

Turkmenistan Holds First Military Drills in Caspian

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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DJAFAR, Turkmenistan — Neutral Turkmenistan flexed its military muscle on Wednesday, holding its first naval exercises in the Caspian Sea to show it can rebuff any attack on the oil and gas riches it hopes to sell to Europe.

The exercises, codenamed Hazar-2012 (Caspian-2012), were held jointly by army and police units. Two corvettes opened fire to defend an imitation village, and a real oil tanker anchored off the coast of western Turkmenistan.

Russian-built fighter jets flew overhead as special police units rebuffed a mock attack by "armed saboteurs" on a dummy oil refinery on the Caspian shore. An audience including President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov responded with rapturous applause.

Turkmenistan was granted official neutral status by the United Nations shortly after the Soviet Union's collapse. The country describes its military doctrine as "exclusively

defensive."

Wearing a camouflage jacket, Berdymukhammedov, a 55-year-old trained dentist, made no statement to the assembled crowd that would suggest a potential threat to his gas-rich nation.

Turkmenistan holds the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves, according to BP data, surpassed only by Russia, Iran and Qatar. The other four littoral nations are Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Iran.

Turkmenistan said this week that it could potentially join Azerbaijan in supplying natural gas into a pipeline through Turkey to the EU border, helping Europe become less reliant on Russian gas.

Berdymukhammedov enjoys absolute power in his desert nation, where he goes by the state-approved nickname of Arkadag, or The Patron. He won a second five-year term as president in February, with 97 percent of the vote.

A program for the war games read: "We express our gratitude [to Berdymukhammedov] for his help in strengthening the country's defense capability, and ask the Almighty to give sound health and a long life to the esteemed president of Turkmenistan."

Turkmenistan plans to build a naval base on the Caspian Sea, equipped with a radar surveillance system, by 2015.

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