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Despite the abundance of the academic and general interest literature on the CIS, the relationship between Belarus and Turkmenistan within the Commonwealth has not been researched as a separate subject. The study of Belarus’ and Turkmenistan’s participation in the CIS institutions and of their bilateral relationships within this and other regional organisations could fill an important knowledge gap and help identify the most appropriate and effective integration strategies for the ex-USSR successor states.

Existing scholarship mostly addresses the foreign policies of Belarus and Turkmenistan separately. By synthesising such research, similarities and differences can be identified, important connections can be described, and the potential impact on the dynamics within the CIS can be assessed. The foreign policies of Belarus in connection with its CIS membership are discussed in [18, p. 102; 36, p. 18; 39, p. 101, 32], and the policies of Turkmenistan in [45; 8, p. 88; 53]. Most published works have focused on the determinants of the foreign policy strategies in Belarus [1, p. 31; 38, p. 15] and Turkmenistan [10, p. 5; 12] following the break-up of the USSR or on the international effort to facilitate the development of both countries as independent states in 1991–1994. However, the discussion of the bilateral ties between Belarus and Turkmenistan has been fragmentary at best [34; 41; 50]. We attempt to fill this knowledge gap by exploring a range of primary sources [2; 14; 17; 19; 20; 21; 23; 28; 31; 33; 37; 49; 56].

Collaborative ties between Belarus and Turkmenistan within the CIS since the break-up of the USSR has so far not been reviewed as a systemic process. The existing scholarship contains only limited and cursory treatment of Turkmenistan’s position with regard to the creation of a union state of Russia and Belarus, and on the establishment of the CIS Collective Defence Treaty Organisation [29; 52, p. 88; 41; 5; 3, p. 90; 46; 47, p. 227; 16, p. 10; 26, p. 12; 35; 40, p. 12; 48]. There has been no comprehensive discussion of Turkmenistan’s attitudes towards the Eurasian Economic Union, the Customs Union of Belarus and Russia, the Common Economic Area of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, and the emergence of the Eurasian Economic Union [22; 25]. There is also a dearth of studies on collaboration between Belarus and Turkmenistan on achieving common foreign policy priorities within international regional alliances, notably, on the views held by the leaders of Belarus and Turkmenistan on the ongoing regionalisation processes in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, on the role of both states in the international regional groupings, including Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Equally unexplored are the efforts of both countries to elaborate shared positions on international regional alliances of which Belarus and Turkmenistan are parties, and to build strategic partnerships [4; 6; 7; 9; 11; 30; 54, p. 13; 17, p. 15; 23, p. 24; 27; 136, p. 22; 43, 44, 53].
The acquisition of independence by Belarus and Turkmenistan in 1991 opened new opportunities for internal and external policy choices on interstate relations, economy, and culture. For Belarus, the legal basis for this new situation was created in 10 December 1991, when the Supreme Soviet of Belarus ratified the agreement on the creation of the CIS. Turkmenistan gave its agreement to the goals and principles of the CIS by signing the Declaration of Alma-Ata on 21 December 1991.

The stated goal of the CIS is to facilitate the qualitative transition of the relationship among the ex-USSR republics. From the outset, coordination among the CIS states covered a variety of areas including: foreign policy; economic cooperation within both within the CIS and in the European and Asian markets; environmental protection; migration policy; organised crime; culture and science; defence and border protection policies.

The ability of both Belarus and Turkmenistan to conduct and sustain independent foreign policy depended on successful efforts to establish friendly foreign policy environments, integrate within the complex system of international relations, establish foreign policy infrastructures, and enter agreements bilateral and multilateral agreements.

Both countries secured international recognition in the early 1990s, shortly after becoming independent. Diplomatic relations between Belarus and Turkmenistan were established on 21 January 1993. The diplomatic mission of Turkmenistan to Belarus has been active since October 1995. The embassy of Belarus in Turkmenistan was opened in Ashgabat in 2002.

