divided into several major periods, which are:

- A) Afghanistan's relations with Turkmenistan during former president Dr. Najibullah's rule.
- b) Relations between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan during the period of Mujahideen rule.



- c) Relations between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan in the first period of the Islamic Emirate.
- d) Relations between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan during the US supported Republic period.
- E) Relations between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan in the second period of the Islamic Emirate.

A) AFGHANISTAN'S RELATIONS WITH TURKMENISTAN DURING PRESIDENT DR.

NAJIBULLAH'S RULE

Turkmenistan gained its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991. On December 22, 1991, the government of Afghanistan at the time recognized Turkmenistan as an independent country and started its political and diplomatic relations with this country. Hence, the protocol of establishment of diplomatic relations between Abdul Wakil, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan at the time, and Ghaliyev Abdullah, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, was signed on February 21, 1992. The political and diplomatic relations of Dr. Najibullah's government with Turkmenistan lasted for almost a year.

B) RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND TURKMENISTAN DURING THE PERIOD OF MUJAHIDEEN RULE

After the fall of Dr. Najibullah's government and the victory of Mujahideen in Afghanistan, despite the instabilities and successive political transformations in Afghanistan, the government of Afghanistan headed by Ustad Burhanuddin Rabbani tried to have good political and diplomatic relations with the newly independent republics, so in July 1993, the first political representative of Afghanistan was introduced at the level of the chargé affairs to that country. With the agreement of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan also opened its consulates in Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif cities. In continuation of the relations between the two countries, Ustad Burhanuddin Rabbani, the then President of Afghanistan, visited Ashgabat and was warmly welcomed by the authorities of Turkmenistan. The visit of the President of Afghanistan to this country somehow strengthened the relations between the two countries.

After the civil war started in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan did not support any of the parties involved in the war in Afghanistan based on the policy of neutrality.

C) RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND TURKMENISTAN IN THE FIRST PERIOD OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

In the first period of the Islamic Emirate, Turkmenistan had good relations with the then Taliban government due to the fact that it had adopted positive neutrality in its foreign policy. At that time, Turkmenistan was presented as a safe place for political negotiations of all parties involved in the Afghanistan issue, in such a way that representatives of the United Nations and the Taliban, along with the opposition front, held several rounds of negotiations in this country. Although the Taliban government was recognized by a small number of foreign governments



and most countries of the world did not have any diplomatic relations with this government, Turkmenistan established a good diplomatic relationship with the Islamic Emirate.

The plan to build the Turkmenistan gas pipeline was first proposed in the 1990s when the Taliban ruled most parts of Afghanistan. At that time, two international oil and gas companies i.e. The American Unocal Company and the Argentinian Bidas Company wanted to transfer Turkmenistan's gas via Afghanistan to Pakistan. Taliban representatives also visited the United States of America in 1997 to discuss with Unocal. But despite all the efforts of international companies, and the agreements reached by Turkmenistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the start of this project was delayed. Competitions and regional politics led to the failure of this plan.

D) RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND TURKMENISTAN DURING THE US SUPPORTED REPUBLIC PERIOD

Afghanistan's relations with Turkmenistan from 1991 to 2001 were limited to diplomatic and political relations due to the civil war in Afghanistan and the short life of the governments, but the relations between these two countries expanded to include various dimensions after 2001. The incident of September 11, 2001, which caused the fall of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, at the same time caused profound political changes unprecedented in the history of Afghanistan. The government of Turkmenistan, led by the then president of that country, Safar Murad Niyazov did not have much desire for the presence of the US in the region, but was prepared to send aid via air and ground after the US attack on Afghanistan although it had adopted a policy of neutrality in its foreign policy since 1995. After the formation of the new government in Afghanistan, both countries tried to expand relations. For this reason, the relations between the two countries were elevated to the ambassadorial level. The then president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, and other high-ranking government officials made several official visits to Turkmenistan, and several declarations and agreements were signed between the two governments.

