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Pipeline Politics in Afghanistan: The Great Game Returns

Dr. Tughral Yamin[1]

Part I

There are moments in international politics when history does not merely repeat itself—it returns with the same geography, similar ambitions, and sometimes even the same characters, but in different costumes. Afghanistan has just witnessed one of those moments.

On September 7, 2026, Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum signed a $200 million exploration and extraction agreement with Saudi Arabia's Delta International Company for the Kushk–Tirpul hydrocarbon basin in western Afghanistan. Significantly, the ceremony was attended by Zalmay Khalilzad, the former American Special Representative for Afghanistan. The agreement also envisages studying a proposed 700-kilometre gas pipeline from the Herat region to Spin Boldak in Kandahar, described as the "CentGas–Corridor of Prosperity."

The figures are impressive, but the politics are even more significant. Afghanistan occupies a crucial geographical position between the energy-rich republics of Central Asia and the energy-hungry markets of South Asia. To its north lie Turkmenistan and the wider Central Asian region; to its south lie Pakistan and, beyond it, India. The shortest routes connecting these regions inevitably encounter Afghanistan.

That geography has repeatedly made Afghanistan an arena of great-power competition. In the nineteenth century, imperial armies competed for influence there. During the Cold War, it became a battlefield between the United States and the Soviet Union. Today, pipelines, minerals, railways, roads, ports and connectivity are becoming the instruments of a new Great Game.

From Bridas to Unocal and CentGas

The modern pipeline story began in earnest during the 1990s. Argentina's Bridas had already explored the possibility of routing Central Asian gas through Afghanistan, but the American oil giant Unocal eventually assembled an international consortium known as CentGas. Its objective was to transport Central Asian gas through Afghanistan to Pakistan and potentially India.

For Washington, this was far more than a commercial venture. Such a pipeline could reduce the Central Asian republics' dependence on Russian-controlled energy routes while avoiding Iran as an alternative route to the Indian Ocean. The pipeline was therefore potentially an instrument for reshaping the geopolitical map of Eurasia.

Unocal cultivated relations with the Taliban. In December 1997, a Taliban delegation was taken to Texas, shown Unocal facilities and even taken to the NASA Space Centre. The Taliban saw the proposed pipeline as a source of transit revenue, international relevance and perhaps a route out of diplomatic isolation. The Americans wanted a stable Afghanistan through which the pipeline could pass; the company wanted security for its investment. For a brief period, their interests appeared to converge.

The Khalilzad Connection

This is where the present story acquires an extraordinary historical dimension.

Zalmay Khalilzad was already involved in the earlier pipeline saga. In the mid-1990s, while working with Cambridge Energy Research Associates, he conducted risk analysis for Unocal concerning its proposed Afghan pipeline and subsequently attended a reception for the Taliban delegation visiting Texas.

Nearly three decades later, the same Khalilzad was present in Kabul when a Saudi company signed an energy agreement with the Taliban authorities. The coincidence is striking. Khalilzad later served as US ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq and as Washington's Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. His career has repeatedly intersected with Afghanistan's political, diplomatic and economic transformations.

The larger irony nevertheless remains. In the 1980s, Washington supported Afghan fighters against Moscow; in the 1990s, American commercial interests negotiated with the Taliban; after 9/11, the United

[1] Brig (r) Dr. Tughral Yamin is a Senior IPS Associate. He can be reached at tughral@ips.net.pk

States fought the Taliban; and today, Western-linked commercial interests are again examining Afghanistan's resources and strategic geography.

The labels have changed. The geography has not.

Part II

The Ghost of CentGas

The name "CentGas–Corridor of Prosperity" attached to the proposed Herat–Spin Boldak pipeline is particularly revealing. The original CentGas project failed because Afghanistan was too unstable, the Taliban were internationally isolated and financing could not be secured. After the 1998 attacks on US embassies in Africa and the subsequent deterioration of US-Taliban relations, Unocal suspended its involvement.

Yet the underlying idea survived. It eventually re-emerged in another form through the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline.

The lesson is clear: pipeline projects may disappear from headlines, but the strategic logic behind them does not necessarily disappear.

