

India and the Global Game of Gas Pipelines

By *Gulshan Dietl*

London: Routledge, 2017, 213, pages, ISBN: 9781138744011 (hbk), 9781315303475 (ebk)

In recent years, natural gas has increasingly gained in geopolitical significance. Gas is no longer a marginal fuel but a fuel of choice for many energy consumers. Driven by the availability of shale gas, the growth of the natural gas industry is firmly linked to growing demand in the power sector from non-traditional places like China, developing Asia and the Middle East, while traditional domains of North America and Europe maintain the most substantial absolute increases in gas use. Gas consumption has become more widespread as its transportation across vast distances has become possible through improved pipeline construction and as LNG shipped in large tankers.

In her book, *India and the Global Game of Gas Pipelines*, Gulshan Dietl reminds us, however, that 80 percent of gas produced is consumed locally, making the resource primarily a national commodity, rather than a commodity of international exchange. That is because gas transport infrastructure

is costly to build (both pipelines and LNG exporting and receiving terminals) and storage is usually tricky. The process of globalization and surge of demand from growing Asia has spurred the building of pipelines across difficult geographical terrains and the extraction of untouched reserves. The author opines that gas pipelines, once constructed, affect the creation of a ‘strategic geography’ as distinct from the territorial demarcation of states they intersect, and through providing passage and access to the resource become “indispensible to the survival, security, and prosperity of the state[s]” (p. 5).

Pipelines are secure ways to transport gas but are insecure entities in themselves, subject to physical vandalism, cyber-attacks on monitoring computer systems, and state level political threats such as sanctions or secessionist/dissident movements (pp. 49-50). While building pipelines through difficult geographical terrains of permafrost or deep-sea is a complicated

and expensive business, keeping the lines functioning is even more so. Such maintenance involves strategic coherence on many factors, including a “committed investor, domestic politics in the countries involved; bilateral relations between the supplier and producer countries; relations among the supplier, [and] producer and transit countries” (p. 43). Above all, the viability of the pipeline depends on two simple economic principles – demand and supply of gas and low production costs that yield a high profit.

In the three case studies of Iran, Russia and Turkmenistan, Dietl looks at the pipelines originating from each of these countries. By possessing the second most abundant oil reserves and second largest gas reserves in the world, in addition to its geographical location as the only nation that abuts both the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, Iran’s ambition to play a pivotal role in the gas trade is obvious. However, the energy trade embargo has constrained the nation’s aspiration. Iran has fought back though, with “gas pipelines it has attempted to propose, revive and build to break out of the shackles around its gas production, sale and purchase” (p. 58).

The success and failure of gas pipelines originating from Iran have followed the cardinal rule of the game: Pipelines get

built when peace and institutions are already in place rather than the reverse (p. 42). Iran’s good relations with Armenia, Turkey and Oman spelt the success of the fully functioning Iran-Armenian pipeline since 2007 and the Iran-Turkey pipeline since 2003. The Iran-Oman pipeline, still in the making, is expected to come to fruition in 2018. The Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline met its death in the civil war in Syria and the many woes of the Nabucco pipeline (from Turkmenistan to Austria), to which Iran was to contribute as much as 25 BCM of gas per year (p. 72), can be related to Russian opposition and American sanctions on Iran. Iranian gas supply has been helped by massive demand in Armenia and Turkey, as it is by ample reserves that bring down the cost of production.

With the largest gas reserves in the world, Russia’s pipeline exports wind through Europe, the Caucasus and Turkey. Much has been written about Europe’s overdependence on Russian gas and its multiple efforts to diversify sources of gas supply, but much less is done about the situation. Germany still wants the Nord Stream II, and Italy and Greece are keen to see the South Stream come online as soon as possible. Gas from the Caspian region or gas-rich countries of the Middle East – Iran, Iraq or Qatar – requires negotiations over a minefield of issues

before long-distance pipelines to Europe can actually be put into practice.

The supply of Russian piped gas to Europe has been aided by stability and market institutions thoroughly in place. Any hint of instability or dispute has stopped the construction of new pipelines. The delay in the development of the Nord Stream II and South Stream pipelines (pp. 93, 95) are examples affirming the idea that peaceful conditions support pipeline trade. Europe is a market that the Russian national gas company, Gazprom, considers its backyard – its dominance protected by vast reserves and low production costs. Russia's 30-year gas contract to supply China, the first of its kind, through the so-called Power of Siberia pipeline, rides on the burgeoning Russian-Chinese ties in defence and infrastructure, as much as it does on demand from the world's largest energy market. A second pipeline to China's Xinjiang region, to be supplied from untapped fields in western Siberia, would match Gazprom's market penetration in Europe and cement a more extensive Russian-Chinese cooperation in different sectors.

In the 'great game' of the pipelines in the Central Asian heartland, Turkmenistan, the holder of the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves, is a critical actor. It

is land-locked, and so are the countries on its borders. Turkmenistan, therefore, faces challenges in developing its gas reserves because of far-off end-use markets and lack of investments. China is the key export market for Turkmen gas; more than 70 percent of exports go to China, through a network of parallel gas pipelines running through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirghizstan called the Central Asia-China Pipeline (CACP). Iran and Russia also import a small amount of gas from Turkmenistan. Do the pipelines from both Russia and Central Asia to destinations in China along with China's Belt and Road Initiative announced in 2013 presage the revival of Mackinder's influential Heartland thesis? Only time can tell but, today, China's allying with Russia and the Central Asian Republics in firm and abiding energy relations, through the sinews of the pipelines and related infrastructures, relates to a potential Heartland condition.

