

Original Paper

Strategy and Challenges for Turkmenistan's participation in the Central Asia Integration

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Abstract

After gaining independence, Turkmenistan actively pursued the status of a "permanently neutral state", aiming to leverage a neutral foreign policy for enhanced stability and peace in Central Asia. Turkmenistan has formulated distinct engagement policies at various stages of Central Asian integration, ensuring the country's flexible position in the region based on national interests, neutrality, and the decisions of the supreme Leader. However, Turkmenistan encounters significant practical obstacles in engaging in Central Asian integration due to the uncertain prospects of regional integration and its unitary economic structure. If Turkmenistan can sustain its engagement, strategically adjust its foreign policy, and optimize its economic reforms, it will be able to assume a more significant role in the process of Central Asian integration.

Keywords

permanent neutrality, the Central Asia Integration, turkmenistan, regional cooperation

1. Introduction

In 1991, the Cold War came to an end, and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, the former republics of the Soviet Union, became independent sovereign states. Geopolitically speaking, Central Asia is situated at a crucial crossroads connecting Eurasia - referred to as "the heart of Eurasia and Africa" by Mackinder - and holds unique geopolitical and economic significance. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a power vacuum emerged in the "heartland", leading to intensified geopolitical competition in Central Asia. To prevent excessive external intervention in Central Asia and strengthen cooperation among its countries, the concept of Central Asian integration has gained traction. Subsequently, through collaborative efforts from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the Central Asian Economic Union was established in 1994 as a

formal step towards integration. As of June 2022, Central Asian integration has progressed through three main stages: inception (1994-2005), stagnation (2005-2018) and revival (2018-).

Turkmenistan, located in Central Asia, is considered a middle-power country in terms of overall strength. However, its poor natural environment poses significant challenges: 80% of the territory is covered by the Karakum Desert, and the strong continental climate brings extreme drought, limiting agricultural development. Additionally, excessive reliance on natural gas and other energy sources has resulted in noticeable shortcomings in national comprehensive strength. Following independence, Turkmenistan has faced a complex international situation and embarked on arduous national construction and economic restructuring at home. In an effort to reduce external pressure, it seeks to minimize its participation in international affairs through its status as a neutral country.

The fact that Turkmenistan has long been a relatively enigmatic country is worth noting. The process of obtaining visas in Turkmenistan is exceedingly challenging for foreigners, and there is a notable lack of academic research on this country. The existing literature seldom directly addresses Turkmenistan's approach and strategy towards Central Asian integration, but rather examines the relevant issues through the lens of Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality, energy trade, and high-level decision-making.

Firstly, according to Turkish scholar Utku Yapici, Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality is not the cause of its isolation in foreign affairs. Neutrality actually contributes to the stability of the state regime and facilitates energy trade, thus making it a viable long-term policy. (Utku, 2018) Barbara Kiepenheuer-Drechsler argues that Turkmenistan's self-imposed isolationism in foreign policy is a result of its policy of neutrality, aimed at maintaining state stability and minimizing the influence of external countries. (Barbara, 2006) Despite their differing views on Turkmenistan's "isolationism," both scholars contend that the country's policy of neutrality significantly influences its foreign policy decisions. Therefore, Turkmenistan's neutrality is a crucial factor in determining its participation in Central Asian integration.

Furthermore, due to the significant role of energy trade in Turkmenistan's economy, numerous academics have directed their attention towards the concept of 'oil and gas diplomacy' as a pivotal factor shaping Turkmenistan's foreign policy. Zhang Zhenguo believes that Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality is conducive to leveraging its abundant resources for national development and achieving the goal of becoming an energy-rich nation. Boris Shikhmuradov, former foreign minister of Turkmenistan, also expressed a similar perspective, stating that the policy of neutrality can enhance Turkmenistan's attractiveness to foreign investment and enable it to fully leverage its energy resources.

Finally, the perception and stance of Turkmenistan's highest decision maker (the President) have significantly shaped Turkmenistan's approach to Central Asian integration. Fabio de Leonadis conducted an analysis of the "Turkmenbashi" phenomenon and its impact on state construction through the lens of comparative politics. His findings revealed that the authority of the president of Turkmenistan serves as a crucial tool for maintaining stability in the country, highlighting the necessity of incorporating factors related to supreme leadership when studying Turkmenistan's foreign policy

from a micro perspective. (Fabio, 2017)

The aforementioned three explanations offer a fresh outlook for the analysis of Turkmenistan's foreign policy. Neutrality is a prerequisite for Turkmenistan's participation in the integration of Central Asia. The principle of integration and neutrality must not conflict for Turkmenistan to engage. Energy trade and economic benefits are significant factors driving Turkmenistan's evolving stance on integration. The President of Turkmenistan's stance and perspective on the integration of Central Asia directly impacts the country's "integration strategy".

The study is structured into four main parts based on the analytical framework. The first part examines Turkmenistan's "apathetic" stance towards early Central Asian integration, focusing on national economic interests, neutral institutions, and decision makers. The second part describes the process and development of obstruction to Central Asian integration, explaining Turkmenistan's participation strategy in a non-regional power-dominated integration mechanism. The third part introduces the restart and development trend of Central Asian integration, summarizing the motivation and purpose behind Turkmenistan's sudden change in integration strategy through its diplomatic practice in three Central Asian heads of state meetings. The concluding part delineates the external obstacles to the second phase of Central Asian integration and evaluates the potential for Turkmenistan's involvement in this process.

2. Turkmenistan's Early Attitude towards Central Asian Integration (1991-2005)

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian countries embarked on a path towards independence. However, following their independence, these nations encountered numerous practical challenges, with economic restructuring being foremost among them. In the past, the five Central Asian states were integrated into the Soviet state system and lacked a relatively independent economic structure, resulting in challenges following their independence. The Central Asian countries are not self-sufficient in industrial and agricultural products, leading to a deteriorating economic situation characterized by high inflation and rising unemployment. There is an urgent need for comprehensive economic restructuring to achieve development goals.

Secondly, the issue of regional cooperation in Central Asia has gained increasing prominence. Take water resources cooperation as an example. During the Soviet period, water resources cooperation among the Central Asian republics was coordinated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. After independence, each country independently formulated its own policies for protecting and managing water resources to safeguard their respective interests. The differences in water resource management among the five countries have become increasingly apparent due to varying government policies, leading to significant disputes over the allocation of transboundary river flow, construction of hydroelectric power stations, and water drainage. (Igor, Andrey, Tatyana et al., 2018)

The third concern is security. In the post-Soviet era, Central Asia experienced significant turmoil, marked by the proliferation of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. The ongoing war in Afghanistan, as well as issues related to drugs and cross-border crimes, have further exacerbated

security challenges in the region. At the outset of their independence, the defense systems of the five Central Asian states were still in a nascent stage and lacked robust barriers against external threats.

Finally, ecological issues are frequently encountered in Central Asia, primarily encompassing water contamination, nuclear contamination, industrial emissions and air pollution. The issue of water scarcity and pollution is particularly severe. As a result of the overexploitation of water resources, the volume of water in the Aral Sea has decreased by 75% in just 40 years, leading to the Aral Sea crisis, which has imposed significant constraints on the social and economic development of Central Asia.

In light of the pressing regional issues, leaders of Central Asian countries have consistently advocated for building upon existing cooperation and establishing a robust integrated cooperation mechanism to collectively address challenging problems. Under the leadership of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan established the Central Asian Economic Union in 1994, marking the beginning of economic integration in Central Asia. In 1998, the organization was rebranded as the Central Asian Economic Cooperation Organization and successfully expanded its membership to include Tajikistan. The Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan signed the Treaty on Safeguarding Peace in the Region in Tashkent in April 2000, marking a significant advancement in countering terrorist forces in Central Asia and enhancing cooperation within Central Asian integration.

Since gaining independence, Turkmenistan has been actively involved in top-level design for the integration of Central Asian States as a member of the five Central Asian countries. In 1992, during a meeting of the leaders of the five Central Asian states to discuss regional cooperation, Turkmenistan's President Saparmurat Niyazov suggested the establishment of a "Union of Central Asian States" as an alternative to joining the Russian-led CIS. (Sebsatain & Alexandra, 2020) The program, however, failed to elicit a positive response from the remaining four countries, as they expressed a preference for cooperation within the CIS framework.

Table 1. Participation of Central Asian Countries in Major Regional Organizations

Participating countries	CIS (1991-)	Central Asian Cooperation Organization (1998-2005)	Eurasian Economic community (2001-2015)	Shanghai Cooperation Organization (2001-)	Central Asian regional economic cooperation mechanism (1996-)
Kazakhstan	√	√	√	√	√
Uzbekistan	√	√	Observer state	√	√
Tajikistan	√	√	×	√	√
Kyrgyzstan	√	√	√	√	√

Turkmenistan	withdrew	×		×		×	√
	in 2005						

Turkmenistan's limited engagement in Central Asian regional integration mechanisms can be attributed to three primary factors. Firstly, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan inherited a highly specialized and trade-dependent economy focused on processing, with the energy industry and cotton cultivation serving as the primary material basis for trade exports. Turkmenistan possesses the world's fourth largest natural gas reserves, with natural gas trade historically constituting 80% of the country's exports. Russia and China stand as its primary energy trading partners due to their substantial size, while other Central Asian nations, constrained by relatively simple economic structures and underdeveloped levels of development, struggle to challenge the dominance of non-regional powers in trade.

