

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



February 24, 2018

Beginning the Construction of Afghan Section of TAPI: Challenges and Opportunities

This is one of the most important economic projects ever started in Afghanistan. Many high ranking officials including the Presidents of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, Pakistani Prime Minister and India's Minister of State for External Affairs gathered in Herat today, February 24, for a ceremony to mark the launch of work in Afghanistan on the TAPI pipeline.

The Aim of TAPI

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline project of the Asian Development Bank, aims to export up to 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year, approximately 1,800-kilometer long, from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India and The cost of TAPI project is \$10 billions. TAPI will be operated by a special purpose consortium company (SPCC) and led by a commercial entry (consortium lead Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

Opportunities of TAPI

TAPI presents an opportunity for regional cooperation on an unprecedented scale. It can link the economies of the four countries. This project will enhance energy trading between Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. This project can establish a long term public-private partnership between these countries by establishing a natural-gas pipeline consortium. Further, there is a concern that the lack of energy supplies to the major energy importing countries in the region will constrain the social and economic development of other countries and there is a growing consensus in favor of a multilateral cooperative approach to energy security in the region. Therefore, TAPI can line up and unified the four countries around one strategic economic and political goal and develop a strategy for regional cooperation in Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) countries. Such a mechanism ensures a strategic long term partnership among these countries that not only can change the long arch-rivalries among them to a strategic partnership that can benefit the entire region and world through a more secure central Asia.

Challenges

The main obstacle of TAPI is the need to ensure energy security because its route will pass through sensitive areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The main issue facing TAPI is security, which is needed for consortium of the pipeline and ensuring a viable supply of gas through it upon completion. As only 100 km of the 1,680 km will pass through Turkmenistan and Indian territory, it faces tough security problems and it is not clear the regional powers will put aside their political and security problems aside in practice and push for a win-win geo-economics approach or not? Afghanistan and Pakistan have had disputes over their territorial borders; however, Afghanistan's borders with Iran and Central Asia are relatively peaceful. But the Durand line remains as the most challenging problem between Afghanistan and Pakistan as before. Also, Pakistan's protectionist policies have led Afghanistan to lean toward cooperation with its western neighbor, Iran.

Thus, Baluchistan is common territory that it is divided between Iran and Pakistan. The two countries also collaborated on suppressing Baluch nationalism, which both Tehran and Islamabad perceive to be a threat to regional stability and their territorial integrity.

The TAPI pipeline shall pass from mountainous areas of Afghanistan, where it is very difficult and expensive to build pipelines, to the Central Asia region where powers such as Russia, China and Iran do not have a positive attitude toward the TAPI pipeline.

Central Asia has great energy potential and is strategically important, but it is landlocked. Afghanistan plays and enjoys a geopolitics position in the region and can act as energy corridor in the Central Asia, and has the potential to change the long run adversaries among India and Pakistan and among Afghanistan and Pakistan to a strategic partnership not only benefiting the region but the world. As a result, the transit of reserves is very critical for countries that have resources, especially gas, and importing of these resources are equally vital for the countries which need it direly. South Asia, China and India have been experiencing faster economic growth and energy demand than other parts of the world. Economic and social development, population growth, high dependence on oil and gas, and limited energy reserves are the main factors promoting and increase in these demands in the region. Geopolitics of energy is very important for countries that need energy resources and as well for the countries enjoy them. It is vital for the countries that transit energy through their territory, since this provides them with political and economic dividends. The regional and cross-regional powers have different attitudes toward TAPI, which has led to a Great Game unfolding between them over energy and its transit. However, launching the TAPI section of Afghanistan is not only one of the historic events in the geopolitics of energy in the country, but in the whole region and even the cross-region. It has the potential to transform the adversaries to the strategic cooperation ensuring a win-win result for all the parties opening a new chapter of peace and prosperity in the region.



Tech vs. Democracy

By Guy Verhofstadt

BRUSSELS - Instagram, a photo-sharing platform owned by Facebook, recently caved in to a demand by the Russian government that it remove posts by opposition leader Alexey Navalny alleging misconduct on the part of Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko. In a YouTube video that has garnered almost six million views (and which is still available), Navalny shows Prikhodko hobnobbing with the oligarch Oleg Deripaska on a yacht in Norway, where he alleges bribery took place.

