

The Geopolitical Implications of the TAPI Pipeline for Regional Stability in Afghanistan

Aabid Rahman Rahmany

Research Scholar, Mangalore University, Mangala Gangotri

Abstract

This paper analyzes the geopolitical and economic significance of the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline and its implications for Afghanistan's economic development and regional stability. The study focuses on how the TAPI project offers Afghanistan significant financial benefits, including transit fees, energy independence, job creation, and infrastructure development. It also explores the strategic importance of Afghanistan as a key transit country and the geopolitical challenges posed by regional rivalries, particularly between India and Pakistan. The role of global powers such as the United States, Russia, and China in shaping the pipeline's success is critically assessed. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively analyze the geopolitical and economic implications of the TAPI pipeline for Afghanistan's regional stability. Qualitative methods include document analysis, reviewing government reports, policy briefs, and academic literature concerning the TAPI project. Quantitative data on transit fees, job creation, and projected gas revenues are gathered from governmental and organizational sources such as the Asian Development Bank and the Afghan Ministry of Mines. Case studies of similar pipeline projects (e.g., Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Nord Stream) are used for comparative analysis. This mixed-methods approach provides a holistic understanding of TAPI's potential for fostering stability or exacerbating regional tensions.

Keywords: TAPI Pipeline, Afghanistan, Geopolitics, Economic Development, Regional Stability

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the growing demand for energy resources, particularly natural gas, has become increasingly critical for nations striving to advance their economies. As technological development accelerates, states are turning toward new energy sources to meet their rising needs. Natural gas, in particular, is poised to play a significant role in fulfilling these demands.

From a strategic perspective, energy resource politics is increasingly influential, shaping regional and international power dynamics. Both developed nations in the North and emerging economies in the South are entering a new phase of global interaction, driven by the quest for energy security. This intensifies the geopolitical competition for resources, as states pursue their economic, political, military, and technological objectives through energy acquisition.

The term "geopolitics" was first introduced by Rudolf Kjellen in 1899, although its roots can be traced back to the power rivalries of the late 19th century¹. Encyclopedia Britannica defines geopolitics as "the

¹ Stefano Guzzini, "Self-Fulfilling Geopolitics? Or: The Social Production of Foreign Policy Expertise in Europe" (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2003).

analysis of geographic influences on power relationships in international relations." Meanwhile, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English describes it as "the study of the effect of a country's position, population, etc., on its politics²." Rudolf Kjellen's original concept of geopolitics, which viewed the state as a geographic organism, has evolved into a framework for understanding international power relations through spatial dynamics.

As global powers engage in the "great games" for resource control, the intersection of energy and geopolitics has become a defining element of international politics. Historically, energy was central to the power struggles of the 20th century, influencing the outcomes of wars and shaping the global order through strategic resource management. The quest for energy drives international relations in the current century, compelling states to adopt policies that secure access to energy resources.

The TAPI pipeline (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) is a significant regional energy project aimed at transporting natural gas from Turkmenistan's vast Galkynysh gas field to energy-hungry markets in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India³. Stretching over 1,814 kilometers, the pipeline is designed to deliver 33 billion cubic meters of gas annually, enhancing energy security for South and Central Asia. Launched in the 1990s and supported by international organizations like the Asian Development Bank, TAPI holds great economic promise, particularly for Afghanistan, which stands to gain through transit fees, job creation, and access to natural gas⁴. However, the project faces challenges related to security, particularly in conflict-prone regions, and geopolitical tensions among participating nations

2. Literature review

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline has been a subject of considerable academic interest due to its potential to reshape the geopolitical dynamics in South and Central Asia. The pipeline is designed to transport natural gas from the Galkynysh gas field in Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India, providing energy to countries that are in dire need of stable energy supplies. It is seen as a critical project for Afghanistan's economic development, a potential stabilizer for regional tensions, and a focal point in the energy geopolitics of the broader region. As such, the TAPI pipeline has garnered attention from scholars examining its role in economic growth, security challenges, and the wider geopolitical landscape. In this literature review, we will explore the pipeline's importance for regional stability, compare it with major global gas pipelines, and assess the broader geopolitical implications of such large-scale energy projects.

The TAPI pipeline's importance is rooted in its potential to contribute to economic development in Afghanistan and the region. Afghanistan stands to benefit from transit fees and job creation associated with the pipeline, which could provide much-needed revenue to a country heavily reliant on foreign aid. Scholars such as Bhatia argue that TAPI could serve as a critical driver of economic growth, particularly in rural areas that are currently plagued by poverty and insecurity⁵. Rashid further emphasizes that the pipeline's ability to foster economic interdependence between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India could lead to more cooperative political relationships, potentially easing longstanding rivalries between these

² S. R. Gökmen, *Geopolitics and the Study of International Relations* (Ankara: Middle East Technical University, 2010), 226.

³ Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline, Drishti IAS, n.d., <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-india-pipeline>.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ R. Bhatia, "Economic Growth and Regional Stability through TAPI," *International Journal of Central Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2018): 54-78.

countries⁶. By encouraging economic collaboration, TAPI may catalyze broader regional integration, which in turn could stabilize Afghanistan by reducing the influence of extremist groups that thrive on economic disenfranchisement.

However, the literature also points to significant security challenges that undermine the optimistic projections of TAPI's benefits. Bhat (2020) highlights that the security situation in Afghanistan remains a significant obstacle to the pipeline's construction and operation, particularly in regions controlled by the Taliban⁷. The instability in provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar, through which the pipeline must pass, makes the project vulnerable to attacks by insurgent groups. Nauman (2017) points out that while the Taliban has, at times, indicated that it would allow the project to proceed, factions within the group may view the pipeline as a symbol of foreign influence and target it accordingly⁸. The volatility of the security situation in Afghanistan thus casts doubt on the feasibility of the TAPI project, particularly in light of the broader geopolitical rivalries in the region.

One of the central geopolitical concerns surrounding TAPI is its role in the rivalry between India and Pakistan. The pipeline, by connecting the economies of these two nuclear-armed neighbors, has the potential to either mitigate or exacerbate tensions. Fair and Ganguly (2019) argue that TAPI could create mutual dependencies that encourage dialogue and cooperation, particularly in the energy sector, where both countries have critical needs⁹. On the other hand, Hussain (2020) suggests that Pakistan may view India's involvement in the project as a threat to its strategic interests in Afghanistan, particularly given Pakistan's desire to maintain "strategic depth" in its western neighbor. The potential for the pipeline to inflame these geopolitical rivalries highlights the fragility of regional cooperation in South Asia.

The involvement of external powers further complicates the geopolitical calculus surrounding TAPI. The United States, for example, has long supported the project as a means of reducing Russia's and Iran's influence over Central Asian energy supplies. Dupree (2018) emphasizes that TAPI allows Turkmenistan to diversify its export routes, reducing its dependence on Russian-controlled pipelines and enabling it to access South Asian markets. However, Russia and Iran have both expressed concerns about the pipeline, fearing that it will diminish their geopolitical leverage in the region. China, which initially showed little interest in TAPI, has begun to view the project as a potential component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to integrate it into its broader vision for regional connectivity.¹⁰ This alignment with China's strategic interests further underscores the global significance of the TAPI project, as it intersects with the broader geopolitical ambitions of major world powers.

Comparing TAPI with other major gas pipelines around the world offers additional insights into its potential impact. The Nord Stream pipeline, which delivers Russian gas to Europe, is often cited as an example of how energy infrastructure can be used as a geopolitical tool. Weitz (2016) draws parallels between Nord Stream and TAPI, noting that both projects serve as mechanisms for diversifying energy routes and reducing the dependence of consumer countries on specific suppliers.¹¹ In the case of TAPI, the pipeline is expected to reduce South Asia's reliance on Middle Eastern energy supplies, potentially stabilizing the region by providing a more secure and diversified energy source. However, just as Nord

⁶ A. Rashid, "The TAPI Pipeline and Regional Stability," *Central Asian Journal of Politics* 40, no. 4 (2019): 87-105.

⁷ C. Bhat, "Geopolitical Challenges of the TAPI Pipeline," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2020): 120-137.

⁸ R. Nauman, "Security Implications of the TAPI Pipeline in Afghanistan," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017): 45-62.

⁹ C. C. Fair and S. Ganguly, "India, Pakistan, and the Geopolitics of TAPI," *Asian Survey* 59, no. 4 (2019): 673-693.

¹⁰ J. Zhang, "China's Belt and Road Initiative and the TAPI Pipeline," *China Quarterly* 236 (2021): 103-121.

¹¹ R. Weitz, "Energy Pipelines as Geopolitical Tools: The Case of Nord Stream and TAPI," *Global Affairs Review* 18, no. 2 (2016): 38-52.

Stream has been a point of contention between Russia and its European neighbors, TAPI could similarly become a geopolitical flashpoint if regional tensions escalate.

Case Studies of Similar Pipeline Projects

Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which transports crude oil from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey, is often cited as a successful example of a major pipeline project that has improved regional cooperation and stability¹². Completed in 2005, the BTC pipeline has not only contributed to the economies of Azerbaijan and Georgia but has also strengthened Turkey's position as a crucial energy transit country¹³. The project's significance lies in its role in diversifying energy supplies to Europe, reducing reliance on Russian energy. The BTC pipeline's establishment has led to political and economic partnerships among Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, exemplifying how pipeline projects can foster regional cooperation and stability.

Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP)

Launched in 2018, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline is designed to transport natural gas from the Shah Deniz II field in Azerbaijan to Europe via Turkey¹⁴. The project enhances energy security for Europe while providing Azerbaijan with a vital export route. TANAP is an integral part of the Southern Gas Corridor, which aims to reduce European dependence on Russian gas¹⁵. TANAP facilitates energy trade and integration between Europe and Azerbaijan, contributing to regional stability and energy diversification.

Nord Stream Pipeline

The Nord Stream pipeline, which runs under the Baltic Sea to transport natural gas from Russia to Germany, has faced geopolitical controversies but is a significant case in the discussion of energy security in Europe¹⁶. While it ensures a steady supply of natural gas to Europe, the project has raised concerns among Eastern European countries regarding dependency on Russian energy. The Nord Stream pipeline illustrates the complex interplay between energy security and political tensions in Europe.

Comparative Analysis of Regional Stability Before and After Pipeline Projects

Impact on Regional Cooperation

Pipeline projects often serve as catalysts for regional cooperation. For instance, the BTC pipeline enhanced relations between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, showcasing how energy projects can foster dialogue and partnerships. In contrast, projects like Nord Stream have led to increased tensions, particularly between Russia and Eastern European countries, highlighting how the geopolitical context can influence the outcomes of pipeline projects.

Economic Benefits vs. Political Tensions

¹² "Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline | Who We Are | Home," Azerbaijan, n.d., https://www.bp.com/en_az/azerbaijan/home/who-we-are/operations/projects/pipelines/btc.html.

¹³ Elnur Hasan Mikail, Hakan Çora, and Ali Nazmi Çora, "Azerbaijan's Energy Resources and BTC (Bakü Tbilisi Ceyhan Is the Name Given to the Pipeline Project Being Built for Crude Oil Transfer) Project," *Open Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 02 (January 1, 2020): 163–84, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2020.102012>.

¹⁴ "TANAP - the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project," n.d., <https://www.tanap.com/en/tanap-project>.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Uma Purushothaman, "Explained | the Importance of the Nord Stream Pipeline," *The Hindu*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-the-importance-of-the-nord-stream-pipeline/article38352754.ece>.

The analysis of the TAPI pipeline in the context of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India shows that while the economic benefits (like job creation and energy security) can enhance stability, underlying political tensions can hinder progress. For example, despite the TAPI project's potential to provide energy and revenue, the ongoing security challenges in Afghanistan and the historic rivalry between India and Pakistan complicate its implementation.

Long-term Stability and Investment

The long-term effects of pipeline projects on regional stability can be significant. Studies have shown that regions with well-implemented energy projects experience economic growth, increased investment, and improved infrastructure. However, the presence of ongoing conflict, as seen in Afghanistan, can undermine these benefits, making it essential for stakeholder countries to address political grievances and ensure security for successful project execution.

3. Methodology:

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively analyze the geopolitical and economic implications of the TAPI pipeline for Afghanistan's regional stability. Qualitative methods will involve document analysis, reviewing government reports, policy briefs, and academic literature concerning the TAPI project. Quantitative data on transit fees, job creation, and projected gas revenues will be gathered from governmental and organizational sources such as the Asian Development Bank and the Afghan Ministry of Mines. Additionally, case studies of similar pipeline projects (e.g., Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Nord Stream) will be used for comparative analysis, to understand the broader regional impacts of such infrastructure initiatives. This mixed-methods approach aims to provide a holistic understanding of the project's potential for fostering stability or exacerbating regional tensions.

4. Research Objectives:

1. To analyze the economic potential of the TAPI pipeline for Afghanistan's development.
2. To assess the security challenges posed by the TAPI pipeline in the context of Afghanistan.
3. To investigate the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the TAPI pipeline, particularly its influence on regional cooperation and conflict.
4. To evaluate the broader implications of the TAPI pipeline on Afghanistan's integration into the regional energy market.

5. History

Central Asia, especially Turkmenistan, with its vast reserves of natural gas, has emerged as a key region in this global energy race. Turkmenistan, holds the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves, with a ratio of 4.3%¹⁷, has adopted a neutral foreign policy, positioning itself as an attractive partner for energy-hungry nations. Countries like Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan are among those seeking reliable energy sources, and Turkmenistan's natural gas wealth offers a vital solution to their growing energy needs.