Secondly, from the perspective of neutrality, Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality constrains its involvement in integration organizations. The model of neutral diplomacy represents a strategy employed by small states to secure themselves amidst power struggles with larger states, as articulated by Robert Rothstein: "Small states seek to leverage their 'smallness' for self-protection." By maintaining an impartial stance and convincing larger countries that they pose no threat, small nations can safeguard themselves amid this tumultuous environment. (Robert, 1968) Turkmenistan embarked on a path of neutrality within one year of gaining independence, and during the OSCE Helsinki Summit in July 1992, President Niyazov introduced a foreign policy of "positive neutrality" as an initial framework for pursuing this stance. (Smith, 1998) On 12 December 1995, the fiftieth session of the United Nations General Assembly deliberated on the issue of Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality. Turkmenistan's permanent neutral status has a twofold impact on its participation in the Central Asian integration mechanism. On one hand, Turkmenistan has established a buffer zone in Central Asia through its neutral policy, actively mediated conflicts in the region, fostered strong relations with Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and other countries, and secured its "independence" within Central Asia, thereby diminishing the necessity for integrated security functions in the region. Furthermore, both en route to and following its establishment as a permanently neutral State, Turkmenistan has diligently upheld its obligations of neutrality under international law and steered its foreign policy with a commitment to neutrality. Article 4 of the Permanent Neutrality Act of Turkmenistan stipulates that "Turkmenistan shall refrain from participating in military alliances, inter-state associations with binding obligations, or collective responsibilities among parties. Therefore, due to the strong intensity and high degree of integration in the first Central Asian integration, it possesses a certain alliance nature that requires member states to relinquish part of their sovereignty, making it impossible for neutral Turkmenistan to join.

Thirdly, from the perspective of decision-makers, the supreme leader of Turkmenistan Niyazov's attitude and judgment towards the first Central Asian integration are pessimistic. Due to Turkmenistan's

initial economic fragility and abundant oil and gas resources, it became a strategic battleground for major powers. Consequently, Turkmenistan is reluctant to be labeled as a "banana republic" in Central Asia and rejects any participation in asymmetrical alliances. Niyazov is also not sanguine about cooperation within the framework of the CIS, showing reluctance to participate in the Economic Cooperation Organization and maintaining a cautious stance towards regional integration initiatives such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, or the Central Asian Economic Community. (Charles, 2020)

3. Obstruction of Central Asian Integration and Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy (2005-2018)

Since the beginning of the 21st century, an increasing number of countries from outside the region have started to enhance their geopolitical influence in Central Asia with the intention of achieving their own strategic objectives. During this period, an increasing number of contradictions surfaced in the process of integrating Central Asia. The significant disparity in economic development levels among countries, the challenges of coordinating monetary policies, frequent border conflicts, and other issues have undermined the integration led by Central Asian countries and gradually supplanted by the integration mechanism led by non-regional powers.

During this period, Turkmenistan's domestic and foreign policies underwent a transition as a result of a change in leadership. On December 21, 2006, the supreme leader of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, passed away due to illness, leading to Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov formally assuming the presidency. Confronted with the intervention of non-regional powers, the second Turkmen government re-evaluated the power dynamics in Central Asia, prioritized national economic development as its main focus, pursued a "balance of great powers" strategy, and endeavored to secure its flexible position in Central Asia.

Firstly, the Turkmen government has shown a lack of enthusiasm for participating in the Central Asian integration and the Eurasian Economic Community organization led by Russia. This is attributed to President Berdymuhamedov's proactive efforts to normalize Russia-Turkey relations after assuming office, leading to the abandonment of the previously adopted "one-sided" policy against Russia during Niyazov's tenure. Turkmenistan's unbalanced approach to Russia has compromised the country's neutrality, and the subsequent government has been cautious about Russian-led integration mechanisms, while prioritizing economic cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Community.

