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## PIPELINE POLITICS IN THE CASPIAN SEA

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### ABSTRACT: -

**T**he Caspian Sea region with its geostrategic location and ample hydrocarbon reserves has become a zone of exhaustive political, economic and security activities for Russia, the U.S, China, Iran, and Turkey. Therefore, these countries have been trying to pursue every possible means to



influence the region by providing alternative pipeline routes to the producing countries. Hence, the extraction and transportation of oil and gas from the region has become a major geopolitical rivalry. Though, the U.S is geographically located far from the Caspian region, nevertheless it directly influences all the Caspian

states. This article focuses on the geopolitical rivalry over the pipeline routes that have emerged as a major challenge for the energy producing countries. Its goal is to examine the major pipeline routes for the transportation of oil and gas from the region and how the major powers are struggling for dominance over the pipelines to balance each other by introducing new pipeline routes.

**KEYWORDS:** Caspian basin, pipeline politics, new great game, major pipeline routes.

### INTRODUCTION :

The extraction and transportation of oil and gas from the Caspian basin have emerged as a major geopolitical rivalry due to its geostrategic location with ample amounts of oil and gas in the region. This rivalry has led to an atmosphere of competition among super powers (Russia, the U.S, China, Iran, and Turkey) to access control over the pipeline routes. Historically and geographically, the Caspian Sea is an important hub of water routes, connecting north to south, east to west, serving as a corridor for Russia's expansion towards Central Asia and the Middle East. But there are crucial issues like disputes among Caspian states regarding ownership of oil and gas reserves, lack of legal status of the Caspian, multiple route options for pipelines, ethnic conflicts, environmental concerns and militarization of the region (Alam, S.2002:6).

The term 'pipeline politics' itself describes two different but interconnected subjects. First, there is power struggle for gaining control over the energy resources of the Caspian region, but it is complicated by the lack of legal status of the Caspian Sea and conflicts among the littoral states regarding their interests. Secondly, though the Caspian region possesses huge hydrocarbon resources but do not have capital and modern technology for extraction and exploitation. Additionally, the region is strategically located between Iran, Turkey, Russia and China, which has no direct access to global waterways as well as transportation routes for exportation of oil and gas. Therefore, the Caspian bordering states are reliant on some Russian and Western oil companies.

The issue of routing and building of pipeline in the region converted into power politics which is known as the 'new great game', which is been played by many actors for victory over the region. In this regard, some scholars believe that this game is without end. As IZVESTIA, the Russian newspaper pointed out that "the most important factors of geopolitical influence will be the control over pipelines in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia in the next century (Shujaat, U.2015:30). The existing pipeline infrastructure built during the Soviet era, has the aim to transport oil from oil producing areas such as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan to Russia. Due to dependence upon the Russian pipeline networks and limited export routes, the Caspian bordering states are unable to get proper benefits from their expensive oil and gas reserves. However, after 1991, the transportation of oil and gas from Caspian littoral states to lucrative international market has become top priority for producers in the Caspian region. The key indicator of the geopolitical rivalry in the region is the struggle over pipeline routes for transportation of oil and gas from the Caspian region. The region's geopolitics has complicated the routes for transporting oil and gas from the Caspian basin to markets in Asia, Europe and elsewhere. Multiple pipeline routes from Caspian Basin became one the key issues of the U.S foreign policy.

The sea contains large volume of oil and natural gas resources both in terms of offshore as well as onshore deposits in the Caspian region. EIA estimated that the Caspian holds 48 billion barrels of oil and 292 tcf of natural gas in 2012. Offshore fields contain around 41% of total Caspian crude oil and lease condensate (19.6 billion barrels) and 36% of natural gas (106tcf). Majority of the offshore oil fields are located in the northern part of the Caspian while offshore natural gas reserves are in the southern part of the Caspian Sea<sup>1</sup>.

