

# Egypt Assesses 'New Silk Road' Policy

by Hussein al-Nadeem

As Egypt opened its new Suez Canal bridges, Cairo University's Center for Asian Studies (CAS) published *The New Silk Road*, a book-length Arabic study of the Eurasian Land-Bridge policy. The book undertakes a rigorous study of the nature of this global project and its impact on Egypt's economic future. It is a sign of Egypt's decision to play a leading role in the Middle East and Africa in promoting this kind of development perspective, as a means for building peace and stability. It also reflects Egypt's historically pivotal position as a bridge between two continents and different cultures.

Edited by Prof. Mohammed Selim, chairman of the CAS, Prof. Gaber Said Awadh, and Dr. Norhan El-Sheikh, this book grew out of a seminar in the Mediterranean city of Port Said, on April 15-17, 2000 (see *EIR*, May 26, 2000). That seminar, "The New Silk Road and Its Impact on Egyptian Interests," was an initiative of the CAS to clarify all the aspects of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, which is also often referred to as the "New Silk Road." Fears had been raised in Egypt, that this project would become a competitor to the trade through the Suez Canal, and would deprive Egypt of a significant source of its national income. The April 2000 conference was important to clear up that "zero-sum game" assumption about trade and economy. Hence, its educational importance for Egyptian and Arab policymakers, and citizens as well.

## The Two Major Land-Bridge Initiatives

This book bears witness to the deep impression the ideas of American economist Lyndon LaRouche and *EIR* have made on the intellectual and political debate in this country. In their introduction, the editors state that "a new era in the history of international relations and Eurasian integration has emerged" since the fall of the Berlin Wall. They describe how, during that decade, two major initiatives, "with highly elaborated and crystallized projects," have taken shape. One is the Chinese initiative to revive the Silk Road and connect the Chinese port in Lianyungang in the East to the European ports in Rotterdam in the West, across Siberia and Central Asia, through a network of high-speed railways that cross more than 40 nations. The Chinese government organized an international conference in Beijing in May 1996 to discuss this great project, with representatives of 34 nations (see *EIR*, June 14, 1996). The other, the editors call "The LaRouche Project," widely publicized through the 1997 *EIR Special Report*: "The Eurasian Land-Bridge: The 'New Silk Road' —

Locomotive For Worldwide Economic Development."

The book's second chapter is a study by Dr. Gaber Saied Awad of the *EIR Special Report*. Giving the historic and strategic context, he indicates that "the idea of building continental land-bridges and transport corridors goes back to the American economist Henry Carey who played a key role in building the first continental bridge in the world in the United States in the 1860s." Dr. Awadh describes how this idea was replicated across Eurasia, but was regarded by the British Empire as a major threat to its maritime hegemony. Because of this British opposition, he writes, "It took a century to build the next Eurasian continental bridge."

The contribution of historian Dr. Galal el-Hafnawi is a guided tour through 2,000 years of the history of the Old Silk Road. Other sections, by academicians and political analysts, deal with the attitude of nations — China, Russia, Iran, Central Asia, Georgia, Western Europe, and the United States — toward this great project, and how it will affect each one.

For some time, the debate in Egypt around the New Silk Road has focussed on the "conflicting interest" between the rail-based transport of goods from Asia to Europe, and the maritime shipping of goods through the Suez Canal. Chapters 9 and 10 take on this specific issue with a detailed study. Mohammed Rizk from the Suez Canal Authority describes all the practical and technical aspects, and concludes that, for "especially container transport between Asia and Europe, the sea routes would still have the upper hand"; but, he emphasizes that the Egyptian state should "improve the connections between the strategic ports on the Suez Canal and Port Said, and the new, planned railways and roads, because this will, in fact, increase the revenues of the Canal, and would be beneficial to the economy as a whole."

LaRouche's idea of the Eurasian Land-Bridge is the building of "development corridors," and not merely a road for transporting goods. Dr. Mohammed Selim elaborates this idea in the final chapter, describing the impact of the New Silk Road on Egypt's economic and strategic interests. Selim rebukes those who believe in the "zero-sum game theory," and concludes that "this road will be beneficial to the Egyptian economy, if Egypt defines the right policies to benefit from this project. Egypt has indeed started building the 'Orient Express' to connect its transport network to the eastern Arab states and the New Silk Road." The CAS recommends the Land-Bridge not only as a transportation route, but also as part of a comprehensive national plan, aimed at developing every part of the country, by bringing water, roads, and a qualified labor force from the Nile Valley to the desert.

Although Egypt has been facing very difficult financial conditions, it has kept its commitment to these projects as a matter of "life or death," and with significant support from other Arab states, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to state that the building of the bridges across the Suez Canal and the publication of this book have significant strategic implications.