Secondly, the United States has also incorporated Central Asia into its global strategic framework and actively engaged in the region's integration efforts. The United States has pursued Central Asian integration not through the establishment of new multilateral institutions, but by leveraging existing or regionally inclusive organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, NATO's Partnership for Peace Program, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. In response to the "olive branch" extended by the United States, Turkmenistan has actively engaged in certain less integrated mechanisms that promote national economic development, and other Central Asian countries have also

enthusiastically joined these organizations. Furthermore, Turkmenistan plays a significant role in the U.S. Caspian Energy Initiative, which aims to facilitate collaboration between its business partners and the governments of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkmenistan for the construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP).

In the 21st century, China has increasingly prioritized institutional development in Central Asia. Through regional mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Belt and Road Initiative, China has engaged in practical cooperation with Central Asian countries in areas including security, energy, economy, and trade. Since President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov assumed office in 2006, Turkmenistan's engagement in China-led regional cooperation mechanisms has increased, and bilateral relations between the two countries have continued to flourish. Since 2008, the China-Turkey "Central Asia Natural Gas Pipeline" project has been successfully completed, with the construction of four natural gas pipeline lines from Turkmenistan to Khorgos in Xinjiang Province. This infrastructure is capable of providing China with over 65 billion cubic meters of natural gas energy annually, solidifying China as Turkmenistan's primary trading partner. On September 3, 2013, the President of China paid a visit to Turkmenistan and the leaders of both nations signed a joint declaration, signifying the elevation of bilateral relations to the level of strategic partnership.

Overall, during the period of impeded integration led by Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan prioritized economic development and selectively engaged in the Central Asian integration mechanism led by Russia, the United States, and middle powers through neutral diplomacy, thereby enhancing its participation and enthusiasm in regional affairs. Although Turkmenistan places great importance on balancing relations with major powers, it demonstrates a stronger inclination towards regional cooperation with China, which objectively promotes the expansion of Central Asian integration cooperation and also generates economic momentum for future participation in integration led by Central Asian countries.

4. The Revival of Central Asian Integration and Turkmenistan's Strategic Adjustment (2018-Present)

The initial failure of Central Asian integration had numerous adverse effects on the region, leading to ongoing instability in political and diplomatic relations among the countries. This resulted in frequent disputes over ethnic, religious, border demarcation, and water resource issues. The Central Asian countries have established diverse economic development strategies and competed to prioritize relations with non-regional countries, leading the region from former "integration" to the opposite extreme of "anti-integration". Against this backdrop, state-led integration in Central Asia has been mired in a "period of stagnation" for over a decade.

The assumption of the presidency by Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016 marked a significant turning point for the revival of Central Asian integration. He emphasized that "Central Asia is the top priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy" and committed to overhauling the country's long-standing economic

model, reestablishing ties with Central Asian nations through economic reforms, and actively seeking to mend relations with neighboring countries. (Daisuke, 2019) Subsequently, at the 72nd session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2017, Mirziyoyev further proposed convening a regular consultative meeting of the heads of Central Asian States. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev articulated the rationale for the summit: "To address the challenges facing the Central Asian region, we are capable of resolving them internally without external intervention, hence our collective gatherings." (Paul, 2018) The inaugural summit of Central Asian countries proceeded smoothly, with the heads of state and government engaging in discussions on topics such as communication, trade, and transportation. This meeting holds significant historical importance as it marks the first summit held by Central Asian countries without the participation of external nations since 2005. The gathering demonstrates the commitment of Central Asian countries to collaborate and can be seen as the "first step" towards reinitiating integration in Central Asia.

In light of the renewed integration of Central Asia, Turkmenistan is exercising caution and carefully evaluating the nature and process of development in order to determine its participation, while also dynamically adjusting its corresponding strategy. In the inaugural Central Asian summit, President Berdymuhamedov opted for an indirect participation, engaging in post-meeting deliberations following a thorough clarification of the agenda, nature, and objectives. The Central Asian integration, initiated by the first meeting of the Heads of State in Central Asia, initially focused on issues related to transportation, communications, and environmental protection. However, there was a lack of detailed top-level design for "high political issues". Furthermore, with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joining the Eurasian Economic Union, they have delegated their foreign trade sovereignty to the Supreme Council of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Intergovernmental Committee. As a result, they are no longer able to independently sign binding trade agreements with third parties. Consequently, there are inherent barriers to establishing a customs union, let alone supranational institutions.