After Navalny's posts appeared, Deripaska went to the Russian communications regulator Roskomnadzor to request that Facebook remove the content, which it immediately did. This episode has now attracted much attention, as well as criticism for Facebook. And yet there have been thousands of other cases just like it.

In an age when most people get their news from social media, mafia states have had little trouble censoring social-media content that their leaders deem harmful to their interests. But for liberal democracies, regulating social media is not so straightforward, because it requires governments to strike a balance between competing principles. After all, social-media platforms not only play a crucial role as conduits for the free flow of information; they have also faced strong criticism for failing to police illegal or abusive content, particularly hate speech and extremist propaganda.

These failings have prompted action from many European governments and the European Union itself. The EU has now issued guidelines for Internet companies, and has threatened to follow up with formal legislation if companies do not comply. As Robert Hannigan, the former director of the British intelligence agency GCHQ, recently observed, the window for tech companies to reform themselves voluntarily is quickly closing. In fact, Germany has already enacted a law that will impose severe fines on platforms that do not remove illegal user content in a timely fashion.

These ongoing measures are a response to the weaponization of social-media platforms by illiberal state intelligence agencies and extremist groups seeking to divide Western societies with hate speech and disinformation.

Specifically, we now know that the Kremlin-linked "Internet Research Agency" carried out a large-scale campaign on Facebook and Twitter to boost Donald Trump's chances in the 2016 US presidential election. According to US Special Counsel Robert Mueller's recent indictment of 13 Russian individuals and

three organizations, an army of Russian trolls spent the months leading up to the 2016 election stoking racial tensions among Americans and discouraging minority voters, for example, from turning out for Trump's opponent, Hillary Clinton.

Mueller's findings obviously raise important questions about transparency and the protection of democratic institutions in the digital age. Despite having allowed themselves to become Kremlin special-operations tools, the major social-media platforms have been reluctant to provide information to democratic governments and the public.

For example, in the United Kingdom, the MP Damian Collins has launched an investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 Brexit referendum, but he has struggled to receive much cooperation from Facebook and Twitter. In December, he described Twitter's response to his questions as "completely inadequate." That is regrettable. When democracy itself is at stake, social-media platforms have a responsibility to be transparent. Moreover, if Russia can interfere so thoroughly in the US democratic process, just imagine what it has been doing in Europe, where we still do not know who financed some of the online advertising campaigns in recent national elections and referenda. I suspect that we have only just scratched the surface when it comes to exposing foreign meddling in our democratic institutions and processes. With European Parliament elections due in May 2019, we must be better prepared.

The tech giants, for their part, will continue to claim that they are merely distributing information. In fact, they are acting as publishers, and they should be regulated accordingly - and not just as publishers, but also as near-monopoly distributors.

To be sure, censorship and the manipulation of information are as old as news itself. But the kind of state-sponsored hybrid warfare on display today is something new. Hostile powers have turned our open Internet into a cesspool of disinformation, much of which is spread by automated bots that the major platforms could purge without undermining open debate - that is, if they had the will to do so.

Social-media companies have the power to exert significant influence on our societies, but they do not have the right to set the rules. That authority belongs to our democratic institutions, which are obliged to ensure that social-media companies behave much more responsibly than they are now.

Guy Verhofstadt, a former Belgian prime minister, is President of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Group (ALDE) in the European Parliament.

Afghans don't want return of Taliban era

By Asif Ghaznawi

National Consultative Peace Conference with tribal elders, dignitaries and provincial council's members in Kabul ended with calls for peace and reconciliation. The conference held by High Peace Council and participants from 24 provinces supporting peace process, urged Taliban and other militant groups to leave fighting and join peace process. Head of the council; Karim Khalili said that the Afghan government was ready for negotiation and fighting is not the solution. President Ghani also spoke at the conclusion of this Conference. He also appealed from opposite militants to join peace process and give up insurgency and stop violence.