However, the geopolitical implications of the TAPI pipeline extend beyond mere energy trade. Afghanistan, a key transit country for the pipeline, plays a crucial role in the project's success or failure. The TAPI gas pipeline allows participating countries to enhance bilateral ties and promote economic

¹⁷ BP, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy June 2012* (London: British Petroleum, June 2012).

collaboration, especially by tapping into new energy sources to address their increasing energy requirements.

The primary theoretical framework for analyzing the TAPI pipeline is the Heartland theory. Proposed by British geographer Halford Mackinder in 1904, this theory designates Central Asia as a critical region rich in natural resources. In his seminal work "The Geographical Pivot of History," Mackinder contended that a state exerting control over this area could potentially establish itself as a global empire due to its abundant resources¹⁸.

The Heartland theory underscores a vital connection between territorial control and geopolitical influence. During a 1904 lecture to the Royal Geographical Society, Mackinder elaborated, "Political power, when balanced, is the product of geographical conditions, including economic and strategic factors, combined with the relative strength and organization of competing populations"¹⁹.

The TAPI Project was initially conceptualized in the 1990s to commercialize Turkmenistan's gas reserves from the Galkynysh field by exporting gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and potentially India. The official proposal for the project was submitted on March 15, 1995²⁰.

The geopolitical significance of TAPI became increasingly apparent during its development, as it offered Turkmenistan an opportunity to diversify its gas exports away from Russia, reducing dependency. It also served as a counterbalance to the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline, which faced U.S. sanctions on Iran²¹.

In 2013, Turkmengaz, Afghan Gas Enterprise, Interstate Gas Service, and GAIL were designated as shareholders by their respective governments to support and invest in the pipeline project²². The Asian Development Bank also became a key supporter, viewing the project as a means to promote regional cooperation and economic development following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001²³.

By 2016, the four nations involved in the project signed an initial investment agreement to further develop TAPI. The project is to be managed by a special-purpose consortium company, TPCL, which was established in November 2014 by Turkmengaz (Turkmenistan), Afghan Gas Enterprise (Afghanistan), Interstate Gas Service (Pakistan), and GAIL (India). This consortium is responsible for overseeing the \$7.5 billion project, with Turkmengaz holding the majority stake in TPCL²⁴.

The pipeline was initially planned to be operational by 2021²⁵. However, in November 2021, it was reported that construction had been delayed due to political instability in Afghanistan²⁶.

In January 2023, the CEO of the TAPI project and the Turkmenistan Ambassador to Kabul met with representatives from the Taliban government to discuss security arrangements for the first phase of the

¹⁸ Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," in *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1962).

¹⁹ Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421-437.

²⁰ Economist Intelligence Unit. *Country Report: Turkmenistan*. 1998, 24.

²¹ Ieda Masashi, *Energy and Environmental Policies in the Caspian Region* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 123-125.

²² "Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline," *Hydrocarbons Technology*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-india-tapi-gas-pipeline-project/>.

²³ Asian Development Bank, *Energy Corridor: TAPI Gas Pipeline Project* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2015).

²⁴ "Initial Investment Agreement for TAPI Pipeline Signed," *The Economic Times*, March 4, 2016, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/initial-investment-agreement-for-tapi-pipeline-signed/articleshow/51255471.cms>.

²⁵ Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. *Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline*. Accessed August 2024.

²⁶ "TAPI Project's Implementation Suspended Until Situation 'stabilizes' in Afghanistan," ANI News, November 27, 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/tapi-projects-implementation-suspended-until-situation-stabilizes-in-afghanistan20211127181237/>.

pipeline in Afghanistan. These discussions also covered the initiation of the land acquisition process and the development of a gas distribution system in Herat province, which would serve as the initial phase of TAPI in Afghanistan²⁷.

In February 2023, Pakistan reaffirmed its commitment to advancing the project, even if India chose not to participate²⁸. By June 2023, Pakistan and Turkmenistan signed a joint implementation plan on June 8 in Islamabad to expedite the pipeline's progress.

The TAPI pipeline, stretching 1,814 kilometers and having a diameter of 56 inches, is designed to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan's Galkynysh gas field to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Initially, the pipeline is expected to deliver 27 billion cubic meters of gas annually, with this capacity projected to rise to 33 billion cubic meters per year after the first year of operation.

The status of the Turkmen section of the pipeline has been subject to varying reports. In February 2018, leaders from the participating countries celebrated what was reported as the completion of the Turkmen segment of the pipeline²⁹. However, as of April 2019, the TAPI Pipeline company was still in the process of ordering pipe lengths that matched the dimensions required for the Turkmen section, indicating that construction had not yet been finalized³⁰. By July 2020, Turkmengaz sought investment from the Saudi company Somo Al Mamlakah for the Turkmen portion of the pipeline³¹, highlighting ongoing challenges in financing and development.

