

India awakens to land-bridge potential

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

On Nov. 28, *The Hindu*, a leading English-daily in India, carried an op-ed by a senior strategic analyst, Sujit Dutt, on India-China relations, which contained the following startling paragraphs:

“... China is rapidly expanding its political, economic, and diplomatic role through a promotion of the Eurasian land-bridge plan—the Silk Road—linking it with Russia, Central Asia, and Europe. Vast untapped markets and resources and trade would be opened up by such high-speed communication and rail networks.

“It is vital that India actively promote a similar land-bridge linking it to Southeast Asia, and through Pakistan and Iran, to Europe. Enormous gains are possible as the route opens up energy, agricultural, and industrial transfers through the entire region and [for] transforming the economies of all the states involved.”

Such a formulation by a senior analyst at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis, India's premier defense and foreign policy think-tank, will not go unnoticed in the corridors of power. Its timing made it doubly significant. The article appeared on the day that China's President Jiang Zemin arrived in New Delhi, the first visit to India ever by a Chinese President. The article served to remind Indian policymakers that, if India wants to interact with China as an equal power, it must broaden its vision and articulate its important future economic and development policies, and give them concrete shape. In this context, such multifaceted projects as the southern Eurasian land-bridge, which would connect Singapore to Europe by rail, should be brought up as a subject for discussion.

A few days later, on Dec. 5, *EIR* was invited by the School of International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi's leading academic institution, to present a paper on the reasons why India should build a southern development corridor linking Southeast Asia to Europe by rail. The *EIR* presentation outlining the land-bridge concept, was one of three on the subject of recent developments in Central Asia, the topic of the seminar, which was attended by a number of diplomats from Central Asia, top academics, and strategic analysts. The seminar was inaugurated by a former foreign minister and a senior Congress Party figure, Pranab Mukher-

jee. Those present at the seminar were concerned about developments in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and India's lack of positive official response to them.

India must look to the region

Both Dutt's article and the seminar discussions reflected the view that India, after being throttled throughout the Cold War and kept busy defending its territorial integrity, must now broaden its ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Koreans, Japan, and Myanmar (Burma) in the east, and the Central Asian and Islamic nations to the west of India. India has tried, although with minimal results, to expand trade ties to the South Asian Association of Regional Countries (SAARC) member nations. With a population of 950 million, almost nine times larger than any other SAARC member nation, India is the obvious candidate to lead in integrating the region's large pool of skilled-manpower-based industries to the ever-improving technologies in Europe and the United States. The potential that this kind of development opens up for the region has not been brought to the fore, however, because policy thinking has been locked in by geopolitical realities.

Dutt's article has, in effect, broken up this game, stating clearly that the Chinese venture to connect its vast landmass, and the industrialized Asian countries to its east, to Europe, through the untapped vast reserves of energy and mineral resources of Central Asia, is no longer a mere concept, but a reality, and India must wake up to this fact.

Notwithstanding Dutt's article, and a wide-ranging discussions on the subject among some strategic analysts recently, Indian authorities have not yet placed the issue on the table for discussion, although there are definite signs that it cannot be kept aside much longer.

The reasons for India's lackadaisical approach center around the on-the-ground realities created by the 1947 partition of the subcontinent—the vital blow by the British Raj prior to its formal departure from Indian soil.

How the containment was built

Historically, India has been a trading nation, but it is no longer. Why? For millennia, traders from China had been coming into India through the narrow passes in the Himalayas in the east, to avail themselves of what was then called the “Southern Silk Road” on their way to Europe, while traders from Arabia and Europe were coming into India from the west. Indian traders visited throughout Southeast Asia, braving the sea using the trade winds.

All this came to a halt with the advent of the British “Great Game.” India, the “crown jewel” of the British Empire, was sealed off in the west, with Afghanistan made a buffer state, to protect against a hypothetical invasion by Tsarist and, later, Bolshevik Russia. In the east and northeast, buffer “tribal” states were created within India, by imposing restrictions

through the drawing of the “inner line.” These buffer states were erected ostensibly to prevent the Russians in the north and the colonial French, who already had worked out an Entente Cordiale with the imperialist British vis-à-vis Indochina and South Asia, from challenging the Raj. In the process of using the buffer states and the “Great Game” to establish “forward” policies probing, provoking, and testing such great powers as Russia and China, the British virtually choked off India, and made it a nation whose trade is directed through the seas to the south, dominated by the imperial British Navy, which controlled all the chokepoints on the route to Europe and beyond.

