
Landscape with a pipeline.

Caspian oil goes to the West detouring Russia
Vladimir Solovyev, Jeikhan
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The opening ceremony of the Baku-Tbilisi-Jeikhan pipeline took place yesterday in Turkish city of Jeikhan. It is the first pipeline on post-Soviet territory which detours Russia. Kommersant correspondent Vladimir Solovyev who attended the ceremony said the main heroes of yesterday's event were 3 men absent at the ceremony. First, late Azerbaijani President Geidar Aliev. Second, US President George Bush who decided not to irritate Vladimir Putin by visiting Jeikhan. Third, Nursultan Nazarbaev who is now expected to fill the pipeline with Kazakh oil.

Filling up the pipeline

The organizers optimistically called yesterday's ceremony "First Oil". Before letting the oil in, Turkish authorities prepared thoroughly, spending \$4 million on the ceremony only. The Baku-Tbilisi-Jeikhan (BTJ) pipeline opening ceremony was held on a small cape on the Black Sea coast, about 1 kilometer away from the sea oil terminal with which the pipeline ends.

The itinerary for processions-the highway connecting Jeikhan and Adana, where all guests lived,-was decorated with flags of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. Pieces of pipe with BTJ logo and a direction arrow put along the highway served as guide signs. Security measures were extensive, using sharpshooters and helicopters, because it was expected that US President George Bush, or at least Condoleezza Rice, would visit the ceremony.

US energy secretaries visited all previous BTJ events, Spencer Abraham in 2002, and his successor Samuel Bodman in 2005. Now, when BTJ does not need patronage from the White House anymore, Washington sent only Deputy Secretary of Energy Clay Sell.

Turkish newspapers were shocked, because not only George Bush ignored the invitation to the ceremony, but also Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev, who went to St. Petersburg for the G-8. He sent Minister of Energy Bahytkoju Izmuhambetov instead. No one was sorry about the absence of Russian representatives, although Putin had been officially invited as well.

Presidents of Azerbaijan and Georgia Ilham Aliev and Mikhail Saakashvili only smiled and shrugged shoulders in response to journalists' questions, when they entered the VIP marquee.

Top managers of BP pipeline operating company spoke first. BP CEO Lord Browne called BTJ a major project of the 21st century which changed the energy map of the world. "This pipeline will make Turkey the major player of world oil market," echoed BP president in Caspian region David Woodward. Then Clay Sell delivered George Bush's address which called Jeikhan the gates to world oil market and reminded that Washington more or less supported the project all these years.

These speeches produced a positive effect on the 3 presidents.

Turkish Prime Minister promised to turn Jeikhan into energy supermarket

refining absolutely all types of oil, and shared plans on building another pipeline between Samsun and Jeikhan for pumping Russian and Kazakh oil. Then Ilham Aliev took the floor. He recalled "the destructive forces" who hindered the project. Mikhail Saakashvili, who spoke next, did not even try to conceal that he spoke of Russia. He emphasized that the BTJ pipeline is the symbol of independence for Georgia and Azerbaijan. "BTJ united us all. It gave us new hopes, hopes for stability and security, gave us new partners and new relations," said Saakashvili.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliev looked the happiest winner at yesterday's oil festivity. Although it was, in fact, the achievement of his late father Geidar Aliev. Almost all speakers acknowledged Geidar Aliev's merit for making the pipeline connect Baku and the Mediterranean sea, after all. As a sign of gratitude, Turkey named the oil terminal in Jeikhan after Geidar Aliev. Turkey also named a park and an avenue in Istanbul after Aliev.

Pipeline's significance

BTJ became the first and largest non-Russian geopolitical project on post-Soviet territory. The West spent \$4 billion on building the pipeline which is absolutely independent from Russia. This pipeline gives space for maneuver both for the West and for the countries in the region, and guarantees uninterrupted oil supplies to Europe.

Caspian reserves of oil cannot entirely substitute the resources of the Persian Gulf, but they are a good alternative. Governmental agreement between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan on transporting Kazakh oil across the Caspian sea was signed a month ago in Astana.

Turkey will benefit from the new pipeline as well. Turkey stopped receiving Iraq's oil ever since the war in Iraq began. Now, Caspian oil will compensate Turkey's losses over and above.

Israel is also interested in the BTJ pipeline. Israeli Minister of Energy and Infrastructure Binyamin Ben-Eliezer attended the opening ceremony. Israel plans to be buying oil in Jeikhan and then transport it to Ashkelon, and from there to the markets of East Asia, India, and China through the KATSA pipeline.

Meanwhile, the pipeline has already begun influencing the region. The U.S. is now creating special forces called Caspian Guard, to guarantee absolute security for the pipeline. Washington's reverent concern about the pipe means the U.S. will not put up with main threats to it existing in the region-the frozen conflicts. Now, the West will not risk anymore and will actively seek ways to solve Karabakh, Abkhazian, and South Ossetian conflicts. The U.S. now pushes Erevan and Baku to sign the declaration on Nagorno-Karabakh problem. Similar steps would probably be taken in regard to Georgia.

The BTJ pipeline might stabilize the region. Yet, it does not guarantee the conflicts will be solved according to Tbilisi's and Baku's wishes. On the other hand, BTJ greatly changes the status of the countries in the region, and cements the new pro-West alliance.

Stretching the pipeline up to the Mediterranean sea, Washington has in fact created a new block, which has been already joined by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and Israel.
