THE PERILS OF PIPELINES

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Oil pipeline companies are keen to ship Central Asian oil and gas across Afghanistan. But their activities raise several moral problems: should they be trying to bring security; what about the human rights issue; would Afghanistan benefit from the revenues?

To the casual visitor, the Afghan capital Kabul offers an awesome spectacle. The devastation inflicted in recent years on the southern suburbs by Pakistani-backed militia such as the Hezb-i-Islami and the Taliban brings to mind the ruins of Berlin or Cologne in 1945. However, if one wanders the northern suburbs, sooner or later one will come across an exceptionally smart building painted blue and white, an image given its surroundings as it would be a geodesic cottage in the modern Black Forest.

This is the offices of the American energy company British Petroleum, and its presence points to the way in which unlikely political forces in Afghanistan are being wooed by even more unlikely nations as the new Great Game this time a struggle for control of access to the oil and gas resources of Central Asia takes off.

The struggle is in its early stages, not least because the presence of conflict in parts of Afghanistan casts a long shadow over the viability of the country as an energy corridor. Yet the implications for long-term political stability in Afghanistan are profound, and have received far too little attention.

The push for pipelines reflects a confluence of interests in the region. Ruling elites in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Central Asia are all setting means to bolster their positions, and for these states richly endowed with natural resources, the sale offers the prospect of income which may buy the loyalty of local populations, and secure a higher degree of independence from Moscow.

On the other hand, the states of South Asia, and (or Pakistan in particular), a land-based pipeline could offer access to cheap energy to support economic expansion, especially once sanctions imposed on India and Pakistan following their May 1998 nuclear tests began to bite.

And for energy corporations, there is the prospect of significant profits from the provision of technology and expertise which both the buyer and seller states presently lack.

There are also wider interests at work. The USA, as long as it pursues its policy of dual containment, would prefer to see Pakistan's energy needs met by Turkmenistan rather than Iran. With a view to containing Iran, even Washington-based lobby groups such as the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) have shown an unusual degree of interest in the pipeline proposals.

It is thus no surprise that Britain has faced strong competition from a rival consortium of which the key member has been the US corporation UNOCAL, and that US Embassies abroad have promoted UNOCAL's claims. It is tempting to argue that it is in Afghanistan's interest too that a pipeline be built, if only to fend off competition from money years of destructive conflict. But on closer scrutiny, this is not so obviously the case.

EXPLOSIVE ENVIRONMENT

The new Great Game has the ability to produce a number of unforeseen short-term effects in Afghanistan. The most obvious problem in moving oil or gas across Afghanistan is one of security, and it is one for which no solution is in sight.

In March 1998, UNOCAL Vice-President Marty Miller reported that "lenders have said the project at this moment is just not feasible." However, when the Taliban movement seized Kabul in September 1996, another UNOCAL Vice-President termed it a "positive development," and even since, there has been a suspicion amongst modern Afghans that UNOCAL may have turned a blind eye to the Taliban's poor human rights record, and in particular their repressive treatment of educated women, to win their support in providing a secure environment throughout the country for pipeline construction.

This the Taliban would fall to in a good economic productivity. But in the scenario that the Taliban controls Afghanistan, where the state has effectively collapsed, companies may seek to use their considerable resources to bring security at a grassroots level. This creates a real danger of moral hazard; if 'security' is seen by oil companies as something...
Pipeline Patrons

Beyond these short-term considerations, there are two longer-term concerns which also merit attention. The first relates to what one might call an "invisible brain drain". While many young Afghans have acquired significant "technocratic" skills working for UN agencies or NGOs over the last two decades, there is still a tremendous shortage of human capital to rebuild the country.

The second, and which is markedly more troubling, relates to the kind of politics which a flood of remittances might produce. As Barnett R. Rubin has documented very carefully, the Afghan state before the April 1992 communist coup was heavily dependent on foreign aid and income from asset sales to fund its activities. It saw little need to seek or secure popular legitimacy.

The political elite, backed as it was by ethnically segmented hierarchies of intermediaries between the foreign powers providing the resources and the groups receiving the largess of patronage. This contributed significantly to the disasterous events of the last two decades, and is not a model that there is much virtue in trying to recreate. Yet this is exactly what remittances from oil or gas pipelines would offer.

NOT A TRICKLE

To put it bluntly, it is wishful thinking to argue that "reconstruction" would be funded by rents paid to Afghan political actors in exchange for the right to transport oil or gas across the territory. What such rents would do is fund complex patronage networks.

Where ethnic divisions and ideological rifts make it difficult for any single group to secure generalised support in a client commodity, there tends to develop a desperate struggle for access to resources with which partial support can be purchased. This is not a recipe for long-term stability, since loyalties evaporate when payments dry up. The communist ruler President Najibullah discovered this to his cost in 1992, when the loss of Soviet assistance led to the disintegration of his regime in April of that year.

Doubtless some of the funds channelled into patronage networks would trickle down to benefit ordinary Afghans, but there are some deeply vulnerable groups which would have little or no chance of benefiting. Afghan women are one such group. Minorities such as the Hazaras are another.

The long-run consequences of a politics of patronage could be extremely damaging for an already fragmented polity. Regions near the pipeline would do well, while remote regions would stagnate. Dominant ethnic and sectarian elites would flourish in a way which counter-ethnic others would deeply resent. Ironically, the very first victim of such a politics might be the "minorities" which facilitated the construction of the pipelines in the first place, and were thus to happen, the pipelines would not long sustain it.

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