The foreign policies of Belarus as an independent states have been affected by a number of key factors, including its close affinity to the Russian Federation, integration tendencies within the CIS, deepening economic integration, proximity to the European Union, and a conflict-averse foreign policy. The CIS had become one of the key foreign policy priorities for Belarus. Among the multitude of factors that affected this choice perhaps the most important was Minsk's inclination to maintain and deepen relations with the former USSR republics to generate mutual benefits.

Similar to Belarus, Turkmenistan had proclaimed a peace-living policy course, consistent with its neutral status assumed in 1995 [3, p. 90]. Turkmenistan has proposed a range of initiatives in a variety of areas, and has expressed support for an infrastructure of the new geopolitical and economic space, appropriate to the ongoing international development trends. Having proclaimed neutral status, Turkmenistan's foreign policy was still affected by a range of long-term factors, including its historical and geographical proximity to Central Asia and Turkey, as determined by its geopolitical position.

Despite differences in the objectives and priorities, the foreign policies of Belarus and Turkmenistan had a number of similarities, which had the potential to increase proximity among both countries, including shared overall positions on arms reduction, nuclear non-proliferation, collective security in the region. Several factors, however, have prevented the Belarus-Turkmenistan relationship from developing into strategic partnership. First, while Ashgabat was seeking to develop strengthen its ties in Asia, Minsk was actively pursuing contacts with the Russian Federation and the European Union, and these divergent geographic priorities had little in common.

The relevance of these motives, however, was limited in time, as most former republics of the USSR accepted the importance of re-activating bilateral and multilateral ties within the former Soviet Union. The need for such ties was particularly acute in the initial years of independence. However, it has remained largely unmet, due to limited experience in building bilateral ties in conditions in the environment if decentralisation, and the risks of regime change, and sometimes of civil war, ethnic conflicts and separatism in some newly independent states. It took considerable time for intra-CIS cooperation to begin to address humanitarian, economic legal and security matters, as well as interparliamentary collaboration. Once started, the collaborative processes have deepened and expanded [38, p. 15].

The evolution of the intra-CIS ties in the 1990s was constrained by the difficulties of the early post-soviet period, including: sharp declines in production, politically unstable regimes, barriers to implementing market reforms and volatility of foreign policy aspirations, Changes in the international prices of primary commodities and fuel also played a substantial role, by promoting re-orientation of the exports of these goods from the CIS to non-CIS markets, and the consequential reduction of intra-CIS trade.

Against this background, Belarus and Turkmenistan tool divergent positions regarding the status and format of the CIS. The differences became apparent as early as January 1993, when the Charter of CIS was adopted by a summit of the Commonwealth [49]. While Belarus became one of the Charter's signatories, Turkmenistan and Ukraine were among the states that abstained from putting their signatures under the document. In effect, the abstainer countries, while remaining the founders and participants of the CIS had declined the legal status of the CIS member states [18, p. 102]. Ashgabat's reluctance to sign the CIS charter was an expression of its doubt in the feasibility of the Commonwealth's objectives, and of its intention to pursue selective participation in CIS affairs. Indeed, the progress of integration within the CIS was accompanied by efforts to address external risk factors, conflicts over territory, attempts at regime change and other problematic events and developments. In these circumstances, the leaders of Turkmenistan have preferred to persist in their strategy of limited participation in the organisational structures of the CIS.

The 2006 CIS summit in Minsk called for the development of a CIS strategic development concept that was eventually approved by the extraordinary
summit in Dushanbe on 6 October 2007 [1, p. 44]. Turkmenistan, along with Georgia, declined to sign the concept. On the part of Turkmenistan, this was a reiteration of its past position of limited involvement in the CIS.

The CIS was faced with the challenge of creating an economic union of the post-Soviet states. However, this aspiration has not been implemented. The failure of economic integration was due to a large extent to the reluctance of some states to vest selected decision making powers in supranational bodies. The economic union treaty was never implemented and its treaty body, the CIS economic Committee was disbanded in 1999 [4, с. 22; 38, с. 15].