**Table I: Fossil Energy Reserve of Caspian Region, 2014**

	Oil		Natural Gas		Coal	
	Billion Barrels	R/P Ratio	Trillion Cubic metres	R/P Ratio	Billion Tonnes	R/P Ratio
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	7.0	22.6	1.2	68.8	-	-
<b>Iran</b>	157.8	>100	34.0	>100	-	-
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	30.0	48.3	1.5	78.2	33600	309
<b>Russia</b>	103.2	26.1	32.6	56.4	157010	441
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	0.6	6.9	17.5	>100	-	-
<b>Region Total (% of World)</b>	<b>298.6 (17.6%)</b>		<b>86.8 (46.4%)</b>		<b>190.6 (21.4%)</b>	
<b>World</b>	<b>1700.1</b>	<b>52.5</b>	<b>187.1</b>	<b>54.1</b>	<b>891.5</b>	<b>110</b>

Source:[http://www.iaee.org/baku2016/submissions/OnlineProceedings/Baku%20Conference%20Proceeding%20Paper\\_Nathaniel%20Babajide.pdf](http://www.iaee.org/baku2016/submissions/OnlineProceedings/Baku%20Conference%20Proceeding%20Paper_Nathaniel%20Babajide.pdf). P.3

Russia and Iran share common interests and frequently has been criticized for the growing presence of the U.S in the region and adopted tit-for-tat strategies to counter any U.S. policy innovation. For example, a new position in the State Department has been created by Clinton administration to coordinate U.S executive branch programs for Caspian oil and gas. In return for this, Russia and Iran frequently signed an agreement to block the exploitation of the Caspian resources by demanding a new division of the Caspian's Sea resources (Hill, F.:2004: 20). In the Caspian region, there are three major centres of active energy development including Kazakhstan's Tengiz oil fields, Azerbaijan's oil fields and Turkmenistan's natural gas fields. A fourth could be Iran if it expands the extraction and exploration of its Caspian Sea zones (Barylski, R. V.:1995:226). Initially, there were at least five routes under consideration to move Caspian oil out of the area. These are the following:

- Northern route (N).
- Southern route (S).
- Western route (W).
- Eastern route (E).
- South-eastern route (SE).

### The Northern Route

Advocated by Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Black Sea. Around 30% shoreline of the northern Caspian Sea is dominated by Russia. The geopolitics of the region plays an important role in Russian foreign policy rather than economic considerations. In fact Russia always sacrifices economic interests to achieve political benefits. Energy and pipeline policy is a tool of Russian foreign policy and its future will depend on the mutual consent with European countries (Tavana, M. et al.:2012: 351). The Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) is a major international crude oil transportation project (1,700 km long). The pipeline transports Caspian oil from Tengiz and Karachaganak fields (Kazakhstan) to Novorossiysk on Russia's Black Sea coast which is seen as a national priority for Kazakhstan. During SCO summit in June 2002, Kazakh president, Nazarbayev and Russian president, Putin signed a 15-year contract on the export of Kazakh oil via Russia (Nygren, B. 2007:173). Indeed, currently the CPC is the main export route for Kazakh oil and Chevron signed agreements with the Soviet over the Tengiz oil field in the late 1980 and is still continuing with newly independent state, Kazakhstan. In 2013, the CPC pipeline transported an average of 706,000 b/d from Atyrau, Kazakhstan, to Novorossiysk<sup>2</sup>. Initially, the CPC was formed by the governments of Russia, Kazakhstan and Oman. Later the international oil/gas companies joined, these companies were Chevron, Rosneft, Lukoil, Royal Dutch Shell, Mobil and BP. Russia acquired 24 % of shareholding in the CPC, followed by Kazakhstan for 19% and Oman for 7% (Daly, J.C.K; 2008). During 2004-2005, the CPC pipeline expansion was planned and it was approved by the shareholders in 2010<sup>3</sup>. But CPC pipeline is under threat of Chechnya uprising movement which is seeking independence from Russia.

