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US-Taliban talks and the fate of TAPI pipeline

Orfonline.org (India) – March 29, 2019

The progress of the TAPI project would largely depend on the outcome of negotiations between the US and the Taliban.

Negotiations between the United States and the Taliban have now reached an advanced stage. As reported, representatives from the US and the Taliban are slated to engage in discussions with their respective stakeholders and leaderships before proceeding to the next stage of negotiations. The next phase, as reported, would witness discussions among different stakeholders within Afghanistan and also for a “comprehensive ceasefire”. Although the specific modalities of the proposed agreement are not clear yet, within the power corridors of South Asian capitals, the news of possible US withdrawal has caused a great deal of concern over the unfolding situation and its ramifications on South Asian security.

In addition to influencing the security situation in Afghanistan and the neighborhood, the possible US withdrawal is bound to have its own set of consequences on several proposed and ongoing development and economic projects in the region. One such project whose outcome would possibly get affected as a result of the evolving power equations in Afghanistan is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project (TAPI). The project is designed to bring natural gas from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan into India. When implemented, the project is expected to bring 38 mmscmd (million metric standard cubic meter per day) of gas to India. However, as a result of several commercial and security factors, the proposed project has not fructified yet.

In the current context, progress of TAPI project would largely depend on the outcome of negotiations between the US and the Taliban and the ability of different parties within Afghanistan to honour their side of the agreement.

In its intent to carve out a larger political space within Afghanistan, one possibility to consider is the fact that Taliban may continue to jostle with Afghan forces post-US withdrawal. Thus, given the uncertain security conditions, which are likely to continue to prevail in Afghanistan post-US withdrawal, it wouldn't be wrong to assume that international financial promoters would be reluctant to support such a project.

On the other hand, construction of the TAPI project may become possible only in the scenario that the Taliban – which enjoys support from Pakistan's security establishment – shows political maturity and expresses its support to the project.

Given the pressing energy shortages as a result of inadequate supply of gas in Pakistan, it won't be surprising to see Pakistan urging and even pressurising Taliban to support TAPI gas pipeline's construction. At this juncture, Pakistan is undergoing a major energy crisis. The situation is acute particularly in Sindh province, with the power crisis increasing the possibility of industries to shut down their operations, also leading to possible unemployment. As of now, to meet its near-term natural gas requirements, Pakistan has sought import

of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from Qatar. Reports in the past have also indicated about Saudi Arabia's offer to supply LNG to Pakistan.

In light of these developments in Afghanistan's politics, it would be interesting to see what position India adopts vis-à-vis TAPI gas pipeline and whether India would be ready to continue its participation in the project. The presence of a non-Taliban government in Afghanistan gave India some level of comfort in agreeing to become a stakeholder in the TAPI pipeline by signing the Gas Sales and Purchase agreement back in the year 2012.

With Taliban slated to now become a recognised stakeholder in Afghan politics, a whole new set of political and security challenges have arisen for India to further pursue its participation in the TAPI project.

India and the rest of South Asia is yet to witness politically "evolved" conduct from Taliban, which is immune from any influence of Pakistan's security establishment.

In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to Ashgabat had reportedly proposed to import gas from Turkmenistan via a land and sea route via Iran. This route for energy exports from Turkmenistan to Iran, which finds its mention in Ahmed Rashid's book *Taliban: The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond*, must, in the present context, be once again explored seriously by India. This strategy will enable India to avoid a politically volatile Af-Pak region and help leverage Chabahar's potential as a future "energy transit hub". It would be a good idea for India to firm up to the idea of this land-sea option and actively pursue consultations with Turkmenistan and Iran to initiate some concrete work on this project. Depending on the evolving political developments, provision can also be made for Afghanistan to source gas from this land-sea pipeline at a later stage.

Considering the expected demand for natural gas in the country, India, according to Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan is already in the process of augmenting its regasification capacity for Liquefied Natural Gas on its western and eastern coasts. Given the emerging ominous geopolitical circumstances emerging in the region, India must explore other options which are more robust from the perspective of its energy security. Pursuing the cited land and sea route would entail a major course correction for India, but when viewed from the prism of sustainability of energy supply security, it would be worthwhile for India to start its energy engagement in the region afresh.

