

Connecting Asia: Uzbekistan Looks to Capitalize on Central Asia's Transport Potential

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One of the priorities of Uzbekistan's foreign policy is the implementation of strategically important projects in the development of transport and communication infrastructure of Uzbekistan and Central Asia. In his address to the Oliy Majlis, Uzbekistan's parliament, on December 23, 2017, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev paid special attention to the task of "forming reliable transport, including transit, corridors for the delivery of Uzbekistan's foreign trade goods to the largest markets of the world and the region."

In December 2017, a comprehensive five-year program to improve Uzbekistan's transport infrastructure and diversify foreign trade routes of cargo was adopted. According to the program, it is important to realize agreements reached on the construction of several international transport corridors, including Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman, Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China, and the trans-Afghanistan transport route which open access to the seaports of Iran (Bandar Abbas and Chabahar) and Pakistan (Gwadar and Karachi).

In particular, following Mirziyoyev's state visit to Turkmenistan in March 2017, an important section of the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman transport and communication corridor was launched. The Turkmenabad-Farab railway and road bridges across the Amu Darya were opened, more than doubling the volume of cargo transportation. Moreover, the opening increased the opportunity to realize the idea of creating a through transport and communication highway along the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Caspian Sea-South Caucasus route with access to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and Black Sea ports of Georgia, Turkey, Romania and other states.

Additionally, after 20 years of negotiations significant progress has been made on the construction of a railway linking China and Central Asia through Kyrgyzstan. During a tripartite meeting of delegations from China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, held on December 25-27, 2017 in Tashkent, practical decisions were made aimed at the forthcoming implementation of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway project. It is expected that by the end of 2018 issues of route identification, a feasibility study for construction, and financing will be resolved.

This corridor will make it possible to transport goods by a shorter route from China via Central Asia to the countries of South Asia and the Middle East, and through the Transcaucasian corridor to Europe. According to the preliminary parameters of the project, the delivery time of cargo will be reduced by seven to eight days and the length of the route from East Asia to the countries of the Middle East and Southern Europe shortened by 900 kilometers.

The agreement on the construction of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway, reached during Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's official to Uzbekistan in December 2017 is particularly important. The railway is a continuation of the existing Hairatan-Mazar-e-Sharif rail line, which was constructed by Uzbek specialists. About half of

Afghanistan's imports and a significant volume of humanitarian supplies are imported along this route.

The construction of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway and ensuring its effective functioning will contribute to the successful integration of the countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan into international transport and trade systems in several ways.

First, the implementation of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway project will make a real contribution to international efforts for the socioeconomic reconstruction of Afghanistan. According to [ADB estimates](#), more than 1,000 people were provided with new jobs when the Hairatan-Mazar-e-Sharif railway launched. Employment in the project area showed an overall growth rate of 10 to 11 percent per year since 2010 and about 1,200 locals were employed in logistics and loading-unloading operations.

In addition, due to the formation of its own sources of income from the increase in goods turnover and transit, Kabul will be able to reduce its acute dependence on foreign aid.

According to expert estimates, the opening of a direct link to the Iranian port of Chabahar as a result of the implementation of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway project could increase Afghanistan's foreign trade turnover by 50 percent. According to preliminary data, the projected volume of cargo transit after the completion of the railway line in the first year of operation will be about 5.3 million tons; later it could amount to as much as 15 million tons per year.

Second, the implementation of the project will open a new stage in achieving regional consensus between the countries involved in the Afghan peace process by creating objective conditions for cooperation, rather than competition. All of Afghanistan's neighbors and regional partners, primarily India, Iran, and Pakistan, would benefit economically from the construction of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway.

With access to the Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas, the railway will allow India a simpler route to the markets of Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the wider Eurasian region. Today, in large part due to the lack of direct transport routes, trade turnover between India and the Central Asian states remains far from its potential, not exceeding 1.1 percent.

India invested \$500 million to develop Chabahar's port infrastructure; it is also involved in the construction of the Iranian-Afghan railway line as part of the development of the Southern Chabahar-Zahedan-Zaranj trade corridor, which will be linked with the Afghanistan's ring road that connects large Afghan cities such as Herat, Kandahar, Kabul, and Mazar-e-Sharif.

The active use of Iran's transit potential and the capabilities of the country's port infrastructure will give new momentum to Iran's relations with the states of Central Asia. Iran takes an active part in the implementation of transport and communication projects passing through Afghan territory. In September 2017, the Iranian section of the Iran-Afghanistan railway from Khaf to the border town of Shamti with Afghanistan was launched. In the near future, the completion of the construction of the railway from the Iranian city of Khaf to Herat is expected.

In addition, the construction of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway will allow the transportation of goods in the direction of Central Asia-Pakistan through the joint Iranian-Pakistani railway networks Zahedan-Quetta-Karachi. At present, the Pakistani side is actively promoting the construction of the Peshawar-Jalalabad railway, which will subsequently connect to a single Afghan railway line and open a direct connection with the Pakistani port of Karachi. According to the Ministry of Railways of Pakistan, the World Bank is interested in executing a new railway route between Peshawar and Jalalabad, which will go through the Loi Shalman Valle.

Third, the prospect of using the transit and infrastructure potential of the Uzbek-Afghan transport corridor opens the possibility for Central Asian states to access the Indian Ocean's sea trade routes. The Eurasian region has a high transport and transit potential already, owing to its geographic positioning with access in all directions — from south to north and east to west — given infrastructure improvements to seize this potential.

The realization of trans-Afghanistan transport and communication projects along with other equally important regional projects such as the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman route and the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway project creates the necessary conditions for the development of efficient intercontinental transport corridors.

For example, the length of the alternative land corridor in the direction of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Iran (3,500 km) will be four times shorter than the existing sea link between China and Iran (13,800 km). In turn, the construction of the Mazar-e Sharif-Herat road will allow goods to get from Afghanistan to China in just three days through Andijan (Uzbekistan).

In general, given the transport and transit potential of Uzbekistan, the economic benefits from the implementation of these projects are obvious. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to do a great amount of work from the point of view of coordinating the technical parameters of the construction of railways, the issues of ensuring security and financing, formalizing the regulatory framework and so on.

The preliminary agreements reached on the formation of new rail transport routes should be viewed as another step toward strengthening the transit position of the Central Asian region, integrating Central Asia and Afghanistan into global economic ties, enhancing the economic potential and welfare of the countries of the region. At the same time, the practical implementation of these initiatives will turn Central Asia not only into an international transit hub, but also a key link in the transcontinental economic space between South Asia, the Asia-Pacific region, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Europe, and the Middle East.

All this, in turn, will help to bring Uzbekistan's relations with major foreign economic partners to a qualitatively new level, significantly expanding trade and economic cooperation with developed and dynamically developing countries such as India, Iran, Pakistan, and others.

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