

TURKMENISTAN MOVES TOWARD ACTIVE NEUTRALITY

Erlan Benedis-Grab

On May 20, 2026 the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a Turkmenistan-initiated resolution recasting neutrality as active stabilization rather than withdrawal from the global stage. Although it was ratified domestically in 2025, in July 2026 Turkmenistan became the last of the five Central Asian states to sign the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century, nearly four years after it was opened for signature in 2022. On October 8, Ashgabat hosted the region's newly consequential gathering, the Consultative Meeting of Central Asian and Azerbaijani heads of state (CMHS) in Avaza. Turkmenistan's recent actions suggest that a country once largely absent from multilateral institutions, is now an active participant in Greater Central Asian initiatives.

BACKGROUND: Turkmenistan has, in the name of neutrality, pursued one of the most isolationist foreign policy orientations in Central Asia, if not the world. Unlike Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan is not a member of the Eurasian Economic Union; unlike Tajikistan, it is not a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; and unlike Uzbekistan, it holds only associate status in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Saparmyrat Niyazov, or Turkmenbashi, intended to build neutrality into a [sovereignty-as-state ideology](#), reinforcing his legitimacy, while also giving Turkmenistan a role as a neutral-venue country where opposing parties could meet.

With almost 35 years having passed since independence, though, neutrality in Turkmenistan has yielded mixed results. Its benefit stems mainly from its energy policy. Turkmenistan's ability to reach various markets has depended mainly on [relations with transit countries](#), where its neutral posture serves as a positive factor.

Yet, Turkmenistan's economy remains in a [precarious position](#), with persistent food, budget, and gas shortages. And, while it was able to serve [as a host](#) between warring parties during the Tajik and Afghan civil wars, it has not convened a major mediation since, while its neighbors have. Astana [hosted](#) the years-long talks on the Syrian conflict, one of the most violent in the contemporary period. Perhaps out of recognition of these shortcomings, Turkmenistan, while maintaining its policy of neutrality, is starting to emerge from its longstanding isolation.

Most notably, it has begun to participate more substantially in regional cooperation projects. The Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia (CMHS), the region's standing summit format convening the five presidents, launched in 2018. It was at the CMHS's 2022 summit that Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan signed the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century. The treaty outlines [cooperation agreements](#), including in critical areas like defense, law enforcement, water, energy, and a mutual-assistance clause. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were both initially hesitant to sign on, citing the need to "complete all domestic procedures." However, in August 2025 Tajikistan [acceded](#), following a breakthrough in delimiting the borders of the Fergana Valley. Turkmenistan formally signed in July 2026.

Turkmenistan previously hosted the CMHS at Avaza in 2021, its only turn as host to date. Since then, the format has grown more consequential, admitting Azerbaijan as a full member in 2025. Turkmenistan's return as host in 2026 therefore fits its broader pattern of renewed regional engagement.

Turkmenistan is also pursuing a renewed effort to participate more seriously in international intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations. In May 2026, Turkmenistan introduced the UN resolution “The Role and Importance of a Policy of Neutrality in Maintaining and Strengthening International Peace, Security and Sustainable Development” which the General Assembly adopted. The same language Turkmenistan once used to keep the world at a distance now draws it closer.

IMPLICATIONS: Signing onto a regional cooperation treaty, hosting the CMHS, and making diplomatic pushes at the UN mark a Turkmen shift from isolation.

Turkmenistan’s recent actions suggest a country poised to try to take on a bigger role in world affairs, motivated by a fear of being left behind, the changing external environment, the need for economic diversification, and regime legitimacy.

Serdar Berdimuhamedov, who became president in 2022, has continued a doctrinal shift, begun under his father, away from Turkmenbashi’s “[permanent neutrality](#)” towards what might be called “active neutrality.” This policy seeks to utilize Turkmenistan’s non-aligned status as a platform for diplomacy.

aPreviously, Turkmenbashi’s “permanent neutrality” was essentially a shield for disengagement, codified within the constitution. The changing nature of Russia’s role in Central Asia partly explains this shift as well. That shield was primarily aimed at one country: Russia. Non-alignment justified staying out of Russian-led integration projects; however, Moscow’s leverage has since thinned. China is moving in, and Russia’s attention is fixed west, on Ukraine, so Turkmenistan has had to update its strategy to this new environment.

Turkmenistan is pursuing renewed engagement with its neighbors. Turkmenistan’s signing of the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century is the clearest marker of this. Although formally binding, the treaty is noncommittal, with no automatic trigger or enforcement mechanism. This is a significant factor in Turkmenistan’s accession, even though it was delayed. If a security threat arises, [the response](#) is “determined through bilateral consultations and within the framework of Consultative Meetings.” That falls well short of the [CSTO treaty](#), which requires members to “immediately provide ... the necessary help, including military one,” or the [CIS treaty](#), which permits “the use of the Armed Forces” in individual or collective self-defense.

Regionalism is advancing regardless of Turkmenistan, and Ashgabat appears unwilling to be the one state left out of it. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have driven the push for deeper integration—and they have been largely successful in this. Intra-regional [trade](#) nearly doubled from 2020 to 2025, while the Fergana Valley states settled their long-running border dispute. Staying outside would have left Turkmenistan negotiating from outside a structure its neighbors had already built without it.

Thus, by hosting the Avaza summit on October 8, Turkmenistan has a chance to set an important agenda. Ahead of the summit, Ashgabat circulated a draft [agenda](#) to its partners spanning security, diplomacy, trade and logistics, climate and water, and humanitarian cooperation. As Kazakhstan pointed out in July, the next steps should be to develop a concrete [action plan](#) as the CMHS format moves along.

Economic diversification is an important focus for Turkmenistan. It remains [constrained](#) by near-total reliance on natural gas exports, the overwhelming majority bound for China. While mutual-assistance commitments are a tougher sell, proposals like

Tajikistan's prospective [joint oil refinery](#) are the kinds of economic initiatives that appeal to Ashgabat.

International validation of Turkmenistan's neutrality reinforces the legitimacy of the ruling family, making prestige a significant motivator for Ashgabat. The May 2026 UN resolution gave neutrality a standalone General Assembly [agenda item](#), strengthening Turkmenistan's diplomatic profile. This momentum also supports its bid for a [2031–2032 UN Security Council seat](#), which would provide another significant source of international prestige.

CONCLUSIONS: This is Turkmenistan's most substantive year of regional engagement since 1995. Ashgabat chose its engagement moves for their low cost. The CMHS treaty is noncommittal, the UN resolution is declaratory, and hosting is a rotational duty. Turkmenistan maintains its neutral doctrine, but through active diplomacy rather than diplomatic isolation. This posture will likely hold in the long term because its drivers reinforce the need for engagement. Turkmenistan still leans almost entirely on gas sales to China, whereas Central Asia continues to build structures regardless of Turkmen involvement. And the international promotion of neutrality plays well at home. The limits to Turkmenistan's shift are also clear and it can be expected to continually abstain from the usual multilateral institutions. If regional cooperation deepens toward binding obligations at Avaza or beyond, Ashgabat's commitment will be tested.

AUTHORS BIO: Erlan Benedis-Grab is a Junior Fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. He holds a dual B.A. in Economics and Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University Bloomington, and his research focuses on Central Asia, International Trade, and Energy Politics. He can be reached at erlanbenedisgrab@gmail.com.