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Russia-Turkmenistan energy partnership: moving towards new regional balances

The announcement of Gazprom's CEO Alexei Miller that Russia can resume natural gas imports from Turkmenistan next year ("Gazprom: Turkmenistan – Russia's traditional partner in the gas sector", *The State News Agency of Turkmenistan*, October 9, 2018, http://tdh.gov.tm/news/articles.aspx&article14990&cat14) is designed to have a significant impact in the regional energy chessboard, influencing the construction of other pipeline projects which are currently frozen.

The energy partnership and cooperation between Turkmenistan and Russia was suspended in 2016, when Gazprom refused to further buy Turkmen gas: during the Soviet Union and after 1991 Russian pipelines were the only export route for Turkmen gas until the construction of a pipeline with Iran in 1997, while the launch of the China-Central Asia gas pipeline in 2009 definitely broke the semi-exclusive Russian monopoly on Turkmen gas exports.

The re-opening of this energy corridor would allow Ashgabat to benefit from new energy revenues, that are needed to boost the national budget and to alleviate the ongoing domestic economic crisis. The possibility to use this export route quickly represents the main strength of the Russian proposal, due to the fact that the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Russia is still existing since Soviet times. On the contrary, the launching of the TAPI (Turkmenistan Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline project has been postponed to 2022 – in addition to the fact that the involved countries should set up their own domestic interconnections and eliminate/mitigate the threats affecting the transit in Western Afghanistan and Baluchistan. Concerning the construction of the subsea-Trans Caspian gas pipeline, it appears a still distant prospect (in spite of the agreement on the Convention of the Caspian Sea legal status) due to lack of investments and possible environmental concerns that Moscow could raise.

Turkmenistan must successfully develop its diversification strategy, finding new alternative export routes to reach energy markets: as a matter of fact, after stopping gas deliveries to Iran in 2017, China is the only buyer of Turkmen gas, but most of the export revenues are used to repay Chinese loans and grants invested to develop the national energy sector and to build the Sino-Turkmen gas pipeline (Fabio Indeo, "Turkmenistan's energy strategy: aiming to the diversification of export routes", *CABAR*, July 19, 2018, https://analytics.cabar.asia/en/turkmenistan-s-energy-strategy-aiming-to-the-diversification-of-export-routes/).

Waiting for the concrete implementation of this Russian-Turkmen energy rapprochement, it is interesting to evaluate the strategic reasons that have pushed Russia to provide Ashgabat a new export route. Russia's aims are multiple. First, it wants to rebalance Chinese influence. Secondly, it offers an immediate option to Turkmenistan to increase gas exports, potentially affecting the strategic relevance of the Trans-Caspian gas corridor aimed at reducing Russian influence on the EU energy market.

Finally, Russia can re-export Turkmen gas to the EU – as Gazprom used to do until 2015 – while the domestic gas production can be allocated to the eastern vector of exports toward China, after the expected inauguration of the Power of Siberia gas pipeline in 2019, with a nominal capacity of 38 billion cubic metres of gas per year.

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