



PAKISTAN-TURKMENISTAN: MOVING AHEAD WITH BILATERAL RELATIONS

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Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Chairman of Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan, Rashid Meredov visited Islamabad on January 15-16, 2018, at the invitation of Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Khawaja Muhammad Asif to attend the inaugural session of Pakistan-Turkmenistan Bilateral Political Consultations. The visit of by the Turkmen Foreign Minister reinforced Pakistan's endeavours to deepen its engagement and economic partnership with Turkmenistan.

Pakistan and Turkmenistan enjoy close, cordial relations marked by trust and understanding. These ties are characterized by mutual respect, shared perceptions and common desire to promote peace, stability and development in the region. The two countries also cooperate closely in regional and multilateral forums.

The Turkmen foreign minister was accompanied by a high-level delegation comprising Minister of Energy, State Minister and Chairman of Turkmen Gas, Chairman and CEO of Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline Company, as well as experts and senior officials from other sectors including information technology and tourism. Both sides discussed the developments on TAPI and agreed to work together to make the project successful. Acknowledging the importance of early implementation of the TAPI gas pipeline project, Pakistan also agreed to set up a working commission to coordinate the implementation of the project.

On the other hand, Afghanistan's Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Resources announced that Afghanistan will start working on TAPI in February 2018. According to the ministry, all impediments relating to the law and order situation have been sorted out.

The TAPI natural gas pipeline project aims to export up to 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas per year through a proposed approximately 1,800-kilometer pipeline from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Under the project, Pakistan and India will be provided 1.325 billion cubic feet per day (bcfd) gas each, and Afghanistan will be getting a share of 0.5 bcfd gas under this mega project. The Asian Development Bank is acting as facilitator and coordinator for the project. Turkmen Gas being the consortium leader for TAPI project is to contribute up to 85 per cent of equity, and the rest of TAPI members namely Afghanistan, Pakistan and India would make 5 per cent each equity share in the project company. The gas will be imported to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India from the Galkynysh and adjacent gas fields in Turkmenistan.

Rashid Meredov also called on Prime Minister of Pakistan Mr. Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, who once again reaffirmed Pakistan's interest in early completion of energy projects with Turkmenistan. The Prime Minister also appreciated the progress made on the TAPI project. The Turkmenistan Foreign Minister informed the Prime Minister about the progress and current status of TAPI gas pipeline and other energy projects including proposals for electricity transmission line and fiber optic connectivity. Mr. Meredov has also invited Pakistani companies to participate in the tenders floated by Turkmenistan for TAPI project.

During the visit, the Minister for Commerce and Textile Mohammad Pervaiz Malik and Turkmenistan Minister for Commerce led their respective sides to the inaugural session of Pakistan-Turkmenistan Bilateral Political Consultations (BPC). Both the ministers expressed satisfaction on the current level of bilateral relationship between the two countries and agreed that both the sides need to make efforts to further enhance economic relations through joint ventures in agriculture, textile, livestock and IT sector. Discussions also focused on measures for enhanced connectivity including air and land linkages to promote trade, travel, tourism and people-to-people contacts.

Both sides also reviewed implementation of decisions of the Joint Governmental Commission (JGC) held in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan on August 17-18, 2017 regarding the issues related to TAPI gas pipeline project, enhancing the volume of trade and establishment of direct air contact between Pakistan-Turkmenistan.

Minister Meredov also made a courtesy call on the President of Pakistan and conveyed the greetings from the leadership of Turkmenistan. The Turkmen foreign minister also extended an invitation from

the President of Turkmenistan to visit Turkmenistan for the link-up ceremony of TAPI being planned in 2018.

The visit was another step in further enhancing Pakistan's relations with Central Asian Republics (CARs). However, there is an urgent need to step up and exchange parliamentary and other governmental and non-governmental delegations frequently in order to enhance broader people-to-people contacts. Given the historical ties and geographic proximity, not to mention the strategic and economic potential of CARs for Pakistan, it is essential that foreign policy makers firmly incorporate countries such as Turkmenistan in their vision for Pakistan's future development on multiple fronts. TAPI can play an important role in this regard, as it will serve to further diversify Pakistan's energy outlets from Central Asia and connect it strongly through significant project such as TAPI and CASA 1000. It can also play a role in mitigating hostilities between India and Pakistan since the TAPI pipeline will connect the two countries, ensuring mutual economic dependence and thus open new avenues for cooperation. Indian involvement in Balochistan will also likely be diminished as a result. Overall as well, given the economic and political conditions facing Pakistan, it is only practical that Pakistan seeks partners in the non-western world. CARs offer an immediate and suitable potential partner in this regard.