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# Policy Report

Turkmenistan's  
approaches to the  
development of the  
situation in Afghanistan  
after August 2021

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## **Turkmenistan's approaches to the development of the situation in Afghanistan after August 2021**

### **Introduction**

The policy of Turkmenistan after the Taliban took control of Kabul and the entire territory of Afghanistan in August 2021 can be described as proactive, aimed at establishing constructive, working and mutually beneficial relations with the new authorities of the country. Meanwhile, Ashgabat sought to achieve three strategic goals - by establishing diplomatic contacts to secure its borders, to maintain access to the Afghan consumer market and to try to give new impetus to transport and energy projects, tied to Afghanistan.

### **Ensuring border security as a key interest of Turkmenistan**

Shortly before the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the intensification of fighting in Afghanistan posed a serious challenge to the security of Turkmenistan as the future policy of Taliban along with its factions was not fully clear. Both the armed attacks against Turkmen border guards and the fighting between the Afghan army and the Taliban during the presidency of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani were cause for concern Turkmen border is 744 km long.

Several attacks on the Turkmen border personal which resulted in a death of three border guards on 26 February 2014 and another attack by an armed group of Afghan-based militants allegedly linked to the Taliban or the

international drug mafia<sup>1</sup> along with other group of fighters crossing the border in the Mukur area of Badghis Province were all reacted by the Turkmen government silently. Yet, shortly after the tragedy, Turkmenistan conducted military exercises on the border with Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

In May 2014, Afghan militants again attacked a Turkmen outpost near Bala Murgab, Badghis province, killing three more border guards. The Consul of Turkmenistan in Mazar-i-Sharif, Bazarbai Kabayev then pointed out the absence of any official information about what happened on the Turkmen-Afghan border.<sup>3</sup>

Clashes on the Turkmen-Afghan border were reported in 2018. In mid-June 2018, allegedly, a fight took place between Turkmen border guards and Afghan smugglers on the border between the cities of Serkhetabad (formerly Kushka) and Takhtabazar. As a result, 25 Turkmen soldiers were killed and several dozen were wounded.<sup>4</sup> However, the Turkmen Border Guard then denied the fact of combat and death of servicemen.<sup>5</sup>

Security on the Turkmen-Afghan border was also threatened by fighting between the Afghan army and the Taliban. The most famous case occurred in March 2019, when 58 Afghan border police officers, as well as women and children, crossed the border with Turkmenistan in the Bala Murgab area in search of salvation from the Taliban after a heavy two weeks of fighting. They later returned home through Torgundi in the western province of Herat.

From the political point of view, instability on the Turkmen-Afghan border narrowed Ashgabat's ability to continue its neutral military approach. This could have made Turkmenistan dependent on external assistance. It is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://globalvoices.org/2014/03/06/attack-leaves-three-turkmen-border-guards-killed-but-who-killed-them/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hronikatm.com/2014/05/na-granitse-s-afganistanom-vnov-pogibli-turkmenskie-pogranichniki/>

<sup>3</sup> ibidem

<sup>4</sup> Türkmen – owgan serhedinde bolan atyşykda 25 töweregi türkmen esgeriniň ölendigi aýdylýar // Azatlyk Radiosyň, Iýul 03, 2018: [www.azathabar.com/a/29336132.html](http://www.azathabar.com/a/29336132.html)

<sup>5</sup> Информация о жертвах среди солдат на туркмено-афганской границе не соответствует действительности // Turkmenportal, 03.07.2018:

<https://turkmenportal.com/blog/15087/informaciya-o-zhertvah-sredi-soldat-na-turkmenoafganskoi-granice-ne-sootvetstvet-deistvitelnosti>

noteworthy that after the incidents on the border with Afghanistan in 2014, Iranian Defence Minister General Hossein Dehghan visited Ashgabat. According to some reports, the topic of his talks with the top leadership of Turkmenistan was the establishment of Iran-Turkmen cooperation in case of invasion of Turkmenistan by militants' 'jihadists' from Afghanistan. H. Dehghan also invited the Turkmen military as observers to the exercise of the Iranian armed forces in the north-eastern part of Iran.<sup>6</sup>

