

Turkmen Warm to Taliban

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Despite international condemnation of the Taliban, Turkmenistan has chosen to foster closer links with the Kabul regime.

In defiance of the UN Security Council's new sanctions against the Taliban, the government of Turkmenistan continues to ignore the international community's concerted effort to isolate the radical Moslem regime in Afghanistan.

Why did Turkmenistan, unlike its neighbours, choose to be loyal and even friendly to Afghanistan's ruling Taliban movement, despite its formidable military threat and despite Afghanistan's notoriety as a major narcotics exporter?

Turkmenistan prizes safety along its frontiers, in particular, its border with Afghanistan, which is more than 800 kilometres long. Since Russian border guards were pulled out a few years ago, Ashgabat believes the maintenance of good relations with the Taliban will prevent incursions.

But more importantly, Turkmenistan's economic ties with Afghanistan have positioned it as a "friend of the Afghan people". Indeed, Ashgabat has been very keen on preserving and boosting its existing trade with the Taliban, focusing in particular on fuel and power.

Last year alone, Turkmenistan made some 70 official contacts with 24 Afghan companies, resulting in contracts worth upwards of 10 million US dollars to supply petrochemicals to Taliban-controlled areas in Afghanistan.

The Taliban are particularly interested in petrol, diesel fuel, aviation kerosene and liquefied gas from the Seidin oil refinery in Lebap Velayat, eastern Turkmenistan, and the Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) refinery in Balkan Velayat, western Turkmenistan.

In the first quarter of this year, deals were closed on 5,000 tons of petrol and 10,000 tons of diesel fuel. Meanwhile, there are suggestions that trade between the two nations will go way farther than that. According to Western press reports, tanks with aviation fuel have been crossing the border to Afghanistan on a regular basis.

Turkmenistan has recently launched construction projects for liquefied gas terminals in Atamurad (formerly Kerki in the east of the country) and Serkhetabad (formerly Kushka in the south), in order to cut gas transportation costs and boost petrochemicals shipments to Afghanistan.

But Ashgabat's relations with the Taliban stretch much farther than petrochemicals. Turkmenistan has gone ahead with its highly pragmatic effort to create a common power system in the region. A project is in the works to supply Turkmen electric power to Afghanistan and on to Pakistan.

A framework agreement to funnel power to Turkmenistan's southern neighbour was reached as far back as September 1999, when top officials from the Taliban's waterways and power ministry visited Ashgabat.

Construction is reportedly in progress on a 70-kilometre power line spanning the Afghan towns of Andhoy

and Shebargan, as well as a 120-kilometre high-voltage line between Serkhetabad and Gerat. Turkmenistan is fitting the line with transformer substations of varying capacity at its own cost.

Ashgabat is setting sights on Afghanistan as a transit nation for its electric power. The final destination is Pakistan, which needs substantial quantities of electricity and has the money to pay for it.

In addition, Pakistan is keen on Turkmenistan's natural gas. Once again, the shortest and most convenient route goes through Afghanistan.

The only problem holding back the construction of oil and gas pipelines is internal instability in Afghanistan. In this light, Turkmenistan is prepared to back any Afghan government that can keep this unruly nation under control and ensure the safety of projects generating hard-currency revenues for Ashgabat.

The idea of building pipelines from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan has been enthusiastically backed by Pakistan. The Pakistani military leader, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, pledged full commitment to those projects during his recent visit to Turkmenistan. The Turkmen authorities are hoping that the pipeline projects will promote political stability in Afghanistan by creating new jobs.

In addition to fuel and power sales to the Taliban, Turkmenistan is looking to boost its exports of agricultural produce, fabrics, consumer goods and chemicals to Afghanistan. In 2000, these export items netted in 38 million US dollars for Turkmenistan.

What's clear is that Ashgabat is attempting to expand its trade and economic ties with the Taliban in the hope of obtaining solid political benefits should the Taliban gain full control of Afghanistan.

This report was submitted by a Turkmen journalist who wishes to remain anonymous

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