In the pipeline game, India is a niggardly player. There are "no external gas pipelines coming in, going out or traversing its territory" (p. 149), although three major pipeline plans have long been in the offing. The Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline, under consideration for more than two decades now, has been held up due to several issues, most importantly, the security of the pipeline through Pakistan's restive

Baluchistan province, putting credence to the argument that pipelines as entities get built and thrive in peaceful and stable conditions. Similarly, a big question mark over the impending Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project is security (p. 163). The India-Bangladesh-India pipeline to bring gas from Myanmar was embroiled in bilateral political issues between India and Bangladesh right from the very beginning, placing an effective barrier to any enduring energy ties.

And so, pipelines are much more than physical entities transporting gas from producers to consumers; they indicate the intricate dynamics of politics and economics involved in their existence. The 'game' is in bringing the various actors together, driving hard bargains, maximizing gains across the board, and sustaining the project's long-term viability. In the end, pipelines will always "reflect the [political] preference of the powerful" (p. 180) actor.

This book provides a wealth of material on natural gas and its trade in the local, regional and global context. With an eye on the lay reader, the author tells us about the chemical composition of natural gas, its earlier discoveries in the worldwide context, geographical distribution, and gas markets in the first chapter. The second chapter gives us an idea of pipeline economics

about how they carry gas over long distances as well as how they fare vis-à-vis LNG trade. The third, fourth and fifth chapters on Iran, Russia and Turkmenistan, tell us about the gas fields, reserves, and national gas policies of each of these actors, besides the pipelines that originate from these countries. In the last chapter on India, the author deals diligently with the questions of demand, production and import of gas in the absence of pipeline supply.

While the book is an imposing study of gas trade and an indispensable read for scholars and lay readers alike, some minor hitches related to editing could have been resolved in the manuscript. For instance, a reference URL (p. 5) in the middle of the sentence breaks the flow for the reader. Or, sometimes, a billion cubic metres is both written out in full and then abbreviated as bcm on the same page (p. 98). I also wish the author had provided a map for each of the pipelines discussed in the book as a ready reference. All in all, the book lives up to its promising title of exploring the game of gas pipelines comprehensively with ample data and thoughtful analysis.

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Contemporary Politics in the Middle East

By Beverley Milton-Edwards

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011, 340 pages, ISBN: 978-0-7456-5230-6

Lecturers in Middle East politics and contemporary history are often influenced by their own preferences regarding what to include in a teaching syllabus. Which textbook best introduces the debates and jargon of academic studies of the Middle East? Many textbooks cover the entire Middle East, some are thematic, and others approach the topic on a country-by-country basis. In her book 'Contemporary Politics in the Middle East', Beverley Milton-Edwards adopts a *hybrid* approach for her analysis of the Middle East.

The thematic chapters (about colonial rule, nationalism, political economy, war and lack of peace, political Islam, democratisation, women, ethnicity and minorities, the West and the Middle East) incorporate case studies involving state and nonstate actors. Such an approach, including a thematic structure supplemented by case studies, has the advantage of including both state and nonstate actors in a comparative overview of the region.

Moreover, the presence of case studies adds a depth of understanding to the thematic topics and subjects and how they have (or have not) materialised in the region over time.

The introductory chapter lays the terminological foundations for the Middle East as such and introduces students to the major debates of Middle East scholarship, such as Orientalism. Furthermore, it directs students' attention to perceptions and portraits of the Middle East from both lay and academic perspectives and clarifies the huge difference that exists between the two perspectives. Moreover, it demonstrates that different streams exist within the academic perspectives. Defining which states are included in the Middle East and which are not, as this book does on page 5, is a good foundation for a textbook for students of the Middle East. By the same logic, it would be helpful to apply the same coherence to the term 'the West', which remains undefined, thus leaving students puzzled regarding what is the West

and what is not. The following chapters explore the historical background and the factors that shaped domestic and inter-regional politics, in addition to international affairs, in the Middle East. The book provides students with the necessary theoretical framework and empirical case studies. The reader becomes aware of the imprint left by the colonial experience on the Middle East in terms of geostrategic boundaries, the engineering of political systems, the struggle with modernist discourses, and economic independence.

The book aims to cover the broader Middle East. Yet, not all the chapters are consistent in this regard. Chapter two, about nationalism, for instance, focuses on (pan-) Arab identity. Thus, it does not cover Turkish, Iranian, and Israeli nationalism, among others. Although this chapter was not written broadly to cover the whole Middle East, the author does not explicate why she imposed such limitations. This focus may be misleading for students who view the Middle East and the Arab world interchangeably. Chapter nine (“Them and Us”) focuses too much on the USA in the Middle East and too

little on the EU in the Middle East. In addition, it disregards the USA-EU nexus in the Middle East.

The author’s methodological approach involves leading social scientists and humanists, with the aim of introducing students to the major scholarly works and related conceptual debates on the Middle East. However, not all the chapters are consistent with this approach. Moreover, the book, printed in 2011, does not shed light upon recent revolutionary upheavals (the so-called Arab Spring and the post-Arab Spring) and power constellations in the region (regional order). The chapters contain illustrative materials, discussion questions and references for further useful reading. This book is one of the most viable textbooks about the Middle East. The reviewer hopes that a future updated and extended edition will resolve some of the above-mentioned issues.

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