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**REPORT ON
TURKMENISTAN'S REFERENDUM ON INDEPENDENCE**

October 26, 1991

Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan

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of the
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SUMMARY

On October 26, 1991, Turkmenistan held a referendum on independence. Over 97 percent of eligible voters turned out to answer "Yes" or "No" to two questions, the first dealing with the republic's independence, the second seeking approval of President Saparmurad Niyazov's political and economic program. Over 94 percent of participants voted for independence; almost as high a percentage of voters voiced backing for Niyazov. On October 27, an extraordinary session of Turkmenistan's Supreme Soviet declared independence.

Most republics of the former Soviet Union declared independence soon after the August 19, 1991 coup attempt. The much-delayed declaration by Turkmenistan's conservative government aimed at putting the republic on an equal footing with the other republics as negotiations among them and what remains of the center continue towards an uncertain conclusion. But Niyazov has made it quite clear that Turkmenistan's leaders will not countenance Baltic or Russian-style political pluralism on the road to independence. Equally clear from statements by the republic's official spokesmen and from the prominence of Iranian guests in Ashkhabad during the referendum is that Turkmenistan will pursue a regional foreign policy, oriented primarily towards developing good relations with its neighbors.

Helsinki Commission staff traveled to Turkmenistan to observe the October 26 referendum. The Commission has been observing elections and referendums in the Baltic States and Soviet republics since February 1990.* Except for monitoring the voting in the March 1991 All-Union referendum in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, however, the Commission has not been to Central Asia. This trip to Ashkhabad thus marks the beginning of a geographical expansion of Commission activity. U.S. policymakers have tended to neglect the region -- a habit that can no longer be afforded as the USSR dissolves and these republics become independent states and enter the world community. The trip's purposes were therefore not only to observe the balloting in the referendum but also to establish contact with the republic's leadership, to gain a sense of the leadership's plans, its attitude towards the CSCE and its commitments, and to meet with representatives of opposition groups.

* See Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Report on the Armenian Presidential Elections* (October 1991), *Report on the Armenian Referendum on Independence* (October 1991), *Referendum in the Soviet Union: A Compendium of Reports on the March 17, 1991 Referendum on the Future of the U.S.S.R.* (April 1991), *Report on the Estonian Referendum and Latvian Public Opinion Poll on Independence* (March 1991), and *Elections in the Baltic States and Soviet Republics: A Compendium of Reports on Parliamentary Elections Held in 1990* (December 1990).

BACKGROUND

Turkmenistan (or Turkmenia) is the southernmost republic in Soviet Central Asia, bordering Iran and Afghanistan. The republic came into existence and became part of the USSR in 1924. Most of Turkmenistan's enormous territory is desert, but the republic has abundant natural resources, specifically oil and natural gas, and is a major producer of cotton. Turkmen, a Turkic people who are traditionally Sunni Muslims, constitute almost 70 percent of the republic's sparse population of 3.7 million, with Russians (about 10 percent), Uzbeks (nine percent) and Kazakhs (three percent) comprising most of the rest.

Under the leadership of Saparmurad Niyazov, who is Communist Party chief as well as president, Turkmenistan has been one of the most conservative republics of the former USSR, even by the standards of relatively conservative Central Asia. Unlike the Baltic States, Georgia, Armenia and Moldova, Turkmenistan's communist leaders have never supported the breakup of the USSR. In March 1991, republic leaders proudly announced that about 97 percent of eligible voters in Turkmenistan had voted to maintain the Union in a referendum organized by Mikhail Gorbachev. This conservatism has also manifested itself in domestic policies: the fledgling political opposition has been consistently harassed, its leaders dismissed from their jobs, and arrested. There is not one unofficial or opposition movement that has succeeded in being registered by the authorities. (*Agzybirlik* [Unity], the best known opposition group, was registered briefly before the authorities reconsidered. See below, pp. 7-8.)

Consequently, the declarations of independence by most of the Soviet republics in response to the putsch attempt of August 1991 created an awkward situation for Turkmenistan's leaders. They remain reluctant to witness, much less foster, the dissolution of the USSR, as evidenced by their frequently stated willingness to sign a new Union Treaty and their signing of the October 18 economic agreement. But they ultimately could not refrain from jumping on the independence bandwagon. When even conservative Tajikistan declared independence on September 9, it was only a matter of time before Turkmenistan did the same.

The holding of a republic-wide referendum on independence was apparently dictated by the desire of the republic's leaders to be seen as enjoying popular support and acting in accordance with democratic principles. An overwhelmingly pro-independence vote would bolster their status in negotiations with other republics and the fast-vanishing Soviet "center," as well as with the governments of foreign countries, with which they intend to develop relations. The fact that non-Turkmens comprise some 30 percent of Turkmenistan's population presumably was another important consideration impelling the leadership to demonstrate the extent and degree of backing for independence among the entire electorate, regardless of nationality.

Not coincidentally, given the leadership's efforts to reach out to old friends and new, the referendum took place during a meeting of the Council of the Humanitarian Association of Turkmen of the World. The first international conference of Turkmen of the World, in May 1991, created the Humanitarian Association to promote a renaissance of national culture, and unanimously elected President Niyazov president of the association.

THE REFERENDUM QUESTIONS

There were two questions on the ballot: 1) "Do you agree with the legislative establishment of Turkmenistan as an independent democratic state?" 2) "Do you support the statement of the president and Supreme Soviet of the Turkmenistan Soviet Socialist Republic 'On the domestic and foreign policy of Turkmenistan' and the practical activity to implement it?"

The statement to which the second question refers was published at the end of September, and lays out a program of sorts by the republic's leaders. They stressed the need for political stability in the republic, given the acute political and economic crisis in the USSR, as the "main condition of successful social development and resolving urgent social problems." The president and Supreme Soviet promised to protect the interests of all inhabitants of Turkmenistan, regardless of nationality, social position or religion, and warned that attempts to sow discord between different groups would be crushed. The statement pledges that no political party or group will enjoy any special privileges, and that the political and civil rights of individuals would be defended, in accordance with the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights and the Declaration of Rights and Freedoms passed by the USSR Congress of People's Deputies in September 1991.

On economic policy, the statement indicated that Turkmenistan would exchange commodities at world prices with other republics, while recognizing the equality at home of all forms of property, developing entrepreneurship, and denationalizing the economy. In this shift towards market relations, less well-off people and groups would receive protection from the state, which will also foster development of education, health care and national culture. Independent Turkmenistan, according to the document, will defend its sovereignty by forming armed units and by entering into a defensive union with other republics, while abjuring the deployment of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction. As for foreign policy, the guiding principle in dealings with other countries will be non-interference in internal affairs.

The statement contained few concrete plans or proposals and was clearly designed to appeal to everyone. As a voter pointed out in *Turkmenskaya Iskra* on October 27, there was "no mention in the document of an irrevocable break with Marxism-Leninism," which he described as "very important for veterans." Rather than a guide to policy, therefore, the statement appeared intended to elicit a popular vote of confidence in President Niyazov's position and his continuing rule.

PROCEDURES AND VOTING

Turkmenistan had previously held republic Supreme Soviet elections, as well as a direct presidential election in October 1990, which Saparmurad Niyazov won handily. (Technically, Niyazov thus became the first popularly elected -- i.e., not elected by parliament -- president of a Soviet republic, beating out Georgia's Zviad Gamsakhurdia by some six months and Russia's Boris Yeltsin by seven.) The law governing the October 1990 election was still in effect and regulated the voting on October 26, 1991, as Turkmenistan has not as yet passed a law on referendums. There were 60 districts in the republic, with a total of 1,395 polling stations for over 1.8 million voters. Polling stations were staffed by people nominated by work collectives, enterprises and neighborhoods; they, in turn, elected a chairman. Polls were open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. (but could be opened earlier upon requests of voters, according to subsequent newspaper reports on individual polling stations). All those over 18 years old could vote.

The authorities distributed invitations to vote to the electorate. Moreover, they organized a substantial and coordinated effort to get out the vote, which the republic press described in detail. *Turkmenskaya Iskra* on October 25 reported that "activists and deputies" were urging "Yes" votes in work collectives, educational institutions, and neighborhoods. Municipal officials from Tashauz related in the same newspaper two days later that hundreds of meetings with voters had been held and that radio and television had been broadcasting information on the significance of the referendum in three languages for ten days. Voters were also attracted to polling stations by various sorts of entertainment and vendors selling food and clothing.

Ballots were available in Turkmen and Russian. Each of the two questions was followed by a "Yes" and "No" box; voters were supposed to cross out the choice they did not want. They came to polling stations, signed on the prepared list of voters for the ballots they received, went into a curtained booth to make their choice, and dropped their completed ballot into a sealed box. The subsequent tally counted the two questions separately and a vote on either question was invalid if both "Yes" and "No" were either crossed out or left untouched.