How painful the border security issue was for Ashgabat is demonstrated by his reaction to the statement made by the first President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev on the situation on the Turkmen-Afghan border following his meeting with Vladimir Putin on October 15, 2015. He said: 'We already know about the incidents that have taken place on the border with Turkmenistan - we are very worried.'<sup>7</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan immediately reacted. In the official communication, it was noted that 'the Turkmen side expresses extreme concern and misunderstanding in connection with such a statement of the Kazakh side about the inappropriate situation on the state border of Turkmenistan'. The hope was also expressed that henceforth when assessing the situation around Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan will be guided by more objective information.<sup>8</sup>

Given the above reasons, Ashgabat immediately after it became known about the beginning of the withdrawal of American troops on May 1, 2021, requested a meeting with representatives of the Taliban movements. According to Radio Liberty, referring to the official head of the Taliban political office in Qatar Muhammad Naim, a secret meeting was held on July 10, 2021 in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. The Taliban delegation was

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<sup>6</sup> Может ли Туркменистан оказаться таким слабым звеном или, наоборот, станет заслоном на пути «джихадистов» в страны Центральной Азии? - эксперт // Central Asia, 12 января 2015: <https://centralasia.media/news:1073851>

<sup>7</sup> Заявления для прессы по завершении российско-казахстанских переговоров // Kremlin.ru, 15 октября 2015: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50512>

<sup>8</sup> Ашхабад возмутился словами Назарбаева об инцидентах на границе Туркмении // RBC.ru, 16.10.2015: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/10/2015/5620d0629a79477bfa7c0da7>

headed by Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanizai, Head of the Taliban political office in Qatar.<sup>9</sup> The main topic of the meeting was security, illegal migration and non-aggression. The Turkmen Foreign Ministry asked representatives of the Taliban not to disclose information about the talks in order to avoid confrontation with the official authorities of Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

The meeting appeared to have been successful, as Ashgabat was able to establish cooperation with the movement on border security very quickly after the Taliban came to power a month after the talks. On August 18, 2021, three days after the fall of Kabul, the Consul General of Turkmenistan in Mazar-i-Sharif held a meeting with the head of the Taliban office in Balkh province. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan characterised the meeting as being 'held positively and constructively', and noted that the relations between the two people are 'fraternal and based on the principles of friendship and good neighbourliness'.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan reported on the rapid contacts between the Turkmen authorities and the Taliban on the protection of the state border, ensuring customs, sanitary, phytosanitary and other types of control and supervision, carried out while moving goods across the border. The Foreign Ministry of Turkmenistan noted the absence of any serious changes in the work of the border checkpoints Imamnazar-Akina and Serkhetabad-Turgundi.<sup>12</sup>

It is noteworthy that, despite the change of power in Afghanistan, Ashgabat continued to execute a contract to supply electricity to the northern and north-western provinces of Afghanistan - Herat, Badghis, Jouzjan, Balkh,

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<sup>9</sup> Taliban Holds Talks With Turkmen Officials In Ashgabat Amid Deteriorating Afghan Security // RFE/RL's Turkmen Service, July 12, 2021: <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-turkmenistan-talks/31354090.html>

<sup>10</sup> В МИД Туркмении провели тайные переговоры с талибами // Lenta.ru, 12 июля 2021: [https://lenta.ru/news/2021/07/12/turkmenia\\_taliban/](https://lenta.ru/news/2021/07/12/turkmenia_taliban/)

<sup>11</sup> Генконсул Туркменистана в Мазари-Шарифе провел встречу с руководителем провинции Балх // МИД Туркменистана, 18 августа 2021: <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2751>

<sup>12</sup> Сообщение для средств массовой информации // МИД Туркменистана, 18 августа 2021: <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2750>

Faryab, as well as the cities of Mazar-i-Sharif, Shibergan and others.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the Taliban paid special attention to the protection of the Embassy of Turkmenistan in Kabul. On 28 August 2021, the spokesman for the Taliban, Zabihull Mujahid, in a report in which he denied information in the media about the detention of two Pakistanis who intended to commit a terrorist act against the Turkmen diplomatic corps, stated that the Embassy of Turkmenistan in Kabul is not in any danger.<sup>14</sup>

