

## Nations Get Back To Building The Eurasian Land-Bridge

by Mary Burdman

After being pushed to the “back burner” for close to a decade, the Eurasian Land-Bridge is again at the forefront on discussions among nations of the world’s largest landmass. The last great phase of building the Eurasian railroad was in the 1990s, after the breakup of the Soviet bloc. Then, for the first time in history, the critical links—China-Kazakhstan-Europe and Iran-Turkmenistan—were built to finally connect Central Asia and Russia directly to East and Southwest Asia.

In May 1996, the government of China sponsored the International Symposium on Economic Development of the Regions Along the Euro-Asia Continental Bridge, in which the proposals of U.S. economist Lyndon LaRouche played a shaping role. This was one among many high-level discussions of this great project. The strategic battle was between this policy, and the virulent “globalization agenda” being spread from the City of London, Wall Street, and continental European financial capitals. Globalization prevailed—for the time. While there were some accomplishments, such as the laying of the final kilometers of track connecting the Trans-Korean railroad, little else was achieved. The great “missing links” in the Land-Bridge remained missing.

Now, there is a strategic shift, in line with the political shakeup delivered to the United States by the emerging “New Politics” of its younger generations, and recognition in the Eurasian giants—Russia, China, and India—that they must take action to prevent total economic collapse. Since late 2006, building rail and supplementary transport links has been on the agenda at every important meeting of Eurasian governments, and a constant theme in national capitals. Most important, in many places, the nations are, at least partly, financing these projects themselves or in cooperation, and not waiting for funding from the United States or Europe. Now, rail lines, accompanied by pipelines, roads, and other infra-

structure, are being planned to cross the Himalayas, the Bering Strait, and the Tibetan Plateau—the most extreme geography in the world.

These international projects are being powered by developments in China and Russia. On Feb. 9, Vladimir Yakunin, head of the state-owned firm Russian Railways, announced during a visit to Rome that Russia is planning to build high-speed rail links among its major cities, and to Finland by 2012-14. The planned links are Moscow-St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg-Helsinki, Moscow-Kazan, Moscow-Samara, and Moscow-Adler, a port on the Black Sea.

Kazan is the capital of Tatarstan in central European Russia, and lies on the conflux of the Volga and Kazanka rivers. Samara also lies on the Volga, in the Volga Federal District. “The first high-speed trains will run between Moscow and St Petersburg, with a maximum speed of over 300 km/hour,” Yakunin announced. He was in Rome to sign a memorandum of understanding for technological cooperation with Italian companies.

China launched its own high-speed rail system on April 18, with 280 new Chinese-made bullet trains, which will link China’s main cities at speeds of 250 km per hour. In March, the Shanghai authorities confirmed that they will extend the existing maglev between the airport and Shanghai (the only commercial maglev in the world) to Jiaxing, a small city in Zhejiang, as the first leg in the planned 160-km maglev link to Hangzhou. China is now developing its own maglev technology.

The country will spend 1.5 trillion renminbi on its rail system from 2006-10, and will lay enough track to encircle almost three-fourths of the globe, its Rail Ministry announced. China will add 17,000 km of track to its system, already the third longest in the world. Funding will be by the

FIGURE 1

**Eurasia: Main Routes and Selected Secondary Routes of the Eurasian Land-Bridge**



government with private input, with the government raising as much as 14 billion renminbi in bonds. The construction will include a new railway linking Lanzhou, Gansu Province, to Chongqing, the largest city in central China. Lanzhou is an important city on the Second Euro-Asian Continental Bridge, the rail line from Lianyungang on China’s Pacific coast, to Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Ultimately, this new rail line will be a direct connection between Central Asia (Alashankou-Xinjiang-Lanzhou) and Southeast Asia (Chongqing-Guiyang-Kunming-Hekou).

This new 817-km rail line will be the first major transport infrastructure in the poor and isolated rural areas of Gansu, Shaanxi, and Sichuan provinces. The rail link will provide the shortest north-south rail route from Xinjiang, Baoji, and Lanzhou in northwest China, to Chongqing and Kunming.

**Across the Himalayas**

China completed its railroad to “the roof of the world,” the first-ever rail link to Tibet, when the 1,956-km Qinghai-Tibet Railway was finished in July 2006. The next step is already planned: The line will be extended from the capital Lhasa to Xigaze, a city 280 kilometers to the southwest, and, most important, much closer to the borders with India and the

Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan. This line should be finished by 2010. Eventually, the entire rail line will be able to carry 7-10 million tons of cargo a year, at speeds of 120 km per hour. China has also been developing plans to eventually build the Tibet rail line even farther, to the town of Chomo, or Yadong, which is 315 km southwest of Lhasa and close to the strategic Nathu La pass to India.

India is also looking to the Himalayas. Whether India is spurred by geopolitical concerns about China, or realizing its own urgent need to develop its mountainous hinterlands, on April 9 *The Indian Express* reported that the Rail India Technical and Economic Services (RITES), is now close to finishing a report on possible rail lines to five cities in Nepal. Geographically, access to Tibet is (relatively) much easier from the Indian Subcontinent side. Historically, traders, British imperialists, and almost everyone else used this route rather than via central China.

As a sign of rapidly improving Indian-Chinese relations, Nathu La was re-opened last year for direct India-China trade, the first time since the 1962 border war. Important sections of the Indian-Chinese border in the area remain to be resolved, but the border has been peaceful for decades. Rail links would revolutionize the entire region. Indian Railways is also carry-

ing out a survey on building the first-ever rail line to Sikkim, the Himalayan state which joined the Indian Union in 1975. This would begin as a cargo line, to supplement the national highway 31A, which is the only road link between Sikkim and the rest of India.

Indian Railways is surveying laying rail on a 50-km route from Sevoke in West Bengal to Rangpo in Sikkim; the report will be completed in four to five months, and then go to the railway board for final approval. There were two efforts to build rail links under the British Raj, but neither reached all the way to Sikkim. The Teesta Valley line was destroyed by landslides in 1950. To date, the only India-Nepal rail link is the container inland port at Birgunj, Nepal, which is linked to Raxaul in Bihar state, India. *The Express* quoted a senior Indian Railway Board member saying, "Although the [Chinese] Lhasa-Nepal link may neither be technically feasible nor financially viable, the strategic importance of such a link cannot be undermined." A RITES official said that the "possibilities of extending railheads on the Indian side into Nepal are being explored. Nepal had also requested that the Indian Railways network be extended to Nepal wherever feasible."

Five routes are being considered, which would link cities in Uttar Pradesh, India, to Nepalgunj and/or Bhairawaha in Nepal; Jogbani in Bihar to Nepal's Viratnagar; New Jalpaiguri to Kakrabitta; and/or Jaynagar and Birdibas. All routes are "technically feasible"; the question is financial.

There is also a proposal to build a 174-km rail route between Raxaul in India and Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, primarily for freight. A detailed proposal by India's Pipavav Railway Corporation (PRCL) for the 174-km rail line was submitted to the Nepalese government in February. This would be an engineering feat, requiring 58 tunnels. The Indian report said that the rail line could "well connect the Nepalese railway system with Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi railway networks and may provide intra-regional connectivity." This would shorten the current road route to the Indian port of Kolkatta (Calcutta) by more than 150 km, and be much more efficient.

Eventually, the link could be extended to Myanmar and Thailand, once India builds a rail link to Southeast Asia.

Another rail line, equally breathtaking, is under consideration, to link Pakistan with China. On April 18, Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz told the Communist Party School in Beijing, that the Pakistan-China partnership goes back to the "fabled Silk Route," and China's classic *Journey to the West*: "Pakistan is fast transforming into an economic, energy, trade, and communications hub linking the neighboring regions of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia," he said.

"Pakistan provides the shortest access to the sea for Western China. Our friendship highway over the Karakoram and road and rail networks to our deep water ports at the Arabian Sea are fast becoming a conduit for trade and energy transactions. These connect Western China as well as Central Asia

to the Gulf and the Middle East. It gives me great pleasure to mention that the Gwadar Port, completed with the assistance of China, was inaugurated on 20 March 2007. The Karakoram Highway is being upgraded. Feasibility studies are being undertaken to establish Pakistan-China rail links."

In late February, Associated Press of Pakistan reported that Pakistani Railways had signed agreements with the Austrian and German ILF Consulting Engineers, and its long-term partner, China's Dongfang Electric Corporation (DEC) and Second Survey and Design Institute, to make a pre-feasibility study of building a 750-km rail link between the city of Havelian, the westernmost end of the Karakoram highway, and 4,693-meter-high Khunjerab Pass at the Pakistan-China border. This already is the highest paved international connection in the world.

### Under the Bering Strait

On April 18, Viktor Razbegin, deputy head of industrial research at Russia's Economic Development and Trade Ministry, gave a press conference in Moscow to propose a project that originated with Tsar Nicholas II in 1905. Russian officials are planning "to call on the governments of Russia, the United States, and Canada to sign an intergovernmental agreement to study and implement the project" to construct the world's longest rail tunnel under the Bering Strait to Alaska, Razbegin announced. This will be the key link of a 6,000-kilometer transport corridor running from Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, to Alaska.

This "TKM World Link" had been under discussion in the past, but was not given sufficient support to go forward. The total cost would be around \$60 billion, and government organizations and private investors would be asked to participate, Razbegin said. The tunnel could be finished in 9-12 years, he said, and would pay for itself in 13-15 years. Pipelines and cable links for oil, gas, and electricity would also be built, to transport energy east to North America.

Russian officials have been visiting Canada and the United States to promote the project, which also has big supporters on the North American side. For example, former Alaskan governor Walter Hickel, now 88, a long-term supporter of the tunnel, will attend a Moscow conference on the project in late April.

This is only one of many proposals being made in Russia to develop its incredibly rich, but utterly underpopulated northeastern regions. When Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov visited Japan at the beginning of March, the two sides discussed cooperation in high-speed railways, and possibly building a rail tunnel from the mainland to Sakhalin, a project first proposed in the 1950s.

Along with the ongoing, steady diplomacy of the Six-Party talks to resolve the Korean peninsula crisis, Russia and China are both building infrastructure to develop the region. Russian and North Korean officials have also been discussing the Trans-Korean Railway, and the still-unfinished link to the

FIGURE 2

## Trans-Asian Railway Network



Russian Trans-Siberian Railway. Meanwhile, China has finished a new railroad connecting Hunchun, to the Trans-Siberian at Hasan, Russia, according to South Korean Donga.com. This will connect China to the port of Zarubino in Russia.

### Integrating the Subcontinent in Eurasia

The Indian Union government on March 8 decided to join the Trans-Asian Railway project (TAR), which was the goal of a conference in Busan, South Korea, in November 2006, where 18 nations signed the United Nations ESCAP agreement to renew the four-decades-old plan to build the remaining “missing links” among East, South, and Southeast Asian railways. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh did not sign at the time, but India has now ratified the agreement. The Southern Corridor of the TAR would link Kunming, southwest China, to India and eventually to the Bulgarian city of Kapikule on the Black Sea, involving links and cooperation with 18 nations. The proposal would link India at Tamu on the border with Myanmar, go through Bangladesh, and again to India, and then connect to the existing rail line to Pakistan.

Rail Minister Lalu Prasad’s initiative was followed up by Indian Railway board chairman JP Batra March 22, at the

first-ever meeting of the Asian Regional Assembly of the International Union of Railways (UIC) in New Delhi. Batra announced that India is soon planning “construction of rail links to China and Myanmar [which] will help tap the economic potential of the region as well as promote peace in the region.” These would be launched as freight lines. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were linked by rail in the 19th Century, but no connections were built east or west. There is a 315-km break which must be built to link India and Bangladesh to Myanmar. (See accompanying article on Myanmar.)

India has already approved building 150 km on its side, and discussion on completing the project is going on, Batra said. The Ministry of External Affairs is considering how to finance the project.

To Russia, the rail link would be via Iran and a shipping link across the Caspian Sea. This will connect India to the “North-South Corridor” already being set up by Russia and Iran, Batra said. Russian-Indian rail connections were on the agenda when President Vladimir Putin visited India for Republic Day in January, and in early February, Russian Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref had told the Indian *Financial Express* that it “would be great to

have a railway corridor between Russia (the Pacific) and India (Indian Ocean) via China. Now that relations among India, China, and Russia have improved and their economies are actively cooperating, we have all the prerequisites for reviving the [TAR] transportation project.”

