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Turkmenistan`s Energy Exportation Deals With Iran

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## Türkmenistan'ın İran'la Enerji İhracatı Anlaşmaları

### Öz

İran, bağımsızlığından sonra Türkmenistan'ın egemenliğini tanıyan ilk ülkelerden biriydi ve sonraki gelişmeler için iyi bir adımdı. O zamandan beri samimi ilişkiler kaydettiler. Ancak bu, ilişkilerin ihtilafsız olduğu anlamına gelmemektedir. Aynı modele sahip birkaç anlaşmazlık olmuştur. Bu tartışmalar neredeyse enerji ilişkileriyle sınırlıydı. Bu çalışma, enerji sektöründeki tartışmaları bağımsız bir değişken olarak ve Türkmenistan-İran ilişkilerini bağımlı değişken olarak ele almakta ve iki ülke arasındaki ilişkilerin diğer alanları ve genel olarak ilişkilerin örüntüsü üzerinde herhangi bir etkisinin olup olmadığını açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Bu alandaki son gelişmeleri açıklamaktadır. Enerji ilişkilerinin ve ondan kaynaklanan sorunların tartışılmasından sonra, çalışma etkilerini ve güncel olarak nasıl ele alınacağını tartışılacaktır. Araştırmanın bulguları sonuç bölümünde verilmiştir. Beklentilerin aksine, değişkenin etkileri aslında olumsuzdur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkmenistan, İran, Enerji, Anlaşmazlık, İhracat

## Turkmenistan's Energy Exportation Deals With Iran

### Abstract

Iran was one of the first countries, who recognized the sovereignty of Turkmenistan, after its independence, which was the good omen for the subsequent developments. Since then, they have recorded cordial relations. However, it does not mean the relations were free of disputes. This study takes those disputes in the energy sector as an independent variable, Turkmenistan-Iran relations as a dependent variable and seeks to explain whether it had any effects on other spheres of relations between the two countries and on the pattern of relations overall, taking into account the latest developments in this sphere. After a discussion of the energy relations and those problems emanating from it, the study will discuss its effects and how it is used to be handled up to date. The findings of the research will be discussed in the conclusion part. Contrary to the expectations, the effects of the variable actually negative.

**Keywords:** Turkmenistan, Iran, Energy, Dispute, Export

### Introduction

Iran was one of the first countries, who recognized the sovereignty of Turkmenistan, after its independence, which was the good omen for the subsequent developments. Since then, they have recorded cordial relations. However, it does not mean the relations were free of disputes. There have been several disputes with the same pattern. These disputes were almost confined to energy relations. This study takes those disputes in the energy sector as an independent variable and Turkmenistan – Iran relations as a dependent variable and seeks to explain whether it had any effects on other spheres of relations between the two countries and on the pattern of relations overall, taking into account the latest developments in this sphere. After a discussion of the energy relations and those problems emanating from it, the study will discuss its effects and how it is used to be handled up to date. The findings of the research

will be discussed in the conclusion part. Contrary to the expectations, the effects of the variable actually negative.

### 1. Natural-Gas Exports and Disputes

The disputes in energy deals between two countries were mostly on payments and price bargaining that never passed a certain threshold, it cannot be regarded as a distorting effect on the relations. This kind of disputes has happened in the past, and recently starting from 1st January Turkmenistan shut down of gas exports over the delaying payments that have left during sanction era. However, in March 2018 sides reached the resolution of the problem and gas exports are resumed. These kinds of problems have quick resilience capacity in the Turkmenistan-Iran energy relations are supporting this study's premise that two sides could develop favourable relations over the years that makes disruption of the relation difficult. The price disputes are always confined to the parleys or disputes between two national gas or oil companies rather than making it an interstate problem.