A positive indicator of bilateral relations was the official congratulation sent by the Taliban acting Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund on the 30th anniversary of the independence of Turkmenistan – “Dear Brother, on behalf of the people and the Government of the Islamic Emirate, Afghanistan is pleased to extend sincere congratulations to Your Excellency and the fraternal Turkmen people on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the independence of friendly Turkmenistan.”<sup>15</sup>

The interview of G. Berdymukhamedov with the Russian news agency TASS, which took place on October 1, 2021, can be considered a peculiar response to this message. The Turkmen President noted that his country is ready to work closely with the new Taliban government to further strengthen traditionally fraternal Turkmen-Afghan relations, to provide the necessary assistance for the speedy normalisation of the situation in this country and to ensure its sustainable socio-economic recovery.<sup>16</sup>

The visit of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Rashid Meredov, to Kabul from 30 to 31 October 2021 was a serious step towards establishing constructive relations with the Taliban. The Head of the Turkmen

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<sup>13</sup> МИД: Туркменистан продолжает обеспечивать электроэнергией регионы Афганистана // Turkmenportal, 26.08.2021: <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/39189>

<sup>14</sup> Представитель талибов: "Туркменскому посольству в Кабуле ничего не угрожает" // Turkmenportal, 29.08.2021: <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/39264/predstavitel-talibov-turkmenskomu-posolstvu-v-kabule-nichego-ne-ugrozhaet>

<sup>15</sup> "Талибан" поздравил президента Туркменистана, назвав "дорогим братом" //ТенгриNews, 29 сентября 2021: [https://tengrinews.kz/world\\_news/taliban-pozdravil-prezidenta-turkmenistana-nazvav-dorogim-449927/](https://tengrinews.kz/world_news/taliban-pozdravil-prezidenta-turkmenistana-nazvav-dorogim-449927/)

<sup>16</sup> Туркмения заявила о готовности работать с новым правительством Афганистана // Информационное агентство ТАСС, 1 октября 2021: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12556539>

Foreign Ministry held meetings with Mr. Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, Mr. Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi and Mr. Mr. Mawlawi Mohammad Yakub. Several landmark statements were made during the negotiations.

In particular, R. Meredov said that the presence of representatives of the Islamic Emirates at international meetings already seems necessary.<sup>17</sup> In turn, the Afghan side stated: 'We will spare no effort to secure infrastructure and economic projects between the two countries'.<sup>18</sup>

Successive diplomatic contacts resulted in Ashgabat's decision to approve the appointment of the Taliban representative Mohammad Fazel Saber as interim Chargé d'Affaires for Afghanistan in Turkmenistan. He took office on 18 March 2022. Thus, Turkmenistan became the first Central Asian country to take such a diplomatic step.<sup>19</sup>

### **Economic and energy vector of Turkmenistan's Afghan Policy**

The second major thrust of Turkmen policy towards Afghanistan since the return to power of the Taliban has been to maintain access to that country's consumer market and to continue efforts to exploit its transit potential for access to the South Asian energy market.

Until 2021, Afghanistan was among the leading export destinations for Ashgabat. In 2019, the Turkmen market was supplied with various types of goods worth \$ 690 million, i.e. 8.06% of the total volume of Afghan imports. Turkmenistan ranked fifth after Iran, China, Pakistan and the US.<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> Attendance of Representatives of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in International Meetings is Urgently Needed: Turkmen Foreign Minister // Bakhtar News Agency, October 10, 2021: <https://baktarnews.af/attendance-of-representatives-of-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-in-international-meetings-is-urgently-needed-turkmen-foreign-minister/>

<sup>18</sup> Талибы пообещали обеспечить безопасность туркмено-афганской границы // РИА Новости, 01.11.2021: <https://ria.ru/20211101/taliby-1757278425.html>

<sup>19</sup> Appointed by IEA MFA, Mr. Mohammad Fazel Saber was introduced in a ceremony as chargé d'affaires to his colleagues at the Afghan Embassy in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, yesterday // Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 19, 2022: <https://mfa.gov.af/en/appointed-by-iea-mfamr-mohammad-fazel-saber-was-introduced-in-a-ceremony-as-charge-daffaires-to-his-colleagues-at-the-afghan-embassy-in-ashgabat-turkmenistan-yesterday/>

