

China's 'Western Development' Spurs Growth of the Eurasian Land-Bridge

by William Jones

The Eurasian Land-Bridge conference, held in Beijing in 1996, with the participation of a Schiller Institute delegation headed by Helga Zepp-LaRouche (see *EIR Special Report*, "The Eurasian Land-Bridge: 'The New Silk Road'—Locomotive for worldwide economic development," January 1997) truly represented a far-sighted and optimistic vision for the development of the Eurasian land-mass and its peoples. Since then, the political and strategic situation has placed many obstacles in the way of development. The Bush Administration's series of local wars, from the Mediterranean region to Afghanistan, is setting in motion a conflagration throughout the entire area. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's attempt, backed by beastman Dick Cheney, to create a series of military "lily pad" bases in Central Asia, positioned to play a new "Great Game" with both China and Russia, has hampered, if not stopped, many of the more ambitious development projects in Central Asia. The development of the Eurasian transport grid has, nevertheless, proceeded apace. The latest meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Shanghai in June 2006, which placed the economic and energy issues at the forefront of the regional discussion, served to underline the strategic importance of the development of this rail/highway transportation project as the only real counterpole to the Cheney-Rumsfeld war policy.

A March 2006 article in the *China Quarterly* by Prof. John Garver of the Georgia Institute of Technology, a specialist in these issues, indicates the progress of the transportation grid. With the generous permission of Professor Garver, the following overview borrows heavily from his article.

Charting a Course Through Mountain and Desert

One of the main lines of East-West rail transportation from China to the West traverses Xinjiang, China's westernmost province, to Europe. The line crosses Kazakstan at the Ala Pass and then proceeds to Aqtoghay in Kazakstan. The Chinese portion of the line has recently been upgraded with double-tracking and electrification to alleviate the growing traffic. The Kazak portion of the line is also undergoing considerable improvement. From Aqtoghay, rail lines proceed further north into Russia, or southwest to Alma Aty and on to the Caspian Sea.

A second line from Xinjiang through Kazakstan is

planned to cross the Kazak border further south and continue on to Alma Aty, the old Kazak capital, cutting the distance there by 350 miles. China's Ninth Five-year Plan (1996-2000) has also projected a third line from Xinjiang (the Southern Xinjiang Railway) which would extend from a line north of the Tarim desert basin to Kashgar. From Kashgar, two new lines are projected that would pass through Kyrgyzstan, which would link up to the Kyrgyz rail lines to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and thence to the Caspian Sea.