Barriers to interstate collaboration have affected the CIS from the moment of its initiation. Fearful of the CIS integration processes going too far, some states have chosen to pursue their priorities elsewhere. One corollary of this trend has been the phenomenon of ‘variable rates’ of integration within the CIS. These developments have led to the emergence within the CIS of several subregional groupings that pursued different principles and objectives of cooperation. First among these was the Union State of Belarus and Russia, followed by the Customs Union of three states, which evolved by the end of the first decade of this century into the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc), and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, a military-political block. Other, less influential groupings included the Central Asian economic Union, and the grouping of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and, for a limited period, Uzbekistan, established mainly to contain Russia’s influence in the CIS.

In its pursuit of sovereignty and neutral status, Turkmenistan’s objectives were at odds with Russia’s actions, which it perceived to be directed towards reintegration among post-Soviet states (consistent with the ambitions expressed in a number of statements, e.g. resolution of the Russian State Duma of 15.03.1996 On deepening of integration among the peoples of the former USSR [16, p. 33]. Although Russia’s intentions did not directly affect Turkmenistan’s interests, the union agreements between Russia and Belarus concluded in 1997–1999 were viewed by Ashgabat as steps towards resuscitation of the USSR. These perceptions have had an effect on the intensity of the bilateral relationships between Belarus and Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan’s main efforts were focused on building a self-sufficient economy that could guarantee its independence as a state. Ashgabat’s position was more aligned with those of the United States and the European Union, both of which were cautious of any attempts at post-Soviet integration. Any such attempts were seen as attempts by Russia to restore its power in the region of the former USSR, and thus to alter the power balance in central and eastern Europe, as well as in the whole of Europe and on a global scale.

That said, Turkmenistan has expressed no official reaction to the creation of the union state of Belarus and Russia. However, already at the initial stages of its independence, Turkmenistan began to seek partnership with the West, viewing this as a more preferable option. This choice was by no means spontaneous. Turkmenistan’s caution has been the result of several key developments. One was Russia’s decision in 1993 to end subsidies for the former USSR republics in the form of technical loans and to conduct a unilateral currency reform in July – August 1993 by invalidating the bank notes issued by the State Bank of the USSR. This created numerous payment difficulties, to which Turkmenistan reacted by introducing its own currency, the Manat.

The second was Russia’s refusal to allocate quotas to Turkmenistan for the supply of gas to Western Europe. The result was a significant reduction in gas extraction and exports, and, consequently, in hard currency earnings. Difficulties also arose in receiving payment for the gas supplies, as Russia’s unilateral monetary reform had made insolvent large numbers of customers, notably in Ukraine and Russia. A sharp drop in the GDP ensued. According to EBRD data, it amounted to 17.3 % in 17.3 %, while inflation had reached a tremendous 2400 percent per annum [47, p. 230]. The leadership of Turkmenistan was also conscious of the presence of competition with Russia in the global energy market, which could, in the event of any alliance between Russia and Turkmenistan could relegate the latter to the status of a weak junior partner, invalidating Turkmenistan’s advantages in the energy sector and further complicating its economic futures.

The divergent aspirations of Belarus and Turkmenistan became apparent in the positions of both countries towards the Customs Union of EurAsEC, to which Belarus became a party in 2009. The aim of the Customs Union was to create a single customs territory free from internal economic barriers and customs duties, with the exception of some protective and anti-dumping measures.

The economic motivation and interest of Belarus towards EurAsEC was determined in large part by the Community’s extensive marker for manufactured goods, estimated at $600 billion, and its large reserves of oil (at 90 billion barrels), making its member states some of the key players in the global energy markets. Belarus’ choice also considered the Community’s presence in the global agricultural market, with total market size of $112 billion, and a share of 17% in the global export and sales of wheat. The combined GDP of the three member states – Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia is $2 trillion, and the total volume of trade is around $900 billion [1, с. 32].