Those not in their home wards on October 26 could vote where they were by informing election authorities in advance: they would be placed on supplementary voter rolls and crossed off lists in their home district. Urns were brought to people too ill to come to polling stations.

RESULTS

The chairman of the republic's Central Election Commission announced the final results at an extraordinary session of the republic's Supreme Soviet -- in which enormous portraits of Marx, Engels and Lenin still overlooked the deputies -- on October 27. He reported that 97.4 percent of the republic's eligible voters had participated in the balloting, of whom 94.1 percent voted "Yes" to independence (4.2 percent voted "No") and 93.5 percent approved of the program of the republic leadership (4.3 percent voted "No").

In Ashkhabad, where some 40 percent of the population is non-Turkmen, 91.5 percent of participating voters cast ballots for independence (7.4 percent voted "No") and 91.6 percent approved of Niyazov's program (7.2 percent voted "No").

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

On the basis of these results, the parliament, led by President Niyazov, declared independence. Niyazov also decreed that the state symbols of Turkmenistan, whose flag on October 26 still featured the Soviet hammer and sickle, would be changed.

The triumphant president went on to make a number of very interesting points in his speech. He noted, first, that the republic's non-Turkmen population had voted for independence and promised that everyone's rights would be guaranteed. But he warned that "we don't need formal democracy" and that strong discipline and social togetherness were essential. Niyazov also made clear that Turkmenistan would not copy the economic plans worked out in Moscow or other republics and would not hurry with privatization of enterprises, land or trade. Furthermore, he continued, law and order will be strengthened and any attempts to sow dissension or disparage the dignity of any people would be decisively suppressed.

Niyazov noted that "the Turkmen people demand to know their history," an apparent reference to the intended development of programs on Turkmen culture and language. The republic, he said, would need backing from Turkmen all over the world, and he promised that Turkmenistan would make dual citizenship available to them.

Then, in a remarkable statement, given the occasion and the setting, Niyazov essentially told the assembled deputies of the Supreme Soviet that they were expendable. He warned them that they "could be recalled" by the people, if they were "illiterate in economic and legal matters."

Niyazov closed his oration with a reference to foreign relations. He promised that independent Turkmenistan would not isolate itself and would instead be open to the entire world. But he singled out for special and favorable mention the republic's ties with Iran, with which trade relations would now expand.

Following Niyazov on the podium was the governor of adjacent Khorasan province in Iran, who led a 200-strong Iranian delegation visiting Turkmenistan. He congratulated the republic on its independence, adding that "walls between our two countries have been cleared away" and that political and economic ties would now develop between the neighboring countries.

IMPLICATIONS OF TURKMENISTAN'S INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM

The formal declaration of independence by Turkmenistan did little to change the situation that had already developed in the former USSR: the Soviet Union has disintegrated and republic leaderships are formulating their own domestic and foreign policies. Whether Turkmenistan will enter a political or economic union with other republics with some sort of center in a coordinating role, as the chairman of the parliament projected in a conversation with Helsinki Commission staff, depends on the center's ability to hold even to that minimal extent. One important factor in the leadership's eventual decision is the relative absence of animosity -- compared, say, to the Baltic States -- among the political elite towards Moscow and, indeed, the Soviet Union. Foreign Minister Kuliev told Helsinki Commission staff that "We are not extremists. We don't condemn the USSR or its entire existence. The Soviet Union did not do only bad things for us and we acknowledge the benefits we received."

A similar point of view was directed at the public in an interview in *Vecherniy Ashkhabad* (October 25) by the director of the Institute of History of Turkmenistan's Academy of Sciences. He said that only in 1924 did the Turkmens manage to establish a state, and however one approaches the Bolshevik Revolution, "we must associate the beginning of our independence with it...at that time, entering the USSR was a benefit -- a step ahead on the path of progress."

Given such official policy statements and leadership attitudes, Turkmenistan would probably join such a union if it emerges. But the republic will surely insist on maintaining control of its natural resources, selling them at world prices and keeping the profits, and pursuing its own domestic and foreign policies.

Degree of Democratization

The holding of a referendum on independence was obviously designed to display a leadership united with its people and enjoying its support. But elections in Turkmenistan since 1990 have regularly drawn the kind of turnout and support for ensconced leaders that were typical of Soviet elections before 1985. Saparmurad Niyazov won his October 1990 presidential election with about 97 percent of the vote; in March 1991, voters in Turkmenistan by almost identical numbers cast ballots in Mikhail Gorbachev's referendum in favor of maintaining the Union, when that was the stated policy of the republic's

leadership. Against that background, the similar results of the October 26 referendum tend to elicit raised eyebrows.

