

Trans-Korean Rail: 'These Lines Will Go Through!'

by Kathy Wolfe

In simultaneous ceremonies on the western Kyongui Line and eastern Donghae Line, the two Koreas at 1:00 p.m. on June 14 re-connected the lines of the Trans-Korean Railway (TKR) for the first time since Sept. 1, 1945. Fifty officials of North and South presided at a ceremony in which 25 kilometers of new rail was laid on either side of the sensitive Military Demarcation Line (MDL) which runs down the center of the 14-km-wide Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Lead footage of the Seoul evening news repeatedly showed white-gloved North and South Korean engineers at the pivotal western Seoul-Pyongyang line, cooperating shoulder to shoulder in a cold rain as they carefully power-bolted the tracks together at the MDL.

A ceremonial golden plaque commemorating the first step to Korean unification was laid on the center rail tie. A similar ceremony was held near the east coast. Only Korean nationals were permitted at the high-security event.

On both sides of the MDL, officials happily waved numerous large "unification flags," showing simply a unified Korean peninsula in blue, on a field of white—the flag under which the two Koreas entered the 2000 Sydney Olympics, to the cheers of the world.

"This ceremony may have been not so widely publicized, and there remains a full consensus to be built in our government on just how fast to move forward with the North," a South Korean official told *EIR* in Seoul on June 13. "But make no mistake. We are determined: These lines will go through!" He was speaking hours after Richard Perle, of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board, told a Washington audience that the United States "cannot exclude the kind of surgical strike we saw in 1981," when Israel bombed Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility—but this time a U.S. strike against North Korea. He went on, "We should always be prepared to go it alone, if necessary." Perle's unilateral threat was received in Seoul with general horror.

But the rail-linking ceremony "is a statement of our industrial vision and our national will in both South and North Korea," said Kim Kyoung-Jung, Director of the Trans-Korean Transportation Division of the Ministry of Construction and Transportation (MOCT), in an *EIR* interview. Kim revealed that while some segments of North Korea's rail line north of the ceremonial area are incomplete, such that trains cannot yet run, still both Koreas had decided make an early and firm statement of their intention, by completing and connecting the most sensitive segment at the heavily guarded MDL. "This shows our resolve to normalize our country and complete the entire line," Kim said.

His ministry hopes to complete the western line by the end of August, and the eastern line by the end of this year.

"And when the first train runs, hopefully later this year, then you will see a celebration bigger than three World Cups," Kim asserted, referring to Seoul's soccer festivities which lit up the capital for a month of fireworks last Summer.

Seoul TV, in celebration, showed footage of the historic June 13-14, 2000 Pyongyang Summit of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-il, and highlights of the progress in normalized relations since that time.

'For the Good of All the World'

"I want to stress that the connection of these two lines is not only in the deep interests of the people of both Koreas, but for the good of the people of the entire Eurasian Land-Bridge and indeed the world," Kim of MOCT told *EIR* at the outset of the interview. "Our strong immediate intention is to not only connect the North-South rails, but to help connect, strengthen, and upgrade the entire route for the rails all along both the Trans-China Railway (TCR) and the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR). Our ceremony June 14 will

create a focus of world attention not only on Korea, but for the entire Eurasian Land-Bridge project and the movement of people and goods across this big land-mass."

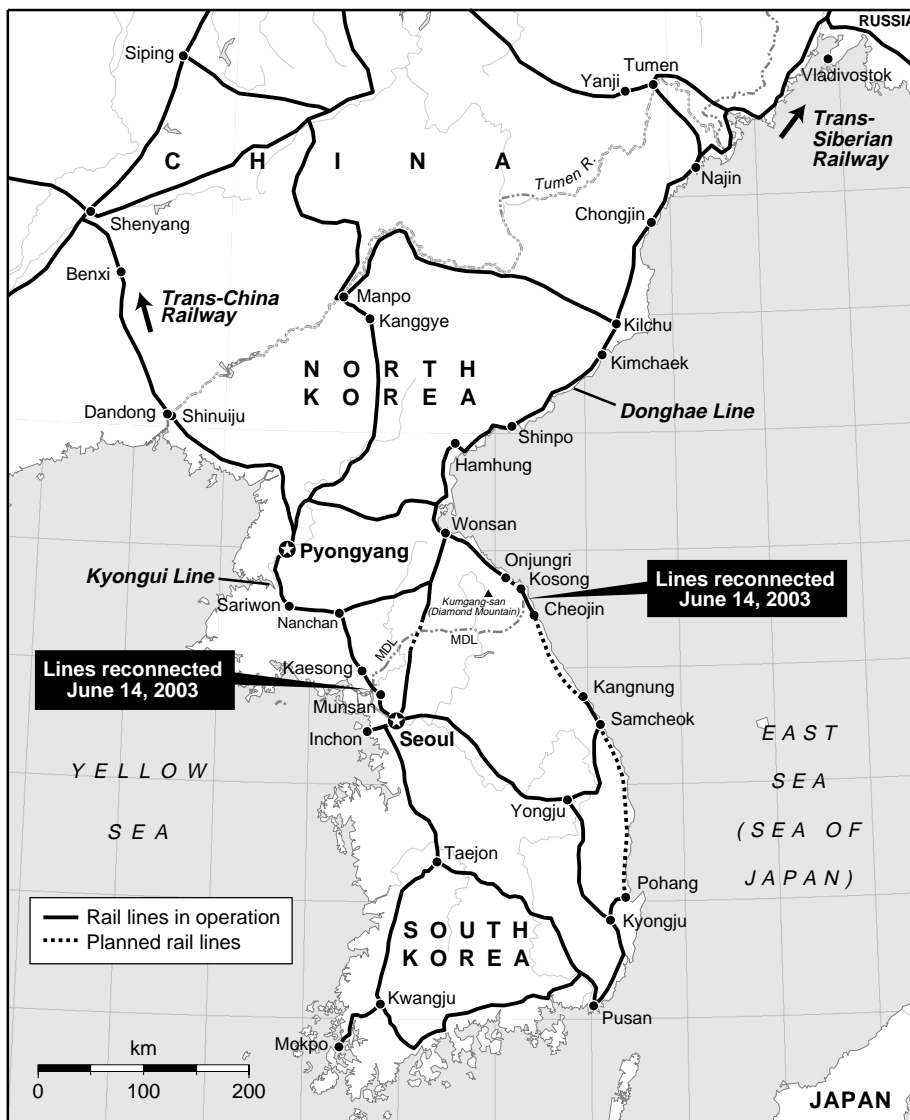
MOCT promotional brochures feature multi-color maps of the entire Land-Bridge project "from Pusan to Paris," and all its many lines. "The day will come when the locomotive that has been asleep for 55 years will awaken to traverse this land," one MOCT brochure says. "The severed history of the Korean people will be reconnected; a forgotten culture will be rekindled, and Koreans will once again travel the same path. . . .

