

**Leonid Gusev**

*Russia*

## **TERRITORIAL DEFENCE PROBLEMS OF TURKMENISTAN**

**Summary:**

*The article deals with the situation on the border of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. It is said that at the beginning of 2015 the situation on the border of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan worsened. In Afghanistan near the border with Turkmenistan a large force of insurgents began to concentrate. At the end of April 2015 the Taliban announced a spring offensive against government forces. Throughout May and June there were regular reports of violent clashes between the Taliban and Afghanistan's forces in neighbouring Turkmenistan provinces of Herat and Badghis. Taliban forces tried to break into the territory of Turkmenistan but were stopped by the Turkmen troops. In this context, ethnic Turkmens in Afghanistan have formed militia groups to fight Taliban militants. Turkmenistan, for its part, began to try to respond to these new threats. The article refers to actions undertaken by the Turkmen authorities to ensure security on the border with Afghanistan.*

**Keywords:**

*territorial defence problems, Taliban forces, Islamic radicals, Afghan-Turkmen border, energy infrastructure*

At the beginning of 2015 year the situation on the border of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan worsened. In Afghanistan near the border with Turkmenistan a large force of insurgents began to concentrate. At the end of April 2015, the Taliban announced a spring offensive against government forces. Throughout May and June there were regular reports of violent clashes between the Taliban and Afghanistan forces in neighbouring Turkmenistan provinces of Herat and Badghis<sup>1</sup>.

For example, in the battle for the county Marchak in Badghis province about 600 fighters participated, whereas in the clash for Kushka-Kuchna –

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<sup>1</sup> И. Зуев, *ИГИЛ прорывает границу с Туркменистаном - пограничники несут потери*, Nakanune.ru, 24.07.2015, <<http://www.nakanune.ru/news/2015/7/24/22409079>> (10.12.2016).

about 250 fighters. In total approximately 850 fighters fought in the above mentioned skirmishes<sup>2</sup>.

According to experts, there are about 3 thousand fighters near the Turkmen border and possibly more<sup>3</sup>.

Also, Islamic State groups (forbidden in many countries, including Russia) appeared in Afghanistan, which declare that for them the main goal is Turkmenistan as the weakest state in Central Asia, devoid of credible military allies due to its policy of neutrality<sup>4</sup>.

In this context, ethnic Turkmens in Afghanistan have formed militia groups to fight Taliban and IS militants. Turkmenistan, for its part, began to try to respond to these new threats.

Many areas of completely permeable or at least poorly controlled Turkmen-Afghan border are under control of militants, both from the Taliban and other armed groups.

Turkmenistan has been a neutral country for over 20 years and the ability of its military to confront such threats of security is in a question.

Even if the number of Islamic radicals, who are now in Turkmenistan, cannot be compared with their number in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the potential threat of instability due to the increasing clashes with Taliban fighters near common border could seriously impact on the central government of Turkmenistan.

Turkmen army may not be ready for the frequent threats of terrorist attacks on the eastern border, which could destabilize the country and become a serious threat to national security.

Taking into account the traditional policy of neutrality, the Turkmen army does not carry out any military operations and has never participated in joint military exercises with other countries. For instance, as a result of their neutrality, Turkmenistan refused to participate in the regional military-political blocs.

At a meeting of the State Security Council in November 2015, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, who is the supreme commander of the armed forces of the country, once again confirmed its intention to carry out large-scale military reforms, which include the upgrade of technology and training of qualified personnel<sup>5</sup>.

The 460 miles long Afghan-Turkmen border is under serious threat, as had previously been proved by cases of armed attacks on the border from terrorists and Taliban fighters, which have bases on the Afghan side.

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<sup>2</sup> Д. Верхотуров, *Мургабский «котел»?*, Gundogar.org, 05.07.2015, <<http://gundogar.org/?0234051603100000000000011000000>> (10.12.2016)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Угроза Талибана может склонить Туркменистан выйти из изоляции*, Chrono-tm.org, 29.02.2016, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/2016/02/ugroza-talibana-mozhet-sklonit-turkmenistan-vyyiti-iz-izolyatsii/>> (10.12.2016).

There is a steady increase of armed clashes in the past few years in the Afghan provinces of Faryab and Dzhovzdhan bordering with Turkmenistan. It is reported that the attacks and provocations are organized by Taliban fighters, who can cross the border and sow pockets of instability in Turkmenistan.

