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## Turkmenistan Pushes Ambitious Trans, Afghan Pipeline

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Turkmenistan is pushing ahead with plans to build a hugely ambitious pipeline to transport its gas through conflict-torn Afghanistan to India and Pakistan, despite concerns about the viability of the project.

Turkmen officials speaking at this week's Oil and Gas Conference in Ashgabat took every opportunity to talk up the pipeline while showing less interest in a similar project that would transport gas across the Caspian Sea to the EU.

The TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) natural gas pipeline, which is backed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), is regarded with suspicion as a wildly ambitious pipedream by some analysts.

"The realization of the TAPI pipeline project will allow an increase in exports of Turkmen gas," President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov was quoted as saying in a formal statement for the conference.

Sakhatmurad Mamedov, head of the state-owned company Turkmengaz, announced that the project had been "successfully pushed forward" in roadshows held in September with potential investors in Singapore, New York and London.

"The realization of the TAPI project will give an impulse to the development of the countries taking part in the project and will also strengthen stability in the region as well as creating new jobs," he said.

The 1,700-kilometre (1,050-mile) pipeline aims to transport more than 30 billion cubic meters of gas annually from Turkmenistan to consumers in Pakistan and India and relieve shortages in Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan in May inked sale-purchase agreements with India and Pakistan for the yet-to-be-built pipeline in a move hailed by the United States as a boost for regional integration. Much of the pipeline will go through Afghanistan which neighbors both Turkmenistan and Pakistan but remains wracked by violence and instability.

According to the ADB, the TAPI in 2008 was estimated to cost at least \$7.6 billion (6.0 billion euros) and the partners now face the task of attracting commercial partners to build, finance, and operate the pipeline.

The project enjoys the support of the United States, which is keen to deter subcontinent states from dependency on energy supplies from its arch foe Iran.

Deputy Assistant Secretary at the US State Department Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Lynne Tracy told the conference that Washington welcomed the progress made on the project even if the road ahead was a long one.

"The road ahead is long for this project, but the benefits could be significant and are certainly worthy of the diligence demonstrated by these four countries so far," she said. She said the project would diversify

Turkmenistan's energy market options, provide revenue and jobs for Afghanistan and bring clean fuel to the growing economies of Pakistan and India.

According to British auditors Gaffney, Cline and Associates, Turkmenistan has the second largest gas reserves in the world.

These are being eyed eagerly not just by Asian states but also the EU which wants to reduce its dependence on Russian imports.

Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and the EU are continuing to negotiate an agreement for construction of a TransCaspian pipeline for exports of Turkmen gas to Europe and the EU's special representative for Central Asia Patricia Flor urged an acceleration of progress.

She said it would be better to sign long term contracts now than in five years time and there was no need to "excessively drag out the talks".

Yet discussion of the TransCaspian pipeline, a project that would be a rival for Russia's South Stream, was absent from the speeches of Turkmen officials, in contrast to their enthusiasm for the TAPI project.

Tracy said the United States also supports this pipeline and in a veiled reference to Russia said that if Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan agree on a pipeline crossing only their territorial waters, no other country has veto power over that decision.

Turkmenistan is also keen on diversifying its export routes which remain dependent on its former Soviet master Russia with whom it has occasionally had prickly relations and has already begun exporting gas to China.

Berdymukhamedov has embarked on cautious economic reforms and sought to attract foreign investment in the energy sector since becoming president following the death of his eccentric predecessor Saparmurat Niyazov in late 2006.

Yet the country remains one of the world's most isolated states with opaque decision making and Berdymukhamedov has faced criticism for failing to implement extensive political reform after the excesses of the Niyazov era.