
BTC security questions persist.

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Touted as the biggest official event in Turkey's history, the July 13 launch of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline marks the long-awaited completion of a project that is as much about geopolitics as energy. But amid the celebrations, questions persist about pipeline security.

The stakes are sizeable. Stretching 1,760 kilometers, with eight pumping stations and 101 block valves, BTC is the second longest pipeline in the world. The \$4-billion project, completed a year later than originally expected, is projected to have a daily capacity of 1 million barrels.

The BTC runs through difficult and dangerous territory. Not only does the route pass through forbidding mountains and remote locales, including over 14 seismic faults, but it runs dangerously close to the region's frozen conflicts and hotspots: Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, the North Caucasus, Abkhazia, Armenian enclaves in southern Georgia, and the restive Kurdish regions of southeastern Turkey. The region has experienced an episode of sabotage as recently as January, when suspicious explosions in North Ossetia cut off gas and electricity supplies to Georgia. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archives]. The pipeline also faces threats on the local level. Despite reimbursement and reinstatement of the land from the British Petroleum-led BTC consortium, locals staged frequent blockages during construction, and illegal tapping attempts were found even before oil began to flow in May 2005.

Faced with a host of potential threats, the BTC consortium has implemented stringent security measures. While there is substantial, tell-tale infrastructure above ground, such as block valves, devices which change the oil's flow direction, the pipeline itself is buried at least a meter underground along virtually the entire route. Once the land above is reinstated, the pipeline right-of-way should look the way it did before construction, making it difficult for potential saboteurs to find its exact location. Large, above-ground structures, such as pump stations, have elaborate security measures, from concrete blast walls to closed-circuit cameras and armed guards.

These measures may look impressive on paper, but their effectiveness is questionable. A three-week research trip to Georgia and Azerbaijan by this observer found that the rush to finish laying the pipeline had often resulted in security systems that were either not well thought out or badly implemented.

In one instance, a pump station had been surrounded by security cameras, but the flood lights supposed to complement them had been installed behind the cameras, negating their purpose. Blast walls, although able to prevent truck bombs, are useless against much more likely mortar or grenade attacks. Two layers of reinforced gates are useful to protect the entrance to the facility, but only if they are kept closed. In many cases, local staff flouts security procedures for the sake of expediency. British Petroleum (BP) security personnel have had to begin the re-installation of security measures after the pipeline's completion.

The pipeline route is also extensively monitored and patrolled.

Sensors along the entire length allow for any disruptions to be immediately spotted on a constantly monitored digital map of the pipeline. In addition, a joint agreement between the BTC consortium and the Azerbaijani, Georgian and Turkish governments facilitates patrolling arrangements. Georgia has gone a step further, signing a bilateral agreement with BP to allow for complementary security arrangements. BP field security teams regularly check above-ground facilities and the company employs local Georgians to patrol the entire right-of-way on horseback. The conglomerate additionally is operating an extensive community relations program, aiming to maintain a strong rapport with residents living along the route.

These residents could form a first line of defense for the pipeline by potentially alerting officials to any suspicious activity. In addition, the agreement provides for patrols by units of Georgia's new 700-member Strategic Pipeline Protection Department (SPPD), outfitted, trained and funded by BP.

To date, BP has been less involved in security measures for the two other BTC host countries. Azerbaijan has not signed a similar bilateral security agreement with BP, but talks are continuing.

Turkey has not indicated that it is interested in such an agreement, preferring to let its armed forces handle pipeline security.

Long hailed for its geopolitical significance, the BTC pipeline is likely to take on additional prominence in 2007 when Kazakhstan begins transporting 3 million tons of oil this year via the conduit.

[For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. President Nursultan Nazarbayev is expected to be among those leaders attending the July 13 ceremony in Ceyhan, according to reports.

While energy security will reportedly feature in talks among leaders of the host countries, opportunities for fresh energy deals will most likely not be missed, either. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who left for Ceyhan on July 11, is expected to discuss with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan the prospect of buying an additional 2 billion cubic meters of gas from the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline "at reduced prices," the Azerbaijani news agency Trend reported.

In addition to Saakashvili, Nazarbayev and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, the Ceyhan ceremony on July 13 is expected to attract four foreign ministers, 16 energy ministers and two deputy prime ministers, Trend reported. Deputy Energy Secretary Jeffrey Clay Sell will head the US delegation, according to the White House.

Editor's Note: Alexandros Petersen is a military and international affairs analyst based in London and Washington, DC.