<sup>20</sup> Afghanistan Trade // WITS, 2019: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/AFG/textview>

structure of Turkmen exports was dominated by petroleum products and electricity. In turn, Afghanistan exported to the Turkmen market of goods for only \$1.11 million.<sup>21</sup>

In parallel, Ashgabat made vigorous efforts to implement several infrastructure projects with Afghanistan until 2021. Eight months before the change of government in Afghanistan, on January 14, 2021, the Presidents of Turkmenistan and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan took part in the online ceremony of commissioning of the railway branch Akina - Andha, an international fiber-optic cable in the areas of Imamnazar (Turkmenistan) - Akina (Afghanistan) and Serkhetabat (Turkmenistan) - Turgundi (Afghanistan), as well as transmission lines from the Turkmen city of Kerki to Afghanistan Shibirgan.

At the ceremony, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated that 'we are ready to open TAPI and TAP projects in Afghanistan in August 2021'.<sup>22</sup> The TAPI project envisages the construction of a gas pipeline from the Galkynsh gas field in the Marysk region of Turkmenistan via Herat and Kandahar (Afghanistan) to Quetta and Multan (Pakistan) and then to Fazilka in the west of India, located near the India-Pakistan border. The length of the gas pipeline will be 1,814 km and will have the capacity to transport 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year. The initial cost of the project was estimated by the Turkmen side at \$ 10 billion. and then was reduced to \$ 7 billion.<sup>23</sup>

TAPI project has been discussed since the 90s. As early as December 2015, Turkmenistan began construction of its 214 km section. On February 23rd, 2018 a ceremony of pipe welding of Turkmen and Afghan sections of the gas pipeline was held.<sup>24</sup> The Turkmen side also did a lot of work to attract

<sup>21</sup> Afghanistan-Turkmenistan // ОЕС. World, 2019: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/afg/partner/tkm>

<sup>22</sup> Ашраф Гани: «Афганистан готов открыть проекты ТАПИ и ТАП в августе 2021 года» // Turkmenportal, 15.01.2021:

<https://turkmenportal.com/blog/33577/ashraf-gani-afganistan-gotov-otkryt-proekty-tapi-i-tap-v-avguste-2021-goda>

<sup>23</sup> Туркмения снизила стоимость проекта газопровода ТАПИ до \$7 млрд // TASS.ru, 13.11.2018:

<https://tass.ru/ekonomika/5787601>

<sup>24</sup> Президент Туркменистана разрешил подписание важных контрактов для энергетики // Neftegaz.ru, 01.02.2020:



investors. In 2018, the head of the project Mukhatmerat Amanov said that the main investor is considered the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which at that time already provided technical and financial assistance. The Islamic Development Bank in turn allocated \$700 million for the construction of the Turkmen site. According to Amanov, Ashgabat expected the ratio of investment and own funding to the project to 70% by 30%. Speaking about ensuring the security of the gas pipeline on the Afghan territory, M. Amanov said that 1,500 thousand people were involved in the territory of this country, where pre-project surveys were carried out. Only one security incident occurred during all time.<sup>25</sup>

As for the TAP project, it provides for the construction of the power transmission line Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan. In October 2018, an agreement was signed between the Ministries of Energy of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan on the project of TAP power lines. The agreement was signed by the Ministry of Energy of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. The agreement defined the amount of electricity to be delivered to Afghanistan as 300 MW each to Herat and Kandahar (total of 600 MW), with a further increase to 1,000 MW. Turkish Çalık Holding was to invest \$1.6 billion.<sup>26</sup> In 2019, a ceremony was held in the Maryskaya Region to mark the beginning of the project and construction of 220 kV TAP power line in the direction of Maryskaya Hydroelectric Power Station (HPS) - Herat.<sup>27</sup>

The importance of this project for Turkmenistan underlines the fact that that in January 2020, President Berdimuhamedov reshuffled the Ministry of

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<https://neftegaz.ru/news/transport-and-storage/522285-prezident-turkmenistana-razreshil-podpisanie-vazhnykh-kontraktov-dlya-energetiki-v-t-ch-dlya-mgp-tap/>

<sup>25</sup> Туркмения снизила стоимость проекта газопровода ТАПИ до \$7 млрд // TASS.ru, 13.11.2018:

