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Railways within the system of the north-south international corridor

In 2000 a tripartite Russian-Iranian-Indian agreement purporting to establish the North-South International Corridor over 7,000 km long, from Saint Petersburg to Mumbai was entered. And in 2002 the ministers of transport of the participating countries executed a protocol for official opening of the North-South Corridor. However, the lack of railway communication between the three countries, first and foremost, between Russia and Iran, became a material hindrance to transit of goods due to the necessity of their transshipment in seaports.

In August 2016 in Baku a meeting was held between the Presidents of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran, Mr. Putin, Mr. Aliev, and Mr. Rouhani, stipulating, among others, that direct railway communication between Russia and Iran should be established via Azerbaijan.

The idea of that itinerary is far from being a new one. In 1908 a line from Tbilisi (Georgia) to Culfa on the Iranian border [5]. And even earlier (in 1883 and 1900) lines were opened from Tbilisi to Baku and from Baku to Port-Petrovsk (now Makhachkala). The latter created a link between railways of South Caucasus and the European Russia. In 1915 Russian road workers built an inland line to Iran, from Culfa to Tabriz. In 1941 the direct (shorter) line from Culfa to Baku was commissioned. And in 1949, as a result of a junction between railways of Abkhazia and Krasnodar Territory, a western road from European Russia was created, via Sochi, Sukhumi, and Tbilisi.

Regretfully, during the post-Soviet times, after military conflicts emerged in Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh, railway link between Russia and Iran via Culfa became impossible. That is why a new road was projected, via Astara lying by the Caspian Sea on the Azerbaijan-Iran border. The Azerbaijan section is practically completed, and in 2018 the Iranian section (Rasht-Astara) is scheduled for commissioning.

Note that the Iranian railway system during the past years saw a rapid development. In 1995 the total length of national railways was 4,500 km. In 2010 it exceeded 10,000 km, and by 2015 it reached 25,000 km. Therefore, within a twenty-year span it increased five and a half times. Among the most important new trunk lines, the road to Bandar Abbas, road from Mashhad to Turkmen border, and Kerman-Zahedan road have to be mentioned. The latter enabled a connection between the railway network of Iran and that of Pakistan and India.

Upon completion of Rasht-Astara road, freight transit will become possible from Russia via Azerbaijan to Bandar Abbas and further by sea to Mumbai. And,

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as a remote prospect, direct communication with India may become possible via Iran and Pakistan.

But, in addition to the above railway route, and the Volga and Caspian Sea waterway, other options for the North-South Corridor are available, including through the Central Asia countries. Projects of railway from the European Russia southeastward, via Turkestan to the British India, appeared back in 19th century. Among them, a special place belongs to the project by engineer Stanislav Baranovsky, published in the Niva magazine in 1874 [1]. It envisaged construction of a trunk line from Saratov on the Volga to Attock on the Indus (nowadays Pakistan). The railway route was intended to start from a bridge across the Volga River near Saratov and to stretch across the rivers of Ural and Emba, across the Ustyurt plateau to the southern Aral Sea coast and then along the Amu-Darya River to the Afghan border. Further the route lay over the eastern part of the country to the Afghan-Pakistani border, then via Peshawar to the Indus banks.

A project of a Russia-India railway, of a comparable scope and ambition, was proposed by Mr. Ferdinand de Lesseps, ex-supervisor of Suez Canal construction[3]. He filed with the Russian government a proposal to construct a railway from Orenburg via Samarkand to Peshawar and connect it to the British India's railways. In January 1875 a special meeting of the Committee for Railways was held in Saint Petersburg on which that proposal was examined. Yet, eventually it was declined, and instead, a recommendation was issued to construct a railway from the European Russia to Tashkent.

Initially it was proposed to start in Orenburg. Yet afterwards, for military strategic reasons, a decision was made to construct the Transcaspian Railway from Mikhailovsky Bay of the Caspian Sea (near the actual Turkmenbashi Port) to the Central Asia regions [2].

In 1888 the line reached Samarkand, and in 1898, Tashkent. Additionally, from the Merv station in Turkmenistan a line was laid to Kushka on the Afghan border. In 1916 a railway was built to Termez, another location on the Afghan border. Yet, the first railway border crossing appeared only in 1982 when a short railway line was laid from Kushka to Turgundi (Afghanistan). Another railway border crossing on Turkmen-Afghan border was opened in 2016 near Akina in North-West of Afghanistan.

In 1985 a road and rail "Friendship Bridge" was constructed from Termez (Uzbekistan) to Hairatan on the Afghan side of the Amu-Daria River. It was built in 2010 when a 75 km line to the Afghan territory was constructed, ending in Mazar-i-Sharif. Leaving aside the two trans-border sections near Turgundi and Akina, and other than the Hairatan line, there is only one railway in Afghanistan, from the Iranian border to Herat. Note that these two lines have different track widths: the 'Russian' (1520 mm) and 'European' (1435 mm). There are projects to construct one or two lines from Pakistan, featuring the 'Indian' track width (1676 mm). Thus, Afghanistan may become a nation with three different rail track standards. Yet this is not the only problem to deal with when constructing

trans-Afghan railways. Two more threats, and much greater, are the country's rugged mountainous topography and political instability. Therefore, it is premature to speak of any realistic projects of a trunk railway running from the Central Asia to Pakistan and India via Afghanistan.

As to the railway from the Volga to the south Aral coast and further along the Amu-Daria (as Mr. Baranovsky suggested), it was constructed in Soviet times, though starting from Astrakhan, not Saratov. That line was constructed in several stages. To be precise, certain sections of that railway were parts of other lines constructed in different time periods. The through traffic from Astrakhan to Chardzhou (now Turkmenabad), with an access to major Central Asian trunk lines, was not opened until 1972.

In 1996 Turkmenistan and Iran constructed the Tedzhen-Serakhs-Mashhad line, connecting the Central Asian railways to Iranian seaports [4]. In 2006 the Ashkhabad-Dashhowuz railway was completed, giving a shortcut from the Iranian border to the trunk line from Astrakhan to the Central Asia. And in 2014, the construction of Kazakh-Turkmen-Iran line was finalized, running along the Caspian east coast, from the Mangyshlak peninsula to Gorgan (Iran).

Therefore, currently there are three railway lines from the European Russia to Iran:

a) via Orenburg, Tashkent, Turkmenabad, and Serakhs;
b) via Astrakhan, Dashhowuz, Ashkhabad, and Serakhs;
c) via Astrakhan, along the Caspian east coast.

As it was already noted above, soon the Russia-Azerbaijan-Iran route is expected to open, running along the Caspian west coast. And, finally, a waterway exists along the Volga and the Caspian Sea. All those five options for the North-South International Corridor will enable direct freight transport from Europe via Russia to Iran and further to Pakistan and India (and the reverse).

Yet how much demand exists for all those corridors? Of all the above railway routes currently only those running via Serakhs are actually loaded, enabling the Central Asian countries to reach the Iranian seaports. The other options remain hardly used at all.

It is premature to speak of any serious scope of freight transit from Europe to the Central and Southern Asia along the North-South Corridor. The bulk of the goods between the regions is hauled through the Suez Canal. In spite of the low speeds, sea transport is rather reliable and inexpensive. And to shift the balance, a great deal of efforts will need to be put to make the new transport routes more reliable and profitable, and thereby, more attractive.

Russia is extremely interested to make the North-South Corridor really functional, as all of its routes are lying across our territory. And, in spite of all the complications of the task, there are significant drivers to successfully develop this transport corridor.