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The disconnect between pipelines and transparency

By John Foster

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Politicians offer plenty of reasons for our presence in Afghanistan. But what they leave out may be more important than what they say

Both Liberals and Conservatives have mused about staying in Afghanistan post-2011 to assist with training and development. The United States, meanwhile, is expanding Bagram into a mega-base outside Kabul, suggesting it plans to stay for years. What's really going on?

Terrorism is still touted as a reason for the Western presence in Afghanistan, but economic development is increasingly emphasized. Afghanistan occupies a strategic piece of real estate: It shares borders with Iran and Turkmenistan, two countries with immense petroleum reserves. George Krol, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state, told Congress last year that one U.S. priority in Central Asia is "to increase development and diversification of the region's energy resources and supply routes."

The Middle East, site of most of the world's oil, is of vital interest to the United States. With the Carter Doctrine of 1980, Washington affirmed that it will use military force, if necessary, to defend its national interests in the region. The Middle East, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan all fall within the military umbrella of U.S. Central Command. U.S. military bases in Afghanistan provide a bridgehead close to the region's energy resources.

Canada and other donors are being supportive. At the donors' conference in Kabul in July, participants agreed to promote "integrated regional infrastructure projects." Within the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, that includes plans for a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India (TAPI). This pipeline has been promoted by the U.S. since the mid-1990s.

Pipelines are more than commercial ventures. They are geopolitically important because they connect trading partners, and influence the regional balance of power. Turkmenistan's natural gas can only get to market through pipelines. The Russians have a pipeline north to connect with a network serving Europe. The Chinese have a pipeline east, connecting with their network and going all the way to Shanghai. The U.S. and European Union are moving to gain access or control. Former U.S. national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski called such geopolitical jockeying "the grand chessboard."

A new study from the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Johns Hopkins University advocates that Afghanistan become a regional hub for transportation, electricity and the TAPI pipeline. An endorsement by General David Petraeus, the American commander in Afghanistan, asserts: "Sound strategy demands the use of all the instruments of power."

The study claims: "Today, the U.S. is paying the salaries of all Afghan soldiers and civil servants." Under these circumstances, how can the Afghan government make independent decisions? The Pentagon recently announced hard mineral discoveries in Afghanistan worth nearly \$1-trillion. A spokesman said, "This is that whole economic arm that we talk about but gets very little attention." The timing is interesting, as the news is years old. Are these resources another reason for the intervention in Afghanistan?

In March, G8 foreign ministers agreed that "military-only responses" are insufficient, and that "solutions must include support for development." They endorsed a new initiative to facilitate infrastructure projects referenced by Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their joint declaration included the planned TAPI pipeline, but it was not mentioned publicly.

Western politicians rarely talk openly about pipelines or trade routes. After visiting Afghanistan in May, German president Horst Köhler created a hullabaloo with a statement that linked German military deployment and trade routes. He resigned, and claimed later he was referring to sea routes, not Afghanistan.

Planning for the TAPI pipeline continues, despite security concerns. The Asian Development Bank, the project sponsor, is an international development bank whose members include the U.S., Canada and several other NATO countries with troops in Afghanistan. Any bank financing for the project requires the approval of member countries. With such a heavy military presence, U.S./NATO influence on Kabul is obvious. The same countries are making military and development decisions.

TAPI is a multibillion-dollar project, and the Afghanistan National Development Strategy

includes plans for 1,000 industrial units along the pipeline route. Who will provide security?

Over the years, Canadian politicians have offered a plethora of reasons for our presence in Afghanistan. What they omit may be even more important than what's openly discussed. Canadians deserve better answers. The time for transparency is now.

John Foster is a Canadian energy economist who has worked for the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, BP and Petro-Canada. He is the author of Afghanistan, the TAPI Pipeline, and Energy Geopolitics in the Journal of Energy Security.