<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/us-taliban-talks-and-the-fate-of-tapi-pipeline-49354/>

Turkmenistan intends to offer Japan to invest in TAPI project

Azernews.az (Azerbaijan) – March 25, 2019

The implementation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project (TAPI) is seen as a promising field for the cooperation of Turkmenistan with financial structures and companies in Japan, Trend reports via Turkmen newspaper "Watan".

This issue is planned to be discussed during the working visit planned for the near future by the Turkmen delegation to Tokyo. A report on the preparation of the visit was presented to President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov.

"Speaking about the main directions of bilateral relations, among the priority areas, the head of state outlined trade, finance and investment, which should get a concrete discussion in the upcoming talks," report said.

The estimated cost of the transnational project is \$7 billion.

Construction of the Turkmen section of TAPI was launched in December 2015, while the Afghan section in February 2018. Pakistan plans to start the work on its pipeline section this year.

The total length of the pipeline, with a capacity of 33 billion cubic meters of gas per year will be 1,840 kilometers. The length of the Turkmen section will be 205 kilometers.

Then, this energy bridge will pass through the Afghan cities of Herat and Kandahar (816 kilometers), through the cities of Quetta and Multan across Pakistani territory (819 kilometers), and reach the settlement of Fazilka in India.

<https://www.azernews.az/region/147733.html>

Turkmenistan: Don't love thy neighbor

Eurasianet.org (USA) – March 19, 2019

Aliquid mali propter vicinum malum – it is ill living by bad neighbors, to quote a Latin saying.

Turkmenistan reportedly engaged in some treacherous behavior this week, when it handed 150 Afghan security troops who fled into its territory for safety over to their Taliban foes. If true – and the claim is contested – this would mark the largest ever capture of Afghan government forces by Taliban militants.

According to an account in the New York Times, the Afghan troops slipped into Turkmenistan after heavy fighting in the Murghab district of Afghanistan's Badkhis province on March 11. The Turkmens may even have handed over the soldiers' weapons.

It is hard to see this doing much good for relations with Kabul, and it was only a few weeks ago that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani was visiting Ashgabat.

These are not the only cross-border ties apparently coming under strain.

The Vienna-based Chronicles of Turkmenistan has reported that the government has since March 10 begun forbidding residents of areas along the border with Uzbekistan from engaging in shuttle trading between the two countries. It used to be that traders would take Turkmen textiles to sell in Uzbekistan and return with goods that are either undersupplied or overpriced in Turkmenistan.

Gundogar News, something of a pro-government attack dog (not to be confused with opposition-affiliated Gundogar), pooh-poohed the report, accusing the Chronicles of Turkmenistan of seeking to poison bilateral relations.

The existence of outlets like Gundogar News attests to a fine-tuning of Turkmenistan's messaging strategy. Rather than relying solely on sententious pronouncements in state outlets, the authorities have created the conditions for an ecosystem of friendly media to proliferate.

As the U.S. State Department's latest country report on Turkmenistan's human rights practices noted this week, "the government [finances] and [controls] the publication of books and almost all other print media and online newspapers and journals."

The same report also helpfully confirms what most people sort of knew already, that the "the authorities blocked access to websites they considered sensitive, including YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, as well as virtual private network connections, including those of diplomatic missions and international businesses, and severely restricted internet access to other websites." Blocking the VPNs of diplomatic missions feels like a particularly aggressive move.

Much of the censorship is more old-fashioned and heavy-handed. This week, RFE/RL's Turkmen service, Radio Azatlyk, reported that people are being detained at bazaars in the cities of Dashoguz and Turkmenabat just for taking photos of produce.

Reporters face even more harassment. The Chronicles of Turkmenistan revealed that independent journalist Soltan Achilova, who has often worked with Azatlyk, was barred from leaving the country on March 11. She had intended to participate in a media seminar in Tbilisi, Georgia.