From Transit State to Energy Producer

The new project is potentially different from CentGas. The old vision largely treated Afghanistan as a transit country for Turkmen gas. The current agreement involves exploration of Afghanistan's own hydrocarbons and envisages using Afghan gas for domestic industry and electricity generation.

If commercially viable reserves are discovered, Afghanistan could become both a producer and a transit state. That would substantially increase its geopolitical importance. A country through which energy merely passes collects transit fees; a country controlling significant energy resources possesses something much more powerful.

Why Pakistan Matters

For Pakistan, the implications are considerable. The proposed pipeline would terminate near Spin

Boldak, directly linking Afghanistan's emerging energy corridor with Pakistan's western frontier. If Afghanistan becomes a significant gas producer, Pakistan could potentially become one of its principal markets.

This could create an economic relationship capable of complementing political and security diplomacy. But there is a major caveat: pipelines require security. A pipeline is fixed and vulnerable infrastructure. Its viability depends on uninterrupted flows, predictable regulation, insurance, financing and long-term political stability.

The deterioration in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations therefore presents a paradox. Pakistan could benefit enormously from Afghanistan becoming an energy bridge, but the success of that bridge will partly depend upon stable relations between Kabul and Islamabad.

Part III

Saudi Arabia Enters the Great Game

Saudi participation adds another layer to the equation. The original pipeline competition involved American, Argentine, Russian, Central Asian and regional interests. The new project brings Saudi capital into Afghanistan.

Riyadh has increasingly sought to diversify its economic and geopolitical partnerships. A Saudi energy company operating in Afghanistan creates a new channel between Kabul and Riyadh and potentially links Afghan energy resources with South Asian markets through Pakistan, a country with which Saudi Arabia maintains close strategic relations.

The pipeline could therefore eventually become part of a broader Saudi-Afghan-Pakistani economic relationship rather than simply a commercial project.

Russia and China Will Be Watching

Russia will understand the strategic implications. Moscow has recognized the Taliban government and is seeking greater influence in Central and South Asia. Energy corridors carrying Central Asian or Afghan gas southward could potentially weaken Russia's traditional influence over Central Asian energy routes.

China, meanwhile, has major interests in Afghanistan's minerals, connectivity and security. Beijing is unlikely to regard a major Saudi-linked energy initiative simply as a commercial undertaking.

The competition is therefore no longer only about oil and gas. It is about who will shape the economic geography of Central and South Asia.

The New Great Game

The old Great Game was fought over territory. The Cold War struggle in Afghanistan was fought over ideology and strategic influence. The twenty-first-century competition is increasingly about connectivity—pipelines, railways, roads, ports, minerals, electricity and digital infrastructure.

The power to determine which country connects to which market may ultimately become as important as the power to control territory.

Afghanistan sits at the center of this contest.

Yet it would be premature to celebrate a new Afghan energy revolution. The $200 million exploration agreement is real, but the proposed 700-kilometre pipeline remains at the study stage. Larger investment figures represent potential rather than committed capital. Development will depend upon successful exploration, proven reserves, technical and economic feasibility, financing, regulatory approvals and, above all, security.

Afghanistan has seen grand infrastructure visions before. Many ended as maps, feasibility studies and diplomatic announcements. The real test will come when drilling begins, financing must be raised and the first kilometer of pipeline has to be protected.

There is an almost poetic symmetry to the story. In the 1980s, America supported Afghan fighters because Afghanistan was the battlefield against the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, American corporate interests saw Afghanistan as the missing link in an energy corridor. After 9/11, Afghanistan became the battlefield of America's longest war. Today, despite diplomatic isolation, Afghanistan is once again being courted because of its resources and geography.

The actors have changed. The ideologies have changed. The companies have changed, but the map has not.

Afghanistan remains poor, politically troubled and strategically contested, yet it possesses something that great powers, regional powers and multinational corporations cannot ignore: geography.

The pipeline politics of Afghanistan are, therefore, not returning. Actually, they never left. The pipes simply had to wait for the geopolitics to catch up with them.