

New Connections Enhance Russia-China Trade

by William Jones

March 10—Thoughts of Northeast Asia these days usually involve visions of conflict: the United States vs. North Korea, Japan against China, and Russia against Japan. Nor are these conflicts recent. Manchuria, the northeast province of China, bordering Russia and Korea, is the region from which the conquering Manchus came, the dynasty that ruled China for four hundred years until 1911. And it was here in Manchuria, not in Poland, where World War II actually began when Japan seized it in 1931.

Now the same region is on the verge of becoming a major focus of development and international cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. And given the recent thaw in U.S.-DPRK relations, it could become an area of cooperation that also will encompass that “hermit kingdom,” the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea.

The first railroad bridge over the Amur River, which serves as a boundary marker between Russia and China’s northeastern Heilongjiang Province, is scheduled to be completed this year. The bridge will connect Nizhneleninskoye in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast of Russia, with Tongjiang in Heilongjiang. The bridge will be 2.2 km long, but its corresponding track infrastructure will be 19.9 km long and is projected to cost \$355 million. It is expected to transport more than 3 million metric tons of cargo and 1.5 million passengers per year.

The first railroad bridge was built over the Amur river in 1916, as a part of Russia’s Trans-Siberian Railroad. Originally, the eastern portion of the Trans-Siberian Railroad ran not through Russia, but rather through China’s Manchuria, stretching all the way to Dalian on the Pacific. A 25-year lease of the right-of-way allowed Russia to build the longest railroad line in the world. It was intended to bring China, as well as Japan, into the major development program planned by Russia’s



Railroad bridge nears completion, linking Tongjiang City in northeast China’s Heilongjiang Province with Nizhneleninskoye in Russia’s Jewish Autonomous Oblast.

Sergei Witte, the Finance Minister who organized the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

The Chinese portion of the Trans-Siberian, called the Chinese Eastern Railway, extended from Chita in Russian Siberia through Harbin, the provincial capital of Manchuria, and then south to Dalian. Another line went west to Suifenhe, near the border, and on to Ussuryysk and Vladivostok in Russia. Japanese resistance to this Russian presence led to the Russo-Japanese War and the Japanese occupation of Korea. At a later stage, with the abrupt withdrawal of Soviet advisers from China in 1960, the Amur River became an armed border, with even some military clashes between China and Russia along its length, and virtually no contact across it.

New Economic Corridor

Much of what is being done in the broad context of the Belt and Road Initiative is being worked out in a variety of sub-regional plans. Northeast China’s development coordination with Russia’s Far East is an example of this. In addition to the direct connections over the Amur River, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic



Map of major projects and railway routes joining Mongolia, Russia and China.

Corridor (CMREC) is also being developed. This will make rail connections from Heilongjiang province in China to Russia directly, as well as through the landlocked nation of Mongolia in between them. The leaders of China, Mongolia, and Russia worked out many of these plans at a meeting in 2016. Thirty-two different projects have now been approved for the CMREC, one-third of them dealing with transportation. For the present, trucking remains the primary mode of goods transport, but this will soon change.

An upgrade to the Beijing-to-Moscow rail connection through Ulan Bator in Mongolia is being discussed. The aim of the upgrade is to bring the 7-day trip down to two days, if high-speed rail is used. The Chinese proposal envisions two lines: one, a more direct route from Shenyang in Liaoning province to Chita in Siberia, and a second more easterly line that would connect to the new Tumen high-speed inter-city rail line which goes from Hunchun on the border with North Korea close to Russia, to Jilin City. Many consider the Tumen inter-city line the most scenic high-speed rail line in China. A recent traveler on the Tumen line looked across the river to North Korea, and was amazed how peaceful things looked on the other side. He hardly saw any military installations. Quite remarkable considering the tensions noted elsewhere when speaking of the DPRK.

The port of Manzhouli on the China-Russia

border, which has long been the main transit route from northeastern China to the Trans-Siberian Railroad, still carries much of the cargo from northeast China. But already there are nine transit points connecting the borders of Mongolia with China's Mongolian Autonomous Region across the border.

For both countries, this sub-regional aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative is very important. First of all, it facilitates the development of Russia's Far East. Today, most investment in the Russian Far East comes from China. Much of it is investment in oil and natural gas, but with the increasing pace of development, this will significantly branch out into other areas.

Before China's "Reform and Opening Up," which began under Deng Xiaoping in 1978, Northeast China was the manufacturing hub of China. But with the development of new industries in the eastern and southern coastal regions as the economy expanded, this area of Manchuria became a rust belt. The Chinese Government is now intent on bringing the economic potential back to this region. Heilongjiang province is also one of the most productive agricultural regions in the country. And if there is peace on the Korean Peninsula, this region will be the key area of confluence with the development of rail connections to North Korea.



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Jilin-Tumen-Hunchun high-speed railway.