

Eurasian Rail Projects Are Going Forward

by Mary Burdman

The highest levels of the Chinese government have confirmed that one of the most challenging rail projects ever to be considered, is to be built. This will be the construction of the first-ever rail line to Tibet, the aptly named “roof of the world.” This project, and the Beijing-Shanghai high-speed rail connection—which could very possibly be the first commercial magnetic levitation (maglev) rail line in the world—are the centerpieces of China’s current national development program.

The Tibet rail line will cost some \$2.4 billion, and take seven to eight years to build.

On Feb. 9, it was announced that Chinese President Jiang Zemin had called the construction of this rail line, which will link Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, to the rest of China, via Qinghai Province, highly necessary, and that construction should start as soon as possible. Prime Minister Zhu Rongji also stated that the time is ripe for building the Qinghai-Tibet rail line, which would accelerate economic and social development in Tibet. Tibet is the only region of China which still has no railroad.

China’s Railroad Ministry began considering building a railroad to Tibet already in the 1950s, but the enormous, and, in many ways, unique, engineering requirements for this project have prevented construction so far. It will be the highest and longest mountain railroad ever built, and will pass through three vast mountain ranges. The overall length of the rail line, southwest from Golmud, capital of Qinghai, to Lhasa, will be 1,118 kilometers (about 700 miles), through incredibly difficult terrain including mountains ranging well more than 6,000 meters (about 20,000 feet) high. On this route, more than 960 km—over 80%—of the rail line will be built at an altitude of more than 4,000 meters. More than half of the project will be laid on earth that has long been frozen, requiring special technology. The rail line will require some 30.6 km of bridges and tunnels.

The rail line to Golmud, from Lanzhou and Xining in western China, was opened in 1984, but construction stopped there. In July 1997, a group of Chinese rail experts began an intensive survey of the route through the mountains to Nagqu and Lhasa, which was completed a year later.

Then, at a meeting on Dec. 15, 2000, Railway Ministry spokesman Ren Guixi announced that China not only intends

to build the 1,300 km Beijing-Shanghai line, but also the Tibet rail line. He said that four routes were under consideration, including one from southern Yunnan province, or central Sichuan, the most populous in China. The Golmud route was chosen because it is shortest, but other lines could be built in the future. A final announcement will be made in March, by the National People’s Congress session.

China has become one of the world’s greatest rail builders, and is currently constructing some 2,000 km of rail lines a year. As a result, it now has the biggest rail network—more than 70,000 km—in Asia. The nation has also developed its own modern and efficient rail-building technology in the recent two decades, preferring this method to importing such machinery.

The go-ahead for the Tibet rail line could be an indication that other Eurasian rail projects, including the “Paris to Shanghai” rail line, will also be constructed soon. This rail line will link Xinjiang in northwestern China, to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, through the Kyrgyz mountains to the Fergana Valley. Its construction was made possible by the opening of the southern Xinjiang rail line in December 1999. This was the first rail connection to Kashi, known as the most landlocked city in the world.

Last October, Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev, in an interview with the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, said that the European Union is helping to build the “Paris-Shanghai” rail line, and construction should start in 2002, and be completed in five years. “There are only 600 km from the Chinese border through the Kyrgyz mountains to Fergana,” Akayev said. “This would be the shortest way to China—1,000 km shorter than over the Russian Trans-Siberian.”

In December, the Kyrgyz Parliament approved the project as the nation’s top infrastructure priority. A commission of experts from China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are reviewing the plans.

Korea to Russia

Another great Eurasian rail project was under discussion in February, this time in Seoul. On Feb. 12-13, Russia’s First Vice Minister of Railways Alexander Tselko led a 53-member delegation to South Korea, to present the superiority of the Trans-Siberian Railway over other routes for transcontinental transportation, to leaders of the Korean government and some 75 Korean firms.