In 1947, when the partition of the subcontinent was executed, the pattern held, and India’s east and west were cut off to make another separate state—Pakistan. By 1971, this situation changed slightly, throwing out a ray of hope, which was shut off within a few years with the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the founder of Bangladesh, in 1975. So, India was effectively choked off from its natural gateways to both the southeast and the west, through a geopolitical setting, soaked with hostility, vis-à-vis Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, Bangladesh. Not surprisingly, India turned inward, almost seeing itself as a vast geopolitical “island.” During the Cold War, the Soviet Union, China, and the Anglo-American-led “Free World” engaged in a protracted struggle for geopolitical control in Asia. India’s containment and self-isolation became increasingly consolidated.

The end of the Cold War did not change the situation much. The United States, the “sole superpower” after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, emerged as a relatively economically weak nation due to its own economic follies of two decades.

However, China, contained earlier by hostile nations across the seas in the east and a hostile Soviet Union in the west and north, saw the historic opportunity. Following a lengthy period, in which China was largely paralyzed by internal strife (the “Cultural Revolution”) and a correspondingly unfortunate foreign policy toward many of its neighbors, including India, the leaders in Beijing developed a new foreign policy and geo-economic strategy. The Chinese leadership began to realize the great economic and development potentials that exist under conditions of a harmonious relationship with South Asia, as well as with Central-West Asia. The Chinese thrust for the Eurasian land-bridge is a central feature of this strategic re-orientation.

India’s special qualifications

There are certain realities which make India immensely competent to handle implementation of such a land-bridge concept immediately. For instance, the last “missing link” of the Eurasian land-bridge that the Chinese have established, involved joining the rail lines between Mashhad, Iran and Tajan (Tedzhen), Turkmenistan. The design and engineering

work for the project was done by two Indian public sector companies, IRCON and RITES. The work was completed last May, and the line was opened on May 14, following a get-together of heads of state and important personalities. Unfortunately, because of electoral compulsions, India was represented by a bureaucrat.

In addition to the availability of adequate engineering and skilled manpower necessary to accomplish such an important task, India has the second largest railroad network in the world, second only to Russia’s. However, railroad planning, a key indicator of the long-term policy for upgrading of technology and transport, remains inward-looking, trying to connect all parts of the country equally by rail. There has been no real vision to use the railroads for cheap transportation of the value-added, high-tech products which have begun to abound in India, thanks to joint ventures and international technology collaboration.

At the same time, there exists about 3,500 kilometers of broad gauge (1,676 mm) railroad connecting Myanmar to Iran, with one missing link, which, when filled, would connect India’s northeast to Myanmar. The length of the missing link is only about 50 km. Another missing link is in Iran itself, between Kerman and Zahedan, which is to be bridged by a 175-km standard gauge (1,435 mm) railroad. Myanmar and Southeast Asia, where another missing link exists between Myanmar and Thailand, is on a meter gauge (1,000 mm). In other words, the southern railroad land-bridge will have to deal with changes of rail gauges. However, the problem is relatively easy to cope with. Transfer stations, at the end of the meter gauge and at the end of the broad gauge, would work, particularly in the case of container traffic. In fact, the east-west broad gauge which runs through the subcontinent is about 3,500-km long, which makes it easy to operate. Similarly, the length of the meter gauge from Singapore to Burma is sufficient to make another transfer station viable.

In addition, India is now in the process of upgrading its locomotives. India has already received a license to manufacture 6,000-horsepower, 160-kilometer-per-hour locomotives designed by the Adtranz—a joint venture of ABB of Sweden and Daimler Benz of Germany. These locomotives, some 30 of which have been bought and are already under construction, will start rolling off the factory premises by 1998. Introduction of these locomotives, and the soon-to-be-introduced modern, electronic signalling system, a weak link in India’s railroad network, will enhance the railroad’s efficiency and capabilities significantly.

These facts are now being increasingly noticed, although not fully grasped. A document, prepared by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) years ago, looked at the prospect of a Trans-Asia railroad and highway which would connect the Asian countries. The *Asian Age*, a major English-language daily,

reported in its front page on Dec. 9 that, during the recent visit to India by Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, this issue was very much on the agenda for discussion, and there are definite indications that Bangladesh is willing to be a part of this railroad system.