The resumption of Central Asian integration presents a favorable opportunity for Turkmenistan. Firstly, the integration commences at a foundational level with a "broad but not deep" scope of cooperation that does not encroach upon issues of sovereignty transfer, aligning with Turkmenistan's neutrality policy. Secondly, integration contributes to fostering warmer relations among Central Asian countries, addressing the "fragmentation" in the region and supporting China's development strategy of "reviving the Silk Road". Consequently, following the inaugural summit of the Central Asian States, Turkmenistan has decided to gradually adjust its foreign policy and participate in integration.

At the second Central Asian Summit in 2019, Turkmenistan made the decision to end its "diplomatic isolation" and demonstrated its commitment to participating in regional integration. President Berdymuhamedov personally attended the meeting, where he proposed measures for Central Asian integration, endorsed the establishment of a platform for regional dialogue and discussion, and suggested practical initiatives such as creating a Central Asian Business Commission. With Turkmenistan's involvement, the second Summit of Central Asian States experienced significant

expansion, with pressing issues in the region consistently included on the agenda. One scholar observed that this gathering signified "Central Asian leaders' efforts to redefine their vision for the region and promote a more comprehensive and diverse geopolitical narrative globally."

The second Summit of Central Asian States has had a positive impact on regional cooperation and further enhanced Turkmenistan's positive perception of Central Asian integration. A year later, Turkmenistan also won the right to host the third Summit of Central Asian States, aiming to bolster its influence in the region and facilitate the robust development of integration. The third meeting was attended by the Presidents of the five Central Asian States and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Central Asia, Natalia Gell-Mann. They issued a Joint Statement addressing pressing issues in the region, including regional security and governance, COVID-19 prevention and control, ensuring regional denuclearization, stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan, and promoting institutionalization of the heads of state summit through negotiations and consultations. As the host, Turkmenistan adhered to the concept of "practical cooperation" and focused the meeting on addressing current regional hotspot issues, enhancing political mutual trust, and providing economic assistance. This contributed to the establishment of a high-level dialogue mechanism in Central Asia and offered valuable insights for the reinvigoration of Central Asian integration.

The diplomatic engagement of Turkmenistan in the three summits of the heads of state of Central Asia holds significant importance, marking its inaugural participation in the integration mechanism led by Central Asian countries. Historically, Turkmenistan has upheld a policy of neutrality as the cornerstone of its foreign relations, maintaining a stance of non-involvement in the Central Asian integration mechanism and showing limited interest in regional affairs. Therefore, Turkmenistan's participation in the reset phase of Central Asian integration is a crucial adjustment to its regional strategy. This represents a strategic shift away from the dominance of the "policy of neutrality" in order to better adapt to the new regional environment, while still upholding international treaties and commitments.

However, this also signifies Turkmenistan's gradual transition from its previous role as an "observer" to actively pursuing a role as a "participant in Central Asian integration" and even a "decision maker." Since the revival of Central Asian integration, Turkmenistan has progressively expanded its efforts towards regional integration, hosting numerous multilateral cooperation conferences and leveraging its position as host to propose innovative solutions for economic cooperation, regional security, environmental governance, and political mutual trust in Central Asia. This has significantly bolstered Turkmenistan's influence in Central Asian affairs.

5. Challenges of Turkmenistan's Participation in Central Asian Integration

The participation of Turkmenistan has injected fresh impetus into the integration of Central Asia and heralded a new era in the collective development and shared future of the five Central Asian countries. However, due to the dynamic deficiencies in Central Asian integration and internal factors within Turkmenistan, the path to reinitiate integration is certain to encounter numerous practical challenges.

After the restart, Central Asian integration is hampered by a lack of political impetus, insufficient economic momentum, and weak cultural synergy. The integration process has been further slowed down in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Western scholar Speicher has pointed out that compared to European integration, Central Asian integration lacks strong political impetus. In post-World War II Western Europe, fear of the Soviet Union and its ideology generated significant political momentum, while US economic aid (the Marshall Plan) and military protection (NATO) further propelled Europe towards economic integration. However, Central Asian integration does not have an external force driving it due to Russia's economic downturn. Additionally, Central Asia only faces common security threats such as Islamic extremism. (Martin, 2002)

At the regional economic level, there are three primary impediments to the integration of Central Asia. The first is the limited complementarity of national economies, stemming from the region's low industrialization and its reliance on energy and mineral extraction. This results in a low degree of interdependence between countries. The second constraint is the significant economic disparity among nations. Kazakhstan stands as the most developed country in Central Asia, with its GDP accounting for approximately 65% of the total for all Central Asian countries, while Turkmenistan, positioned in the middle economically, only contributes around 10%. Such substantial discrepancies exist in economic output across these nations. The third factor is the high external dependence of the regional economy. Since 2015, the proportion of imports and exports in the GDP of Central Asia as a whole has exceeded 75%, indicating a significant reliance on external sources. This has dampened enthusiasm for economic and trade cooperation in Central Asia. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, along with Western economic sanctions against Russia, also impacted the economy of Central Asia, leading to severe turbulence in financial markets and disruptions to regional industrial and supply chains, further exacerbating economic integration in Central Asia.