Such an overwhelming turnout and a pro-independence vote are not necessarily suspicious, of course: why wouldn't the great majority of voters in Turkmenistan prefer independence, especially when almost every other republic has already made its declaration? Moreover, Armenia declared independence after a September 21 referendum produced similarly high figures. But in Armenia, the Communist Party apparatus was overthrown well before the referendum on independence; in Turkmenistan, it continues to hold sway and gives every appearance thus far of being able to produce virtually any result it wants in an election or referendum, even if all the formalities of voting and tallying are observed.

Perhaps almost everyone in the republic does support President Niyazov -- but the absence of any institutionalized political pluralism makes it hard to know. There are no registered political organizations in Turkmenistan, so the members of polling stations, who handed out ballots and later counted them, were not representatives of different political parties, as was the case in elections held in the Baltic States and various Soviet republics. The 90 percent-plus vote of support for President Niyazov's program was therefore no more surprising than the pro-independence result.

Political Opposition

There are few indications that the republic's present leadership will allow any serious opposition to develop. Representatives of *Agzybirlik* [Unity] told Helsinki Commission staff that there are about half a dozen political organizations in Turkmenistan, which have recently formed an independent Helsinki group. Apart from *Agzybirlik*, there is a Democratic Party -- which was holding a congress in Moscow during the referendum, as the authorities would not allow the congress to be held in Ashkhabad -- the Popular Front of Turkmenistan (in the city of Mary), and the student organizations *Nazaryet* and *Maksat*.

Agzybirlik spokesmen reported that the members of these organizations suffer repression of various kinds, including harassment at work, dismissals from jobs, fines, and arrest. For example, the republic's most prominent political prisoner is the poet and dramatist Shiraly Nurmyradov. According to *Agzybirlik* spokesmen, he was sent to prison for defrauding someone of money but actually was convicted for ridiculing President Niyazov. *Agzybirlik* hopes to effect his release in the near future, since he is being held in a prison on the territory of the RSFSR, and President Yeltsin has pledged that there will be no political prisoners in his republic. *Agzybirlik* spokesmen also charged that President Niyazov rules by decree and complained about the total lack of independence of the legislative and judicial organs.

Despite these complaints, *Agzybirlik* fully backs Turkmenistan's independence and did not call for a boycott of the referendum. However, the movement urged supporters not to answer the second question on the ballot relating to Niyazov's program.

In this context, an article in the October 25 issue of *Turkmenskaya Iskra* about a draft law on social organizations is intriguing. The chairman of the Supreme Soviet's committee on legislation stated that "the right exists for each person to unite with like-minded people to express himself," as inscribed in the Universal Declaration of Human rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the constitutions of all countries." "Alternative political organizations are now actively making themselves known," he continued, "and the state is obligated to create conditions to guarantee the right for people to unite with those who share their views."

The draft law, which is ready for presentation to the parliament, stipulates that political organizations will not need official permission to be established, but they will require registration. An initiative group of 50 people will prepare a constituent assembly for political parties, which must have a minimum of 1,000 adherents. After passing a charter and program (which may not propagate racism, war or fascism), they apply to the Ministry of Justice, which will register parties within two months. Registered parties receive juridical status and can engage in political work and create mass media outlets, i.e., newspapers.

If passed and taken seriously, this law would legalize opposition political organizations. But by establishing conditions for their formation, it would also legalize the authorities' refusal to register any group by claiming that it lacks the minimum number of members (or by harassing its backers below the necessary number). It is unclear how Turkmenistan's fledgling political opposition might fare under such a law. But one unsettling indication is the statement of the chairman of the commission on legislation that the law's fate in the parliament will be decided by the Communist Party, the komsomol and the [official] trade unions -- all of which have been thoroughly discredited in most other former Soviet republics. In any case, one safe bet is that the first political group to be registered will be the Communist Party or whatever it is renamed.

"We will educate our people in the spirit of established traditions," the Foreign Minister told Helsinki Commission staff. The Minister of Culture told *Turkmenskaya Iskra* (October 27) that independent Turkmenistan should have one faith: "faith in spiritual riches, in the traditions of our fathers and grandfathers." It would appear that President Niyazov and his associates intend to continue ruling the republic in a top-down paternalistic fashion, deciding for the people what is "natural" and what is not, while emphasizing to a greater degree Turkmen national traditions, as opposed to Islam, as the basis of the republic's collective identity.

