

Iran: an east-west strategic bridge

by A. Broujerdi

The following is a speech by Mr. Broujerdi, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, on May 7.

In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful: Mr. Chairman, distinguished participants, dear guests, may I start by expressing my appreciation to the organizers of this symposium for holding this important gathering. In the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, and political and economic developments in the latter part of the 1980s, the new independent Central Asian republics became the focus of international attention. This was due to a number of reasons, including the immense economic potentials, fertile plains, and mines, in these republics. The republics have come under the spotlight of international firms from the East and the West, and over the past two years, have been witness to major investments by large multinational corporations. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the formation of the new republics, good opportunities became available. Two international phenomena occurred. First, the Islamic Republic of Iran became the hub of global economic and political relations of Central Asia and the Caucasus. This role of a linking hub has its roots in Iran's geographical location, as well as its pragmatic foreign policy.

All Central Asian republics, except Georgia, are landlocked, and should pass through Iran for direct and indirect economic connections with the rest of the world. Those countries that see economic ties with the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus have no alternative but to use the land and air routes of Iran, China, and Russia. Among these countries, Iran and China enjoy, uniquely, a very advantageous position.

China borders a part of Central Asia in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and has various land and air routes to Central Asia. Iran also borders the region of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and its land and sea routes are linked to Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Russia. An international study on Iran's connection routes to Central Asia would be very constructive.

The emergence of these new republics brought about great cooperative relationships with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition to geographical contiguity with the Central Asian countries and the Caucasus, the two sides have many things in common, including shared faith, culture, and his-

tory. They have since time immemorial enjoyed strong bonds of amity that have withstood the test of time and the ordeals and tribulations of the past decades. Iran warmly welcomed the independence of the republics by embarking on an all-out and relentless effort to expand mutually beneficial and reinforcing political, commercial, economic, cultural, tourist, oil, and marine relations. To this end, and for greater regional solidarity, Iran welcomed the joining of these countries to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) as new members, and proposed the establishment of the Caspian Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (CSECO), comprising Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. They have all agreed in principle with this new cooperation scheme, and the final formalities are currently under way.

Euro-Asian rail hookup completed

The geopolitical advantage of the Islamic Republic of Iran, its position as a regional and continental linking bridge between the Central Asian countries and the open sea, have made the linkage of its railway system with the railway network of the new republics and Russia a reality. This new railway linkage will greatly facilitate transport of goods and trade between Central Asia and destinations in other parts of the world, and contributes to better understanding of the culture, religion, and history of these nations. Construction of the 300-kilometer Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan railway, which complements the 700-kilometer-long Bafq-Bandar Abbas railroad, has been finally materialized. This railway network will be inaugurated on May 14, 1996, before heads of state and dignitaries of more than 30 countries.

This grand project of the century, that was dubbed by ESCAP [UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific] as the Iron Silk Route, was finished by our experts and with the help of the brotherly country of Turkmenistan without any international assistance. We have now constructed the missing link in the Euro-Asian railway network.

With the operation of this railway, Lianyungang port in east China will be connected to Bandar Abbas at the Persian Gulf via the cities of Urumqi, Almaty [formerly Alma-Ata], Tashkent, Sarakhs, Mashhad, and Teheran, providing access to the open seas for land-locked Central Asia nations, on one side, and linking this railroad to Rotterdam via Teheran, Istanbul, and Europe, on the other side.

I should seize this opportunity to express our appreciation for the cooperation of the government of China in constructing segments of the railway network to make possible the first running of a train from Lianyungang port to Tashkent in November 1995. The nations of the region and the world will now see the fruits of collective and regional effort for greater economic prosperity and well-being. The length of this railway reaches 2,750 kilometers, as outlined below:

Central Asian rail link to Persian Gulf port is now complete



Bandar Abbas-Teheran	1,500 kilometers
Teheran-Mashhad	950 kilometers
Mashhad-Sarakhs	170 kilometers
Sarakhs-Tajan (Turkmenistan)	130 kilometers

Implementation of this project is of international economic significance and can provide the best and safest transportation and transit routes to the CIS states, particularly in Central Asia, and China. Starting in Xi'an, China, this route will revive the historical Silk Road, that has been called the East-West bridge. The Silk Road had been in existence 1,800 years. This ancient route was the most important trade and travel road in the past centuries, with a travel distance of 8,000 kilometers. A branch of this road began in Xi'an, crossed the Pamir Plains, and passed through Marv, Samarkand, and Balkh in Transoxania. This route contributed to consolidation of trade and cultural interaction among the nations on its path.

Mr. Chairman, linking of the Silk Road land connections from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean in the south and west, to China and the Pacific coast in north and east, and subsequent connection of sea routes from the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean to ports in Canton [Guangzhou], Shanghai, and Lianyungang via the Malacca Strait, will create a new cycle of exchanges of raw materials, fin-

ished products, and technology between west and south Asia. With this new development, cooperation between the two regional groupings of ECO and ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations], and China, will be of special importance, as it will consolidate economic and political independence, and will help restore the cultural identity of Central Asian people.

Other projects planned

As I have explained in my presentation, Iran has always occupied an important strategic position for its location as a continental bridge between Asia, Africa, and Europe. The revival of the Silk Road will enhance this advantageous position. In addition to this project, the Islamic Republic of Iran plans to implement other important railway and road projects to enhance its strategic capacity. Among these projects, mention can be made of the grand Kerman-Mashhad Railway. With this project completed along the Iran-Pakistan border, the distance of rail travel from Sarakhs to Bandar Abbas will be reduced from 2,750 kilometers to 1,850 kilometers, which is 900 kilometers shorter.

Excellency, it has become possible once again for Iran to benefit from new communication possibilities and historical and cultural bonds, to promote amicable relationships and consolidate economic, technical, and spiritual ties with a vast part of Asia and the Far East. The road network from Central Asia to China, and shipping lanes from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, herald a prosperous future and greater friendly and fraternal relationships among nations of the region. In this very connection, we have had constructive talks with Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines. These countries will use this transit route for transport of their goods to be traded beyond their region.

As you are all aware, economic development of any region depends, most importantly, on its communication and trade routes. I want to seize this opportunity to state our support and appreciation for the constructive decision at the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in March 1996 to construct the Singapore-Thailand railroad, which complements the historical Silk Road. It is indeed a good step for the development of countries in the region. When this grand project is materialized, the railway network of Singapore and Malaysia will be linked to Thailand and China, and will pave the way for much greater commerce and economic exchanges between the member countries of ASEAN, China, Iran, and the Commonwealth of Independent States. It will also impart fresh momentum to commerce and industry, promotion of tourism, and cultural and technological exchanges, and will ultimately lead to the creation of a powerful trade and industrial bloc.

To conclude, I want to thank the organizers of this symposium and wish them success and happiness. I should also express my sincere appreciation to the government and people of China for their warm hospitality.



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