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Turkmenistan: time to revise the neutrality policy?

The visit of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in Ashgabat on June 9 has a strategic relevance, because it shows the potential development of a military cooperation between Russia and Turkmenistan to contain the destabilising threat which affects the Turkmen-Afghan border. It was the first time that a Russian Defence minister visited the country since Turkmenistan has become independent.

Since 1991 Turkmenistan promotes its neutrality policy, refusing to join any regional security organizations (like the Russian-backed Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Sino-Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization): however, since 2014 the Turkmen authorities have dealt with a worsening security situation along the eastern border, which is shared with Afghanistan, following the consolidation of the Taliban's position in the Afghan districts close to the Turkmen border.

This scenario could push Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov to partially revise the neutrality policy, amending the national constitution in the next months, in order to improve bilateral military cooperation with Russia to ensure border security.

As a matter of fact, Russia is traditionally perceived as the regional security provider even if bilateral relations worsened following the Gazprom decision to suspend purchases of Turkmen gas in 2016. Moscow is clearly interested to preserve security and stability in the southern flank of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), and has expressed serious concerns on the weakness of the Turkmenistan's armed forces which do not appear ready to face the challenge of frequent terrorist incursions on the Eastern border.

In addition to Russia, also China will support Turkmenistan's attempts to improve security border. The existing strategic partnership between Beijing and Ashgabat could explain a growing military involvement of China to ensure Turkmen stability, considering that China plans to import 65 billion cubic metres of Turkmen natural gas by 2020.

In April 2016, Turkmenistan showed off its newly acquired Chinese air defence systems during military exercises. Moreover, Turkmenistan could potentially host a Chinese military base (Turkmenistan is not a CSTO member, therefore it can host a foreign military base on its territory without the full consent of all other members of the organization) even if this significant geopolitical change necessarily requires a

rethinking of the traditional neutrality in foreign policy, which will significantly reshape the regional security chessboard.