Another transit route through Russian territory is the **Baku-Novorossiysk oil pipeline**, also known as the Northern Corridor. This project was concluded between Transneft, Azerbaijan's state energy company SOCAR and the International Operating Company of Azerbaijan. After the second Chechnya war, Transneft bypassed the Chechnya. Besides, the **Atyrau-Samara Pipeline** is one of the major oil pipelines of Kazakhstan, which runs from Atyrau to Samara (Volga region) and it is operating by Russian oil company, Transneft. Kazakhstan exported almost all oil through this pipeline before the BTC completion. Transneft head Nikolai Tokarev recently said that after the start of supplies from the Kashagan oilfield, Kazakh oil via the Atyrau-Samara pipeline would increase from 2 million to 17 million tonnes in 2017<sup>4</sup>.

### The Western Route

The Western route is preferred by the U.S which passes through Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey. Major oil production comes from the Baku, the giant Azeri-Chirag-Guneshi (ACG) fields. **The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC)** is the cornerstone of Clinton's foreign policy for the Caspian region. It is one of the largest and is very expensive politically and economically for Turkey, the U.S, EU and Caspian states. In 2002, the construction of this project started with the cost of about 4 billion USD and the pipeline officially operated since 13 July 2006 (Misiagiewicz, J.:2012:71). The 1,768 kilometre long BTC pipeline carries oil from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshi (ACG) and Shah Deniz (Azerbaijan's Caspian fields), transports it through Georgia territory to Ceyhan marine terminal on the Turkish Mediterranean coast<sup>5</sup>. It runs 443 km through Azerbaijan, 249 km through Georgia and 1,076 km through Turkey to the Ceyhan<sup>6</sup>. The BTC came into existence due to cooperation of many international companies such as Unocal, ConocoPhillips (US), BP (Britain), SOCAR (Azerbaijan), TPAP (Turkey), Itochu and INPEX (Japan) and Statoil (Norway) (Misiagiewicz, J.:2012:71). But Azerbaijan has been afflicted with Armenia on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and it is a major element of the country's national security since its independence<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the BTC pipeline is under threat due to Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Georgia's internal problems with separatists groups. For example, in 2004, the Azeri separatists successfully blocked the Georgian port of Batumi which caused transportation of Azerbaijan oil onto the Black Sea. Moreover, Kurds are a large majority of

the population in Turkey who are fighting for independence and posing threats for pipeline (Rudaw; 2017).

Another project is the **South Caucasus Gas pipeline**, a natural gas pipeline known by different names such as Shah-Deniz pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline (BTE). It runs from the Shah-Deniz and Azeri-Chirag-Guneshi gas fields in Azerbaijan sector of the Caspian Sea to Georgia and Turkey which began in 2004 and is in use since 2006 (Nygren, B. 2007:172). The BTE pipeline runs parallel to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and approximately 250 million cubic meters per year is the capacity of the pipeline (Misiagiewicz, J.:2012:72). Furthermore, the **Trans-Caspian Gas (TCG) pipeline** is the further element of the Southern Corridor but is still under process. The Trans-Caspian gas pipeline is a proposed subsea pipeline from Turkmenistan's central Karakumi gas fields to Azerbaijan, further Turkmen gas will deliver to European markets through Turkey territory bypassing both Russia and Iran. In other words, the TCG pipeline is delivering Central Asian gas to Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus pipeline delivers gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey (Mitrova, T, 2007:69).

Moreover, the **Baku-Supsa pipeline** also known as the Western Route Export Pipeline runs from the Sangachal terminal near Baku to the Georgian port of Supsa to western market. The pipeline is operated by Azerbaijan International Oil Consortium and BP. In August 2008, this pipeline was closed due to military activities in Georgia but it reopened in November 2008<sup>8</sup>. However, pro-Russian Separatists of South Ossetia, are controlling mile-long stretch of the Baku-Supsa pipeline.

The aim of these projects is to reduce transit dependency on Russia. In this regard, Putin explained the legal aspects around the Caspian Sea. Any decision made by European Union on the Trans-Caspian pipeline as well as Caspian Sea will not be accepted without Caspian five's consensus, otherwise it would be illegitimate<sup>9</sup>. In 2011, Russian Prime Minister Medvedev warned that "any construction of pipeline planned by Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, supported by EU, will not be acceptable until the legal status of the Sea is resolved by the five littoral states of the Caspian" (German, T. 2014: 22).