ESCAP's Trans-Asian railroad proposes connecting Calcutta to Kunming, China, through Dhaka, Bangladesh and Myitkina, Myanmar, over a difficult mountainous terrain of about 350 km. India has also proposed a railroad which would link the Bangladesh cities of Dhaka, Chittagong, and Khulna, on its way to Yangon, Myanmar. It seems that both countries are interested in developing this railroad, in order to cater to the trade with China, Nepal, Myanmar, and Iran. Myopic as it is, this proposal is an important effort to break down India's containment in the east, and will be a very positive step toward putting together the land-bridge to Europe.

Even the more difficult containment in the west, which exists in the form of a hostile Pakistan, is showing signs of softening. The absolute failure of the Pakistani elite, the land-based gentry who made Pakistan's trade entirely depen-

dent on the health of the annual cotton crop, in the political and economic sphere, and even in their ability to govern the nation, has given rise to a group of entrepreneurs, best exemplified by the Karachi Chamber of Commerce, who want to integrate Pakistan into regional as well as international trade for the country's future well-being.

Iran has played a useful role in this endeavor. Isolated by Saudi Arabia and the United States, Iran seeks an outlet into Europe, and access to Central Asia, India, and to the east of India. Iran's perseverance in its efforts to persuade Pakistan to allow a gas pipeline to be laid to India through its territory, is indicative of its sincerity. Moreover, Iran is in constant contact with India for the purpose of enhancing its and India's trade with the Central Asian nations.

These are positive signs, although New Delhi has been slow in taking note of them. At the same time, the developments in Afghanistan, with the Taliban in power in Kabul, create uncertainties. New Delhi looks at it as yet another attempt to break through the containment, and give a boost to those Pakistani elites who have been instrumental in preventing India from trading westward by land.

LaRouches' role praised in Malaysian daily

The Kuala Lumpur daily *Sun* on Dec. 9, featured the leading role of Lyndon and Helga LaRouche in the fight for global development, in an article by well-known Islamic scholar Dr. Kassim Ahmad. Dr. Ahmad begins by summarizing the theme presented by Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, during a speech in Beijing in August, and again in Mahathir's keynote to the Third Pacific Dialogue in Kuala Lumpur on Nov. 22, where he called for "America and Asia and whosoever wishes, to join hands in a joint venture, to build a New World, a global commonwealth such as the world has never seen, worthy of the hopes of mankind and worthy of the twenty-first century."

Dr. Ahmad describes this as one of "two diametrically opposing views emerging on the future of the world": The oligarchical opposition being typified by Samuel ("Clash of Civilizations") Huntington, the Royal Institute for International Affairs, and the Bush-Kissinger Republican Party faction, who perpetrated genocide in the Gulf War.

Now, Dr. Ahmad argues, it is time for Asia to invoke the anti-colonial, republican, and humanist tradition of Americans like Washington, J.Q. Adams, Lincoln, McKinley, Franklin Roosevelt, and Kennedy. "Asia and the world need such an America to reshape the modern world.

Anti-colonial Asia, with rich philosophical-ethical traditions as are imbedded in the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Islam, are in such a position to invoke this anti-colonial, humanist, and republican (not the Republican Party, to be sure!) America, and to partner with it to build the New World defined by Dr. Mahathir."

That tradition "is very much alive [in] the much-maligned LaRouche philosophical-political movement of nearly 30 years . . . and in its younger sister organization, the Schiller Institute, led by Helga Zepp LaRouche." He continues, "Mr. LaRouche himself, now 73 years old, and wrongfully jailed for five years . . . and now on parole, has visited many countries and called on many heads of state."

Dr. Ahmad reviews the international scope of the Schiller Institute's work, including participation in three conferences in Kuala Lumpur against the Iraq embargo, on human rights, and in support of Bosnia-Herzegovina. LaRouche's writings on the disintegration of the world financial system and ridding NATO of the Entente Cordiale have been discussed in capitals around the world, while Helga LaRouche led a Schiller Institute delegation to the International Symposium on Economic Development of the Regions in Beijing, organized in May by the Chinese government, and attended by over 460 experts from 34 countries. Dr. Ahmad quotes her, that "the reason why I am so optimistic is . . . because the genie of world development is already out of the bottle," as well as from Pakistani Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg's September 1996 speech in Beijing citing the LaRouches' work.