

The Hill Times, June 23rd, 2008  
NEWS STORY  
By Simon Doyle



## Top Canadian officials agreed to Afghanistan 'energy bridge'

**'If we try to build the pipeline now, with the insurrection going on, it could become a massive target,' says John Foster**

Despite the government's silence on the issue, top Canadian officials agreed to "assist Afghanistan to become an energy bridge" at a November 2006 meeting in New Delhi, and to begin "accelerated" work on the U.S.-backed \$7.6-billion natural gas pipeline through Afghanistan.

The conference agreement, titled the "New Delhi Declaration," involved top Canadian officials and is publicly available on the Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

The diplomatic conference was the Second Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan, included representatives from 21 countries, and was held Nov. 18 to 19, 2006, in New Delhi. It is alluded to in a new report by former international energy economist John Foster, and according to his report, the Canadian delegation to the conference included Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, Alta.), the Parliamentary secretary to the minister of Foreign Affairs; David Malone, Canada's high commissioner to India; Douglas Scott Proudfoot, director of the Foreign Affairs Department's Afghanistan task force; and Linda Libront, the Canadian government's first secretary for aid and development.

The conference declaration agrees to a number of principles surrounding Afghanistan's future. One of them is that delegations decided that "countries and organizations will assist Afghanistan to become an energy bridge in the region and to develop regional trade through supporting initiatives in bilateral/multilateral cross-border energy projects." It goes on to say that the participating countries will work towards the development of renewable energy projects and "work will be accelerated on [the] Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India [TAPI] gas pipeline to develop a technically and commercially viable project."

Mr. Foster's report, titled "A pipeline through a troubled land: Afghanistan, Canada, and the new great energy game," was released at a news conference on Parliament Hill last week, and says that the pipeline, called the TAPI pipeline project, is risky because it must be constructed partly through Kandahar province, where the Afghanistan insurrection has seen rising levels of violence.

"If we try to build the pipeline now, with the insurrection going on, it could become a massive target," Mr. Foster said, whose report was released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Mr. Foster, now retired, lives in Kingston, Ont., and formerly worked as an energy economist for the World Bank, Petro-Canada, and the Inter-American Development Bank.

Mr. Foster's report notes that Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India signed a Gas Pipeline Framework Agreement on April 25, 2008 committing to begin construction on the pipeline in 2010 and supplying gas by 2015, under the sponsorship of the Asian Development Bank.

"These countries have been meeting regularly over the past six years with the Asian Development Bank sponsoring the project," Mr. Foster said, adding that the pipeline is important to Afghanistan because the revenue it generates can go to infrastructure and education. "The good news is that pipelines provide gas, and they also provide revenue to transit countries. One report I read estimated that the TAPI pipeline could provide about half of the Afghan government's domestic revenue."

Mr. Foster's report says the U.S. has promoted the TAPI pipeline project for more than a decade, connecting energy-rich Central Asia with South Asia. In recent years the project has been delayed by the instability in Afghanistan, and the estimated cost of the pipeline has doubled since 2002 to reach \$7.6 billion, says Mr. Foster's report.

A potential rival pipeline is also being proposed by Iran, Pakistan and India, called the IPI pipeline, to supply Iranian gas to Pakistan and India. It is estimated to cost \$7.5 billion.

Major Western and regional players were involved in the 2006 New Delhi Declaration, including India, Pakistan, Iran, Canada, France, Germany, the U.K., the U.S. and Russia.

In an interview, Mr. Foster told *The Hill Times* that all conference participants would have agreed to the conference declaration, and that Canadian officials, although they are not talking about it publicly, should be perfectly aware of the importance of the TAPI pipeline to Afghanistan and the U.S. Indeed, his report suggests that Canada may have been drawn into the Afghanistan war to support U.S. strategic interests, including the control of the flow of natural resources in the region.

"It means they were on notice, even if they were sleeping, and that there is this project," Mr. Foster told *The Hill Times*, adding that the Canadian government has been virtually silent on the issue. "They know, and they'd have reported back, that all countries, presumably including Canada, will take best efforts to promote the project."

Liberal MP Keith Martin (Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca, B.C.) said that the Conservative government appears to be "putting the cart before the horse," and that tribal conflicts on the ground in Afghanistan must be resolved before building such a pipeline. "You've got to have security on the ground before you invest in a construction project that has a huge bull's-eye on its back."

Mr. Obhrai was not available for an interview, and the office of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Minister David Emerson (Vancouver Kingsway, B.C.) did not respond to requests for comment last week.

When *HT* asked Mr. Emerson about Afghanistan's development and the construction of the pipeline in April, he said he did not want to comment on the project. But he went to say, "I certainly would very much want, and I'm sure that the Government of Canada would very much want, to see the development of a legitimate, legal economy that can sustain a credible, viable state."

At the time of the 2006 conference in New Delhi, Defence Minister Peter MacKay (Central Nova, N.S.), then the Foreign Affairs minister, similarly said in a statement that "enhanced regional economic cooperation is important not only to Afghanistan's progress toward becoming a self-sustaining, prosperous state, but also in promoting regional stability."

Mr. Foster said he does not see the TAPI pipeline project as viable until there is peace in the South of Afghanistan, where the insurgency is strongest, as well as on the Pakistan border. He said he believes all parties must be included in the discussions on the pipeline, and that the Pashtun in the South, who are now alienated, as well as the Taliban, must feel part of the process.

Top Canadian officials—Mr. Foster said he does not know whom—also participated in a similar meeting on June 12 in Paris, where diplomats discussed Afghanistan's National Development Strategy for 2009-2013. Mr. Foster's report notes that the National Development Strategy "refers briefly to ongoing planning for the TAPI gas pipeline and to Afghanistan's central role as a land bridge connecting land-locked, energy-rich Central Asia to energy-deficient South Asia."

Canada's mission in Afghanistan has been turbulent in recent weeks. A Taliban attack this month on a prison in Kandahar city, which set an estimated 1,200 prisoners free, seemed to represent a deteriorating security situation.

Mr. MacKay told reporters on Parliament Hill last week that the attack showed the determination of the insurgency. "This exemplifies again the lengths that these insurgents will go to reassert their control over Afghanistan, and this was a suicide bombing," he said. "This was obviously a very well planned and executed attack on a facility within Kandahar City. So we're responding to the best of our ability and we'll continue to do so."

Mr. Emerson told reporters that Canada's troop strength in the region is not underestimated, and that the NATO commitment of an additional 1,000 must be deployed effectively. "We've always known that we're only part way through the mentoring processing and getting the Afghan Army and police and corrections system to the standard they need to be at," he said. "Unfortunately, we had this, this very difficult event and it simply reveals that the job's not done, but we're quite confident that by 2011, we will have gotten them to a level where they'll be able to carry on without Canadian Forces at their side."

The government released details surrounding its 20-year defence plan on the internet last week, which involves a total of \$490 billion for military equipment, Canadian Forces personnel and operations. Part of the goal is also to increase the Canadian Forces numbers to 70,000 regular forces personnel and 30,000 reservists.

[srdovle@hilltimes.com](mailto:srdovle@hilltimes.com)

...re Commencem...

*The Hill Times*