

Iran inaugurates rail link to revive the ancient Silk Road

by Hussein Al-Nadeem

In a major strategic development in Central Asia, 12 heads of state and representatives from 50 nations attended the inauguration ceremony of the Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tedzhen (Tajian) railway in northeast Iran on May 13. Connecting Iran with Turkmenistan, this 165-kilometer rail line is a crucial link to revive the ancient Silk Road.

This ancient trade route used to transport silk, gold, spices, and other valuable products from China to Europe, but has been inoperative since the 13th century following the Mongol invasions. The route remained closed for over 600 years, including as a result of British imperial policy beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries, and later because of the British-orchestrated Cold War. The completion of the project has finally made real a long-awaited dream of connecting Russia and the land-locked Caucasus and Central Asian states to the warm-water ports of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

At the same time, it now connects Asia with Europe through one network of rail lines extending from the Far East, on the Pacific coasts of China and Japan, through continental Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey, to the western-most point of Europe on the Atlantic coast. Another line is now under construction in Iran to connect the same network via southeast Iran, Kerman-Zahedan, to Mirjaveh on the border with Pakistan. Thence, to Southeast Asia and the Far East through India.

This project will open a new phase of economic cooperation among the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central and East Asia. Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said at the inauguration ceremony: "Today we open a railway in cooperation with our friends in Turkmenistan which revitalizes the historic Silk Road, which is famous as a symbol of East-West relations. . . . It shortens the long distance between Chinese ports to the Persian Gulf, is the bridge for the region and the world."

At the ceremony, Turkish President Suleyman Demirel said, "An historic legend comes to life. The Silk Road was not only about a route but was about the coming together of various nations." In the same vein, Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng described the railroad as "the Silk Road for the 21st century."

Following the ceremony, the Presidents of the member-states of the Economic Cooperation Organization, comprised of Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan, left Sarakhs for Ashkhabad, the capital of Turkmenistan, for

a summit meeting on cooperation in economic development and trade. The ECO, although short of finances, established a trade and development bank, a reinsurance company, and a joint airline company.

Countering Britain's 'Great Game'

The Silk Road is also important as an element for political stabilization in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Asian subcontinent. These regions have been wracked, since the middle of the 19th century, by regional wars, civil wars, and other political and military conflicts, all resulting from Great Britain's regional geopolitical strategies historically known as the "Great Game." Since the 1970s, the region has been plagued by the modern form of this Great Game, the so-called "Arc of Crisis," devised by Anglo-American strategists, including Bernard Lewis and Sir Henry Kissinger. In the last century, the Great Game was aimed at preventing the Russian Empire from reaching India, then a colony of the British Empire. Today's Arc of Crisis shares the same purpose: preventing any real economic development across Eurasia. Today, as then, transport of goods from Asia to western Europe is done over the seas, predominantly under the control of British companies.

A clinical specimen of what the British, still today, are passionately scheming, is the reaction which came out from British media and political institutions, such as Chatham House (the Royal Institute of International Affairs) and the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. Their line is, that there will emerge an Iranian-Russian conflict over the wealth of Central Asia; Iranian-Turkish control of the Caucasus and Turkish-speaking Central Asia; conflict between the United States, which "wants to strangle the mullahs economically," and Iran—a Hobbesian world of "each against all." One can expect new schemes to be hatched in London in an attempt to make such conflicts a reality. The bare truth is that Russia, Turkey, and Iran will, to a large extent, share the benefits of the Silk Road equally. For the first time in modern history, the question is whether Russia will be able to connect its transport network to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean without having to go to war.

The construction of major infrastructure projects and development of these regions compels these nations to solve their political conflicts peacefully and to free themselves of

New rail lines build the 'Silk Road of the 21st century'



- Existing main rail lines
- == Newly completed rail line
- Proposed new rail routes

British geopolitics. A glance at a map demonstrates that almost every regional conflict lies astride key infrastructure nodal points. For example, the bloody Afghanistan civil war prevents linking Pakistan and India with Central Asia and Russia. One significant sign of the potential for peaceful resolution of conflicts, was the statement by President of Pakistan Farooq Ahmed Leghari, at the inauguration ceremony. Leghari expressed hope that Iran will work with Pakistan to conclude a peaceful end to the war in Afghanistan. He also urged Iran to mediate in the conflict between Pakistan and India around the Jammu and Kashmir problem.

The Iranian government, meanwhile, urged Azerbaijan and Armenia, which are at war over Nagorno-Karabakh, to settle their problems, to make it possible to reactivate the railway which can link the Iranian rail network to the Georgian Batuman port on the Black Sea. Mediation efforts are being pushed to stop the struggle in Tajikistan between the government and opposition forces. The problems between Iran and Turkey emerging from the military activities of the Kurdish Workers Party in southeast Turkey must be solved. These are some of the real issues that have to be dealt with, if development and peace are to be achieved. This must be the last station for the Great Game. New relations based on economic cooperation and partnership among the nations of these regions must be installed in its place.

Details of the New Silk Road project

1. Inaugurated on May 13, the Mashhad-Sarakhs railway is the first stage of a bigger project being implemented by Iran to link the Transcaucasian-Central Asian rail grid with that of Iran, which in turn is connected to the Turkish grid in the west. Thus, Iran would be a key center of the Eurasian land-bridge comprising a network of railroads from Beijing to Urumqi in north China, Almaty in Kazakhstan, Tashkent in Uzbekistan, Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan, Teheran in Iran, and to Istanbul, Turkey, which is already in place.

2. The second phase of the project is the completion of a railway from the northern Iranian city of Mianeh, to Astara, across the border into Azerbaijan on the western coast of the Caspian Sea, and from there to Baku, and eventually to the Russian network. When completed, this would become the shortest route between Moscow and the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Today, there is an inactive railway that goes from Tabriz in northern Iran, through Nakhichevan, the Azeri enclave in Armenia, to Yerevan, and from there it splits to the north, to Russia, and to the west, to Istanbul, via north Anadol.

3. On the southern line, another railway between Kerman and Zahedan in southeast Iran is under construction. This one is intended to connect the Iranian rail network to Pakistan, at the border city Mirjaveh. From Pakistan, a network of railroads extends through India to Bangladesh, and eventually to all of Southeast Asia. The transport of goods and passengers from Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent via Kerman-Teheran-Istanbul to Europe, and also to Russia and the Caucasus, and vice versa, would be possible.

4. Last year, Iran inaugurated the Bafq-Bandar Abbas railway. This, together with a planned Mashhad-Bafq-Bandar Abbas railway, which will shorten the route by 900 kilometers compared to the detour through Teheran, would give Turkmenistan and the rest of the Russian-Central Asian grid a more direct route to the shores of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

5. A railroad from Kerman to the Chah Bahar port on the Gulf of Oman is now under construction.

These railroads will not merely serve as means of transporting goods and passengers across Eurasia, but will be the backbone for development in the region. They serve as supply lines for other infrastructure projects along the Silk Road. Transport of raw materials and energy needed for industry and agriculture could easily be supplied to infrastructure and industrial projects along the Silk Road. Major trade, industry, and cultural centers will be built along these rail networks.

Sarakhs, once a forgotten and deserted oasis lying on the edge of a vast desert, has become the heart of a transcontinental crossroads, with an international airport and a major marketing center. Two major reservoirs are under construction to the south of Sarakhs and northeast of Mashhad, to turn the vast arid area on both sides of the Silk Road railway into cultivable land. Most of the deserts, extending from northeast Iran to Central Asia, contain the potential for agro-industrial development. The New Silk Road is the key element for that development to proceed.

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