

Eurasian Land-Bridge Enters a New Era

by Mary Burdman

China is leading six nations in taking the Eurasian Land-Bridge into a new era. For the first time since the “Euro-Asian Second Continental Bridge” was opened by finally linking of the Chinese and Kazakhstan railways in 1992, a direct, regular train service is being established between China and Europe’s biggest industrial nation, Germany, with the cooperation of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Poland, and Mongolia. All six nations have signed an agreement to ensure that the China-Europe land-bridge really works (the first continental bridge in Eurasia is the Russian Trans-Siberian Railroad). On Jan. 9, a pilot container train, flying flags in traditional Chinese style, left Beijing for Hamburg, Germany’s leading port, an epic trip 9,780 kilometers long. Before this new agreement was signed, Chinese rail connections to Russia and Central Asia had been greatly expanded, but the critical connection to western Europe has barely functioned, due to long cross-border customs delays, different rail gauges, and other barriers which severely slowed transport.

Two months earlier, the land-bridge connection to western Russia was finally opened. On Oct. 23, 2007, the first direct container train from Lianyungang, Jiangsu province, the “eastern terminus of the continental bridge” on China’s east coast, reached Moscow, 8,310 km away, after 15 days transit. Lianyungang has opened integrated sea-railway container connections from the U.S. Pacific coast, all the way by rail to Russia and Europe. This was the first “real operation of the whole Eurasian railway since the land-bridge opened in 1992,” the Lianyungang port authorities announced. The western terminus of this land-bridge is Rotterdam, which is the biggest port in Europe. Now, the bridge will reach Germany as well.

The railway authorities of the six land-bridge nations have formally agreed to deal with all the blockages, and make regular container train service a reality. The pilot train should reach Hamburg in 18 days, as compared to at least 40 days by ship; it is also a big improvement in current rail transport time. As late as 2006, rail transport time from the Chinese coast just to Moscow was estimated at 30 days.

Development Concept

That it has taken 15 years from closing the last big gap in the rail links between China and western Europe, to reach a political agreement which can make the land-bridge economically viable, is hardly surprising. The whole question of the development of Eurasia—in which this land-bridge

plays a critical role—has been one of the most fundamental political battles of the last two centuries, between nation-builders in the United States, Russia, China, and Europe, and the geopoliticians of the Anglo-Dutch financial empire.

What is on one level an important rail agreement, is on another, a big step showing determination by Eurasian nations to cooperate, as Lyndon LaRouche immediately recognized. In May 1996, Schiller Institute head Helga Zepp-LaRouche delivered a speech to one of the workshops at the Beijing International Symposium on Economic Development of the Regions along the New Euro-Asia Continental Bridge. She laid out the necessity to build a land-bridge of advanced technology “development corridors,” as the key to economic reconstruction of Eurasia, and the only way to overcome the ravages of “free-market” globalization let loose on Russia, Africa, Ibero-America, and other regions. LaRouche representatives had brought his Eurasian policy, which he had enunciated a year before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, directly to China already in 1994, and this played a key role in shaping the agenda of the Symposium, which was attended by 450 leading officials from Asia and Europe. Mrs. LaRouche’s presentation, demonstrating the need for a renaissance to make it possible to realize projects on the scale of the Eurasian land-bridge, was greeted for its impact, in the final plenary session of the meeting.

Cooperation Breakthrough

Zheng Mingli, chairman and president of China Railway Container Transport, announced on Jan. 9 in Beijing that the agreement “can be seen as a breakthrough in our cooperation. Today railway officials from six countries are here to witness this event. This is very important for the development of the Asia-Europe continental bridge. This means of transportation has great potential for the countries involved.”

The international rail officials posed before a big map of Eurasia, which showed the entire rail line from Beijing to Hamburg, with the caption “Sketch Map of Eurasian Land-bridge Corridor” printed in Russian, English, and Chinese. Zheng said that the “goal is to open a scheduled railway container service between the six countries. Barring any complications, a scheduled container train should be shuttling between China and Germany in a year’s time.” It will take about that long to ensure that transit time for the freight containers is reduced to just 15 days, which Deutsche Bahn—the initiator of this project with the Chinese Railway Ministry two years ago—considers necessary to make it commercially workable.

The International Union of Railways praised the project on Jan. 15, when UIC head Luc Aliadière said from Paris that “China is the workhouse of the world—the potential is enormous. . . . It’s like a new [high-speed] TGV line coming

into play, and now it’s becoming real.” His assessment is that “export transport costs taking goods from China to Europe are worth some 3 billion euros per day.” Aliadière noted that more and more Chinese manufacturing is moving into the interior, away from the Pacific coast ports like Shanghai; this also favors increasing direct rail transport to Europe.

China itself—which has, with the United States, the most rail freight traffic in the world—will build and put into operation 15,000 km of new railways just in the next three years. China’s total rail system will expand to 120,000 km by 2020, including 20 new big projects to link the most important economic regions in eastern China—on the Bohai Sea, the Yangtse valley, and the Pearl River delta—with the interior. These will be high-speed rail lines, using Chinese technology for passenger trains that can travel as fast as 300 km per hour. In 2008 alone, there would be 1.4 billion passenger rail trips in China, and cargo transport would be more than 3.3 billion tons, generating revenue worth 361 billion yuan (\$49.5 billion). China is also building 18 new, strategically placed rail container terminals in the next five years.

A new “southern route” of the land-bridge is also on the agenda. In Shenzhen, on China’s southeast coast, the authorities are proposing building a third continental bridge, to link Shenzhen to Rotterdam. This route between South China and Europe—15,150 km long—would go through 21 countries, including Myanmar, India, and Turkey, the Academy of Social Sciences of Kunming, Yunnan province (one of the stations on the route) announced in October 2007.

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