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## **TURKMENISTAN: TAPI DEADLINE PUSHED BACK TO 2022?**

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Afghan officials have said it will take four years to prepare, design and complete the pipeline.

The government of Turkmenistan has regularly stated it expects the trans-Afghan TAPI natural gas pipeline to be completed by 2019, but a recent statement from Afghanistans government suggests that target has been pushed back to around 2022.

The revised timeframe emerged in February as the state-run Afghan Gas Enterprise signed an engineering design deal with Austria-based ILF Consulting Engineers.

According to an Afghan presidential administration press release, Mines Minister Ghezal Habibyar said at the signing ceremony that the practical work on the pipeline will take three years.

Also, although an official ceremony was held last month in Turkmen to mark the start to construction in Afghanistan, it appears that was a largely cosmetic exercise since most of the preliminary groundwork has not yet been done.

The first phase of the project, which includes the security of the project, agreements, design, social and environmental study, de-mining, a survey of the pipelines route and expropriation will be completed in one year, Habibyar said.

That timetable will be a source of frustration for Turkmenistan, which is withering under the impact of a deep economic crisis provoked in large part by its inability to get competitive remuneration for its immense gas riches. The TAPI pipeline would provide Turkmenistan with three new markets — Afghanistan, Pakistan and India — in addition to its only reliable current customer, China.

There was a slight fillip to the prospects of the Afghan section of the pipeline when an self-identified spokesman for the Taliban last week declared that the insurgent group would pledge its support for the project.

The Islamic Emirate views this project as an important element of the countrys economic infrastructure and believes its proper implementation will benefit the Afghan people. We announce our cooperation in providing security for the project in areas under our control, the Taliban said in a statement cited by VOA News.

But Afghan officials are warning that there are potential dangers from another source. On February 22, authorities in the city of Herat claimed to have captured a group of 10 militants that they said had been trained by Iran to sabotage the inauguration ceremony due to take place the following

day.

Whether or not there was any truth to that plot, it is evident that Tehran is discomfited by perceived progress on TAPI. Speaking to the Tehran Times newspaper, energy analyst Omid Shokri Kalehsar echoed the official Iranian stance by alluding to the pipeline as a Saudi-supported initiative.

Saudis financial support for TAPI would help Pakistan not to need Iranian gas. And it means that Iran will lose Pakistan natural gas market if TAPI [materializes]. Last decade India was interested [in buying] Iran natural gas via Peace Pipeline, but due to US pressure this project did not materialize. It seems that when TAPI comes \* online, India will [no longer] be interested [in] Iran natural gas, Kalehsar said.

There is scant evidence so far, however, of quite how much material support the Saudis are really willing to invest in a project that could end up costing more than \$10 billion to complete. The notion that Riyadh intends to throw large amounts of money at TAPI has been promoted by Turkmenistan, where the deputy prime minister with the portfolio for energy issues, Maksat Babayev, stated at a January 19 government meeting that Saudi Arabia has committed to providing substantial investments. No figures have been provided and the Saudi Fund for Development, which is identified as the source of funding, has not responded to requests for clarification.

Other than Saudi Arabia and the Asian Development Bank, there are no other known prospective funders. As leader of the Isle of Man-based TAPI Pipeline Company construction consortium, Turkmenistan state-run Turkmengaz is supposed to be stumping up 85 percent of equity. But the Turkmen government shows every sign of being broke and, in any case, has a history of unwillingness to commit its own financial resources in these types of transnational projects.

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Kaynak/Source: