



Two soldiers walk along an oil pipeline in Iraq. Photo: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Postcard from Pipelineistan

What happens on the immense battlefield for the control of Eurasia will provide the ultimate plot line in the tumultuous rush towards a new, polycentric world order, also known as the New Great Game, argues Pepe Escobar, roving correspondent for Asia Times, analyst for The Real News and contributor to Tomdispatch.com. This article is based on his new book “Obama does Globalistan”.

| by Pepe Escobar

The nonsensical “Global War on Terror”, sports a far more important, if half-hidden, twin – a global energy war. I think of it as the Liquid War, because its bloodstream is the pipelines that crisscross the potential imperial battlefields of the planet. If its crucial embattled frontier these days is the Caspian Basin, the whole of Eurasia is its chessboard. Think of it, geographically, as Pipelineistan.

All geopolitical junkies need a fix. Since the second half of the 1990s, I’ve been hooked on pipelines. I’ve crossed the Caspian in an Azeri cargo ship just to follow the \$4 billion Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan pipeline through the Caucasus. I’ve also trekked various of the overlapping modern Silk Roads of possible future energy flows from Shanghai to Istanbul. In Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan (before

mainstream media’s obsession with al-Qaeda, the Taliban or the “war on terror”. These are diversions compared to the high-stakes, hardcore geopolitical game that follows what flows along the pipelines of the planet.

Calling Dr. Zbig |

In his 1997 magnum opus *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski – realpolitik practitioner extraordinaire and former national security advisor to Jimmy Carter, the president who launched the US on its modern energy wars – laid out in some detail just how to hang on to American ‘global primacy.’ Later, his master plan would be duly copied by that lethal bunch of Dr. No’s congregated at Bill Kristol’s Project for a New American Century (PNAC), who launched George W. Bush on his Iraq war. For Dr. Zbig it all

energy supplies to ‘the painfully slow development of energy alternatives.’

The first skirmishes in Pipelineistan’s Liquid War are already on, and even in the worst of economic times, the risk mounts constantly, given the relentless competition between the West and Asia, be it in the Middle East, in the Caspian theater, or in African oil-rich states like Angola, Nigeria and Sudan.

In these early skirmishes, China reacted swiftly indeed. Even before the attacks of 9/11, its leaders were formulating a response to what they saw as the encroachment of the West on the oil and gas lands of Central Asia. In June 2001, its leaders joined with Russia’s to form the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Back then, the SCO’s junior members were, tellingly enough, the Stans, the energy-rich former SSRs of the Soviet Union – Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan – which the Clinton administration and then the Bush administration, run by former energy men, had been eyeing covetously. Today, Iran, India, and Pakistan enjoy “observer status” in an organization that increasingly aims to control not just regional energy supplies, but Pipelineistan in every direction. This is, of course, the role Washington would like NATO to play.

When the US bombed Kosovo in 1999, this was already seen by Beijing as a move in a new, developing energy war. At stake were the oil and natural gas reserves of a vast span of lands extending from North Africa to the Chinese border. This was where the global empire of US military bases, such as Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo, met Pipelineistan, represented, way back in 1999, by the AMBO pipeline. The US-backed AMBO, short for Albanian Macedonian Bulgarian Oil Corporation, is building a \$1.1 billion pipeline, aka “the Trans-Balkan,” slated to be finished by 2011. It will bring Caspian oil to the West without taking it through either Russia or Iran. As a pipeline, AMBO fits well into a geopolitical strategy of creating a US-controlled energy-security grid that was first developed by President Bill Clinton’s Energy Secretary Bill Richardson and later by Bush’s Vice President Dick Cheney.

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it was moved to Astana, in the middle of the middle of nowhere) the locals were puzzled when I expressed an urge to drive to that country’s oil boomtown Aktau. (“Why? There’s nothing there.”) Entering the Space Odyssey-style map room at the Russian energy giant Gazprom’s headquarters in Moscow – which digitally details every single pipeline in Eurasia – or the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC)’s corporate HQ in Tehran, with its neat rows of female experts in full chador, was my equivalent of entering Aladdin’s cave. And never reading the words “Afghanistan” and “oil” in the same sentence is still a source of amusement for me.