New Technocracy in Turkmenistan?

It is also possible, however, that the role of the Communist Party apparatus and its influence in the republic may be changing, as a new force enters the republic's political arena. The stark warning Niyazov conveyed to deputies about their dispensibility in his October 27 speech could indicate a decision on his part to create a smaller, technocratic legislative and governmental elite as opposed to the Communist Party apparatchiks who currently occupy most of those administrative posts. With Turkmenistan about to take on the management of its own domestic and foreign affairs, competence may become a more important criterion for job placement than membership in the Party apparatus.

Furthermore, *Izvestiya* reported on October 28 that Niyazov intends to restructure Turkmenistan's administrative system by doing away with regional and district councils and replacing them with administrators appointed by himself. The report left unclear whether this plan involves the actual dissolution of elected local councils -- hardly a step towards democracy -- but it could also be an aspect of a larger plan to professionalize administration as Turkmenistan enters the world community.

Inter-Ethnic Relations

Newspaper reports on the referendum both before and after the balloting stressed that voters of all nationalities supported independence, and voters themselves voiced the hope and expectation that ethnic harmony would continue. In Krasnovodsk, for example, a Russian voter interviewed in *Turkmenskaya Iskra* (October 27) said it was most important that efforts would be undertaken to maintain peace among peoples of different nationalities. She added that many acquaintances had begun studying Turkmen, "not because they're afraid of anything, but just because that's how it should be."

But the very frequency of affirmations of inter-ethnic harmony in official statements, the republic press and in private conversations with high-ranking authorities indicates an area of particular concern for the republic's leadership. This is not surprising, considering that some 30 percent of the republic's population is non-Turkmen, that inter-ethnic violence has flared in many regions of the former USSR (though not in Turkmenistan), and that deteriorating economic conditions generally tend to exacerbate national tensions. The government's plans to foster Turkmen national culture, especially if implemented rigorously with respect to language requirements, could cause concern among non-Turkmen elements of the population, especially since the last few years have witnessed large-scale emigration from all over Central Asia of Slavic residents, concerned about their fate and loss of status in newly nationalist republics.

On the other hand, Turkmenistan's leaders seem sensitive to this issue, which is a critical component of the domestic stability they appear to value above all. Another reason for cautious treatment of non-Turkmens is economic necessity: the leaders of other Central

Asian republics have openly voiced the hope that Slavic inhabitants of their republics will not leave, as they often possess technical expertise which will become crucial as these republics begin managing their own affairs. Turkmenistan's leadership presumably shares this view, and will probably proceed carefully in implementing nationalist policies.

Foreign Relations

Turkmenistan is now on an even footing with all other republics that have declared independence, as they all engage in complicated negotiations among themselves and with what remains of the center. As Niyazov said at a state banquet on October 27, the republic's next task was "to show the world there is one more independent government."

The declaration of independence also facilitates the development of Turkmenistan's foreign relations. Foreign Minister Kuliev met with Helsinki Commission staff for an hour on October 28 and laid out the basic foreign policy directions independent Turkmenistan intended to follow. He said little that was not contained in the September statement issued by President Niyazov, on which voters cast ballots on October 26. Kuliev stressed that it was essential for the republic to build good relations with its neighbors, mentioning Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He said Turkmenistan would try to coordinate its foreign policy with theirs in the interests of ensuring regional peace. But, he added pointedly, their ideology and politics are their own business, and non-interference must guide their relations with independent Turkmenistan.

Kuliev said that Turkmenistan's leaders respect religion and support the creation of conditions that would allow believers to pursue their faith. But in a clear reference to neighboring, Shiite Muslim, Iran, he warned that religion would not be permitted to become a political force, and that there would be no "religious fanaticism here."

Kuliev said that his government also hopes to establish good relations on an equal basis with Western industrialized countries and Japan. He added that students from Turkmenistan would be sent to study in those countries, and that the republic would gradually open its doors to foreign capital and offer assurances about investments.

Turkmenistan and the CSCE

The chairman of Turkmenistan's parliament told Helsinki Commission staff that the republic's leadership had not yet begun thinking seriously about the CSCE, but Foreign Minister Kuliev stated positively that Turkmenistan would like to join. When asked about Turkmenistan's attitude towards CSCE human rights provisions and commitments on political pluralism, he said that human rights were of critical importance and asserted that there were no contradictions between international human rights standards and the republic's legislation and practice.