"TAPI" project was one of the biggest projects that passes through Afghanistan and was already signed between Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. With India's entry, this project became one of the most important economic projects for Afghanistan and the region. But due to insecurity, this project was left unfinished.

E) RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND TURKMENISTAN IN THE SECOND PERIOD OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

Officials of Turkmenistan government have had meetings with the current Afghan government led by the Taliban after the victory of the Islamic Emirate but the former does not have diplomatic relations with the Taliban based on the policy of positive neutrality.

The highest Turkmen official was Rashid Muradov, the Foreign Minister of the country, who met with the high-ranking officials of the Islamic Emirate, including Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund, the acting Prime Minister, and Maulawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Acting Minister of



Foreign Affairs, in Kabul regarding the TAPI project about two months after the victory of the Islamic Emirate, and also discussed security issues.

"TAPI" gas transmission project was opened in Herat province in 2016, but the work in this regard has not started until now due to security problems in Afghanistan. The Islamic Emirate has assured Turkmenistan that it will ensure the security of this project and solve other problems in this regard. Besides this, the electricity transmission project from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, which also passes through Afghanistan, is one of the issues that brings the Islamic Emirate closer to Turkmenistan. Using this line, Turkmenistan exports about 1,000 megawatts of electricity to Pakistan. With the implementation of this project, Afghanistan will benefit from its electricity in addition to the right of transit. After the victory of the Taliban and the establishment of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan in August 2021, Turkmenistan has provided humanitarian aid worth 1.2 million US dollars to Afghanistan, which can be seen as a sign of the improvement of relations between this country and the Islamic Emirate.

TURKMENISTAN'S PLACE IN AFGHANISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

In the course of its history and cultural identity, Afghanistan is influenced by the political, security, cultural, economic and social structure and context of the three regions of Central Asia, the Middle East and South Asia. Afghanistan holds a special place to Turkmenistan in regional relations, relations with neighboring countries, especially in Central Asia.

Turkmenistan has about 800 kilometers of common border with Afghanistan. In addition to the intertwined border-territorial areas, the presence of groups of Turkmens (co-descendants) on the other side of the border is also one of the issues raised in the context of the relations between the two countries. The landlocked nature of both countries (lack of independent access to open seas) and the necessity of diversifying trade and export routes, especially the importance of gas export and the establishment of routes to transport it to consumption markets in South Asia for Turkmenistan, and the establishment of new exchange routes to the north and west (beyond Iran) for Afghanistan is the other side of the relations between these two neighbors.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AFGHANISTAN FOR TURKMENISTAN

It is understood from the basic lines of Turkmenistan's foreign policy that this country wants friendship and cooperation with all countries of the world based on the principle of non-interference in other people's affairs. On the other hand, the foreign policy of this country is based on positive neutrality. These two features open the door to Turkmenistan's relations with other countries, especially neighboring countries.

Afghanistan is considered important for Turkmenistan; the prosperity and security of Afghanistan has a significant impact on the country of Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan needs the geography of Afghanistan to ensure economic and trade relations with South Asian countries.

OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE BILATERAL RELATIONS

A) Political opportunities



In fact, foreign policy is the continuation of domestic policy, or in other words, domestic policy is the beacon of foreign policy in the international scene with different methods and in a completely different environment. In fact, the type of government, whatever it is (elective or non-elective), determines the type of foreign policy of countries. No country can continue its political, military, economic, cultural life without foreign policy. Every country tries to achieve its national interests by using its foreign policy tools i.e., diplomacy, economic tools, cultural-propaganda tools and military tools. Securing national interests along with maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country is the main goal of the foreign policy of the countries.

The Islamic Emirate believes that the Afghan government regulates its foreign policy on the basis of maintaining independence, national interests, territorial integrity, non-interference, good neighborliness and mutual respect, and does not allow anyone or any group to abuse the territory of Afghanistan and the address of this country. On the other hand, the Islamic Emirate is trying to establish its foreign policy with all the countries of the world, and in the first step with the countries of the region and the Islamic countries.

Afghanistan has always supported Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality and has been interested in political-diplomatic relations. The Islamic Emirate makes extra efforts to develop bilateral relations in all dimensions with this country. After the fall of the republic and the victory of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan has kept its consular activities in the cities of Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat, and emphasized the continuation of consular activities and customs cooperation in these provinces. The meeting held with the Consul General of Turkmenistan on August 18, 2021 emphasizes the cooperation and good neighborliness of the two sides.

b) economic-commercial opportunity

Both Afghanistan and Turkmenistan are members of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the TAPI project, and on the other hand, these two countries have a good geographical and transit location for the growth of bilateral trade.

As a central country in the heart of Asia, besides having huge underground resources, Afghanistan is closer to South Asia and open waters, and according to the authorities of Turkmenistan, it is the closest way to export this country's gas to South Asia and global markets. Although extensive efforts have been made to extract Afghanistan's underground resources, especially in the field of oil and gas, but some insecurities have made Afghanistan unable to widely use these resources.

Turkmenistan also enjoys a strategic position in the region and the world, as this country is located on the Silk Road, and on the other hand, the location of this country on the coast of the Caspian Sea is another advantage for Turkmenistan. Still, according to the statistics of 2019, this country has abundant gas and oil reserves and is the fourth largest holder of natural gas resources in the world.

Using this opportunity, Afghanistan can solve part of the problems of lack of access to the open sea through communication and sea trade with the Caspian Sea countries through Turkmenistan, and also get connected to European countries through trade with Azerbaijan using this route. Turkmenistan is considered a suitable transit route for Afghanistan to connect Afghanistan to Kazakhstan and Russia.



In the field of bilateral trade relations between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, it should be noted that the ports of Turghundi in Herat and Aqineh in Faryab are the most important commercial goods crossings between the two countries. Through these ports, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan can import and export goods needed by both sides. Turkmenistan is one of the countries that has the most exports in Afghanistan in the field of fuel and electrical energy. Afghanistan has had memorandums of understanding with Turkmenistan in the fields of trade, energy and railway network. If the relations between the two countries develop, Afghanistan can be a good route for the export of electricity from Turkmenistan to South Asia, which is in dire need of it. Afghanistan and Turkmenistan joined ECO, which is an economic organization, in 1992. The existential philosophy of this organization is regional cooperation. Turkmenistan has provided a lot of assistance to Afghanistan in the field of reconstruction.

Afghanistan has also signed an agreement with Turkmenistan for cooperation and regional integration on the Gaz Tapi pipeline, which dates back to the beginning of the nineties, when the former Soviet Union controlled it. With the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Turkmenistan tried to export its gas to the world market for economic growth and development. For this reason, in 1998, a plan to pass the gas pipeline of this country through Afghanistan to Pakistan and then to India was examined by the American Unocal company. This project was postponed due to the lack of security and the occurrence of civil war in Afghanistan. The route of this 1,735-kilometer pipeline starts from Dolatabad in Turkmenistan and extends through Herat province to Kandahar and reaches Fazilka in India by passing through Quetta and Multan in Pakistan. The longest length of this pipeline passes through Afghanistan.

Afghanistan could make optimal use of this project, but unfortunately this project has not yet been implemented. One of the factors is the interference of powerful and neighboring countries in this field and the other main reason is the lack of security in Afghanistan and the change of political regimes is considered important in the implementation of this matter, although Afghanistan has had several memorandums and meetings on this matter.

c) cultural-scientific opportunities

Being in the same geographical area since a thousand years ago has created many cultural-historical commonalities between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. Despite the frequent and profound political developments on both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, these commonalities are still standing. In other words, the lack of political stability in Afghanistan and the domination of Turkmenistan as one of the fifteen former Soviet republics has not been able to destroy these commonalities. However, the influence of Russian culture on this country cannot be denied; But the image of Islamic national culture is still outstanding in Turkmenistan. According to the Constitution of Turkmenistan in 1992, freedom of religious beliefs is allowed.