Last year, oil cost a king’s ransom. This year, it’s relatively cheap. But don’t be fooled. Price isn’t the point. Energy is still what everyone who’s anyone wants to get their hands on. The New Great Game goes on, no matter what else muscles into the headlines this week. Forget the

boils down to fostering the emergence of the right set of ‘strategically compatible partners’ for Washington in places where energy flows are strongest. This should be done to shape ‘a more cooperative trans-Eurasian security system.’ By now, Dr. Zbig – among whose fans is evidently President Barack Obama – must have noticed that the Eurasian train which was to deliver the energy goods has been slightly derailed.

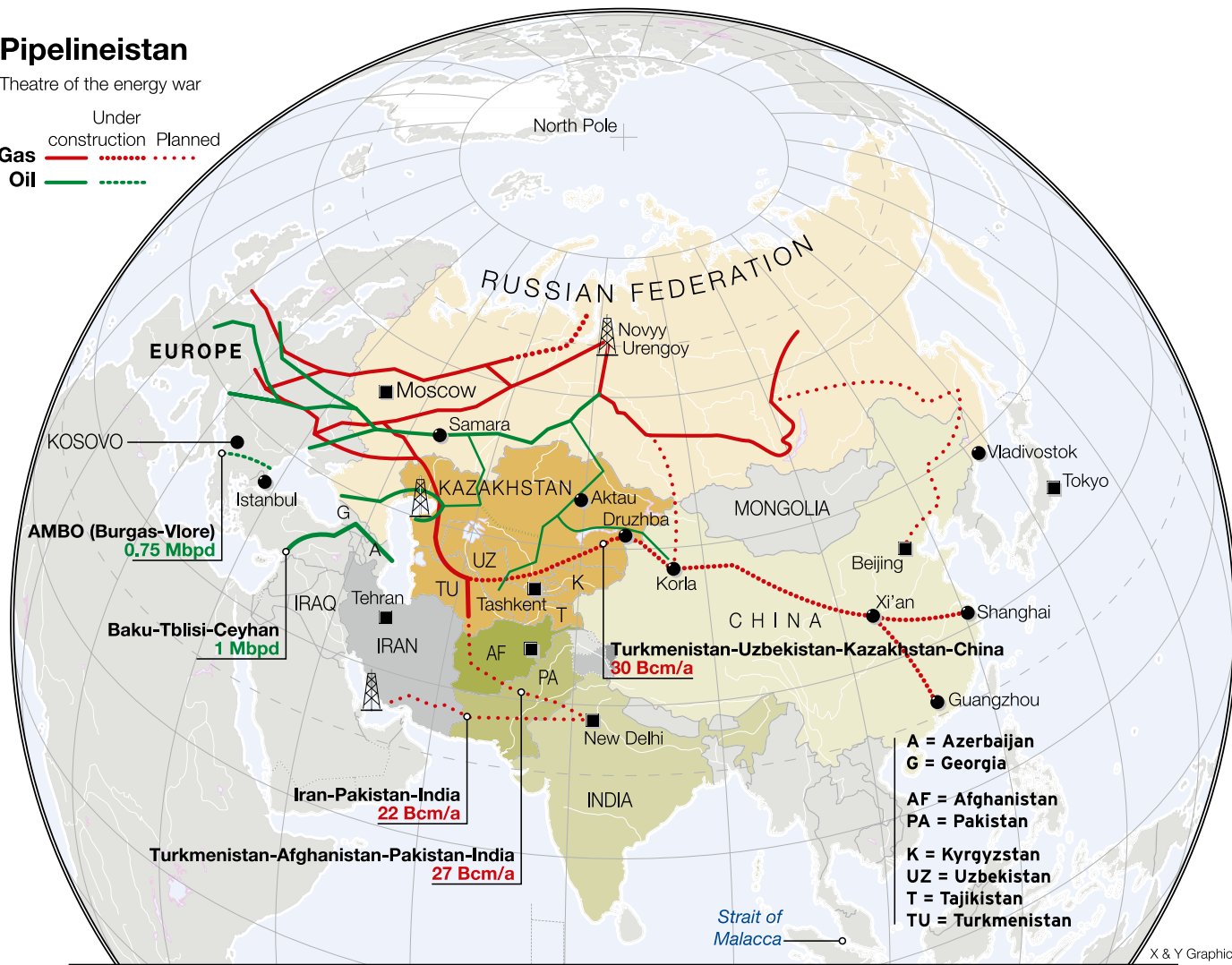
Global financial crisis or not, oil and natural gas are the long-term keys to an inexorable transfer of economic power from the West to Asia. Those who control Pipelineistan – and it’s unlikely to be Washington – will have the upper hand in whatever’s to come, and there’s not a terrorist in the world, or even a long war, that can change that.

