

Leaders break ground on Afghan section of TAPI

Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India on Friday ceremonially broke ground on the Afghan section of an ambitious, multi-billion dollar gas pipeline expected to help ease energy deficits in South Asia.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Turkmen counterpart Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov joined Pakistani premier Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and India's Minister of State for External Affairs M. J. Akbar for the ceremony at gas-rich Turkmenistan's border with Afghanistan.

Speaking at the ceremony, Mr. Ghani said the pipeline would "unite [the] countries". "There were pessimistic voices, but now we are witnessing the construction of the TAPI gas pipeline," he said, using the acronym for the conduit which takes its name from the four countries.

The quartet aims to complete the 1,840 km pipeline and begin pumping natural gas from Turkmenistan's giant Galkynysh gas field by the beginning of 2020.

While the pipeline will traverse war-racked Afghanistan, raising security concerns, the bulk of the 33 billion cubic metres of gas to be pumped annually through the conduit will be purchased by Pakistan and India.

Mr. Berdymukhamedov, whose country currently depends heavily on China as a market for its natural gas exports, called diversification of gas deliveries an "important part of the politics" of the isolated Central Asian country.

India's stand

India's commitment to the pipeline has previously been questioned over its relationship with Pakistan and easy-access to liquified natural gas markets seen as potential stumbling blocks.

But Mr. Akbar hailed the project as "a symbol of our goals" and "a new page in cooperation" between the four countries.

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