But Kuliev said, echoing Niyazov's words of the previous day, that "we don't intend to play at democracy" [i.e., there will not be a profusion of political parties here]. He pointed to developments in the Baltic States, Moscow and Leningrad as evidence of the sort of chaos caused by such "playing." Political groups from the Baltic States and from certain Russian cities had come to Turkmenistan and tried to stir up trouble, added Kuliev, but "we didn't allow them to do so and we won't allow them to do so." Political parties, he said, "should not be imported. They should be a natural outgrowth [of the society] and we won't prevent natural parties from becoming established."

At the September 9 - October 4, 1991 Moscow Meeting of the CSCE Conference on the Human Dimension, the Soviet delegation announced that the USSR would support applications to join the CSCE by all former Soviet republics. As in the case of other republics which have proclaimed their independence, Turkmenistan presumably will at some point seek admission. CSCE signatory states will then have to consider whether this republic has become a truly sovereign state, and, if so, given its Central Asian location, whether it should be admitted to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in *Europe*. This decision will have to be made and gain unanimous consent, even though Turkmenistan was a constituent entity of a CSCE participating state, the USSR. The debates over this issue promise to be intense, considering that the admission of many new states -- not European in location, political development and culture -- could create a new bloc in the CSCE that might complicate, if not alter, its structure and functioning.

Should Turkmenistan successfully leap these hurdles, other circumstances would have to be considered. Albania, for example, was kept in observer status for almost two years because of its human rights and political freedom deficiencies.

The elaboration of legislation on political parties may to some degree be intended to ease Turkmenistan's way into the CSCE, or, at least, the Western community of nations. But despite the possible legalization of opposition parties in the near future, Turkmenistan's leaders seem determined to retain power and not to open the political arena to their critics (unless, perhaps, they feel that the opposition has few supporters or can be controlled). Foreign Minister Kuliev, when asked how the republic could implement CSCE commitments on political pluralism, said that everyone in Turkmenistan was free to express his/her views. As confirmation, he pointed to the proceedings in the Supreme Soviet on October 27, when various parliamentarians and invited guests made congratulatory statements after Turkmenistan's independence was declared. But it remains to be seen -- and there is reason to doubt, based on past practice and current official statements against "playing at democracy" -- that the republic's leaders will grant the same right, enshrined in CSCE commitments, to parties they consider "not natural."

Implications for the United States

Whether or not a union of sorts emerges from the USSR, all the former republics have made clear that they intend to pursue their own foreign policies. If assumptions and projections made above about Turkmenistan are accurate, that republic and perhaps others in what has been Soviet Central Asia are likely to become new states. Turkmenistan's leaders clearly would like to establish relations with the United States and other Western countries, but their emphasis on regional stability appears to be a higher priority. The establishment of ties with neighboring Iran (while stringently acting to prevent Islamic fundamentalism from infecting Turkmenistan's population), Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey seems more important to Ashkhabad than developing good relations with a faraway United States, especially if Niyazov faces uncomfortable demands about political pluralism. He has already been to Teheran and will visit Ankara at the end of November, but it will probably be some time before he comes to Washington.

If Turkmenistan requests recognition, U.S. policymakers will have to decide whether and under what circumstances to recognize Turkmenistan as an independent country and whether to establish diplomatic relations with it. That decision, in turn, will depend on many factors, including: whether a new union emerges from the USSR, of which Turkmenistan would be a member, and the state of U.S. relations with that union; and, the nature of U.S. relations with Russia, which might prod Washington to recognize or not to recognize other former republics. In September 1991, the chairmen of the Foreign Affairs and Human Rights Committees of the Russian Supreme Soviet urged the Helsinki Commission and the U.S. Congress and government to pressure former republics of the USSR on human rights issues, arguing that it would be easier and more effective to influence their behavior from Washington and other Western capitals than from Moscow.

In any event, Washington will have to consider Turkmenistan's application to join the United Nations. According to Foreign Minister Kuliev, membership in an international organization is essential, as the Soviet Union can no longer guarantee the integrity of the republic's borders. But more important, the likely emergence of new states in Central Asia will certainly affect the regional balance of power, with Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia already jockeying for influence. If the United States wants to lend such influence and leverage as it has -- and they may be considerable, given Washington's ability to provide technical and economic expertise, and to decide whether Turkmenistan is admitted to international organizations -- a policy of engaged involvement might help move the republic towards a secular, pro-Western, democratic and free market orientation.