<https://tass.ru/ekonomika/5787601>

<sup>26</sup> С. Бердымухамедов назвал строительство ЛЭП ТАП приоритетной задачей Туркменистана // Neftegaz.ru, 11.10.2022:

<https://neftegaz.ru/news/powernetworks/753867-s-berdymukhamedov-nazval-stroitelstvo-lep-tap-prioritetnoy-zadachej-turkmenistana/>

<sup>27</sup> Ашраф Гани: «Афганистан готов открыть проекты ТАПИ и ТАП в августе 2021 года» // Turkmenportal, 15.01.2021:

<https://turkmenportal.com/blog/33577/ashraf-gani-afganistan-gotov-otkryt-proekty-tapi-i-tap-v-avguste-2021-goda>

Energy and transferred Head of the Ministry M. Atykov to the post of Head of the specially created Department of International Electricity Projects in the direction of TAP.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government, as well as the tough stance of the US and the West as a whole towards official recognition of the new authorities, which was largely due to the refusal of the Taliban to create a truly inclusive Government and the movement's policy of violating the rights of women and ethnic minorities, has endangered Turkmenistan's commercial interests in the Afghan and South Asian markets.

Despite this, Ashgabat and the new interim Afghan authorities have been in direct contact since August 2021 to re-establish trade and resume TAPI and TAP. At a meeting with the Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Mr. Meredov on October 30-31 2021 in Kabul, acting Minister of Defence of Afghanistan Mawlawi Mohammad Yakub directly stated that his country will make every effort to provide security for infrastructure and bilateral economic projects.<sup>29</sup> Further, on February 28, 2022, the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Defence of the Interim Taliban Authorities of Afghanistan presented to Ambassador of Turkmenistan Khoja Ovezov and Director General of the TAPI project Muhammatmyrat Amanov a plan to ensure the security of the TAPI gas pipeline.<sup>30</sup>

Despite increased attention to TAPI, however, the most intensive and fruitful contacts between the parties took place around the continuation of the TAP project. Pakistan has also come to the Turkmen-Afghan negotiating process. On February 6, 2022, the Ambassadors of Turkmenistan and Pakistan Khoja Ovezov and Mansur Ahmad Khan met in Kabul to discuss the implementation of the TAP LINE project. On the Turkmen side, it was stated

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<sup>28</sup> С. Бердымухамедов назвал строительство ЛЭП ТАП приоритетной задачей Туркменистана // Neftegaz.ru, 11.10.2022: <https://neftgaz.ru/news/powernetworks/753867-s-berdymukhamedov-nazval-stroitelstvo-lep-tap-prioritetnoy-zadachey-turkmenistana/>

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem  
<sup>30</sup> TAPI security plan shared with Turkmenistan // The Kabul Times, 28.02.2022: <https://thekabultimes.gov.af/tapi-security-plan-shared-with-turkmenistan/>

that Ashgabat will take over construction and installation works at the Nur al-Jihad substation in Herat.<sup>31</sup> 22 days later, February 28, 2022 a corresponding Turkmen-Afghan agreement was signed in Kabul to increase the power of power lines for the Nur al-Jihad substation from 110 kV to 220 kV.<sup>32</sup> The implementation of the project of modernisation of the substation Nur ul-Jihad was started in September 2023. Its cost is estimated at \$3.5 million and project implementation should take six months.<sup>33</sup>

At present, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are in active contact on intensification of diplomatic contacts with Pakistan to coordinate the implementation of the transnational electricity transmission project. This was mentioned at the meeting held on 18 September 2023 between Myrat Artykov, Head of the Department for International Electric Power Projects Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan and the Acting Minister of Energy and Water Resources of Afghanistan, Mullah Abdul Latif Mansoor.<sup>34</sup>

Active contacts between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in the period from 2021 to 2023. were in the sphere of bilateral trade and transit. In January 2023, the parties renewed the contract for the supply of Turkmen electricity, but the volumes of supply and the cost of supplied electricity were not disclosed.<sup>35</sup>

The appointment in May 2023 of Mohammad Harun Sayedi, ITA Ministry of Industry and Trade of Afghanistan, as a commercial attaché to the Afghan embassy in Ashgabat, was a breakthrough. Its objective was to

