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Canadians could be defending Afghan gas pipeline

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Josh Visser, CTV.ca News Staff

A U.S.-backed pipeline would be an inviting target for the Taliban and al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan, and the planned project would run directly through Kandahar, the volatile region that Canada has promised to defend through 2011.

Afghanistan and three other countries agreed in April to build a US\$7.6-billion natural gas pipeline starting in 2010 that would deliver gas from energy-rich Turkmenistan to energy-hungry Pakistan and India.

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline is strongly supported by the U.S. because it would block a competing pipeline from Iran that would bring oil to India and Pakistan. It would also reduce Russia's dominance of the energy sector in Central Asia.

A U.S.-backed pipeline -- more than 500 kilometres of it -- in Afghanistan would be an inviting target for Taliban and al Qaeda operatives there. It would be very difficult to defend.

But Ottawa and the military have been quiet about what could be one of the biggest changes to the operational paradigm in Kandahar, despite plans for such a pipeline going back a decade.

Report asks for answers

Energy economist John Foster wrote a report for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives that was released Thursday, in which he called for the government to make clear its policy with respects to the pipeline.

The Canadian government has spent billions on Afghanistan and spent massive political capital convincing the public of the need to stay in the war-torn country, he said in the report. So why no mention of the pipeline?

After the report was released to the public, a senior government official confirmed to the *Globe and Mail* that the Canadian Forces would support the Afghan National Army in providing security if the Afghanistan government asks for help.

"How did Canada get in this situation?" Foster said in an interview with CTV.ca. "I would say, unwittingly."



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"What I see in the future is that Canada could be trapped, and drawn into defending a pipeline," he said.

The Afghan government has made assurances that the gas route would be clear of landmines and Taliban within two years.

It's clear the pipeline would be a boon for Afghanistan's economy. It is estimated the project would bring in \$160 million annually for the country's coffers -- a considerable sum for the impoverished country.

The project would also create much needed construction-related jobs. The pipeline could even help stabilize the region as it could force co-operation between the Afghan, Pakistani and Indian governments. Clearly, there is a strong argument that the defence of the pipeline should be an essential part of the Canadian mission.

"The bad news is that ... the pipeline will follow the main highway from Herat to Kandahar, so the route would slap through the heart of the insurgency," Foster said. "Without peace, the pipeline would be a massive target."

But besides the tactical changes that may have to be made on the ground, Foster argued that Canada has to make a larger strategic decision about where it belongs in the new "Great Energy Game."

"There's no debate about this yet in Canada," he said.

The Great Energy Game

The new 'Great Energy Game' -- the original Great Game was the 19th Century battle between Britain and Russia for influence in Central Asia -- is the term for the geopolitics behind the efforts of the world's most economically powerful nations to secure a stable and long-term supply of energy.

"Afghanistan is a key part of the pipeline politics of Central Asia," Foster said. "What we don't know is where does Canada stands in regards to what is called the 'new Great Game.'"

"Does Canada support (U.S. objectives) or what?" he asked.

The U.S. has a measure of control over or access to about 50 per cent of the world's oil reserves. It has backed the TAPI proposal for over a decade. Two U.S. administrations -- Bill Clinton's and George W. Bush's -- negotiated with the Taliban on the project.

In a twist that has spawned numerous conspiracy theories, negotiations with the Taliban broke down in August 2001 -- one month before the Sept. 11 attacks.

The U.S. has significant interest in Central Asia, not just over the war on terrorism, but energy too.

At a 2006 NATO summit meeting, the U.S. proposed that NATO start guarding oil pipelines and sea lanes.

Furthermore, the U.S. also proposed to amend NATO article V commitment (an attack on one nation is an attack on all) to include energy resources. That illustrates how seriously the U.S. takes its commitment to securing its energy supply.

That is not expected to change in the future, as both U.S. presidential nominees, have made securing energy a key part of their platforms.

The Conservative's Canada First Defence Strategy, released Thursday evening, makes no overt mention of defending Canada's energy resources or those of its allies overseas.

It does say that Canada will continue to "support and attribute" NATO.

With respects to the pipeline, the new game is a race between the TAPI line and the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) line.

Foster said India and Pakistan are "backing both horses" -- essentially waiting until the final hurdle to see which of the pipelines proceeds.

For Pakistan and India, the Iranian pipeline -- which would pass to the south of Afghanistan -- would be more stable than the Afghanistan one, given the current strife. But dealing with Iran would draw the ire of the U.S. government.

Canada does not have the luxury of hoping a pipeline bypasses Kandahar.

If TAPI is built, Foster asks if Canada will be in Afghanistan defending the project over its 50-year lifespan.

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