Secondly, Turkmenistan's economic momentum remains inadequate, with limited progress in economic reform and a persistent reliance on energy trade as the mainstay industry, posing challenges for complementing the economies of the other four Central Asian countries. Following a seven-year economic recession from 1991 to 1997 due to declining productivity and disrupted trade routes, Turkmenistan gradually began its recovery in 1998. In contrast to Russia's shock therapy approach, Niyazov pledged a modest and gradual transition towards a market economy through privatization and rationalizing the country's industrial structure. Presently, Turkmenistan is undergoing systematic efforts to embrace market-oriented reforms while striving for accelerated industrialization and privatization between 2019 and 2025. Despite some improvements in its foreign trade structure after extensive reforms, natural gas and oil continue to dominate the domestic industry as the leading sectors within the national industrial system. According to reports from Russian news network "Arzuw" on January 26th, 2021, Turkmenistan's industrial output accounted for 27.8% of GDP in 2020, with total industrial product value exceeding 59 billion manats during that year; energy products alone contributed up to 40%, signifying their continued prominence. Consequently, Turkmenistan currently faces limitations in

serving as an "engine" for economic integration across Central Asia.

The recent internal regime change in Turkmenistan has introduced uncertainty regarding the country's participation in integration initiatives. On March 15, 2022, Deputy Prime Minister and Democratic Party candidate Serdar Berdymuhamedov was declared the winner of the presidential election by the Central Election Commission of Turkmenistan, securing 72.97% of the votes. The newly elected president, Serdar, is the son of former president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and has held positions in the foreign Ministry, parliament, and National Security Council. At present, specific policy objectives under President Serdar's leadership are yet to be revealed, leaving it uncertain whether Turkmenistan will maintain its active involvement in Central Asian integration efforts since 2019.

In conclusion, Turkmenistan has emerged as a significant driving force in the integration of Central Asia through its domestic economic reforms and adjustments in foreign policy, objectively creating favorable conditions for security, stability, and development in the region. However, Turkmenistan's integration strategy is confronted with several practical challenges, the most prominent being the uncertainty surrounding the prospect of integration and potential domestic regime changes. The lack of clarity regarding the progression of Central Asian integration from partial to higher stages, insufficient vertical development of integration, and difficulties in establishing customs unions or other supranational mechanisms pose significant obstacles. Additionally, questions have arisen about Turkmenistan's integration policy due to recent government changes. It remains uncertain whether President Serdar—son of a former president—will continue with previous policies or adopt a different approach towards integration participation. Nevertheless, there are indications that if President Serdar maintains the same level of commitment as his predecessor did, Turkmenistan will play a pivotal role as Central Asian integration advances to higher stages.

6. Discussion

The paper concludes that Turkmenistan's participation in Central Asian integration is influenced by three core issues: the potential conflict between the principle of neutrality and the integration mechanism, the compatibility of Turkmenistan's strategic needs with the integration mechanism, and the perception and attitude of Turkmenistan's decision makers towards integration. The paper also delves into the challenges that Turkmenistan faces in participating in Central Asian integration through research. From a macro perspective, the level of Central Asian integration is much lower than it was in 1994, both in terms of intensity and mechanism construction. There are still significant deficiencies in political power and economic strength, resulting in a "semi-vertical and semi-horizontal" integration model with an uncertain outlook. On a micro level, Turkmenistan itself has numerous shortcomings and limited capacity for integration. In the short term, domestic economic reform in Turkmenistan has limited impact, and its economic structure is not sufficiently rational to drive regional economy growth. The change of political leadership in Turkmenistan has introduced uncertain factors into its integration strategy.

The framework of Turkmenistan's participation in the Central Asian integration mechanism offers a perspective for comprehending the rationale, constraints, processes, and impacts of neutral countries' involvement in the integration mechanism. For instance, in light of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Sweden and Finland, two permanently neutral countries, have opted to join NATO and abandon their neutrality. It is worth exploring whether the research perspective presented in this paper can be applied to elucidate this case.

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