

Independent and non-aligned?

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On 15 March 2015, I attended a conference marking the 20th anniversary of Turkmenistan declaring its status of *permanent neutrality* in 1995, five years after the fall of the Soviet Union when the former Soviet republic, including the Central Asian states became independent.

The marking of the anniversary took place in Islamabad on the same date and indeed in the same room in the Marriott Hotel as the document was made. Pakistan's Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs and National Security, Sartaj Aziz, was the chief guest. Turkmenistan's ambassador Atadjan Movlamov introduced two senior guests from home, an ambassador-at-large and the rector of the University of Humanity and Development in Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabat. It was an informative meeting, giving the participants an opportunity to reflect on issues of countries' independence and non-alignment.

Can countries really be totally independent and neutral? And if so, do they not then risk becoming isolated and alone, perhaps especially in our time of interdependence and globalization? Today, there is one single superpower, USA, yet with several regional and major powers, which have their cosmologies and spheres of interest. As for Turkmenistan, can it really speak of 'permanent neutrality'? And what are the pros and cons for the country itself, neighbours and the region? What can the rest of the world learn from the score countries who have declared that they are neutral, with United Nations recognition for it? Do we really consider them neutral, countries such as Turkmenistan, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, Finland and others? What can they teach us about how to solve conflicts and create development peace – and live in the shadow of a 'big neighbour' or world power, which was a reality for many small and developing countries during the Cold War?

It is not possible to talk about neutral states without also discussing the Non-Aligned Movement, although currently it is quite dormant and in need of redefinition. After the end of World War II, the self-proclaimed neutral bloc arose, founded by Egypt, India, Indonesia, Yugoslavia, and later many other countries (today 120, plus 17 observer states), rejecting military association neither with the US-led West and the Soviet-led East – the two blocks that emerged, splitting the alliance against Nazism after WWII. Yet, the Non-Aligned Movement was always closer to the East Block than the West.

The loser after WWII was in many ways the Soviet Union. The Marxist economic system with one-party states was seen as totalitarian; yet, many aspects were also looked up to by Western socialist and labour parties, and certainly by communist parties. After the end of the Cold War, which the American-led West won, the Soviet Union again lost. Its defense alliance of the Warsaw Pact was dissolved, but not the West's NATO alliance, as had been anticipated.

Russia, the dominant leader of the Soviet Union, came out with potential for change all right, embracing Western capitalism, a liberal political system, and modernization of the civil service. The former Eastern European countries and the Soviet republics quickly declared independence as sovereign states, including Turkmenistan and the three other '-stan' neighbours in Central Asia, plus Afghanistan, although already a sovereign state, but occupied by the USSR from 1979-1989.

The three Baltic States in Northern Europe and the South-Eastern European countries also quickly established Western loyalties. The Baltic States are members of the European Union (EU) and even NATO; others are EU members, or potential members. The West has indeed grown fast and vast.

This can only be seen as provocative to Russia since the country was not itself included directly in broader cooperation with the West, as it should have been; but it was kept out, even snubbed and humiliated in its transformation from superpower to a major power. Russia has in many ways been pushed away from Europe; the West may already regret already that, and more so in future when Russia is likely to have sought closer cooperation eastwards.

Today, the conflict in Ukraine is about where the West ends and where the East begins, and the West has the main responsibility for the current situation. Where should the American-led hegemony end and how much can the Russian sphere shrink? This dispute is indeed understandable considering that the West has for two decades manifested its expansionistic ambitions eastwards. True, many people in Ukraine and some of the other former Soviet states wish to join the West's capitalism. I should add, though, that major or superpowers should never decide what smaller countries should do neither in domestic nor in foreign politics, and should certainly allow the use of military force.

One could question why Ukraine cannot be part of 'two worlds', the Russian and the West's hegemony. Why are we still so fixated on geographic borders of states, and other virtual, but very real borders in the sand?

There is not yet much debate about where the Central Asian states belong – in whose sphere of interest they should stay. Well, we probably still consider them closer to Russia than any other major or superpower; that also concerns the 'neutral' Turkmenistan.

China wields its power mostly in trade, but that is likely to be expand to politics in future. India, too, has geopolitical interests in Central Asia, and even Pakistan, with Afghanistan as its closest (unruly) neighbour. Central Asia's cooperation with Iran is growing. To the south and west of the Caspian Sea, Turkey is the most important power.

The Central Asian countries are mostly Muslim. However, after some 70 years of Soviet Union's anti-religious communism, the countries have become more secular than other Muslim countries. Some will argue that this is one of USSR's positive legacy, along with government administration and control. In Turkmenistan, the religious book 'Ruhnama' by founding President Saparmurat Niyazot (who died suddenly in 2006) was given prominence and even displayed side by side with the Quran. In future, it is likely that religion, mainly Islam, will have a revival.

Turkmenistan is a wealthy country due to its oil and gas resources, with a small population of about 5 million and a GDP per capita of about USD 8-9,000. Its growth has not yet led to liberalization and major democratization of political institutions and human rights. The countries 'permanent neutrality' has to a certain extent allowed for less outside scrutiny and interference.

I wish that countries who declare themselves neutral and non-aligned also would develop their democratic culture and human rights faster than other countries. I also wish that neutrality lead to close cooperation with neighbouring countries. The Central Asia countries have a great future if they do that, and they will also toe the line and cooperate with Russia, the West, China and the rest.

In certain ways, there are similarities between the relative independence of the Central Asian countries and the Nordic and Baltic States. Being a Norwegian myself, I wish that we, too, in the north could develop our special strengths and independence, away from the American-led West with its NATO alliance and nuclear capability.

Was there much to celebrate regarding Turkmenistan's 20th anniversary of *permanent neutrality* last Sunday? Not really. But the concept has important elements which can lead to greater independence and democracy, in particular in cooperation with neighboring countries. The job is still unfinished – both in theory and praxis, the practical process.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid