

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم

بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپائی

Spiegel Online

The World Powers Court Central Asia Hubs for Gas and Militaries

By Erich Follath and Christian Neef

11/5/2010

The world's great powers are all vying for influence and access in Central Asian countries, which are important supply hubs in the Afghanistan war and could become pivotal in reducing Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas. Despite the interest, the countries in the region still haven't come up with a vision for a common future.

The politician with the round cheeks and unpronounceable name is the greatest son of his country, of Central Asia and perhaps even the entire world -- at least if one is to believe a book published in May, called "The Grandson Fulfills the Grandfather's Dream."

In the work, which was distributed to schools and universities, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, 53, the president of Turkmenistan since December 2006, is described as follows: "His authority comes from God. No problem is too much for him. He is not only a doctor who treats the sick, but a great person who assumes full responsibility for the fate of his people -- a unique combination that astounds everyone. The successes under the leadership of our revered president are turning the world's attention to our country."

His capital is called Ashgabat, or "City of Love." But there is nothing lovely or graceful about the buildings that make up the city's skyline, from tasteless apartment towers to cold glass palaces, and from the gleaming white parliament to gilded monuments. Turkmenistan's capital combines the bland grayness of Soviet architecture with the hideousness of Western wannabe avant-garde, an ostentatious past with a gaudy present. It is a fitting combination for the capital of a country that often looks like a Stalinist Disneyland and is led by a supposedly infallible president.

Berdymukhammedov is actually an improvement. He has toned down the cult of personality nurtured by his predecessor, Saparmurat Niyazov, the country's first president, a Soviet-era ruler who called himself "Turkmenbashi," or "Father of all Turkmen." Dozens of monuments still celebrate the man. When he was in office, citizens couldn't even get a driver's license without quoting his wise sayings. The current president keeps a slightly lower profile, as evidenced by the smaller number of posters showing his likeness.

Turkmenistan is in the lower half of the United Nations Human Development Index, and it ranks 171st out of 183 nations on the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom. It is ironic that President Berdymukhammedov, a dentist and former health minister, heads a country whose healthcare system the organization Doctors Without Borders holds in such low regard. Amnesty International is critical of Turkmenistan for its persecution of members of the political opposition.

Not surprisingly, many find Ashgabat and its authoritarian leadership disconcerting. But anyone who concludes that Turkmenistan, larger than Germany by a third but with a population of barely more than 5 million, is a banana republic and thus of no interest to Europe is mistaken. Berdymukhammedov's bizarre realm is floating on a bubble of natural gas. Turkmenistan is estimated to have the world's fourth-largest reserves and is one of the top exporters of the precious natural resource.

Pipelines and Military Bases

Turkmenistan, the least populous of the five nations between the Caspian Sea and the Pamir Mountains that emerged from the former USSR, is a perfect example of why Central Asia will play an increasingly important role in world politics. With new pipelines planned for Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the region will be critical to the future energy supply of Europe, as well as to China and India. The West is also determined to stem the flow of drugs to Europe via Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as to put a stop to a wave of Islamist terror coming from Central Asia. In a modern-day version of the "Great Game" of the 19th century, today's major powers are competing for strategic interests and military bases along the old Silk Road.

Despite the lack of unity among the rulers of the five Central Asian countries, who are at loggerheads over borders and the use of water rights, their forms of government are similar. They believe that the only way to stay in power is to rule with a heavy hand. This explains why a bizarre, irrational cult of personality in Central Asia does not contradict a policy that cleverly plays off the major powers against one another. President Berdymukhammedov is a case in point. He claims to be neutral and open to offers from all sides, while unscrupulously taking advantage of his opportunities to engage in highly lucrative deals.

Reducing Europe's Gas Dependency on Russia

The People's Republic of China has reached an agreement with Ashgabat under which Turkmenistan will supply Beijing with up to 40 billion cubic meters of gas in four years. A declaration of intent for the construction of a giant pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India was signed a few weeks ago (although the plan will remain utopian unless the political situation in the region settles down). And in the next few months implementation of the Nabucco pipeline project is also expected to begin. The consortium behind the project, which is to supply natural gas to Germany and other countries, includes the German utility RWE, which holds a 16 percent stake, and counts former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer among its consultants.