With a proven 34 trillion cubic meter reserves, Iran occupies one of the world's largest natural gas reserve (Bruegel 2015). However, due to sanctions, it could not attract enough investments in its gas sector. Thus, most of the South Pars gas fields remained untapped during the sanction years. Iran's northern part had suffered, due to lack of gas provision. In order to alleviate the problem, Iran resorted to purchasing gas from Turkmenistan, which was more cost-effective than laying a pipeline from the Southern region to the Northern region. Upon the necessity of pipeline infrastructure, construction of the first pipeline between the two countries had been planned. The long process of discussion finally culminated with clinching the agreement in 1995, for 25 years. It is known as Korpedje-Kurt Kuyy pipeline with total length 200 km with a diameter of 1,000 millimetres (Turkmenistan.ru, 2005). The construction of the pipeline had continued for two years. On 29 December 1997, the natural gas pipeline was inaugurated by Presidents Niyazov and Khatami. Shipment of annual 8 bcm gas was planned in 1998. Fifty per cent of Iran financed project was contracted as a loan. The construction of the pipeline was carried by the National Iranian Oil Company, with contracted repayment schedule with gas sale to the country.

Korpedje-Kurt Kuyy pipeline started to function in 1998. Due to the lack of investments in Korpedzhe onshore natural gas field, the planned initial amount of 5 bcm natural gas was elusive. Gas deliveries had remained quite meager for some time. Turkmenistan was charging USD \$40 per thousand cubic meters to pay back Iranian USD \$190-million expenditure for building the pipeline. The amount was lower than Turkmen gas at the European market. The dispute happened in April and May 2000, that the National Iranian Gas Company had decided to cut natural gas imports from Turkmenistan by half (RadioFreeEurope, 2000). Eventually, Turkmenistan retreated from

its claim to increase the charge of natural gas to Iran in order not to jeopardize its future plan to export 16 bcm to Turkey and 14 bcm to Europe through Iran. The price dispute on exported gas reoccurred several years later again. International gas price hike led Turkmenistan to demand a higher oil-linked price for thousand cubic meters from Iran in 2008. At first, Iran hesitated, then agreed to pay in 2009, upon a fierce bargain. The new price was fixed as USD 140\$ per thousand cubic meters, was still lower than the price set for natural gas exports to Russia, which was around USD 240 \$ per thousand cubic meters. Turkmenistan and Iran witnessed several disputes on pricing natural gas but, those disputes had never passed a certain threshold to be considered within distorted relations.

Due to the smallness of the total capacity of the constructed pipeline and lack of investment in the Korpedzhe gas field, Turkmenistan could not deliver Iranian annual demanded volumes of natural gas. To overcome the shortage of supply, the Construction of the new pipeline was decided in July 2009 (Trend News Agency,2009). The Dovelabad field was planned as a new source of gas supply to overcome the existing shortage in the delivery of gas supply to Northern Iranian provinces. The construction of Dovletabat – Sarahs - Songbast pipeline was initially considered as Dovletabad – Sarahs Khangiran pipeline, it starts from the Dauletabad natural gas onshore field in Turkmenistan a and extends to Khangiran in Iran, there it was planned to be connected to the Iranian gas pipeline system. The total annual capacity of the second pipeline is 12 billion cubic meters. Construction of the Dovletabad – Sarahs Khangiran part of the pipeline was completed in October 2009. Presidents of both countries, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad attended the inauguration ceremony of the pipeline on 6 January 2010. The inauguration ceremony was held at the village of Salypyar in Serakhs district of the Mary province of Turkmenistan. The second phase of the pipeline, which starts from Khangiran in Iran and extends to Songbast in Iran, was completed in November 2010. The inauguration ceremony was held in Iran with an attendance of Presidents, Ahmadinejad, and Berdimuhamedov. The 190 km long natural gas pipeline shall meet gas demands of north-eastern Iran, namely Semnan, Mazandaran, Golestan, Khorasan-Rezavi, North Khorasan, and South Khorasan provinces (Turkmenistan.ru, 2010). The aggregate amount of the two aforementioned pipelines' capacity is 20 billion cubic meters per annum.

## **2. Turkmenistan's Oil Swap Agreements with Iran and Interruptions**

Under a swap deal with Iran, Turkmenistan used to send oil to the Iranian coastal port of Neka for transportation to the refineries in Iran in exchange for Tehran's exportation of equivalent volumes of its own oil at Turkmenistan's behest (Azernews ,2015). Iran had swapped oil from Turkmenistan 1998-2009 for 11 years, during this

period Iran had earned USD \$880 million from oil swap operations but had stopped it due to price dispute. Iran used to charge a transit fee of USD \$ 1.1 per barrel from Turkmenistan but later reneging the deal has increased it to USD \$5.5 per barrel. The reason of increase was maybe the Iranian economic crisis because of sanctions on the country by U.S and EU, or Iranian retaliation of Turkmenistan`s increase of gas price in 2008 -2009. But it is not clear whether it is just correlation or causation of one the other. Turkmenistan did not want to pay such amount as a transit fee.

Turkmenistan had exported oil under swap agreements with Iran through various means of transportation such as railway, marine, and pipeline from Neka to Rey. In 1995, Argentinean Company Bridas had initiated exporting swap oil from Turkmenistan to Iran. However, it was stopped after a short time. In 1998, Monument Resources Petroleum co. (Now Lasmo Oil PLC) had started in exporting 4000 b/d swap oil from Burun field in Turkmenistan to Neka Port on Caspian coast in Iran. The amount had reached the 70 000 b/d in 2005. In 1998, Dragon Oil PLC had started to export 6000 b/d oils under swap agreement with Iran from Cheleken field of Turkmenistan. In April 2000, Dragon Oil had managed a clinching swap deal with Iran for 10 years. Burren Energy Company had also involved in exporting oil to Iran through swap agreement. The amount of oil has exported to Iran reached 85000 b/d in 2001, which makes 3671597 metric tons per year. The swap deal continued until 2009.

There had been the swap deal with Iran before 2009 in oil trade. In 2009, Iran ceased importing crude oil from Turkmenistan. Not tightened sanctions on Iran were the real cause of the cessation of oil export to Iran. The reason was the Iranian demand of more transit fee made the swap trade less profitable and resulted in derail of oil exports from the country, shifting Turkmen oil via tanker to Azerbaijan in 2010 to contribute BTC pipeline. In fact, Sanctions have affected the swap deal indirectly: economic recession of Iran due to sanctions has compelled Iran to increase the transit fee for the swap oil to five times more than it used to be and Turkmenistan was not found new tariff remunerative enough.

In subsequent periods, fresh initiatives have been taken by Iran to resume the swap deal with Turkmenistan, for instance, Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh discussed the issue with Rashid Meredow, the foreign minister of Turkmenistan, on May 7, 2016, during his visit to Tehran (Newsbase,2016). Resumption of swap deal is essential. Iran's oil production virtually depends on southern regions. The distance between the southern provinces to Northern regions is nearly 1800 km and the supply of oil to refineries in Tehran and Tabriz cities expensive (Azernews, 2015). The Iranian authorities have been improving the capacity of the refineries of Tehran and Tabriz to develop practices of a swap with the four Caspian Basin states, which had used to receive the oil unloaded from Caspian tankers at the Port of Neka.

Turkmen oil was started to be shifted via tanker to Azerbaijan in 2010 to contribute BTC pipeline. Transportation of Turkmen oil via BTC is carried out in accordance with the contract signed between Dragon Oil company with SOCAR Trading. 5.6 million metric tons of oil were transported through BTC in 2014, increased substantially from 2013 amount of 3.3 million metric tons (Trend News Agency, 2015). After incrementing of transit fee in 2010, Turkmenistan shifted export route from Iran to BTC pipeline. The country found the BTC route more economically attractive than erstwhile swap deal with Iran.

Turkmenistan and Iran cooperation in the oil sector is improving, after seven-eight years of hiatus. Dragan Oil company, which is owned by Dubai-based Emirates National Oil Company, Around 6,000 tons of Turkmen crude oil was discharged by Russian tanker at the port of Neka on August 3, 2017, which was first swap operation through Iran since 2010 (Financial Tribune, 2017). The Dragon Oil Company used to ship the crude oil it produces from an offshore development at the outlying place of the in western Turkmenistan to Neka and used to receive Iranian oil from Khrag Islan in the Persian Gulf. The company moved about 80 per cent of the crude it pumps through a swap deal with Iran. Turkmenistan had stopped the oil shipment through Iran upon the latter's increase of transit fees.