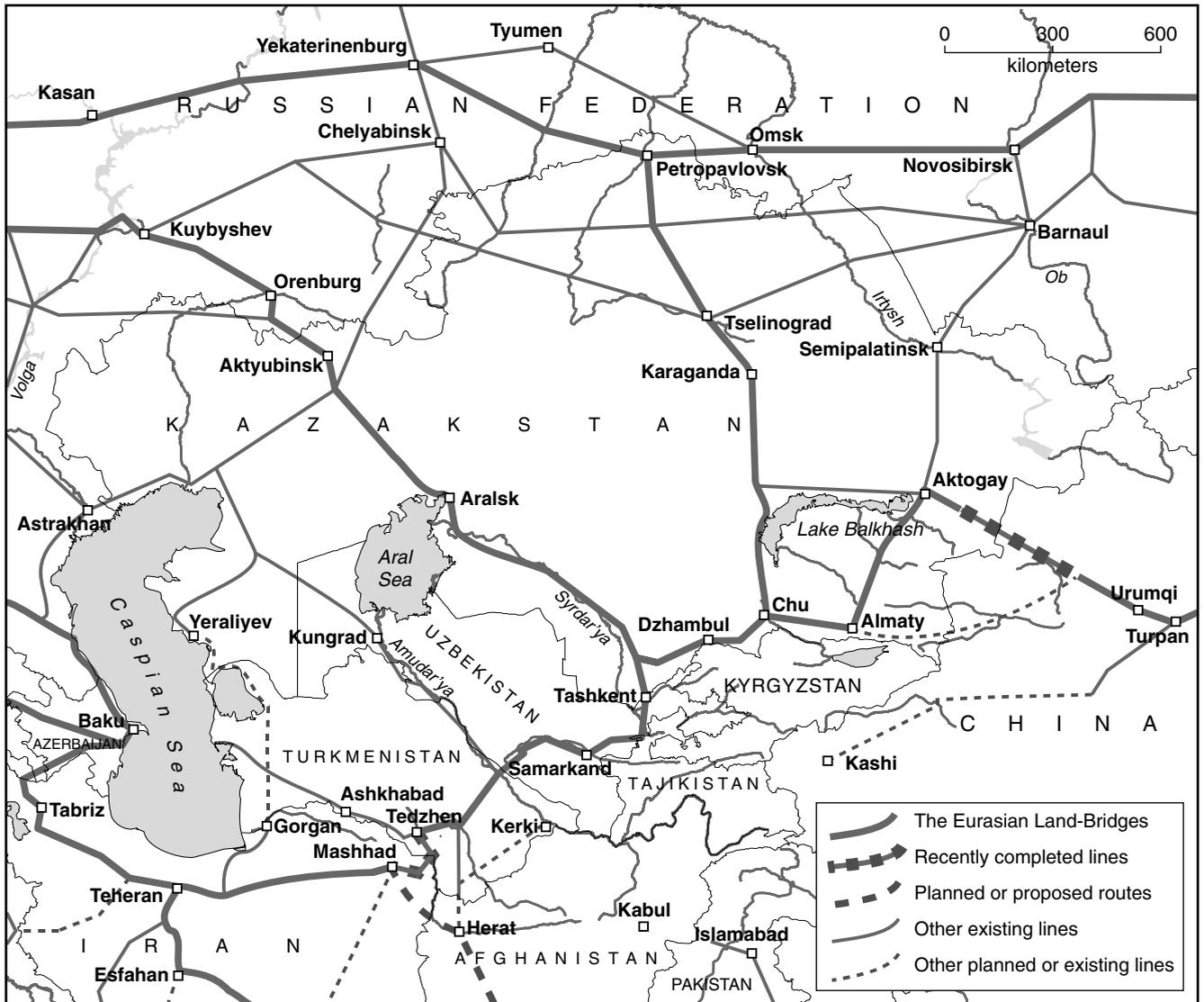
These new routes will also be facilitated by the construction of new railroad lines being built from the other direction by the European Union, under the aegis of the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia, TRACECA. The TRACECA line will usefully link up the five new Central Asian republics—Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—and the three Caucasian republics, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Most of the roads and rail lines in Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan which will connect with Xinjiang are also TRACECA-supported projects.

These developments are complemented by a major upgrading of the Russian Trans-Siberian Railroad, that old workhorse of Eurasian rail travel. Under President Putin, the lines have been significantly improved, the double track electrified, and provided with modern computer communications. Every year, the freight has been increasing, with Chinese imports to Russia growing at a rapid rate. The Russian government also plans to increase its high-tech exports to China, thereby providing balance to what has largely been one-way traffic. The planned link-up of the Trans-Siberian with the Trans-Korea Rail line (see "New Silk Road Diplomacy Steps in Northeast Asia," by Kathy Wolfe, *EIR*, May 28, 2004) will increase this traffic, linking up other parts of Southeast Asia to the Eurasian grid.

Linking Up to South Asian Ports

Communications are also progressing to China's southwest. While the highway connection between Kashgar and Rawalpindi in Pakistan, the Karakorum Highway, is being significantly upgraded, there are still no concrete plans for linking these two cities by rail. The building of a modern highway along this stretch, once a part of the ancient Silk Road trade route, was initially undertaken by China in 1964 to link western China with northern Pakistan. China now is

Central Asia Rail Lines



Source: EIRNS.

providing financial support for an improvement of the rail links further south, from Rawalpindi to Karachi. In addition, the Chinese intend to build a north-south rail link between an already existing east-west Pakistani line at Dalbandin to the coastal city of Gwad, which they intend to transform into a major deep-water port on the Arabian Sea, rivaling neighboring Karachi in the amount of transit cargo. At the groundbreaking in March 2002, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao committed to support Phase II of the Gwadar project, which would deepen the new harbor to a depth of 154 meters, enabling it to receive 200,000-ton oil carriers and 100,000-ton container carriers. The planned Gwadar-Dalbandin line will also provide a link-up to the Iranian rail network.

China also assisted in completing the rail links between

Tejen in Turkmenistan and Mashhad in Iran, which will allow Chinese goods access to the Persian Gulf through Iran and to the Mediterranean through Turkey. Another China-assisted line was built between the Iranian cities of Baq and Zahadan, linking up the Pakistani and Iranian railroad network, providing access to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas.