A group of European partners launched Nabucco in 2002. The name is taken from the Verdi opera of the same name, which the partners attended to celebrate their first meeting in Vienna. The pipeline will run from Erzurum in Turkey through Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, ending at Baumgarten in Austria. The plans call for other pipelines to be connected to the Nabucco pipeline in Turkey, bringing gas from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, and eventually from Iraq and even Iran. The goal is to reduce Western Europe's energy dependency on Russia. Construction of the 3,300-kilometer (2,050-mile) pipeline is slated to begin in 2012, at an estimated cost of €7.9 billion (\$11.2 billion).

However, the massive project only makes sense if there is enough natural gas available. Azerbaijan is expected to be one of the two main suppliers, with an initial projected annual delivery of 8 billion cubic meters, while Turkmenistan is to deliver 10 billion cubic meters. But can Ashgabat deliver, is it willing to deliver, and at what price will it deliver? For months now, an instructive game of "pipeline poker" has been played on the global stage, one that has triggered growing nervousness among the Western players. The key player is Berdymukhammedov.

A Hub for Supplying Troops in Afghanistan

At a September summit of Turkish-speaking countries in Istanbul, Berdymukhammedov made it clear, once again, that he was highly interested in the project. He pointed out that once the South Yolatan and Yashlar fields have been developed, Turkmenistan will be producing enough gas to fill the pipelines to China and Western Europe (a claim that is debatable according to experts).

But nothing has been signed yet. "We hope to achieve clarity regarding the gas deliveries for Nabucco by the end of this year," says an RWE spokesman. But it can't be ruled out that Berdymukhammedov will auction off his country's resources to the highest bidder, which could leave Nabucco largely high and dry. This prospect and other factors means that the pipeline could turn into a failed venture: For political reasons, it is unrealistic to expect Iran to become a supplier in the near future, and even the deliveries from Azerbaijan are not a sure thing, because Iran has a 10-percent stake in the largest fields, near Baku in the Caspian Sea.

The Crown Jewel of Central Asia

And the West has other worries, to boot. These are evident on a Wednesday evening at Manas Airport, which serves the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, and where the terminal is almost empty. There are very few flights in and out of Manas these days. Most people boarding a plane there are on their way to Moscow, or they are wearing uniforms and are in the region on official business.

The latter group includes the American soldiers serving in the 376th Air Expeditionary Wing, who are currently loading 12 gray US Air Force cargo planes on the tarmac. Washington uses Manas as a hub to supply its troops in nearby Afghanistan and has most of its tanker planes stationed there. Some 55,000 American soldiers a month pass through what Commander Dwight Sones calls the "crown jewel" of Central Asia, and Washington pays the Kyrgyz government \$60 million a year to lease the facilities.

A group of men -- a major and a captain in the Russian army, as well as a few lower-ranking officers, all wearing field uniforms -- are watching the Americans through the glass wall of the transit lounge. They are passing time with a bottle of cognac from the duty-free shop. Their flight to Dushanbe in Tajikistan isn't in sight yet. They've already been waiting for hours.

The two major powers are cheek by jowl in Kyrgyzstan. Both have military bases there, the Americans in Bishkek and the Russians nearby. Moscow also has 6,000 men stationed at a base in Tajikistan, which they also fly to from Bishkek.

Since Washington declared Afghanistan to be the main theater of its war against terror, military and intelligence officials from the world's key powers have descended on Central Asia. While the West shifts its emphasis more and more toward the northern route through Central Asia to supply its troops in Afghanistan, due to unsafe conditions in Pakistan, other countries are beginning to think about what will happen after NATO withdraws from Afghanistan and the cards are reshuffled in the region. The Russians, in particular, are trying to gain a foothold in Central Asia once again, but so are the Turks, Iranians, Indians and Chinese.

Iran and China Eye Tajikistan's Prize

They are paying special attention to Tajikistan, Afghanistan's immediate neighbor. The smallest country in Central Asia has a population of only 7 million people, who speak a form of Persian and who are, for the most part, Sunni Muslims. They too are ruled by an autocrat: 58-year-old Emomali Rakhmon, who was once an electrician in a meat factory, then served as a sailor in the Soviet Pacific fleet and was finally the director of a collective farm.

