

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Eurasian landbridge is taking shape

Three crucial transport infrastructure projects have received the official go-ahead.

Usually, even "accelerated" infrastructure projects in Europe make very slow progress. The bureaucrats in the European Commission and in the national member governments interpret "priority" differently than the public. Many bureaucrats believe that a project is "real" only if preceded by years of painstaking debate.

The important transcontinental transport corridor project from Berlin to Moscow via Warsaw has suffered much unnecessary delay. After four years of fruitless debate, the mid-December 1994 summit of the European Union in Essen finally put it on its list of mid-term priority projects, and in late February 1995, the transport ministers of Germany, Poland, Belarus, and Russia signed a declaration of intent in Berlin.

In Warsaw on April 24, the state railway companies of the four nations signed the "Agreement on Cooperation for the Modernization, Reconstruction, and Development of the Railway Corridor Berlin-Warsaw-Minsk-Moscow," making the Berlin statement more concrete. It defines a timetable for completion of the project, and states that the aim is to cut, within five years, Berlin-Moscow rail travel time to approximately 24 hours.

The agreement defines "the historically shaped railway corridor E20 Berlin-Warsaw-Minsk-Moscow" as "a natural prolongation of the western European net, the railway corridor Paris (London)-Brussels-Berlin." It also addresses the Eurasian perspective: "In respect to the geographic location of Russia, the transport corridor Berlin-Moscow, together with the Russian railways and especially the

Trans-Siberian railway corridor, represents a reliable link between Europe and Asia."

The project outline envisions that, by 2010, Berlin-Moscow travel time will be shortened to 17 hours.

The Chinese also have an intense interest in a Eurasian landbridge for high-speed rail transport. At about the same time that the Warsaw agreement was signed, senior officials of the People's Republic of China were emphasizing the importance of the route along the old "Silk Road" from Asia to Europe and the western parts of Russia. In Germany, Bavarian state governor Edmund Stoiber reported on his return from Beijing and the Bavarian sister-state partner region of Chandong on April 25, that the Chinese have made the new Silk Road a priority in their national infrastructure program.

The first phase of the Chinese program envisions the construction of 20,000 kilometers of new railway tracks, plus 100,000 km of highways, over the next 5-10 years. The projects will start from the urban industrial centers on the Chinese coast and extend into the underdeveloped inland, early next century. The Silk Road connection to Russia and western Europe will be crucial for the economic development of the largely unpopulated, western regions of China. Stoiber said that his Chinese discussion partners, who are watching the development around the Berlin-Moscow corridor project closely, welcomed a leading role for German industry, with its know-how in modern transport technology, in their national infrastructure program.

But the projects are not only mak-

ing progress toward the East: On April 20, the Dutch cabinet okayed increased funding for the rail link between the port of Rotterdam on the North Sea, and the German high-speed grid. The project, the 130 km "Betuwelijn," which will cost about DM 7.5 billion (\$4.6 billion), is designed for containerized transport on high-speed trains from Rotterdam (Europe's largest seaport) to Emmerich on the Dutch-German border, and on to the rest of the continent.

With the projected completion of the national German high-speed grid by the year 2000, and with the improvement in transit from Berlin to Moscow by the year 2000 which is envisioned in the Warsaw agreement, it will be possible to transport goods by rail from Rotterdam to Moscow in no more than 30 hours by the year 2004, when the "Betuwelijn" will be completed, according to Dutch plans. And by 2010, when the Belarussian and Russian sections of the corridor are completed, the transit from Rotterdam to Moscow will be less than 24 hours.

The corridor, and its extension to Rotterdam, also is of immense importance for the underdeveloped regions directly bordering on the Baltic Sea. This aspect was addressed by Ottokar Hahn, a senior official of the EU Commission's department on transport policy, at a conference in Berlin on April 24. Hahn said that the integration of the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into western Europe will work best through spinoff effects of the Berlin-Warsaw-Moscow corridor.

The EU made yet-another step for the improvement of infrastructure in the Baltic coastal regions when, on April 27, it gave its official go-ahead for the A-20 highway project between the German port of Lübeck and the Polish port of Szczecin.