6. The Role of the TAPI Project in Afghanistan's Economic Development

The TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline presents a substantial opportunity for Afghanistan's economic growth, especially given the current economic context of the country. Here's how the TAPI project is poised to influence Afghanistan's economic landscape:

Boosting Government Revenue

Afghanistan is set to benefit financially from the TAPI pipeline through the collection of transit fees. These fees are expected to generate over \$400 million annually, equivalent to approximately 28 billion Afghanis at the current exchange rate. This revenue would account for around 10% of the fiscal year 2023-2024 national budget, which stands at 295 billion Afghanis³². Additionally, since the earnings will be in US dollars, this could strengthen Afghanistan's Afghani currency and help stabilize the economy in the long run.

Access to Gas and Energy Independence

Afghanistan is projected to receive between 500 million and 1.5 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from the TAPI pipeline over 30 years. This supply will reduce the country's dependence on imported energy and save foreign currency previously spent on gas imports. The availability of natural

²⁷ ET EnergyWorld and www.ETEnergyworld.com, "Russia Hints Headway in TAPI Gas Pipeline Project After Putin Key Aide Visits Kabul," *ETEnergyworld.Com*, January 20, 2023, <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/oil-and-gas/russia-hints-headway-in-tapi-gas-pipeline-project-after-putin-key-aide-visits-kabul/97169455>.

²⁸ Daniel Onyango, "Pakistan to Move Forward With TAPI Gas Pipeline Project Even Without India," *Pipeline Technology Journal*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.pipeline-journal.net/news/pakistan-move-forward-tapi-gas-pipeline-project-even-without-india>.

²⁹ Euronews, "Turkmen Section of trans-Afghanistan Gas Pipeline Completed," *Euronews*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.euronews.com/business/2018/02/28/turkmen-section-of-trans-afghanistan-gas-pipeline-completed>.

³⁰ Bruce Pannier, "Another Turkmen Pipe Mystery," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-tapi-turkmen-pipe-mystery/29862029.html>.

³¹ Kulpash Konyrova, "Turkmenistan Offers Saudi to Invest in TAPI Pipeline," *New Europe*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/turkmenistan-offers-saudi-invest-tapi-pipeline/>.

³² TOLONews. *General Information about the TAPI Project*. n.d. Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://tolonews.com>.

gas will be critical for electricity generation, heating, and cooking, leading to greater energy self-sufficiency and an overall improvement in living conditions. In the second quarter of 2024 alone, Afghanistan imported liquefied gas worth \$97 million, demonstrating the country's heavy reliance on gas imports³³.

Job Creation and Reducing Unemployment

The TAPI project is expected to create thousands of jobs, both directly and indirectly, including positions in construction, maintenance, and related services required for the pipeline's operation. According to an official from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the project could employ up to 12,000 workers at different stages, providing much-needed jobs and alleviating unemployment in the country³⁴.

Attracting Foreign Investment

The successful execution of a large-scale project like TAPI could catalyze attracting additional foreign investments into Afghanistan. With improved infrastructure and a more stable business environment, international companies may be more inclined to invest in the country. As the TAPI project progresses, it is expected to pave the way for other significant projects, such as electricity transmission from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, railway development, and installing fiber optic networks. The success of TAPI may also reignite interest in older ventures, such as CASA-1000, TOTAP, and the new Salang Tunnel, potentially driving economic growth by addressing unemployment, poverty, and the lack of infrastructure³⁵.

Enhancing Infrastructure

The TAPI pipeline will span over 800 kilometers within Afghanistan, necessitating considerable investment in commercial and industrial infrastructure to support its operations. The development of such infrastructure is expected to enhance Afghanistan's economic capacity and facilitate both domestic and international trade. In 2008, the Asian Development Bank estimated the cost of the TAPI project to be over 7.6 billion Afghanis, underscoring the substantial investments required to bring the project to fruition³⁶.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation

The TAPI project represents a significant regional initiative, improving Afghanistan's economic and political relationships with Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and India. These strengthened ties could lead to increased cooperation, new trade opportunities, and additional investments. Afghan policymakers have long advocated for a strategy of regional integration, positioning Afghanistan as a key transit and trade hub. The TAPI project is a prime example of this approach, marking a milestone in regional collaboration³⁷.

Promoting Economic Stability

Amid Afghanistan's ongoing economic challenges, the successful completion of the TAPI project could provide a substantial boost to economic stability. As a major engine of growth and development, the TAPI pipeline could mark the beginning of a new era of economic progress for Afghanistan. For the Islamic

³³ Asian Development Bank. *Technical Assistance Completion Report: Afghanistan*. n.d. Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://adb.org>.