Last June, Achilova was attacked by unknown men – most likely government-hired goons – near her family's home in Yoloten, in the Mary province. A month earlier she was detained and harassed by Ashgabat police, who tried to pressure her into ceasing to cooperate with RFE/RL.

State-controlled television news is not much good for anything other than relentless toadying, but it has at least gotten easier to watch. The government this week launched a website to make all its channels viewable online.

The drama between Turkmenistan and Belarus over the Garlyk potash refinery gives no indication of abating. Government-friendly outlet Turkmenportal announced on March 12 that Ashgabat has filed a counterclaim against Belarusian company Belgorkhimprom at the Arbitration Institute of the Stockholm Chamber of Commerce.

But the state of health of bilateral relations is hard to fathom entirely. While this squabble is unfurling, there is more friendly diplomatic action seemingly taking place on the sidelines. Turkmenportal reported that Belarusian Ambassador Oleg Tabanyukhov and Turkmenistan's Deputy Prime Minister with the portfolio for industry, Mammetkhan Chakiyev, met to discuss organizing a joint business forum.

It is possible, however, that this talk of forums is merely a smokescreen. Chakiyev, after all, was the inaugural director of the State Service for Combatting Economic Crimes, a post he held until last April. And there has been occasional talk of funny business at Garlyk.

The Garlyk saga is a clear illustration of the dangers of doing business in Turkmenistan, and yet the government continues to talk up its agenda of boosting the role of the private sector. The body charged with spearheading that initiative is the increasingly ubiquitous Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, or UIET.

From the outside though, it just looks like Turkmenistan is shifting ever so incrementally from statism to para-statism. It is hard to speak of a free market when all would-be private enterprise is required to pass through UIET.

The authorities are not even bothering to be especially coy about UIET's effectively monopolistic role. In a recent Turkmenportal piece advising Turkmen citizens on how to formally establish a business, the first tip was to take a course run by UIET.

Foreign partners are also inevitably required to join forces with the union. On March 14, the ribbon was cut at the country's first private food safety laboratory – a joint project between the U.S. Agency for International Development and UIET. U.S. Ambassador Alan Mustard and UIET head Alexander Dadayev attended the ceremony.

This stuff is for the birds compared with the epochal projects that Turkmenistan is banking on to secure its future economic prosperity. As expected, a package of new agreements aimed at furthering progress on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline, which is commonly known as TAPI, was on March 12 signed by Pakistani officials and Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov at a ceremony in Islamabad. The hope is that these formalities will now serve as the impetus for Pakistan to finally start work on its section of TAPI.

Turkmenistan is also touting for business from Bahrain. The king of the Persian Gulf nation, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, came away from his March 17-18 visit to Ashgabat with an armful of memoranda of understanding on

cooperation in a series of areas, including transportation, banking, culture, education, sports and tourism. Even e-government and “women’s affairs,” perplexingly.

More to the point, Turkmenistan invited Bahraini companies to get involved in the TAPI project. Bahrain and Turkmenistan have previously discussed joint oil and gas ventures, so Ashgabat may be angling for something more ambitious.

<https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-dont-love-thy-neighbor>

Reference information on sources used

Observer Research Foundation

A think tank founded in 1990 and based in India. The foundation has three centres in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata. ORF provides informed and viable inputs for policy and decision-makers in the Indian Government and to the political and business leadership of India.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observer_Research_Foundation

AzerNews

AzerNews, published since 1997 in Azerbaijan, is a weekly newspaper issued in English. AzerNews is a member of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA). The WAN-IFRA brings together 18,000 publications and 15,000 websites of news publishers and other industry players from around the globe.

EurasiaNet

A website providing news, information and analysis focused on countries in Central Asia, the Caucasus region, Russia and Southwest Asia. EurasiaNet spun off in 2016 to become an independent news organisation. The online media outlet is now hosted by Columbia University's Harriman Institute, Based in New York.

EurasiaNet has won EPpy Awards for Best Newssite with under 250.000 monthly visitors (2011).

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EurasiaNet>

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