Rakhmon, who faces a strong Islamic opposition, is a master of the political game. He was closely aligned with the Russians for a long time, but then -- to Moscow's irritation -- he set off in a different direction.

He is trying to develop stronger ties to the West, partly for financial reasons. A French military unit has 240 men stationed at the airport in Dushanbe, which they maintain as a hub for flights to Kabul. The United States is building a training center for the Tajik army and has financed a new border bridge to Afghanistan. Even India is involved in Tajikistan, where it is modernizing the former Soviet air base at Ajni west of Dushanbe. Observers believe that New Delhi is seeking to establish its first foreign base there, as a counterweight to arch-enemy Pakistan.

But the more influential players in Tajikistan are Iran and China, and they are already making plans for years from now.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad makes frequent trips to Dushanbe. In light of the international sanctions against his country, he is seeking new allies. He has found them in Central Asia, where he is currently assembling a union of Persian-speaking countries, which is to include Iran, Tajikistan and the northern part of Afghanistan, which has a large Tajik population.

For Ahmadinejad, Iran and Tajikistan represent "one spirit in two bodies," and he has called upon Tajik President Rakhmon and Afghan President Hamid Karzai to close ranks

against NATO in Asia. His overtures have been just as successful with Karzai, who is also seeking new allies for the period following the West's withdrawal from Afghanistan, as with Rakhmon, who will eventually have to keep his regime afloat without Russian or American support.

A 'New Silk Road'

There are already 15 Iranian-Tajik joint ventures. The Iranians helped build a large tunnel at the Anzob Pass, which is to become a conduit for a "new Silk Road" from Tehran to China via Afghanistan. They are also planning to build a railway and overhead power lines in the region.

The Chinese are investing even more avidly in Tajikistan. Beijing, Dushanbe's second-largest trading partner, is building roads and bridges and, like the Iranians, a hydroelectric power plant.

The People's Republic of China could turn out to be the real winner of the new Great Game. Beijing is not suspected of religious agitation in the region, like the Shiite Iranians, or of playing military and political power games, like the Russians. The Chinese want only one thing: to engage in trade and secure resources.

China's Vision for Central Asia

The Chinese already have a leg up with the region's autocratic leaders. Beijing shares the Central Asians' mistrust of militant Islam. China can only maintain control over its Wild West, with the restless majority Muslim Xinjiang Province and its aspirations for a trans-border Greater Turkestan, in coordination with its Central Asian neighbors. This is why Beijing helped establish an alliance that provides it with substantial influence, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which has the potential to become a very powerful club.

SCO was founded in Shanghai in 2001. It includes China, Russia and all Central Asia nations as members (except Turkmenistan, which is a "guest"), and Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia as observers. Afghanistan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are also represented at SCO conferences. The combined landmass of the club's members and observer nations makes up more than a quarter of the Earth, while they represent more than half of the world's population. The secretariat is in Beijing.

China seems to be the only nation with a vision for Central Asia: a "new Silk Road" consisting of pipelines, new highways from the heart of the continent to the Chinese coast and new railway connections from Beijing to Tashkent (and on to Berlin and Paris). The

development of the region is comparable to the development of America's Last Frontier by the Union Pacific Railroad, as it cut straight across the North American continent: The great pitch in the Great Game.

But whether Central Asia will truly become a booming trade zone between East and West will depend on what happens in the Afghanistan war. Only when a relatively stable government that can curb terrorism materializes in Kabul will it be possible to pacify the neighboring countries.

Are Central Asians The Greatest Obstacle to Their Success?

Sometimes it seems as if the Central Asians not only had the least power to shape their own future, but were also their own biggest obstacle. **Uzbekistan** and **Kyrgyzstan** are still at odds over land and water in the divided Fergana Valley. Disputes are also constantly flaring up between Tajiks and Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Kazakhs.

So far, Kazakh President **Nursultan Nazarbayev** is the region's only leader who has tried to unite contentious neighbors. He has dreams of forming a Central Asian union.

During a visit by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in September, Nazarbayev brought up a mammoth project from the Soviet days. It involved diverting large Siberian rivers to Kazakhstan, which, as Nazarbayev pointed out, would dramatically improve "the water supply for the entire Central Asian region."

Perhaps that would be a project that would create some unity -- and a little hope.