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TAPI Pipeline: A win-win for all

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Central Asia has always been a region of great significance. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, importance of this region has substantially increased since it constitutes a part of the modern “Silk Road” & also neighbours the 21st Century power centres- Russia, India and China. More so, when America is sitting in neighbouring Afghanistan and by way of that presence, is trying to extend its foothold in the region. In order to extend its sphere of influence to the region, the US is actively endorsing the Trans-Afghan gas Pipeline; better known as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline, proposed by the Asian Development Bank.

Largely seen as a Western-backed rival to the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) Pipeline, the TAPI, with a length of 1680-km, will source the gas from Dauletabad gas field in Turkmenistan, completing its run at the Indian border town of Fazilka. This \$ 7.6 billion project is likely to contribute immensely to the energy security of deficient downstream nations, provided it overcomes the challenges posed by huge investment costs and disturbed volatile areas *en route*.

For war-ravaged Afghanistan, this pipeline is expected to be a critical source of employment and revenue spinner, apart from contributing to the country’s energy security and thus boosting Afghan development. Apart from providing a clean source of energy to the growing economies of India and Pakistan, the TAPI can be a possible peace catalyst between India and Pakistan. Moreover, it has the potential to kick-start a new era of inter-regional cooperation between Central Asia and South Asia.

Even though the Cold War is over and the sphere of influence of the Soviet successor Russia has significantly shrunk, the Central Asian region still holds much importance for the US-

firstly, to contain a rising China, and secondly, to keep a check on resurgent Russia. Also, the US involvement in the regional developmental projects will provide legitimacy to enhanced presence of its troops and military bases. Washington's support for the project is also significant as it has, for the time being, successfully weaned India away from the IPI Pipeline.

Interestingly, the TAPI has also got the Russian backing and its gas giant Gazprom has expressed its willingness to participate in the consortium. The partner states have also suggested that Gazprom become a supplier for the pipeline along with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. If Russia manages to become a part of the project, it will renew Moscow's strategic influence in the region besides weakening the EU sponsored proposed Nabucco pipeline, aimed at reducing the European dependence on Russian gas, by depriving it of enough gas sources. For a bigger role in the region, Russia is already involved in ambitious CASA-1000 project, aimed at transferring surplus electricity from Tajikistan to Pakistan. For India too, the TAPI means much more than 'energy security'. India can get a strategic foothold in the energy-rich Central Asia where China is already present in a big way. So that, a much sought balance of power could be maintained in the region. Central Asia has thus become a fighting ring with all major world powers struggling for geopolitical gains.

A major factor deciding the fate of the project would be the political stability. Since the birth of independent Central Asian states, the region has witnessed huge political instability and religious and ethnic conflicts. While the US has tried to engineer "Colour Revolutions" in the guise of spreading western style democracies; Russia, in order to maintain its writ, has always backed its favourite Soviet era autocrats. Even today, despite the functioning democratic regime of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow in Turkmenistan, the political situation remains fragile. Other determining factors include the agreement on transit fee and security mechanisms. Since the pipeline passes through the restive Afghan areas of Herat and Kandahar and Balochistan in Pakistan, it becomes imperative to have a well-defined legal institutional mechanism in place. The European Energy Charter Treaty of 1994, which provides a legal framework for energy transit across Europe, can be a guiding tool.

Notwithstanding this, India should keep its efforts on to make the IPI pipeline a reality as the TAPI alone is not sufficient for the appetite of energy-thirsty Indian economy. India needs diversified energy sources so as to ensure uninterrupted supply. Moreover, the IPI can bring much bigger geopolitical gains for India apart from causing a sea change in its ties with Pakistan. At the same time, India needs to make sure that it is not being used by the US as its proxy in the Central Asian region to execute its imperial designs. If all the above aspects are taken care of, the TAPI will indeed be a win-win for all stakeholders.