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<sup>31</sup> Туркменистан и Афганистан подписали Соглашение по строительству ЛЭП // Turkmenportal, 28.01.2022:

<https://turkmenportal.com/blog/43782/turkmenistan-i-afganistan-podpisali-soglashenie-po-stroitelstvu-lep>

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem

<sup>33</sup> Afghanistan embarks on upgrading infrastructure to increase electricity import from Turkmenistan // News Central Asia, 06.09.2023:

<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/09/06/afghanistan-embarks-on-upgrading-infrastructure-to-increase-electricity-import-from-turkmenistan/>

<sup>34</sup> Turkmenistan and Afghanistan discuss implementation of the TAP regional energy project // News Central Asia, 18.09.2023:

<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/09/18/turkmenistan-and-afghanistan-discuss-implementation-of-the-tap-regional-energy-project/>

<sup>35</sup> Туркмения и Афганистан продлили контракт на поставки туркменской электроэнергии // TASS.ru, 24.01.2023: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/16867327>

stimulate trade and investment and to develop economic relations and cooperation between the two neighbouring countries.<sup>36</sup>

In May 2023, the parties also agreed to establish a joint committee to improve trade and began negotiations to reduce the cost of transit of commercial goods from Afghanistan. The Acting Minister of Industry and Trade of Afghanistan made a similar request to Ashgabat. In turn, the Minister of Transport of Turkmenistan responded that it is necessary to establish a bilateral commission to discuss the details. Afghan economists believe that the reduction of transit costs will have a positive impact on the economic situation in the country.<sup>37</sup>

The successful delivery of Turkmen liquefied petroleum gas to the Pakistani market in April 2023 is an indication that the Taliban is complying with its guarantees to ensure safe transit through Afghan territory. It was a test delivery consisting of 50 gas carriers.<sup>38</sup>

To further expand bilateral trade, Kabul announced in September 2023 plans to build a new transit crossing with Turkmenistan through the Bala Murgab district of Badghis Province. Negotiations are under way with companies that are ready to sign a contract for its construction.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, trade relations between the two countries cannot always be referred to as positive. The case of July 2023, when the Afghan National Standards Authority (ANSA) returned 17 tankers with substandard Turkmen LNG back to the sender in Turkmenistan, was significant. Experts interviewed by the Turkmen news Internet Agency note that the supply of substandard LNG to Afghanistan is a frequent case of a general crisis of the Turkmen oil and gas sector. As examples are given the accident in winter 2023 at the field

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<sup>36</sup> Минпромторг Афганистана назначило торгового атташе в Туркменистане // Tmcars.info, 29.05.2023: <https://tmcars.info/post/2958937230/minpromtorg-afganistana-naznacilo-torgovogo-attashe-v-turkmenistane>

<sup>37</sup> Afghanistan and Turkmenistan Agree to Form Joint Trade Committee By Fatema Adeeb // Tolonews, 31 May 2023: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183591>

<sup>38</sup> Turkmenistan began supplying natural gas to Pakistan through Afghanistan // SpecialEurasia, May 2, 2023: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/05/02/natural-gas-turkmenistan-afpak/>

<sup>39</sup> Islamic Emirate: Efforts Underway to Create New Crossing with Turkmenistan By Habib Rahman Qooyash // Tolonews, 22 Sep 2023: <https://tolonews.com/business-185216>

Galkynysh, as a result of which the gas supply to Uzbekistan and, partly, to China was suspended. Ashgabat also lost competition to Gazprom in the market of Central Asian countries. The Russian gas concern managed to sign an agreement on cooperation in the gas sphere with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Moreover, Gazprom ahead of Turkmenistan in volume of gas supplies to China.<sup>40</sup>

### **Uncertain TAPI prospects and water problem**

Of all the key economic projects, the prospects for implementing the TAPI gas pipeline are still very uncertain, as the lack of international recognition by the Interim Taliban Government creates high political risks for investors. Without international recognition of the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan the ADB were unable to provide previously promised fundin for the TAPI project in March 2022.<sup>41</sup>

Although the Taliban gave their guarantees to ensure the safety of the pipeline, and announced in March 2022 that they would resume the project and that the suspension of ADB's involvement will not stop them, however, this did not happen. Experts had already pointed out at the time that the lack of official recognition could be a serious problem for TAPI. In addition, the Interim Taliban government lacks financial capacity to support the project.<sup>42</sup>

Despite these problems, Ashgabat is still trying to maintain momentum around TAPI, and to find a solution to the current situation. As General Director of LLC TAPI Pipeline Company Muhammadmyrat Amanov said, his company is currently working with legal consultants and relevant stakeholders on a road map to reduce the sanctions risks for the project.