These calls for peace come at a time that a week ago Taliban in an open letter urged American people and US congress to force the White House to begin political dialogue with this group in Afghanistan to end the conflicts. The US president earlier threatened to reinforce US military power, intensify and increase ground and air operations against insurgents in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, it is seen that air strikes by US forces on hideouts and bases of Taliban have been increased. US president refused talks with Taliban and said, insurgents in Afghanistan should be finished by military power. NATO commanders in Afghanistan also rejected this call of Taliban. US secretary of State spokesperson has said, Taliban should talk to government of Afghanistan. Calls for dialogue and peace are heard from different sides while insecurity is at its peak and insurgents spare no efforts to create violence and terror. According to UNAMA's annual report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan more than ten thousand Afghans have been killed or injured in 2017. UNAMA's human rights section has said this year's high casualties were mostly caused by suicide attacks and other bomb blasts by Taliban and other terrorist groups. Security situation has worsened, terrorist attacks are bloodier, more complicated and more brutal and public concerns are growing. This is while government of Afghanistan continuously pursued peace efforts and calls on insurgents to join peace process. High Peace Council since its creation 8 years ago has worked to urge Taliban leaders for talks; different methods and means were used by the council and other government and non-government channels to convince Taliban for talks and leave militancy; several rounds of primary talks were held in different parts of the world; Pakistan, Turkey, Arabic countries and other unknown places; but all gone in vain, no result and achievement. The Taliban has proved to be alien to tradition of talks and negotiation, much familiar to violence, murder, destruction and savagery. The bloody incidents; suicide attacks and bomb blasts especially recent attacks in Kabul are proven examples. Taliban leaders consider themselves lords of war and think they are undefeatable; that's why they are continuing recklessly that fight and have not given positive response to years calls for talks and peace. Perhaps this is because of more flexibility shown by Afghan government and its futile and fruitless peace and reconciliation programs.

Government of Afghanistan In fact has been far flexible in its peace efforts; Hamid Karzai former president of Afghanistan would use term of 'unhappy brothers' for Taliban and this was

to some extent to legitimize their fight. He for several times opposed airstrikes by Afghan and international forces on Taliban. But on other side, Taliban leaders persistently continued bloodshed and destruction under and banner of so-called jihad. President Ghani at the conclusion of peace conference on 21st February 2018 once again invited the militants to negotiation. Unlike his past warnings he said; "if our children are killed and their bodies torn in the streets and their blood spilled, this is an examination by God. The enemies kill us and if we choose to kill them, so what is the difference between us and them, we should decide wisely when we are mourning." Attributing bloodsheds and loss of life to Almighty God neither convince Taliban to end violence, nor relief pains and miseries of the people and solve the problems. President at the conclusion of peace conference should have issued the hardest warning to insurgents; because Taliban and other militant groups have not taken any single step for talks and peace.

Now considering these, is it necessary to continue the failed practices of peace process, spend money and time for it? Or change the strategy and concentrate on military means? Undoubtedly recent call of Taliban for talks with US government is because of warnings by White House and increase of air strikes on hideouts of insurgents. Taliban better knows the military power; either by Afghan special force or US and other international troops in the country. They have not forgotten that their entire rule on nearly whole parts of Afghanistan finished within weeks; they remember well that several top leaders and commanders of Taliban and as well as AL Qaeda targeted in their most secret hideouts and perished.

So a strong military pressure on insurgents, targeting their hideouts, training camps, depots, and their drug trafficking channels could compel them to come to negotiating table. US president Donald Trump pledged to finish terrorism and security threats in Afghanistan and people hope US and Afghan governments don't spare any military effort to force Taliban leaders for talks. It is most probable that application of full force on insurgents can bring them to talks. According to experiences of past wars, armed conflicts mostly ended through dialogue and negotiations; but military force in some cases played decisive role, compelling battle sides to sit for talks. Majority of Afghans don't want to return to Taliban rule and era. They don't want to lose achievements of past years. Taliban apparently claims to fight for changing the system, restore their Sharia rule and exit of international forces; they oppose human rights, women's rights, rights of minorities, civil society activities and political parties; according to Taliban's ideology only clerics have the rights to rule and just clerics deserve to handle all social, political, economic and other affairs of the country; they don't allow girls to be educated and sharia should be top most subject in universities' curriculum. But people in Afghanistan don't accept these and never want to again hand over the government and country to Taliban. Peace talks if coupled with strong military pressure could make Taliban ready for talks. Our enemies better know the language of force.

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