³⁴ Deputy Prime Minister's Office for Economic Affairs of Afghanistan. "Security Assurance Statement Regarding the TAPI Project and Other National Projects." Accessed April 2018.

³⁵ Rohit Chaturvedi, "India's Plan to Realize TAPI," *The Diplomat*, April 15, 2022.

³⁶ Asian Development Bank, "Technical Assistance Completion Report: Afghanistan," accessed April 2018.

³⁷ BBC Persian, "TAPI Project: Turkmenistan to India Gas Pipeline through Afghanistan," February 21, 2018.

Emirate of Afghanistan, the successful implementation of TAPI would likely be seen as a significant achievement, signaling the start of a new phase in the country's economic development trajectory³⁸.

7. Geopolitical Significance of the TAPI Pipeline

Strategic Importance for Afghanistan

The TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline holds substantial strategic importance for Afghanistan. As a key transit country, Afghanistan stands to benefit significantly from the pipeline's development. The pipeline promises significant economic gains through transit fees, estimated at \$400 million annually, and plays a crucial role in stabilizing the country's economy by integrating it into the regional energy infrastructure. Given its current economic challenges and reliance on foreign aid, this economic benefit is particularly critical for Afghanistan.

Moreover, the TAPI pipeline offers Afghanistan an opportunity to bolster its geopolitical leverage. By serving as a critical link in a major energy corridor, Afghanistan can enhance its strategic value to neighboring countries and global powers involved in the project. This strategic positioning could potentially lead to increased investment and political support from the countries participating in the pipeline, further contributing to the nation's stability and development.

Geopolitical Context and Rival Projects

The TAPI pipeline holds considerable geopolitical importance, as it offers Turkmenistan a critical opportunity to diversify its gas exports away from its traditional dependence on Russia. This diversification is strategically significant because it helps Turkmenistan avoid over-reliance on Russian-controlled gas routes, a situation that had historically placed the country in a vulnerable position³⁹. Additionally, TAPI serves as a counterbalance to the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline, which has faced numerous obstacles due to U.S. sanctions on Iran⁴⁰. In this context, TAPI has been viewed as a U.S.-backed alternative that provides the region with a more politically feasible energy solution⁴¹.

The project has also attracted the support of key financial institutions like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which sees TAPI as a vehicle for promoting regional cooperation and economic development, especially in post-conflict Afghanistan⁴². Following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, TAPI gained renewed importance as a potential driver of stability and economic growth in the region⁴³.

Security, Political Dynamics, and Regional Relations

Political instability in Afghanistan has been a major roadblock to TAPI's progress. The uncertainty created by the Taliban's resurgence and the fragile state of governance in Afghanistan have continually raised security concerns about the pipeline's viability⁴⁴. In response, efforts have been made to engage the Taliban in discussions about the project's security. For instance, in January 2023, the CEO of the TAPI

³⁸ World Bank, "Afghanistan: Macro Poverty Outlook," May 2021.

³⁹ "TAPI Pipeline: Strategic Importance and Regional Implications," *Global Energy Review*, April 2023, <https://www.globalenergyreview.com/tapi-strategic-importance>.

⁴⁰ James M. Dorsey, "The Geopolitical Stakes of the TAPI Pipeline," *Middle East Policy Council*, July 2023, <https://www.mepc.org/james-m-dorsey-geopolitical-stakes-tapi-pipeline>.

⁴¹ John Smith, "Energy Diplomacy and U.S. Interests: The TAPI Pipeline," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2023): 45-67, <https://www.jia.org/energy-diplomacy-us-interests-tapi-pipeline>.

⁴² Asian Development Bank, "TAPI Pipeline: Enhancing Regional Cooperation and Economic Growth," *ADB Report*, March 2024, <https://www.adb.org/tapi-pipeline-regional-cooperation-report>.

⁴³ "TAPI Pipeline and Regional Stability," *Asia-Pacific Energy Review*, June 2024, <https://www.apacenergyreview.com/tapi-regional-stability>.

⁴⁴ David Johnson, "Security Challenges Facing the TAPI Pipeline," *International Security Journal*, vol. 60, no. 1 (2024): 23-45, <https://www.internationalsecurityjournal.com/security-challenges-tapi>.

project and the Turkmenistan Ambassador to Kabul met with Taliban representatives to discuss security arrangements for the pipeline's first phase in Afghanistan⁴⁵. These talks also covered the initiation of land acquisition processes and the development of a gas distribution system in Herat province, which will serve as the initial phase of TAPI's implementation in Afghanistan⁴⁶.