However, the barriers to CIS integration were not created by the economy alone. At the CIS summit on 26–27 August 2005, Turkmenistan renounced its status as a permanent member of the CIS, and declared itself to be an associated member of the Commonwealth. For most political observers, this decision did not come as a surprise. The president of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov has stopped attending CIS summits since the late 2000s. The
exit of Turkmenistan from full CIS membership was announced at the 2005 summit in Kazan by the Prime Minister, Aganiyaz Akyev [46].

Admittedly, the neutral status of Turkmenistan was indeed a barrier to its full involvement in the integration processes within the CIS, particularly of a political nature. Under the international obligations deriving from its neutral status, Turkmenistan surrendered its right to participate in military blocs and unions, or in international alliances with prescriptive rules, or collective responsibilities of members, including membership in law enforcement associations [50].

Thus, Turkmenistan ruled out the possibility to collaborate with Belarus under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. The organisation was established to facilitate and coordinate policies and efforts against international tourism, extremism, trafficking in drugs and human persons. Unlike Turkmenistan, Belarus does not consider the format of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation as a barrier to membership of a state that had declared a policy of neutrality and non-alignment. For Belarus, such membership has not contradicted its role in the non-aligned movement.

The restrictive interpretation of neutrality by Turkmenistan has impeded its engagement even in the governing bodies of the CIS, such as the Commission for Economic Affairs, or the Council of Ministers of Defence. Not only has this made the CIS less receptive to Turkmenistan’s initiatives, but has also complicated the implementation the Strategic Development Concept of the CIS.

The limited participation of Turkmenistan, along with some other CIS states, in the work of the Commonwealth structures and in implementing their decisions have generally been approached by the other members with understanding and respect, as decisions resulting from those countries’ determination of their national interest [21]. Simultaneously, these choices have also been pushing the more willing CIS members towards creating alternative mechanisms of integration with more specific functions. These developments have led to the emergence within the CIS of several subregional groupings that pursued divergent principles and regional priorities.

Turkmenistan’s estrangement from the political processes in the CIS was reinforced by the events in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014–2015 that had been caused by internal political destabilisation in these countries. In the view of Turkmenistan’s politicians, these events have demonstrated Russia’s leadership in the former Soviet Union. The intervention in Georgia in 2008 was particularly viewed as Russia’s clear geopolitical success. However, the destabilisation of Georgia and Ukraine were received negatively by countries that were seeking closer relationships with the West and more limited collaboration within the CIS. Turkmenistan’s inclination to distance itself from the CIS was further reinforced by tensions within the CIS in the 2000s, including armed conflicts, all of which have created perceived threats to Turkmenistan’s neutral status.

These trends are indications of the emergence within the CIS of a completely new model of integration that does not yield itself to a straightforward definition. On the one hand, narrow groupings of states have been able to facilitate and accelerate solutions to practical matters of mutual significance and increase the attraction of the more advanced forms of integration. At the same time, this created the risk of fragmentation within the CIS, undermine the integrity of the entire system and worsen isolation of the participants of regional groupings from the remaining states. The ‘variable rates’ of intra-CIS integration have limited the extent of collaboration between Turkmenistan at Belarus by shifting political and business leaders’ priorities towards partnering with other countries.

Prior to the change of Turkmenistan’s supreme leadership in December 2006, intra-CIS partnership with Turkmenistan was constrained by its rigid totalitarian regime. Starting from 1992, the political environment in the country has been dominated by a personality cult of President Saparmurat Niyazov, referred to as the Turkmenbashy, or the leader of all Turkmens. The foreign policy was strongly isolationist and dependent on the personal preferences of the president, who happened to be opposed to his country’s participation in regional integration mechanisms.

President Niyazov’s successor Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov made no changes to the neutral status of Turkmenistan, but did contribute to broadening the country’s international contacts. However, the policy of avoiding a role in the Eurasian integration processes while deepening links with the EU and the United States remained unchanged. This was supplemented by the announcement of a privatisation policy, and the intention to acceded too WTO. Simultaneously, contacts with the Customs Union were minimised.