Turkmenistan and Iran cooperation in the natural gas sector is improving, after 2017 dispute over payment of natural gas exported to Iran, Iran has resumed gas swap with Turkmenistan since March 28, 2018, after President Rouhani's official visit to Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan is a "strategic partner" of Iran in the energy sector and Iran's Petroleum Ministry, Amir Hossein Zamani-nia, Deputy Petroleum Minister for International and Commercial Affairs, said the two countries could start in joint exports of energy to India, Pakistan and littoral states of the Persian Gulf (Xinhuanet, 2018). Iran's government also, well-received Turkmenistan's proposal to develop three offshore natural gas fields in the Caspian Sea. The country has developed the infrastructure of the port in the city of Neka, around 200 km distance from Tehran, and improved its oil and gas swap capacity. Turkmenistan-Iran cooperation has been improving despite the ebb and flows sector-wise in the last fifteen years.

### 3. Electricity Exports

In 2003, Turkmenistan signed a tripartite agreement with Iran and Turkey for electricity cooperation. As per the terms of the contract, Turkmenistan is to deliver both countries 500 million kWh via the Balkanabat-Gonbad-Hoj-Bashkal line. The Turkmen-Iranian part of the project or Balkanabad-Gonbad section was constructed in 1999 by the Iranian company Tavanir, and the Iranian-Turkish section of the project,

Hoj-Bashkal part in 2003 by the Turkish company Tetas (Peyrouse and Sebastien , 2012). Exports to Iran have been continued through power transmission lines with 400 kilovolts through Mary-Mashhad and Balkanabat-Aliabad lines (Trend News Agency, 2015). New steam-gas power station within Mary state Electric Power Station was inaugurated on 8 September 2018 (Yorite Habarcymyz ,2018). During his official visit to Turkmenistan, President Hassan Rouhani in March 2018 visited the Power Plant to see its new installed steam-gas power station, which would increase power export volume to Iran. Iran has a 400 kilovolt (kV) line with Turkmenistan for the exchange of electricity (P, Stobdan, 2014). Additional power exports to Iran will be supplied by Mary Power Plant. In the power sector, there have not been any big disputes over payment and pricing compared to other energy sectors.

#### 4. Turkmenistan-Iran Cultural Relations

Almost every year cultural days of Turkmenistan is organized in Iran and Cultural days of Iran in Turkmenistan with huge participation of artists and audiences. Turkmenistan and Iran celebrated Nowruz (spring festival) together in 2019. It was celebrated at the border of two countries on 4 April at Gowdan-Bajgiran crossing point and has been noted to the point that cultural interactions are “borderless”, transcending physical limitations of any state. Since, its official inclusion to the UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2016 (Real Iran, 2016), Nowruz celebrations are taking place robustly. Apart from the spring festivals, one of the cultural ties between the two countries are pilgrimages to the holy places and shrines of Sufi saints. Annually representative delegation makes a pilgrimage to the shrine of Magtymguly (Berdimuhamedow, 2010) who is regarded national hero and great poet in both Turkmenistan and among Turkmen minorities of Iran. Two states also have been taking part in annual international book fairs organized in Ashgabat (Yazberdiyew, Almaz, 2019). Those kind of activities have become part of the routine political culture over the years.

Iran has taken part in sports activities, championships and competitions organized in Turkmenistan. Iranian sports teams were able to win 36 Gold, 23 Silver and 59 Bronze medals in aggregate with a total of 118 medals Wikipedia (2017), securing third place, after Turkmenistan and China in Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games Championship in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, which was held from 17 to 27 September 2017. Two nations’ football teams used to match occasionally.

On 21 February 2011, V specialized fair of the Islamic Republic of Iran and “Turkmen –Iran entrepreneurs’ conference” was held to uphold the concrete trade agreements (Berdimuhamedow, 2015) and to initiate and further trade facilities between two states. Specialized exhibition of goods of the Islamic Republic of Iran held in Ashgabat on 27th November 2007, which was the great event testifying about the successful

development of bilateral relations and trust of both states (Berdimuhamedow, 2010). In 2010 Turkmen national production fair held in Iran. The conference of entrepreneurs and fairs between the two states has been organized almost every year and it has become part of the extended political practice.