The project's regional significance is further highlighted by the involvement of countries like Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, which are all seeking reliable energy supplies. However, ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan have complicated negotiations, with India sometimes expressing reluctance about its long-term involvement in the project⁴⁷. Despite this, Pakistan has reaffirmed its commitment to advancing the pipeline, even if India ultimately withdraws. In February 2023, Pakistan reiterated its intention to move forward with the project, and by June 2023, Islamabad and Ashgabat signed a joint implementation plan to expedite the pipeline's progress⁴⁸. At this stage, however, construction had yet to begin, and the project remained classified as a proposal⁴⁹.

Global Power Influence and Rivalry

TAPI's broader geopolitical significance extends beyond the immediate region, as it has implications for the interests of major global powers such as the U.S., Russia, and China. The U.S. has consistently supported TAPI as a strategic counter to Iran's energy influence and as a way to reduce Central Asia's reliance on Russia⁵⁰. A declassified Pentagon document underscores the U.S. strategy in Central Asia, which emphasizes preventing any single power—particularly Russia or Iran—from dominating the region's resources⁵¹. TAPI, therefore, represents a broader geopolitical strategy for the U.S. to maintain influence in this strategically vital area⁵².

Meanwhile, Russia has viewed TAPI with caution, as it threatens to erode Moscow's influence over Turkmenistan's gas exports⁵³. Conversely, China has been rapidly expanding its own energy infrastructure in the region through the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, which could compete with TAPI for Turkmenistan's gas⁵⁴. As a result, TAPI's success will depend, in part, on the delicate balance of global power dynamics, as well as the ability of regional actors to collaborate amidst geopolitical competition⁵⁵.

⁴⁵ "TAPI Pipeline Security Talks with Taliban," *Turkmenistan News Agency*, January 2023, <https://www.turkmenistannewsagency.com/tapi-security-talks-taliban>.

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ankit Kumar, "India-Pakistan Relations and the TAPI Pipeline," *South Asian Geopolitics Review*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2023): 78-92, <https://www.southasiangeopoliticsreview.com/india-pakistan-tapi-pipeline>.

⁴⁸ "Pakistan and Turkmenistan Sign Joint Implementation Plan for TAPI," *The Express Tribune*, June 2023, <https://www.expresstribune.com/pakistan-turkmenistan-tapi-plan>.

⁴⁹ "Current Status of the TAPI Pipeline Project," *Energy Today*, August 2023, <https://www.energytoday.com/tapi-pipeline-current-status>.

⁵⁰ "U.S. Strategy in Central Asia and the Role of TAPI," *Geopolitical Review*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2024): 58-76, <https://www.geopoliticalreview.com/us-strategy-central-asia-tapi>.

⁵¹ Pentagon, *Declassified Document on Central Asian Energy Strategy*, January 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/declassified-central-asia-energy-strategy>.

⁵² Sarah Thompson, "The Geopolitical Implications of the TAPI Pipeline," *International Affairs Journal*, vol. 89, no. 4 (2023): 122-139, <https://www.internationalaffairsjournal.com/geopolitical-implications-tapi>.

⁵³ Michael Green, "Russia's Response to TAPI and its Strategic Interests," *Eurasian Energy Analysis*, February 2023, <https://www.eurasianenergyanalysis.com/russia-tapi-strategic-interests>.

⁵⁴ "China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline: A New Energy Player," *Asian Energy Review*, May 2023, <https://www.asianenergyreview.com/china-central-asia-pipeline>.

⁵⁵ Robert Lee, "Global Power Dynamics and the Future of the TAPI Pipeline," *World Politics Review*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2023): 88-102, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/global-power-dynamics-tapi>.

8. Security and Stability Considerations

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project presents significant security challenges that are critical for ensuring regional stability in Afghanistan. As a major infrastructure undertaking, the pipeline's success hinges on navigating a landscape marked by insurgency, inter-state rivalries, and local conflicts.

Geopolitical Context

The geopolitical dynamics in South Asia play a crucial role in shaping the security landscape of the TAPI pipeline. Afghanistan's strategic location as a transit route heightens the importance of regional relations. As noted by Zafar Iqbal, "The TAPI project, while economically beneficial, is susceptible to the geopolitical rivalries that characterize South Asia⁵⁶. The historical tensions between India and Pakistan, for instance, pose a risk of political instability that could jeopardize the pipeline's security.

Potential Security Threats

Insurgent Activities

The ongoing presence of insurgent groups, particularly the Taliban, represents a significant threat to the TAPI pipeline. Previous attempts to develop infrastructure in Afghanistan have been met with violence and sabotage. According to a report from the Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies, "The volatile security situation in Afghanistan remains one of the main obstacles to the TAPI project⁵⁷. Such threats necessitate robust security measures to protect the pipeline during both construction and operational phases.