At the March UIC conference, Russian Railways President Vladimir Yakunin proposed a consortium “led by India, Russia, and Iran,” to run a container service by rail-sea link. Russia already has signed a memorandum of understanding with Iran to build and operate a new railway line linking Qazvin and Rasht in northern Iran to the Azerbaijan Caspian Sea port of Astara. This is a key link in the North-South Corridor, and will connect the Russian and Azerbaijan railroads to Iran. There is already a Caspian Sea ferry link between Russia and Iran. In addition, new sea links from the Iranian port of Bander Abbas and Mumbai, India, are being planned. Russia is also offering India, among other nations, advanced technologies, including space and aircraft technologies, to help operate its huge system.

### The Western Rail Link

Pakistan will finally be linked to the Iranian national rail system next year, Iranian Minister of Roads and Transportation, Mohammad Rahmati, said in Tehran on April 14. Iran has been building the final link in its rail system—Kerman to Zahedan in southeastern Iran—and when this is completed, for the first time in history, the Indian Subcontinent will be linked to Asia and Europe by rail.

The Iranian city of Zahedan is already linked to the Pakistani system, at the border city of Mirjaveh, and this link runs via the Pakistani city of Quetta and from there, there are connections to the rail system of India. The Iran connection will be finished some time after March 21, 2008.

This announcement was made at the Iran-Pakistan Joint Conference on Transportation, which met in Tehran, attended by Pakistani Federal Minister for Communications Muhammad Shamim Siddiqui, leading a high-level delegation. Siddiqui said that many of those who enter Iran from Quetta, are pilgrims wanting to visit the holy city of Mashhad, in north-eastern Iran. Siddiqui called for building a railway direct to Mashhad.

Tehran is already connected to Turkey by rail, via Tabriz-Lake Van-Ankara, and thus to the rail systems of Europe. In 1996, the Mashhad-Ashkabad, Turkmenistan rail link was opened, for the first time connecting Iran and Southwest Asia directly to the nations of Central Asia. Before then, all the rail links of the Central Asian nations—then part of the Soviet Union—were only to Russia.

Rahmati then announced that “Iran is willing to access the transit road linking Pakistan to China [the Karakoram Highway]. We hope that an agreement will soon be finalized in this regard.” Rahmati also said that Iran is making it a priority to build a highway to connect the city of Chadbahar, on the Gulf of Oman, with the new Pakistani port of Gwadar.

### First Railroad in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan, also, may for the first time in its history have a railroad. This ancient pathway from Central Asia to the Indian Subcontinent has never been brought into the world rail system—partly because Afghan leaders themselves, in the early 20th Century, reportedly wanted to ensure that it was as difficult as possible for Britain and Russia to enter their country. Incessant war has since prevented any such infrastructure construction. Proposals are now on the table: Pakistan, wants to build an 11-km rail link from Chaman to the Afghan border town of Spin Boldak. Iran also has a plan, but has enormous economic problems.

China is also part of the picture, while on April 7, a Russian Railway Company delegation visited Islamabad, where Minister Rashid Ahmed called for improved Russian-Pakistani economic relations. The Minister described the policy of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to make Pakistan the economic bridge between Asia and Europe via sea, road, and rail networks. Then, Russian Prime Minister Fradkov was in Pakistan April 11-13 for the first visit of a Russian Prime Minister there since 1969. Fradkov discussed rail and energy projects as well as other Eurasian cooperation. *Railway Market Magazine* reported April 20 that an agreement was signed that “Russia will build new rail lines

## Iranian Maglev Will Link Tehran to Land-Bridge City

Political and industrial circles in Iran have taken the first small, but important step towards introducing the revolutionary technology of the Transrapid’s magnetic levitation trains into the Islamic Republic. What this will unleash among hostile circles in the West, who are bent on blocking Iran’s nuclear program—also on grounds of technological apartheid—is as yet unknown.

The news broke April 14, when Iranian media outlets reported on an agreement, struck at the Mashhad International Fair site, between Germany and Iran on the idea of a maglev train link between the capital city of Tehran and the holy city of Mashhad.

The Tehran-Mashhad link is crucial in the broader Eurasian Land-Bridge, transcontinental rail network stretching from China to Europe. In 1996, the Iranians succeeded in finishing a link between Mashhad and Sarakhs, filling in the “missing link” in the chain from Iran to China, through the Central Asian Republics. The Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan stretch completed that year, established this link between Iran and Turkmenistan; from there, the line

in Pakistan, including those going toward Iran.”