Energy expert Michael Klare has been instrumental in identifying the key vectors in the wild, ongoing global scramble for power over Pipelineistan. These range from the increasing scarcity of primary

Pipelineistan

Theatre of the energy war

Under construction Planned
Gas ————
Oil ————



Behind the idea of that “grid” lay a go-for-broke militarization of an energy corridor that would stretch from the Caspian Sea in Central Asia through a series of now independent former SSRs of the Soviet Union to Turkey, and from there into the Balkans (thence on to Europe). It was meant to sabotage the larger energy plans of both Russia and Iran. As for Camp Bondsteel, the largest overseas base the US had built since the Vietnam War and before the Iraq war, is the Balkan equivalent of a giant immobile aircraft carrier, capable of exercising surveillance not only over the Balkans but also over Turkey and the Black Sea region. How could Russia and China not interpret the war in Kosovo, then the invasion of

Afghanistan, followed by the invasion of Iraq and the recent clash in Georgia as straightforward wars for Pipelineistan? Though seldom imagined this way in our mainstream media, the Russian and Chinese leaderships saw a stark “continuity” of policy stretching from Bill Clinton’s humanitarian imperialism to Bush’s Global War on Terror.

Rainy Night in Georgia |

A major battlefield in the Liquid War is Mafia-ridden Georgia. Though its army was crushed in its recent war with Russia, Georgia remains crucial to Washington’s energy policy. It was around the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline that American policy first congealed. Zbig

Brzezinski himself flew into Baku in 1995 as an “energy consultant,” and sold the idea to the Azerbaijani elite. The BTC traverses no less than six war zones, ongoing or potential: Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya and Dagestan, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Turkish Kurdistan. From a purely economic point of view, the BTC made no sense. A pipeline running from Baku through Tehran to Iran’s Kharg Island, would have been the really cheap way to bring Caspian oil to Europe.

Even though Moscow never planned to occupy Georgia long-term in its 2008 war, by briefly cutting off the BTC oil flow, it made it all too clear to global investors

that Georgia wasn't a reliable transit country. The Russians made a mockery of Zbig's world.

In Central Asia, some of the biggest stakes revolve around the monster Kashagan oil field in "snow leopard" Kazakhstan, the jewel in the Caspian. The Kazakhs hold all the cards. How oil will flow from Kashagan will decide whether the BTC lives or dies.

The major Iranian card in the game is the gigantic South Pars natural gas field (which Iran shares with Qatar). Russia and Iran together control roughly 20% of the world's oil reserves and nearly 50% of its gas reserves. It's little wonder that, for the leadership of both countries as well as China's, the idea of Asian integration, of their own "Grid", is sacrosanct. If it ever gets built, a major node on that Grid will surely be the prospective 2,100 kilometre, \$7.6 billion Iran-Pakistan pipeline (the "peace pipeline"). In May, Iran and Pakistan signed a deal by which Iran will sell gas to Pakistan for the next 25 years. India for now has declined to join.