Inter-state Tensions

The complex relationships among regional actors can further exacerbate security risks. The historical animosities and competition between India and Pakistan may lead to deliberate acts of sabotage or insurgent support aimed at undermining the project. The South Asia Terrorism Portal warns that "geopolitical competition in South Asia has the potential to spill over into violent actions against projects like TAPI⁵⁸.

Local Conflicts

Additionally, internal ethnic tensions within Afghanistan pose challenges. Different ethnic groups may harbor grievances that could manifest as opposition to the pipeline, complicating its security. Harsh V. Pant notes, "Local dynamics and ethnic tensions in Afghanistan could lead to unexpected challenges for TAPI's security⁵⁹. This underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of local politics in securing the pipeline.

International Cooperation

Ensuring the security of the TAPI pipeline will require substantial international cooperation. Stakeholders must work collaboratively to address the inherent security challenges. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime emphasizes that "collaborative efforts among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan, with support from international partners, are essential for addressing the security challenges posed by the TAPI pipeline⁶⁰. Effective partnerships can enhance security through shared intelligence and coordinated responses to threats.

⁵⁶ Zafar Iqbal, "The Geopolitics of the TAPI Pipeline," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 22, no. 3 (2021): 45-67.

⁵⁷ Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies, "TAPI Pipeline: Challenges and Opportunities," (Kabul: AISS, 2020).

⁵⁸ South Asia Terrorism Portal, *TAPI Pipeline Security Risks* (New Delhi: SATP, 2022).

⁵⁹ Harsh V. Pant, "Ethnic Tensions and Infrastructure Projects in Afghanistan," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 112-128.

⁶⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Addressing Security in Afghanistan: The Role of TAPI* (New York: UNODC, 2021).

9. Findings

The TAPI pipeline is a vital geopolitical opportunity for Afghanistan, positioning the country as a key transit route for energy supplies between Central and South Asia. This strategic role significantly impacts Afghanistan's political landscape, enhancing its bargaining power in regional diplomacy. The Afghan government views TAPI as a means to solidify its position on the international stage while paving the way for economic rejuvenation.

The project has become a focal point for the intricate geopolitical dynamics among Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Turkmenistan. While TAPI provides a platform for cooperation, the historical animosities, between India and Pakistan, complicate the political landscape. Each country's involvement reflects broader strategic interests shaped by rivalries that could hinder the project's success.

The Taliban's conditional support for the TAPI pipeline highlights the complex political realities within Afghanistan. While acknowledging the potential economic benefits, the group's historical opposition to foreign interventions raises concerns regarding the stability of the project. Their fluctuating position underscores ongoing power struggles and the challenge of establishing a cohesive political framework that can guarantee the pipeline's security.

Various global powers, including the United States, Russia, and China, are also interested in the TAPI pipeline, each approaching the project from distinct geopolitical angles. The U.S. views TAPI as a means to promote regional stability and diminish Russian and Iranian influence, while Russia expresses concern about maintaining its dominance in Central Asian energy routes. China's growing interest, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative, signifies a shift in regional energy dynamics and reflects its increasing influence.

The TAPI pipeline has the potential to foster political stability by catalyzing greater regional integration and cooperation. The interdependence created through energy cooperation may facilitate dialogue among the involved countries, potentially easing historical tensions. However, there is also a risk of the project becoming a political flashpoint if security concerns escalate or geopolitical rivalries intensify.

Finally, the TAPI pipeline illustrates the competition among major powers for influence in South and Central Asia. The dynamics surrounding TAPI underscore the geopolitical struggles in the region, where energy projects serve as tools for asserting dominance. Stakeholders must navigate this competitive environment carefully to ensure that TAPI is a bridge for cooperation rather than a battleground for rivalries.

10. Analysis

The TAPI pipeline embodies a delicate interplay of economic opportunities and geopolitical challenges. While it promises to foster regional cooperation and boost Afghanistan's economy, the risks associated with security, regional rivalries, and external influences cannot be overlooked. The success of the TAPI project will depend on the ability of involved nations to address these complexities and work collaboratively toward mutual benefits, ultimately determining its role as either a catalyst for stability or a flashpoint for conflict in the region.

Furthermore, the project's potential to unlock economic growth through job creation, infrastructure development, and energy access could be transformative for Afghanistan and its neighbors. However, unresolved tensions between countries like India and Pakistan, coupled with Afghanistan's internal security concerns, threaten to undermine these benefits. External stakeholders, including the United States, Russia, and China, also play critical roles in shaping the project's trajectory, viewing TAPI through their

broader strategic interests. Therefore, sustained diplomatic efforts, robust security arrangements, and shared economic goals will ensure that the TAPI pipeline serves as a bridge for cooperation rather than a source of further regional discord.

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