In addition, the proposed Khwuf-Herat railway, which would connect Iran and Afghanistan, was discussed by Afghan Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta at a press conference in Kabul on April 15. The proposal for this rail link was signed last year by the Presidents of Iran and Afghanistan. It will connect the city of Khwuf, northeast Iran, with the city of Herat in western Afghanistan. The Foreign Minister, just returned from a three-day visit to Iran, said that “once this railway project is implemented, northern and southern parts of Afghanistan will be connected to Pakistan. Besides railway lines inside the country will also expand.”

### A Third Euro-Asian Continental Bridge

China and Kazakstan are now in the process of opening a second, modern rail port on their borders, at Korgas. The port will be opened at latest by 2009, but on March 19, Kazakstan’s Prime Minister, Karim Masimov, said the connection should be finished as early as next year. The rail link, built at the large highway land port, will begin by carrying 5 million tons of freight, which should build up to 10 million a year in a few years. Kazakstan itself wants to expand its own rail network, and is looking to build more rail links to Saryozek, Kulantebe,

or Jetigen, which will then be linked to eastern Europe. Currently, trains have to go via the Druzhba-Alashankou terminal, opened as the historic Second Euro-Asian Continental Bridge in 1992, but this is hampered by the difference in rail gauges between Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union. The new corridor through Kazakstan will be built on the European and Chinese gauge standard, so that trains can pass through directly.

To the west, another rail line is being launched. Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia will begin construction in June, on a rail line to link Kars in eastern Turkey to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, on the Caspian Sea, to so-called the TRANSECA Silk Road. A tunnel under the Bosphorus will be finished in 2009 at a cost of \$600 million. It will pass through Akhalkalaki and Tbilisi in Georgia. The line will link the rail systems of the three Caucasus nations, and, through connection to Kazakstan, will join Turkey to China.

There are geopolitical elements in this project, in that it avoids Russia. Kazakstan is promising 10 million tons of cargo for the line. “It’s possible that a significantly large volume of cargo could be attracted to the [railway], since we are actively working with China . . . to open a second gate to the East,” Transport and Communications Minister Serik Akhmetov said at Tbilisi on April 3.

should proceed all the way to China, as outlined in the Eurasian Land-Bridge report issued by EIR. That report, published in 1997, contained the speech by then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, who announced completion of the link, and the implications for Eurasian transportation.

Later reports specified that the agreement was a Memorandum of Understanding, for a feasibility study, the first step towards launching such a project. The agreement was signed between the Iranian Ministry of Roads and Transportation, and a German company—left unnamed. The fact that Iran’s First Vice-President Parviz Davoudi was also in attendance, was a sign, according to Iranian sources who spoke to *EIR*, that it was quite official.

According to the Governor General of Khorasan Razavi province, Mohammad-Javad Mohammadi-Zadeh, who spoke at the ceremony, the maglev would reduce travel time between Tehran and Mashhad to 2½ to 3 hours. It now takes about 14 hours, to make the 560-mile trip. He added that Germany would invest 6.7 billion euros in the project under a base operations support contract, according to which Iran would repay the loan within a 15- to 25-year period.

The maglev project has been under discussion in Iran for some time. On Aug. 29, 2006, the English language *Iran Daily* reported government plans to invest some \$1.5

billion in the project. *Iran Daily* referred to a Persian-language report that said that the total budget for the State Transportation Infrastructures Development Company was \$260 million a year through March 2007. Expert estimates suggested that the maglev project would cost more than \$15 billion. The *Iran Daily* also reported that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said the government would finance the project from its Foreign Exchange Reserves Account. This is the Oil Fund, which is a fund of oil revenues earmarked for investment projects of this type.

According to the same account, Hossein Tehrani, deputy head of rail, airport, and port development, said that the Mellat Bank Investment Company, together with an unnamed German firm, would invest in the project, adding that such BOT (Build, Operate, Transfer) projects had to have the participation of a partner from an advanced sector nation. According to a report posted on the International Maglev Board Forum on April 19, such a BOT would mean that the investors would operate the line for a certain period of time, estimated to be 10-25 years, during which they would get a return on their investment plus a profit. Thereafter, the entire operation would come under Iranian control.

Another 5.2 billion euros, according to this source, would be put up by Germans, that is, Iranian investors living in Germany.—*Muriel Mirak-Weissbach*