Russia and the U.S are the major competitors in the Caspian region, which are seeking to establish their supremacy over the transportation routes. As Russian supported "**Blue Stream gas pipeline**" which is considered a failure of American pipeline strategy in the Caucasus and Central Asia as a whole. The Blue Stream pipeline will bring natural gas from Russia to Turkey across the Black Sea bypassing third world countries. In this regard, Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister in 2008 stated that 'the Blue Stream project is already operational and economically more effective' while Nabucco pipeline is connecting Turkey and Austria as an 'artificial project' (German, T. 2014: 21). **The Nabucco Gas Pipeline** (1,300 km long), is an important project of EU's gas supply security strategy (Endicott, N.:2009:6). It will transport gas from the Caspian Sea to Europe in order to bypass Russia. As already stated, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has expressed his concern on 30 Jan., 2010, that "the EU has dealt seriously with the Nabucco project which needs 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas every year. But there is no gas, no pipeline" (Benke, I.:2010:35).

### The Southern Route or Iranian Route

The southern route through Iran to the Persian Gulf is the shortest, cheapest and environmentally safe for exporting oil from the Caspian Sea. From Persian Gulf, both markets Asian and European could be effectively served. With the world's second largest natural gas reserves, Iran occupies a strategic location between the oil rich regions of the southern Caspian Sea and the Middle East (Amirahmadi, H.:2000:166).

The primary interest of Iran is the security of its northern border in the Caspian region that requires stability in Central Asia. Hence, Iran is normalizing its relations with EU, China and Japan with the aim to transport its natural gas to Europe through Turkey's pipeline network. But the U.S economic sanctions on Iran weakens oil sector (Tavana, M. et al.:2012: 352). However, there are major pipelines including the 1,880 km long, Iran –Pakistan Gas pipeline will run from South Pars fields of Iran to Baluchistan and Sindh provinces in Pakistan. It was originally proposed in 1990 and included 600 km extension to India. However, in 2009, India withdrew from this project due to security and gas price concerns. In 2013, Iran's Tadbir Energy Costar and Pakistan's Inter-State Gas System signed an agreement for starting the construction of the Pakistani segment of the pipeline. Though, the construction of the Pipeline in Iranian section has been completed, nevertheless, in Pakistan section it is under process.<sup>10</sup> Besides, **Iran-Turkey-Europe (ITE) pipeline** which is 5,000 km long carries natural gas from Iran to



Europe through Turkey. The agreement on the project signed in November 2008 between the Iranian Oil Ministry and Turkish Ministry of Energy and Natural Resource started in August 2013 (Bahgat, G.:2014). Approximately 35 billion cubic meters is the target annual amount of gas to Europe. Despite the U.S opposition, Ankara is interested to fully utilize Tehran's oil and gas resources<sup>11</sup>. However, the international sanctions on Iran are a serious concern in terms of both infrastructure and technical capacity. Furthermore, the southern route is opposed by the U.S for political reasons and Azerbaijan remains cautious of Iran's intentions and is always provoked by its allies such as the U.S, Turkey and Israel. In this regard, Moradi, M. (2006: 174) claimed that the nature of the international economy is political and follow the process of "who gets what, when and how", this is called politics. For example, the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is seen more as a political move than an economic one. Instead of taking the cheapest, shortest and safest export route through Iran, an expensive route constructed from Azerbaijan to Turkey. The United States wants to have its monopoly over the BTC and enhance its position in the region by bypassing both Russia and Iran.