Nor was Turkmenistan showing any intention to engage with Belarus within the Collective Security Treaty organisation, despite growing international pressures to do so. Instead, it still preferred to remain bound by its original decision avoid any and all military and political collaboration. By 2015, many countries of Central Asia were facing unprecedented challenges too their security. The main threats were generated by instability in Afghanistan and Iraq and by the terrorist activities of IGIL/DAISH. Turkmenistan has been approached on multiple occasions by Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation with proposals to collaborate in security matter. However, Turkmenistan rejected all such approaches, preferring to stick to its original interpretation of neutrality [48].

Despite differences in the objectives and priorities that emerged in the early years of independence, Belarus and Turkmenistan were sharing a range of common foreign policy positions, including on arms reduction, nuclear non-proliferation, and
collective security systems in the region. However, as demonstrated above, the relationships between Belarus and Turkmenistan have not reached the level of strategic partnership.

Another factor that impeded Turkmenistan’s more active involvement in the CIS have been the concerns of its leadership over the systematic strengthening of Russia’s role in Central Asia and Russian leadership in the CIS. Mindful of the destabilisation in Georgia and Ukraine, Turkmenistan had chosen to avoid close rapprochement with Russia and limit its influence within the country. Inevitably, this policy was worsening the climate of the bilateral relationship between both countries. Nevertheless, despite being an economic and political ally of Russia, Belarus was able to retain the status of a close partner with Turkmenistan.

In its choice of partners, Turkmenistan was showing a clear preference for Belarus. The global priorities of Belarus formulated by President Alexander Lukashenko as early as in 1995 have resonated extremely well with the leadership of Turkmenistan, especially since the late 2010s. These included enhanced multilateral and bilateral cooperation with the CIS member states, while deepening the relationship with Russia; developing partnerships with the West, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe; and facilitating collaboration with the interstate and international organisations [31]. These included enhanced multilateral and bilateral cooperation with the CIS member states, while deepening the relationship with Russia; developing partnerships with the West, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe; and facilitating collaboration with the interstate and international organisations [31].

Belarus’ willingness to pursue all-rounded economic collaboration was particularly well received.

Second, pursuit of economic ties with Belarus brought multiple benefits for Turkmenistan from a geopolitical perspective. These included Belarus’ advantageous geographical position at juncture major transport routes, extensive economic and exporting potential, and internationally recognised research and culture. For Turkmenistan, therefore, Belarus was progressively gaining priority as a partner in Eastern Europe.

The third major factor that contributed to the rapprochement between Belarus and Turkmenistan was the change of leadership in Turkmenistan. The dismantling of Niyazov’s personality cult contributed to the advancement of the bilateral collaborative ties, including within the framework of the CIS.

The location in Minsk of the CIS Consultative Committee and Executive Secretariat served as a good foundation for furthering bilateral collaboration. These CIS bodies provided a platform for Turkmenistan’s participation in debating the decision of the CIS, including on matters of economic collaboration.

This combination events and factors was fostering the movement of Turkmenistan and Belarus towards becoming strategic partners. Such partnership was becoming a necessity in light of the recent significant shifts in the international environment, including the advancement of globalisation, the growing relevance of regional collaboration and integration for the prosperity of the modern states, and the emergence of new risks and challenges. Of these, one challenge was to modernise the national economies to make them more aligned with the international trends and more effective players in the international economy.

In response, Belarus was adding a progressively global reach to its policies with the view to promoting efficiency and competitiveness. To this end, Belarus has been looking for strategic partners, mainly among the newly independent states of the FSU.

Turkmenistan was also beginning to face similar needs, resulting from a range of economic pressures. One was gradual decline in revenues from energy exports. Exports outside the CIS have been constrained by stringent competition and limited competitiveness in the world market. It was the trade with the CIS that provided the income to support the national economy, particularly the light, food and extractive industries.

In addition, the president of Turkmenistan has been sympathetic to the intention of his Belarusian counterpart to pursue a policy of equal distance from international blocs and coalitions, which he believed would help strengthen within the CIS the appreciation of the sovereignty of each member state.