Then there's Turkmenistan. Sun-king Saparmurat "Turkmenbashi" Niyazov is now dead, but the Chinese quickly moved to lobby the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, to speed up the construction of the Mother of All Pipelines. Officially called the Central Asia Gas Pipeline, this Pipelineistan corridor from eastern Turkmenistan to China's Guangdong province, with a branch through Uzbekistan and another through Kazakhstan, will be the longest and most expensive pipeline in the world, 7,000 kilometers of steel pipe at a staggering cost of \$26 billion, built by China's CNPC and providing China with 30 billion cubic meters of gas a year for 30 years.

The Real Afghan War |

In the ever-shifting New Great Game in Eurasia, a key question – why Afghanistan matters – is simply not part of the discussion in the US. The country sits conveniently at the crossroads of

any new Silk Road linking the Caucasus to western China. "Losing" Afghanistan and its key network of US military bases would, from the Pentagon's point of view, be a disaster. In April 2008, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India signed an agreement to build a long-dreamt-about \$7.6 billion pipeline, TAPI, which would cut right through the heart of Western Afghanistan. TAPI's construction is to start in 2010 and the gas should begin flowing by 2015. (But don't hold your breath.) TAPI's roller-coaster history begins in the mid-1990s, when the Taliban were dined (but not wined) by the California-based energy company Unocal and the Clinton machine. A Taliban delegation enjoyed Houston's hospitality in early 1997 and then Washington's

soon forced down Afghan throats as the country's new leader.

Among the first fruits of Donald Rumsfeld's bombing and invasion of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 was the signing by Karzai, Pakistani President Musharraf and Turkmenistan's Niyazov of an agreement committing themselves to build TAPI. Russian President Vladimir Putin did nothing – until September 2006, when Gazprom suddenly agreed to buy all of Niyazov's natural gas at the 40% mark-up the dictator demanded. Turkmenistan indicated it was bowing out of any US-backed Trans-Caspian pipeline project.

A knock-out blow to TAP, it seemed, but here's the beauty of Pipelineistan: the game goes on forever. Just before he

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in December of that year. They cannily courted Argentinean oil company Bridas, which was later acquired by BP Amoco. A key Amoco consultant happened to be the ubiquitous Zbig Brzezinski, while another such luminary, Henry Kissinger, just happened to be a consultant for Unocal. Under newly elected president George W. Bush, Unocal gained the upper hand. The Taliban were invited back to Washington in March 2001. Negotiations eventually broke down because of those pesky transit fees the Taliban demanded.

But beware the Empire's fury. At a Group of Eight summit meeting in Genoa in July 2001, Western diplomats indicated that the Bush administration had decided to take the Taliban down before year's end. The attacks of September 11, 2001 just slightly accelerated the schedule. Hamid Karzai, a former CIA asset and free lance Unocal P.R. man (he's always denied it), who had entertained visiting Taliban members at barbecues in Houston, was

died in December 2006, the flamboyant Turkmenbashi had boasted that his country held enough reserves to export 150 billion cubic meters of gas annually (three times as much as Qatar) for the next 250 years. Given his notorious megalomania, nobody took him seriously. So in March 2008, Gurbanguly ordered an audit by the British consultancy GCA. GCA confirmed that the Yolotan-Osman gas fields in southwest Turkmenistan were among the world's four largest, holding up to a staggering 14 trillion cubic meters of natural gas (5 times the total Norwegian reserves). The problem for Gazprom is that, according to a Gazprom source quoted in the Russian business daily Kommersant, the newly discovered mega-fields turn out not to be part of its deal with the Turkmen. So this year, Obama's national security strategists lost no time unleashing a no-holds-barred diplomatic campaign to court Turkmenistan And so the game will go on. ■