### 5. Dispute Resolutions

Due to a dispute over the payment overdue on exported natural gas to Iran In 2017, the natural gas exports to Iran were shut down. Ashgabat claimed that Iran owes the country \$1.8 billion from sales between 2007 and 2008 (Caspian News, 2019). The payments were delayed due to sanctions on Iran. The natural gas exports to Iran resumed in 2018 and similarly, oil exports to Iran also resumed in 2017. During Rouhani's official visit in March 2018, 13 agreements were signed covering a wide array of bilateral fields, including arts, culture, education, agriculture, and aviation, however, the main issue was energy (The Diplomat , 2018). Turkmenistan is a "strategic partner" of Iran in the energy sector and Iran's Petroleum Ministry, Amir Hossein Zamani-nia, Deputy Petroleum Minister for International and Commercial Affairs, said the two countries could start in joint exports of energy to India, Pakistan and littoral states of the Persian Gulf (Xinhuanet , 2018) Iran's government also, well-received Turkmenistan's proposal to develop three offshore natural gas fields in the Caspian Sea. Iran has developed the infrastructure in the port in the city of Neka, around 200 km distance from Tehran, and improved its oil and gas swap capacity. Turkmenistan-Iran cooperation in the energy sector has been developing in the last fifteen years, despite the hindrances.

Turkmenistan cut natural gas supply to Iran on 1 January 2017 due to disputes over the payment on exported natural gas to Iran around \$1.8 (Caspian News, 2019). Iran offered to pay its debt through highway construction in Turkmenistan via its state-owned company but Turkmenistan resisted on cash over services. The two national companies sought arbitration in International Court, Turkmen Gaz was demanding, not payment for exported gas is a breach of the contract, while NIGC of Iran was claiming that cut of natural gas supply is not lawful as per agreement. The court came out with a decision for both sides, but details of the decision would not to be divulged as per arbitration rule without the consent of the National Iranian Gas Company and State Concern "Turkmengaz". Reaction of the Ministry of Oil of IRI's to the decision was positive claiming that in the decision no winner or lost. It is noted that the decision views in cases of "Turkmengaz" prove to be true, while in other parts the opinions of the National Iranian Gas Company has also supported. The press release of the Ministry of Oil of the Islamic Republic of Iran views it: "This decision will pave



a way for the further development of relations between two friendly and neighboring countries” (Gulamov, 2020). Based on the source of the Oil Ministry and the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC), Islamic Republic News Agency reports that Iran has been convicted for not paying for gas it imported from Turkmenistan during the years 2007- 2013. As per the verdict, Iran should pay around 2 billion USD to the country to settle its debts (Amanov, 2020). It is important to note that such kind of disputes over payment or pricing have happened several times. The national companies of countries have learned how to tackle deadlock in energy diplomacy.

### Conclusion

There have been disputes over pricing and payments between the two countries in energy deals, but the disputes have not passed a certain threshold. They have occurred only in bilateral energy relations, whereas multilateral relations were smooth. The sectoral disputes have not affected relations and activities in other sectors, for instance, during the payment disputes of 2017 on exported natural gas, the relations in cultural, sports, humanitarian and economic relations were smooth. Similarly, during the crisis in oil swap deals in 2010 -2017, the relations in other streams of energy have continued without disruption. The disputes in natural gas exports have not affected the relations in the oil sector and vice versa. The power sector was not affected from disputes in the oil and natural gas sectors. Routine cultural activities, and activities in the non-energy sector have continued. The sector-wise crises have not affected relations in other sectors and relations between the two countries overall.

Despite the occasional sector-wise disputes, two countries were able to maintain favorable relations in other fields, confining the problems between two national energy companies, not elevating it to the state level, which shows that the importance of Turkmenistan for Iran is not limited with the energy sector and similarly the importance of Iran for Turkmenistan is beyond the energy deals. Geographical location, political and strategic compulsions, historical connections and mutual economic interests of the two countries` were the compelling factors in maintaining good relations.

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