

Afghan pipeline raises security questions

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Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada says NATO's military mission has nothing to do with a proposed massive pipeline project that will bring natural gas to his country's neighbours. In a phone interview with the Georgia Straight, Omar Samad said the \$7.6-billion pipeline won't be finished before Canadian troops are scheduled to leave Afghanistan in 2011.

"So I fail to see what the relationship of this pipeline is with the Canadian mission," Samad said from Ottawa.

On June 19, the left-leaning Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives published a report questioning the feasibility of the pipeline project, given the strength of the Taliban insurgency. Samad, however, said that the Afghan army and local security forces would provide security for the pipeline. "If there is a need to do something different," he continued, "we will discuss it with whomever will be interested to do so, down the road...beyond the Canadian mission."

The proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-India-Pakistan pipeline (TAPI) could generate as much as \$300 million in annual revenue for the Afghan government, Samad said. Afghanistan's National Development Strategy lists the country's projected domestic revenue for March 21, 2008, to March 20, 2009, as \$887 million.

When operational, the pipeline will transport 33 billion cubic metres of natural gas annually. Energy-hungry Pakistan and India are planning to share output equally, while Afghanistan will only receive a "small percentage" of the pipeline's gas.

Written by energy economist John Foster, the CCPA's report raises serious concerns about the project's security. The planned route for the pipeline runs through Kandahar province, where most Canadian Forces combat operations in Afghanistan are taking place.

Speaking to the Straight from Ottawa shortly after the report's release, Foster said that if they were to build the pipeline now, it could become "a massive target going right through Kandahar, the heart of the insurgency".

According to the CCPA report, a Gas Pipeline Framework Agreement was signed by representatives of the project's participating nations on April 25, 2008. That agreement committed those parties to beginning construction in 2010. Foster said that if TAPI's security is to be counted on for investment by 2010, the entire southern region of Afghanistan will have to be cleared of land mines, and Taliban and al-Qaeda forces will have to be eliminated.

Foster said that in 40 years of working for such financial institutions as the World Bank, he

has never made a loan that required a foreign army's presence as a precondition for security.



Construction of the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline scheduled to begin in 2010. CCPA image. Click image to enlarge.

The Asian Development Bank is coordinating the pipeline project. Speaking from Manila, Howard Brown, an executive director for the bank representing Canada, said that security concerns for TAPI definitely need to be addressed.

"Nobody is going to start putting pipe in the ground unless they are satisfied that there is some reasonable insurance that the workers for the pipeline are going to be safe," he said.

Brown noted that a number of financial and engineering issues also still need to be worked out.

According to Thermo Design Engineering Ltd.'s president, Jim Montgomery, his company is probably the largest natural-gas contractor now operating in Turkmenistan, where TAPI will originate.

Thermo Design specializes in processing natural gas at its extraction site. Speaking from the company's corporate headquarters in Edmonton, Montgomery confirmed that it is likely that Thermo Design will play some roll in TAPI.

He conceded that working in Central Asia can be politically challenging, with much less negotiating room than in North America. "There is always lots of suspicion in these countries, too," he added. "You're forever wired to your reputation and you have to be careful who you talk to and who you don't."

But Montgomery claimed that he is not especially concerned about TAPI's security. He said that if "everybody is taken care of," there will not be a significant security risk.

Asked if the pipeline could become a target for militant groups or terrorists, Montgomery said that any deal around the pipeline would likely include them, too.

"That happens all of the time," he said. "If a deal was made with them [armed groups] and with the villages along the way, I think that that could be fairly secure."

The CCPA report also raised questions about how TAPI could affect the Canadian Forces' mission in Afghanistan.

André Gerolymatos, an SFU professor and expert in military and diplomatic history, pointed to the work of Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid in analyzing TAPI's role in Afghanistan.

"It is all about the U.S. It has very little to do with Afghan development," he said.

For Gerolymatos, TAPI is a geostrategic concern, not a development project. He noted that negotiations for an Afghan pipeline began under the Clinton administration, which held talks on the project with the Taliban government in the 1990s.

Gerolymatos said that he is highly skeptical that much of TAPI's transit revenue will make it

to Afghanistan's ordinary citizens, or even to the Afghan government. He also suggested that a lot of money would have to be spent paying regional warlords not to attack the pipeline.

The Canadian Department of National Defence responded to an interview request with an e-mail stating that the DND is aware of a regional agreement on TAPI but "an interview on this matter will not be possible."

Foster said that the answer to Ambassador Samad's question about why Canada should take an interest in TAPI is clear. He emphasized that the pipeline is potentially Afghanistan's largest development project and is planned to run right through the area where Canadian troops are most active.

Foster suggested that a better question would be to ask why the Canadian government has been silent on the project.

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