### The Eastern Route

The eastern routes include Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are richest in energy reserves while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have few fuel deposits. To the east, China shares a large 3700 km border with the Central Asian Republics and it is the main importer of hydrocarbon resources, hence strengthening its presence in the Caspian energy market. Over the past decade, China has successfully accessed to the Caspian states, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan by building pipelines. The **Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline** is built by joint venture between KazMunaiGaz and the China National Petroleum Corporation. This pipeline annually transports about 10 million oil to China and can be doubled in the future. In 2010, both the countries also agreed on to build the second phase of the **Kazakhstan-China Gas Pipeline** and launched its gas supplies to China on 16 October 2017 (Aliyeva, K.:2017). This transit route is also a part of a larger project, **the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline** which connects Central Asia's natural gas reserves with China. This pipeline stretches from Gedaim, on the Uzbekistan/Turkmenistan border and ends at Horgos, in the Xinjiang region of China. In 2010, the pipeline shipped 4.38 billion bcm natural gas to China from the fields in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup>. This project will fulfil China's energy desire. Apart from this, China is also cooperating with Turkmenistan in the energy field. As in April 2006, CNPC signed an agreement with Turkmenistan for supplying natural gas to China for 30 years. Along this, around 30 bcm natural gas will be annual transported from Turkmenistan to China from 2009 (Misiagiewich: 2012:77). Thus we find that the western route through Caspian and Black Sea exports might be prohibited by terminal capacity. A northern route via Russia is restricted by transit quotas whereas southward via Iran is limited by the U.S economic and political sanctions (Tavana, M. et al.:2012: 352). Thus, the eastern route is considered reliable rather than other routes.

### The South-Eastern Route

This route includes Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan which signed a document to construct the Central Asian Oil Pipeline to transport oil to Pakistan and world markets though Afghanistan. But it is unsuccessful project due to instability in Afghanistan. Turkmenistan is the third largest country in the Caspian region in terms of liquid and hydrocarbon. However, due to transportation bottlenecks, it has not been able to properly develop its energy resources. Although Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan have historical and cultural heritage, but increasing influence of terrorism and political instability is threatening the development of route in the region. However, China, the U.S and EU are the major players in the region which support Pakistan as an international trade corridor (Tavana, M. et al.:2012: 352). With the length of 1735 km, **Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI)** is a natural gas pipeline which would start from Galkynysh gas field in Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan into Pakistan, then to India. In December 2015, the construction work of this pipeline in Turkmenistan has started after the agreements among these countries and it would be completed by 2019 (Gidadhubli, R.G:2016). Under this project, India and Pakistan each will receive 1.325 bcf/d (billion cubic feet of gas per day), while Afghanistan will get 0.5 bcf/d gas (Bhutta, Z.:2017).

Another project is **Turkmenistan- China Gas Pipeline** also known as the Central Asia-China gas pipeline,

natural gas pipeline system that is extension of earlier pipeline which was started by the Soviet Union. The original pipeline was laid between 1960-1988 which transported gas from Turkmenistan's Dzharkak field in the Amu Darya basin to Russia via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan<sup>13</sup>. To the expansion of the pipeline, Turkmenistan and China approved a gas export agreement and construction of the pipeline was begun by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in August 2007 which runs from natural gas fields of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Tengiz, Karachaganak and Kashgan) to China<sup>14</sup>. The whole pipeline was inaugurated during China's president Hu Jintao's visit to Turkmenistan with the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Crandall, M. 2011:79).

## CONCLUSION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent states of Caspian states became rich in energy resources. There are three major centres of energy developments such as Kazakhstan's Tengiz oil fields, Azerbaijan's oil fields and Turkmenistan's natural gas fields. These three countries have become a focal point of geopolitical rivalry and pipeline politics, because majority of the pipelines are directly run from these states. Undoubtedly, the pipeline routes for transporting oil and gas from the Caspian region have become a source of competition among the super powers. As the U.S is trying to bypass Russia and Iran, in return Russia, Iran and China are against the involvement of the U.S in the Caspian region. Notwithstanding the Western pipeline routes, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan still largely rely on Russian pipeline network to export their hydrocarbons to western markets. Thus, the whole picture shows that energy resources of the Caspian Sea has become an object of heavy competition among Russia, United States, Turkey, Iran and China. However, there are two burning issues in the Caspian region; the lack of legal status of the Caspian and ethnic conflicts, which can jeopardize the security of the region any time.

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