In terms of cross-border stability, the situation is further complicated by the fact that there are approximately 1.5 million Ethnic Turkmens in the north Dzhovzdhan and Faryab provinces, where Taliban militants are active. As I mentioned before, ethnic Turkmens had created two groups led by former warlords, known as Gurbandurdy and Emir Karyad. During the Taliban attacks in 2014 and 2015, these units provided counter-attacks and defended their villages.

On the January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Turkmenistan adopted a new military defense doctrine, which aim is to guarantee the security and territorial integrity of the country. Also it supports the traditional status of permanent neutrality, which is the basis of the foreign policy of Turkmenistan.

Before it, on the December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Turkmenistan celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of permanent neutrality, and president Berdymukhamedov once again officially confirmed the commitment to preserve the policy of permanent neutrality, which boils down to the non-interference in the affairs of other states, respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as non-participation in international military organizations and treaties.

Experts say that if the threat from the Taliban on the border reaches a certain level, president Berdymukhamedov will find himself in a situation where he would have to reconsider the concept of neutrality in foreign policy to provide military support to deter the Taliban from attacking<sup>6</sup>.

One of the options could be the development of bilateral military cooperation with regional and foreign countries such as Russia, Central Asian states, China, maybe NATO as well.

Despite a number of discusses and consultations between Turkmen and Russian presidents on security issues and perils emanating from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan refuses to cooperate with Russia in both directions: in the framework of the Organization of Treaty of Collective Security, and bilaterally, rejecting recent offer of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to support Ashgabat to monitor and patrol the border<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, bilateral cooperation with Central Asian countries in the field of security and military issues may be necessary in view of urgency.

However, so far Turkmenistan and other countries of Central Asia have not created any structure in order to jointly respond to and deter these threats. Despite the fact that there are the problems of poor coordination between the states of the region, the potential risk of violence and the spread of instability in the region could force them to intensify military cooperation.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*

It should be noted that the unstable situation along the border does not only complicate the political situation but also the implementation of infrastructure projects such as TAPI. Although the pipeline is planned to go through the Turkmen-Afghan border in Herat province, which is far from the clashes between the Taliban and the government forces, the project risks are still high.

From the Turkmenistan's point of view, TAPI is a short-term strategic goal, which allows Ashgabat to diversify energy exports. At the moment, 60 percent of all Turkmen export is oriented to the Chinese market.

Afghanistan is perceived as the main menace to the Turkmen border, but Turkmenistan has always had a pragmatic approach to Afghanistan coupled with a proposal to solve the Afghan problem through economic projects. Turkmenistan also offers integration of Afghanistan into the regional economy through trade and energy infrastructure such as TAPI gas pipeline and supply of electricity.

At the end of June 2016 a visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov took place in three Afghan provinces – Jowzjan, Faryab and Balkh<sup>8</sup>.

Officially, Rashid Meredov's trip to Afghanistan was made in order to discuss bilateral projects. Meredov took part in the ceremony of laying the railway Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Tajikistan in Akina city in Faryab province and discussed the issues of electricity supply from Turkmenistan to Afghan border counties. It is worth noting that such discussions often take place in Ashgabat or Kabul<sup>9</sup>. But this time it happened in northern part of Afghanistan.

According to some political analysts, Turkmenistan may be trying to make the Afghan border provinces dependent. Nevertheless who will gain the control of the northwest of Afghanistan it needs friendly relations with Turkmenistan.

It would be far better than just try to stay away from the Afghan policy as a whole that, in practice, is impossible<sup>10</sup>.

*The Turkmen government wants stability on the borders with Afghanistan, and it appears that the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that they are willing to make some sacrifices in the policy of neutrality, – said Gennady Rudkevich who is a senior lecturer of a Chair of Political Science at the University of Georgia and an expert on Central Asia<sup>11</sup>.*

Despite the deterioration of the situation on the Turkmen-Afghan border, Turkmenistan has ambitious goals for promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan through preventive democracy. For example, the government in Ashgabat has offered to host an inter-Afghan peace dialogue under UN auspices to find

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<sup>8</sup> *Ситуация на границе Туркменистана с Афганистаном ухудшилась до такой степени, что Ашхабад готов пойти на жертвы в политике нейтралитета, СА-News.org, 05.07.2016, <<http://ca-news.org/news:1192445>> (10.12.2016)*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem.*

new political and diplomatic mechanisms to solve the problem. But now it is difficult to say how events will develop in the future.

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