"Once unfettered from the bounds of history, the Kyongui Line will go beyond simply inter-Korean economic cooperation. The Silk Road Railway will offer a new vision and new possibilities for the development of both Korea and all of Northeast Asia. The 21st-Century Silk Road linking Europe and Asia will link continents and greatly help to revolutionize global logistics. The Trans-Siberian Railway, which links Asia and Europe, as well as the Trans-China Railway, both can connect with the Trans-Korean Railway. This will become the world's largest overland transportation route, bringing together the European and North East Asian markets."

Russian response has been ecstatic. "This might become the major event of our lives," said Vitaly Yefimov, head of the transport committee of the Russian Chamber of Commerce, run by former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, previewing the TKR link-up, in the *Moscow Times* on June 10. "This is a unique project that can change our concept of business, if not in the whole world, then certainly in the Northern Hemisphere," said Igor Pikan, general director of Moscow's Business Systems Development.

MOCT maps also show the TKR and the TCR connecting to an elaborate rail network in Southeast Asia, via a new line projected to be built from Guangzhou in southern China, to Hanoi and all the rest of Southeast Asia.

Major Railway Network Map of South and North Korea



John Sigerson / EIRNS 2003

Source: Ministry of Construction and Transportation (MOCT), Seoul, Korea.

A Normal Commute?

Seoul newspapers are commenting that the whole process shows great progress in normalization. For the June 7-9 joint rail commission meetings in the Northern town of Kaesong, which finalized the June 14 events, South Korean officials were able to travel overland by bus through the DMZ every day from Seoul to Kaesong, and return home each night—a daily "commute" through what is ostensibly the world's most dangerous 14 kilometers.

While the MOCT carefully avoids any mention of politics, many Seoul officials said clearly that the action at the MDL is meant to back up South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's June 10 statement in Tokyo, that he is determined "to

resolve the North Korea nuclear issue through dialogue and rule out the possibility of using force or other means that could destabilize regional security.”

“Removing barbed-wire fences and mines, the nation’s artery has been re-linked,” the South’s delegate, Cho Myong-kyun, said in the official statement. “This is truly unification and what a united nation would look like,” said Kim Byung Chul, the North’s chief delegate. “Through this railway will run the energetic blood of the nation, warm hospitality, and the history of co-prosperity.”

Also on June 14, the Koreans agreed to hold a seventh round of family reunions on June 27-July 2 at the North’s Diamond Mountain.

‘Line Number One’

Both Koreas’ top priority is the Western Kyongui (Capital Route) line, which connects Pyongyang and Seoul. “We are most eager to increase the flow of people, skills, technology, and cargo goods between the two capitals,” MOCT’s Kim told *EIR*. Officially dubbed “Line Number One” in Seoul, this was the ancient trade and administrative corridor throughout most of Korea’s 5,000-year history. When complete, the Kyongui Line will run from the southwestern, new container superport of Mokpo for 498 km through South Korea to the MDL, and from the MDL another 444 km to Shinuiju on the Chinese border, then on to the Trans-China Railway (TCR).

South Korea has completed the entire 12 km segment from Munsan just south of the DMZ (to which Kyongui Line trains already run regularly), to the MDL, ending in the beautiful new Dorasan Station. Just south of the MDL inside the DMZ, the new line passes the old Changdan Station, where a rusting locomotive and rails from the 1940s still lie, as shown repeatedly on TV.

MOCT estimates that North Korea has completed about 5 km of rail from the MDL running north, and that some 7 km remains to be completed to link the entire line to the Kaesong Industrial Complex just north of the DMZ.

In the East, the situation is complex, in that no construction is presently permitted on the planned direct route from Seoul to North Korea’s key east coast port of Wonsan. Rail-and road-bed construction is now focussed on the east coast, with North Korea eager to expand visits by Southern citizens to historic Diamond Mountain.¹

1. North Korea is working to connect the 18 km from Diamond Mountain and its train station Onjungri to the MDL at the coast, and South Korea is working to connect its coastal town of Cheojin by building rail 9 miles north of Cheojin to the MDL. Much of South Korea’s eastern coast is not yet serviced by rail, so the Trans-Korean plan has become an impetus for the South to build a whole series of new high-speed rail connections to the southeast superport of Pusan.

South Korea is also inaugurating a new high-speed TGV-style rail line from Seoul to Pusan in April 2004, which will create large new cargo capacity for container freight to transit the peninsula from Japan and the Pacific to Eurasia, and back again. While the Russian government is keen to develop the direct route from Wonsan to Seoul, they are also willing to take a small detour north of Seoul via Nanchan to Wonsan for the immediate future.