During the period of the former Soviet rule, the cultural relations between the two countries were weaker, because the Soviet policy at that time was to weaken cultural and Islamic relations so that cultural and Islamic relations would not cause problems for the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence of Central Asian countries, especially Turkmenistan, the cultural relations between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan became more and more profound. This expansion was due to the fact that the cultural-social relations of



these two countries is a natural process and is not a new issue, but both countries belong to the same civilization and only the new political borders separated them.

After Turkmenistan declared its independence from the former Soviet Union, there was always a desire to establish cultural relations with neighboring countries along with other existing relations, the security problem in Afghanistan sometimes hindered this. In general, Turkmenistan has good cultural relations with Afghanistan, and the granting of scholarships, the preparation of books in the Turkmen language, the training of Afghan Turkmen teachers by Turkmen teachers, the scientific and cultural cooperation of Jawzjan University, Faryab Institute of Higher Education and Afghanistan Academy of Sciences can be mentioned.

As having a foreign policy of positive neutrality, Turkmenistan can establish better relations in this field based on the opportunities provided in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Turkmenistan had a series of concerns about the presence of US troops in Afghanistan during the period of the republic's rule, and these concerns have been lifted for the time being. So, a suitable platform for relations, especially cultural relations, has been provided.

CONCLUSION

Among the neighboring countries, Afghanistan's relations with Turkmenistan, in addition to the historical and cultural commonalities, and especially with the adoption of a policy of positive neutrality by Turkmenistan in 1995, the relations of this country, compared to Afghanistan's relations with other neighboring countries, are extensive, deep, and stable. And it has had a special strength.

A look at the past relations between the two countries in the form of two independent political entities and the current improving situation of the relations between the two sides promises a better future in the relations between the two countries. But this issue does not mean negating the challenges and problems in the relations between the two countries, although these challenges are not major and big. But they are worthy of reflection and require the efforts of the governments of both sides in the field of solving the roots of these problems at the internal levels and bilaterally. Although the foreign policy of the two countries is different in principle and implementation; But a reflection on the principles of Afghanistan's foreign policy and the strategy it has taken to implement it, and also a look at the principles of Turkmenistan's foreign policy, leads us to the conclusion that this difference does not necessarily mean contradiction and opposition. This means that by adopting the policy of positive neutrality, which Afghanistan was one of the first countries to recognize, Turkmenistan has not played a negative role in the currents and political developments of Afghanistan. It should also be remembered that the lack of positive involvement in the currents and political developments of Afghanistan does not mean that there is no positive role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan; Rather, it is more to follow the policy of positive neutrality. After gaining its independence, Turkmenistan has always cooperated with Afghanistan and has made a significant contribution to the revival and reconstruction of Afghanistan in various political, economic-commercial and scientific-cultural fields. Currently, there are many political, economic, commercial and scientific-cultural opportunities that can become a suitable platform for improving bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan.



SUGGESTIONS:

- 1- The foreign policy of the country should be circled or zoned so that the position of the countries in the region becomes more clear and bilateral relations expand in that light.
- 2- In the current situation where security is established throughout the country, more attention should be paid to the implementation of the TAPI project and more efforts should be made to satisfy the neighboring countries.
- 3- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs pays more attention to the optimal use of available opportunities in hiring committed, expert and experienced diplomats.
- 4- To make optimal use of the country's geographical and economic situation, more serious research is needed, and the government should review its policies and pay more attention to this matter.
- 5- By formulating a dynamic foreign policy, the Islamic Emirate should try to establish relations with the countries of the region and the world, as well as participate in regional and international organizations, and make more serious efforts to remove the obstacles that exist in this direction.

The End

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