
US Leans on Caspian Pipeline Partners

Institute for War & Peace Reporting - 7/3/2008

Washington is working to end disputes between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan in the hope of getting a major new pipeline project moving. United States diplomat Steven Mann flew into Turkmenistan for the second time this year on February 28, on a mission to get the Central State firmly behind the planned Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, TCGP.

When the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State met President Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov in Ashgabat, energy issues were at the top of the agenda.

Washington wants to see Ashgabat actively committed to building a pipeline that would for the first time bring Central Asian gas to the West without going through Russia.

Mann has been alternating visits to Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, which lies on the other side of the Caspian Sea and would be another key project participant. Three days before flying to Ashgabat, the diplomat was in the Azerbaijani capital Baku, where a tender for a feasibility study for TCGP has already taken place.

The proposed pipeline would stretch almost 2,000 kilometres from Turkmenistan under the Caspian Sea floor to Turkey.

There it would connect up to the planned Nabucco pipeline, which is intended to run from Turkey to Austria via Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary.

TCGP would be capable of carrying 30-32 billion cubic metres of natural gas a year, most of it from Turkmen and Azerbaijani deposits.

The idea for a gas pipeline circumventing Russia was first floated in 1998, but has not been implemented so far.

There are several reasons for this, one of which is that the Kremlin, the main buyer of Turkmen hydrocarbons and owner of the only major gas pipeline out of Central Asia, has actively opposed the project.

Iran, too, is against a western pipeline being laid close to its territory, especially as the Caspian's waters have yet to be finally demarcated among littoral states.

Finally, there is the unresolved dispute between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan over who owns a large offshore field which the Azerbaijanis call Kapaz and the Turkmen call Serdar.

This ownership dispute will only be finally resolved when the status of the sea itself has been determined. All five littoral states - Iran, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakstan and Russia - have different visions of how this should be done.

Ashgabat and Baku have been particularly at loggerheads. Azerbaijan favours a plan where a median line would be drawn down the centre of the sea and individual national sectors then sliced up on either side of it. That would give it an advantage in claiming oil deposits.

Turkmenistan, however, wants the sea to be divided in such a way as to divide oil wells according to how close they are to national borders.

With concerted US diplomacy, observers believe the pipeline may finally be about to get off the ground.

They say the time for a deal has never been more favourable, as Russia is currently absorbed in domestic affairs, having just elected a new president.

Mars Sariev, an NBCentral Asia political expert, said the US diplomat had timed his latest visits to the region to coincide with a 'power paralysis' in the Kremlin.

'Mann is taking advantage of the moment to exert pressure on Ashgabat to resolve its disputes with Azerbaijan,' he explained.

'Berdymuhammedov and [Azerbaijani president Ilham] Aliyev may be able to reach a consensus under the aegis of the Americans and with [the promise of] massive western investment.'

Sariev's argument would appear to be backed up by the inter-governmental talks between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan which began in Baku on March 5.

Equally significantly, the foreign ministries of the two countries have also started consulting on an official visit which the Turkmen leader will pay to Azerbaijan in the first half of this year.

'By the time Berdymuhammedov visits Baku, the issue of the disputed areas will have been solved in essence,' predicted Sariev.

Rovshan Ibrahimov, an expert with the Turkey-based International Strategic Research Organisation, also expects US diplomatic efforts to play a role in bringing Baku and Ashgabat together.

'If these assumptions prove correct, the last obstacle will have been cleared away for talks on the demarcation and status of the Caspian, which are essential to making TCGP a reality,' he said.

Analysts predict US diplomacy could prompt a firmer Turkmen commitment to the pipeline project.

Filling the future pipeline to capacity would require more natural gas than is currently available, and Turkmenistan will need foreign investment if it is to increase its extraction levels.

'The US could be a potential investor here,' noted Ibrahimov.

(NBCentralAsia is an IWPR-funded project to create a multilingual news analysis and comment service for Central Asia, drawing on the expertise of a broad range of political observers across the region. The project ran from August 2006 to September 2007, covering all five regional states. With new funding, the service is resuming, covering only Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan for the moment.)

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