
The critical BTC pipeline.

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Yesterday, at the southern Turkish Port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean Sea, the 1,087-mile Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) crude-oil pipeline will be inaugurated at an official ceremony with the presidents of Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan in attendance. This historic event marks the culmination of a major U.S. foreign policy effort to connect the Mediterranean with the heretofore landlocked but energy-rich Caspian Sea.

Since the discovery of sizable hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Sea, a fundamental premise of U.S. energy policy has been the uninterrupted transportation of the Caspian's 80 billion barrels of oil to international markets, thereby diversifying world energy supplies and easing Western reliance on Middle East crude supplies.

The new pipeline is the linchpin of this policy because it carries crude oil directly from the offshore oil fields of Azerbaijan to the Mediterranean via Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia.

This world-class marvel of the 21st century runs entirely underground in order to preserve the environment. Operated by BP, it has the capacity to deliver more than 1 million barrels per day of crude oil to the port of Ceyhan, where the oil can be offloaded to tankers with destinations worldwide.

Support from both the private (BP) and public (World Bank) sectors for the BTC pipeline has helped bring prosperity to the region. More than 500 villages along the pipeline route have received improvements in their medical, water and educational facilities.

Interestingly, of the 15,739 micro-loans issued by the World Bank in Azerbaijan, 49 percent were to women. The gross domestic product of Azerbaijan alone is expected to grow by 20 percent per annum, transforming this nation into the Kuwait of the Caspian Sea.

Sadly, the man most responsible for making the BTC pipeline a reality died before it was completed. Former Azerbaijan President Heydar Aliyev used his formidable leadership capability, determination and courage to bring the pipeline into existence. The obstacles Mr. Aliyev faced were tremendous. When the U.S. government determined that it did not want a pipeline from the Caspian Sea to run through the territory of Iran, then-President Aliyev showed enormous courage and stood up to the clerical regime in Tehran, despite the latter's vociferous objections. Azerbaijan's neighbor to the north also objected to the U.S. policy of multiple pipelines, but Mr. Aliyev did not buckle under Moscow's pressure. He forged ahead because he realized that U.S.-Azerbaijan interests were mutually reinforcing, and nowhere did they overlap more than in the uninterrupted exploration, development and transportation of Caspian Sea oil and natural gas to international markets.

Upon Mr. Aliyev's death in December 2003, the responsibility for ensuring the completion of BTC was inherited by his son, Ilham Aliyev, who was elected president after his father's death. The young president, who recently visited President Bush at the White House to

discuss global energy security, has continued his father's legacy and can be credited for turning this South Carolina-sized country of 8 million into the transport hub of the Caspian Sea region, thus elevating Azerbaijan's strategic importance to the West. Just last month, oil-rich Kazakhstan signed a long-term agreement to transport 140 million barrels per annum through the BTC pipeline, thereby enabling it to deliver crude oil to Western markets without Russian involvement.

Credit for today's historic event must also be given to those many individuals within the U.S. government who fought day and night for years to see this pipeline become a reality. Furthermore, the personal commitment to the pipeline by Sir John Browne, chairman of BP, was also instrumental in giving confidence to the international financial community to finance the \$3.4 billion project.

BTC must be seen as a project of geo-strategic significance: linking three allies of the United States along an East-West energy corridor, loosening Russia's long-standing grip over oil exports from the Caspian and denying the Islamic regime of Iran transit revenues.

In order to ensure the viability of this strategic asset, which is of enormous importance to Western energy security, Washington might consider the following initiative: First, the resolution of the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict over the territory of Nagorno-Karabagh should be a priority of American diplomacy because resumption of this conflict could negatively affect the flow of oil to the United States. And second, Congress must immediately allocate funding to bolster U.S.-Azerbaijan military ties.

Over the last decade, the strategic partnership between the United States and Azerbaijan has helped both countries significantly.

Today, with the flow of oil through the BTC pipeline, this important relationship has also enhanced global energy security.

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