The conference, titled “The Trans-Siberian Land Bridge in the 21st Century: Prospects for the Development of Russian-Korean Relations in the Field of Railway Transportation,” is the most recent development in the creation of the “Iron-Silk Road” announced by the leaders of both Koreas at their historic summit in Pyongyang in June 2000.

There, it was proposed that the 20 km of rail line needed to re-connect the North Korea-South Korea Seoul-Sinuiju rail line, now severed by the “Demilitarized Zone” which has divided the Korean Peninsula since 1953, be rebuilt.



The main line in Lanxin in northwestern China. China has now officially announced plans to build a rail line to Tibet, "The Roof of the World," which is an engineering challenge.

Mine clearing and groundbreaking to lay the rails began last September, and the necessary military agreements were finalized this month. This rail line is slated to re-open in September.

South Korean President Kim Dae-jung announced last August, that when the Seoul-Sinuiju line is finished, the Kyongwon Railway connecting Seoul to Wonsan on the east coast of North Korea, must be reconnected and restored, opening the way to eastern Russia. North Korea's rail connection to China at Sinuiju is in use, the only rail connection from the North to the outside world.

Last September, Kim Dae-Jung met with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the United Nations Millennium Summit, where they agreed that their Prime Ministers would initiate talks on connecting the Korean and Russian rail lines. South Korea's Construction and Transportation Ministry estimated that making the Seoul-Wonsan line usable, would cost about \$236 million and take up to 36 months. It would then be possible to ship from South Korea, to the 9,028 km Russian Trans-Siberian transcontinental railway, and to Europe.

Putin, who was the first Russian head of state to visit North Korea in July 2000, will also visit Seoul in late February. On Feb. 26, at a meeting to finalize the economic agenda for the Russia-South Korea summit, a South Korea-Russia rail committee will be formed. The North Korea-Russia rail committee is already in existence. The committee will be led by Tselko and South Korean Vice Construction-Transportation Minister Kang Khil-boo.

At the Seoul conference, Tselko said that Russia will discuss investment in modernizing North Korea's rail lines,

at a proposed three-way meeting with South and North Korea. The North Korean vice minister of railways has already accepted the proposal, he said. "Russia's position is, in principle, that it wants to make investment in the modernization of the eastern section of the inter-Korean railway, stretching from [the Russian border city of] Khasan to [the North Korean city of] Pyongsan via Wonsan," Tselko said.

He also said that Russia plans to train 1,500 North Korean technicians at a Russian rail university. A Russian delegation was in Pyongyang last year to analyze the costs of modernizing the North's railways.

If the three-way meeting is convened, commented the South Korean daily the *Korea Times*, "it will mark the major milestone in a grand

scheme to build the so-called 'Iron Silk Road.' . . . The project, if completed, is set to bring about a revolutionary effect on the transportation of humans and cargoes on the Eurasian continent, because the time and costs for transportation will be reduced dramatically."

Will There Be Energy?

An exhibition on the Trans-Siberian Railway is to open at the Industrial Bank of Korea building in Seoul. Russia is claiming that the Trans-Siberian would be a superior trans-Eurasian route to the "Trans-China Railway" (the Euro-Asian Continental Bridge), because of its lack of border crossings, lower costs, and high technological standards.

However, there is a problem. One of the worst effects of the deindustrialization of Russia over the past decade, has been the destruction of its energy infrastructure, especially in the Far East. Both rail and industry have been robbed of energy under the shock-therapy regime imposed on Russia, and the Trans-Siberian and other eastern railroads are frequently shut down for lack of power. Energy essential to keep the vast Siberian region functioning, is being sold abroad for profit. This year, due to a ferocious winter, the situation has been worse than ever, leaving the population, as well as industry and transport, to freeze. On Feb. 5, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Gavrin was ousted due to the crisis east of the Urals, and the corrupt and contentious Governor of Far East Primorye Territory, Yevgeny Nazdratenko, was also forced out of office.

Until Russia can solve its fundamental economic problems, no great project, no matter how beneficial, can be realized.