There are also moves now to upgrade the famous Burma Road connecting China through Myanmar (Burma) to the Bay of Bengal. The Ninth Five-Year Plan also envisioned the construction of a railroad, westward from Kunming, the capital of China's southern Yunnan Province, to the Chinese city of Dali, and beyond. The UN-backed project, the Trans-Asia Railway, also envisions the extension of the Kunming-Dali line all the way to Lashio in Burma, which would line



Lanzhou Railway Bureau

Construction of a railway bridge, on the Eurasian Land-Bridge in China. Although many obstacles have been placed in the way of the Land-Bridge's development, regional powers intend to realize its full potential.

up with the Mandalay-Yangon railroad. In addition, China is financing a new rail line from the capital of Yangon to Thilawa on the Andaman Sea, which is also earmarked for becoming a major port for goods transported by rail, as well as a seaport for the barge traffic coming down the Irrawaddy River, which already carries over 200,000 tons of goods from China annually.

Rails at the Top of the World

A recent centerpiece in the western development of China has been the completion of a rail link from Golmud in Qinghai Province to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, which made its maiden voyage on July 1 of this year. Traversing the 1,956 km stretch over the Tibetan Plateau, the rail line has had to overcome some of the most difficult terrain in the world, with 960 km of the track located 4,000 meters above sea level. The largest stretch of track is built on stilts above the Tibetan plateau so as not to disturb the natural habitat, and contains some of the longest railroad tunneling ever constructed. A 1,686 meter-long tunnel in the permafrost region at an elevation of 15,092-15,748 feet had been pushed under the Kunlun mountain range. A 1,390 meter-long bridge had also been built across the Tuotuo River at an elevation of 15,092 feet. Some 550 kilometers of track is built on frozen tundra, and the average annual temperature on the Qinghai-Tibet line is 0° Celsius, with minimum temperatures of minus 45°C. Because of the rarefied atmosphere, the trains contain oxygen supplies which are provided to passengers as they need it. Chinese President Hu Jintao cut the ribbon at the Golmud Railway Station in Qinghai province. Both trains were fully booked with passengers eager to travel on the maiden voyage.

China also has plans to extend a rail line from Dali in southwestern Yunnan Province to Lhasa in far western Tibet. The railroad from Lhasa will also be extended to Yadong in the Tibetan prefecture of Xigaze. Yadong is only dozens of

kilometers away from a possible link to the Indian rail network, as well as to the rail network in Bangladesh.

China's construction of rail links through Tibet, as well as their involvement in the Myanmar rail network, has raised some concerns from Indian security circles, wary of the increased Chinese presence on the Indian Ocean. These fears have been deftly manipulated by the Cheney-Rumsfeld crowd, which hopes to bring India into its anti-China containment policy. While India has not been entirely immune to the interest shown them by the Bush Administration, it has consistently rejected being pulled into any conflict with China. On the contrary, relations between India and China have been steadily warming. The opening of the Nathu Lu Pass between China and India on July 5, 2006, an old Silk

Road route which had been closed for 40 years, indicates that India is fully aware of the benefits in the increased trade and transportation links with China. If China and India truly develop a close collaboration in the economic realm, this would also open the way for an extension of the Tibetan line to Nepal and Bhutan and to the Bangladesh railroad network.

The China-India relationship is key to the successful development of the Eurasian Land-Bridge. Every extension of these rail links has tremendous implications for the overall political environment in almost all areas of its construction. A failure to implement the Westphalian principle of providing for the "benefit of the other" in such projects, will leave them open to manipulation by those who wish to sabotage the economic development of Eurasia and transform the rail links from a means of cooperation into a bone of contention. Therefore, a resolution of the outstanding issues between China and India, as well as a stabilization of the India-Pakistan conflict, must be incorporated into any agreements on transportation links from China further into the Indian Subcontinent.

Judging from the latest SCO summit, at which non-member India and non-member Pakistan were both represented, it would appear that the regional powers have made their own intentions fairly clear. They intend to enhance their mutual cooperation in the development of this immense region in the Eurasian heartland, which is destined to become the productive center of the world economy. The primary task now is to prevent the lunatics of the Bush Administration's "War on Terror" from plunging the region into a new bloody conflagration, that will leave these plans in ruin. At the same time, unless the machine-tool capabilities of the developed sector are brought to bear to create what LaRouche has called "corridors of development"—building new cities and industries along the lines traversed by the railroads—the transportation grid will become a mere skeleton, still awaiting those muscles and sinews that would give life to the region.