In light of the changing international and regional context, the president of Turkmenistan became convinced that the CIS was indeed making consistent and systematic efforts to strengthen collaboration among its members, and was doing so in accordance with its charter and the existing agreements. He emphasised the importance for the CIS to maintain its constructive role, based on the principles of equality, mutual respect, good neighbourhood and goodwill. He also acknowledged the great potential of the CIS, which could, and should be used to maintain the balance of regional security, prevent conflicts and promote negotiated settlements as the only acceptable means of conflict resolution [40, c. 12; 32].

Likewise, the President of Belarus also underlined the need for more effective collaboration in the post-Soviet space. In his view, the former Soviet Republics had come to rediscover the value of regional integration in light of globalisation and in the wake of the world economic crisis [29]. The leaders of Belarus and Turkmenistan both view the changes within the CIS as useful, constructive, and conducive to a more effective Commonwealth. This shared vision has been exemplified by the current relationship between Minsk and Ashgabat. Agreement on the role of the CIS, reached by the end of the 2000s, has provided the missing link for the strategic partnership between both states to take off.

Once in place, the partnership has reinvigorated bilateral ties in a variety of areas, including the economy, investments, culture and education. Belarusian exports to Turkmenistan include chemical fibres, drugs, foods, and timber products. They have grown exponentially, from $45.3 million in 2000 to 188.7 million in 2014. Turkmenistan’s export to Belarus have consisted mainly of cotton yarn and fibres, fabrics, wool, bed and table linen. In 2000—
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as domination, perceived to undermine the equality
have tended to view Russia's leadership in the CIS
followed from tensions in the relationships between
by disengage itself from the CIS and limit its contacts
given the limitations provided by their respective
Constitutions and foreign policy priorities.
The bilateral relationship between both
countries within the CIS – the most representative
organisation of the newly independent states of
the former USSR – has thus evolved from weak to
effective. From the very beginning some features
in the CIS have acted as constraints, and others
as facilitators of the relationship between the two
states. One constraint resulted from Turkmenistan’s
preference, throughout its independence to act in
accordance with its declared foreign policy principles
by disengage itself from the CIS and limit its contacts
with the former Soviet republics. Other constraints
followed from tensions in the relationships between
Russia and some CIS member states. These states
have tended to view Russia’s leadership in the CIS
as domination, perceived to undermine the equality
of the CIS members. Turkmenistan has been more
inclined to collaborate on a bilateral basis, rather than
within the framework of the CIS.

Recognising the soundness of the reasons
for the creation of the Union State of Belarus
and Russia, and the basis for Belarus' move in its
special economic, environmental and geopolitical
environment, Turkmenistan was nevertheless
reluctant to follow its example. Instead, it was seeking
to reinforce its neutrality with respect to attempts at
integration among the newly independent states. One
important factor in this respect has been the
ambiguity of its relationship with Russia, resulting
from the differences in their economic aspirations that
emerged in the early 1990s. Citing its desire to avoid
bloc membership, Turkmenistan has been averse to
using the Collective Security Treaty Organisations as
a platform for partnership with any state, including
the like-minded Belarus.

In general, the history of the CIS has been marked
by multiple challenges, many of which have not been
adequately addressed. Against this background, both
countries have managed to develop mutually satisfactory
strategies for collaboration with benefits for their
political and economic futures. In the process, both
countries have learned to de-emphasise their differences
over the CIS that could sour their relationships. Both
parties were keen to avoid the actions that could
affect their partnerships. This included both parties’
commitment to react to any problems within the CIS
in a sound and reasoned manner.

As both countries are moving towards integration
in the world economy, they are faced with the task
of developing new regulatory approaches, and new
models of economic behaviour for enterprises and
individuals, and new modes of participation in
the international division of labour. Both parties
have been interested in attracting multinational
corporations, whose presence is not only a sign of
stability in the domestic market, but also a vehicle
for investment and technological advancement. Both
economies have benefited from the operation of the
free economic zones. This solution, as well as some
other policy innovation, could be of relevance to the
other CIS states.

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