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<sup>40</sup> Афганистан вернул в Туркменистан 17 цистерн с некачественным газом // Turkmen News, 12.07.2023: <https://turkmen.news/afganistan-vernul-v-turkmenistan-17-cistern-s-nekachestvennym-gazom/>

<sup>41</sup> ADB suspends TAPI project until IEA gains international recognition // Ariana News, March 10, 2022: <https://www.ariananews.af/adb-suspends-tapi-project-until-iea-gains-international-recognition/>

<sup>42</sup> Work on TAPI Project Will Continue: Islamic Emirate // Tolonews, 10 March 2022: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-177052>

In addition, according to him, Turkmengas and the Ministry of Energy of Pakistan signed the Joint Plan for the implementation of the accelerated implementation of the TAPI project in June 2023. Ashgabat also continues cooperation with the Afghan side on the consideration of security measures, necessary for the construction and operation phases of the project in accordance with international standards.<sup>43</sup> Uncertainty is also present in the relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan around the water issue. Turkmen government is still silent about the continued construction of the Qoshtepa canal by the Taliban, which threatens the water, economic and human security of downstream Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The Qoshtepa canal, which will pass through the territory of the Afghan provinces of Jawzjan and Faryab bordering Turkmenistan, will be a huge hydro-technical facility 285 km long, 100 meters wide and 8 meters deep. Experts believe that this canal, which will take at least 12-15% of the water from the Amu Darya, and represents a serious threat to Turkmenistan, a significant agricultural area of which depends directly on the stability of irrigation. The drinking water situation may also worsen.

Several Turkmen provinces are currently experiencing water problems. For example, settlements in the Balkan Region along the Karakum Canal and at its end have suffered the loss of winter wheat, onion and garlic crops due to lack of water.<sup>44</sup> Due to the decrease in the volume of run-off in the Amu Darya itself there is a shortage of water for irrigation of agricultural land in Lebap province.<sup>45</sup> This is compounded by long-standing problems with inefficient water use in the country. In this regard, it is obvious that Ashgabat sooner or later will have to raise the difficult topic of coordinated water withdrawal

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<sup>43</sup> Turkmenistan-South Asia gas pipeline could reduce energy poverty in region - Consortium // Dariyo.uz, 28.10.2023: <https://dariyo.uz/en/2023/10/28/turkmenistan-south-asia-gas-pipeline-could-reduce-energy-poverty-in-region-consortium>

<sup>44</sup> Туркменский эксперт: Строительство канала в Афганистане приведет к резкому осложнению водной обстановки // Radio Azatlik, 30 марта 2023: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/32341718.html>

<sup>45</sup> Строительство канала в Афганистане может усугубить водную проблему Туркменистана // Radio Azatlik, 29 марта 2023: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/32338884.html>

from the Amu Darya with the ITA, as well as to start fundamental reforms of the entire water management system in the country. Otherwise, Turkmenistan could face extremely complex consequences, exacerbated by the continuing deterioration of climatic conditions in the Central Asian region.

Turkmenistan has become one of the crucial partners for the Interim Taliban government since their takeover in August 2021. Ashgabat prefers to maintain a pragmatic approach towards Afghanistan and build a cooperative relationship with the authorities in Kabul. Shared border and water resources, plans for energy transit via the country by construction of pipeline and concerns over stability in the neighbouring territory are driving factors of Turkmenistan's careful attention and foreign policy in Afghanistan. Ashgabat is trying to have more subjectivity on Afghanistan related issues in the broader region and would be interested to use the current momentum in the promotion of its long-term support and development assistance to the neighbouring country. More coordination of efforts with other regional states could add to the stronger and long-term strategy of Turkmenistan towards Afghanistan.