

Afghan Pipeline Dream One Step Closer

Author: [Abdol Wahed Faramarz](#)

Analysts see Pakistani support as key to guaranteeing security of pipeline through insurgent heartlands.

Long-held dreams of a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to energy-hungry markets in South Asia are a step closer with the signing of a framework deal by the four key players. But many hurdles have to be overcome before construction gets under way, not least the presence of Taleban militants along the Afghan section of the proposed route.

The presidents of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan and India's oil and gas minister signed an agreement to begin implementing the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline Project on December 11.

The project, also known as TAPI from the initials of the countries involved, has been under discussion for almost two decades, with occasional flurries of activity that then die away. The overriding obstacle is always the same – instability in Afghanistan. Mistrust between India and Pakistan, the two prospective markets for Turkmen gas, has also played a part.

Discussions began in the 1990s, with the Argentine firm Bridas as the main construction firm, then superseded by the United States' Unocal. On the Afghan side, the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani which was initially involved in the talks was ousted by the Taleban, who allowed the project to proceed, signing an agreement in 1998. But the consortium collapsed by the end of that year as Unocal withdrew.

With a new administration in place after 2001, western interest revived and an initial deal was signed by Afghan, Turkmen and Pakistani leaders in 2002. But substantive progress was impossible because the Taleban were reviving and gaining ground in many of the areas a pipeline would go through.

Despite continuing security concerns, last year saw significant progress. The four participating states signed documents in September referring to the organisational structure for the project – costed at eight billion US dollars – and the terms on which Turkmen gas would be paid for by recipients.

The pipeline would run from the gas fields of Turkmenistan via Herat, Helmand and Kandahar to Pakistan and then on to India, with a capacity of 33 billion cubic metres a year.

Siamak Herawi, deputy spokesman for Afghan president Hamed Karzai, says both India and Pakistan are fully committed to the project, which he sees starting next year and completed in 2014.

"The greater emphasis that Pakistan and India are placing on setting up this project stems from their shortage of gas," he explained. "Their economic growth has made India and Pakistan heavily dependent on imported energy, particularly from Central Asian sources."

India is now among the world's major users of energy and is looking for additional external supply sources, while although Pakistan is a smaller market, officials there are predicting exponential growth in consumption, and the country is more reliant on natural gas than its neighbour.

While the energy needs of India and Pakistan are clear, Afghanistan itself will benefit from natural gas supplies as well as transit fees and up to 5,000 new workplaces. Mining minister Wahidullah Shahrani says the country will take just over five billion cubic metres of the Turkmen gas a year.

The downside, of course, is that much of the 750-kilometre route through Afghanistan crosses territory where the Taleban operate more or less freely, launch attacks on government and international troops and plant roadside bombs to disrupt communications.

Afghan officials say they will provide a new military force of 5,000 to 7,000 men to guard the gas pipeline.

"At a meeting I had with the interior ministry, they took the view that 7,000 armed men would be sufficient for security on the pipeline, and traffic units and other police would also be deployed for the purpose," Shahrani said, adding that securing the cooperation of local communities would also be crucial.

Many Afghan commentators believe the pipeline project will have a beneficial effect on their country politically, economically and in a regional context.

"When the gas pipeline comes through because of the demand in Pakistan and India, it will have a positive impact on the security situation in Afghanistan," Azarkhsh Hafizi, who chairs the foreign affairs committee of the Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said. "It will provide a sound basis for other agreements in future. It also increases the geostrategic importance of Afghanistan."

That optimism is echoed by many Afghans like Kabul resident Sayed Jamal, who told IWPR that the pipeline deal was the government's only noteworthy achievement in the last decade.

"If this pipeline project is successful, we will no longer be reliant on neighbouring countries," he said, holding a cooking gas canister he had bought. "You'll notice that Iran halts our fuel tankers in the cold of winter. In addition, our forests will be saved once there's more gas available, as it will be cheap and people's lives will change."

Some analysts say Pakistan's role as a participant is central to the project's success, as they argue that the country's security service can rein in the insurgents.

Ahmad Sayedi, an expert on Afghan and Pakistani affairs, says that if Islamabad will face a serious energy shortage unless it can secure gas supplies within five years. He believes this means that the Inter-Services Intelligence agency or ISI, which allegedly had close contacts with the Afghan Taleban in past years, will not obstruct the pipeline project.

"Groups like the Taleban and Hezb-i Islami listen to what Pakistan tells them," Ahmad Sayedi, an expert on Afghan and Pakistani affairs, told IWPR. "Because Pakistan needs gas, the project will be carried through."

Noting that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the head of the Hezb-i Islami insurgent faction, has said publicly that his group will not block the project, Sayedi said, "It's beyond doubt that the Taleban and Hezb-i Islami will not place obstacles in the project's way once it gets under way, because they conduct their operations in Afghanistan on the basis of orders from ISI."

He added, "If there is any disruption, it will be from Iran."

Last year, India indicated it was now reluctant to join the Peace Pipeline project, which would result in an alternative gas supply route from Iran via Pakistan. The official reasons given were the likely price of the gas and security concerns, but Sayedi argues that it was pressure from Washington that forced the withdrawal. United States support for TAPI is seen as a way of countering Iran's export ambitions.

Abdul Wahed Faramarz is an IWPR trainee reporter in Kabul.

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