**Trans-Afghan Railway Line**

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As connectivity of Southeast Asia and the Middle East with Central Asia and the Caucasus hinges on Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Trans-Afghan Railway Line, if completed, will serve as a lifeline for an integrated Eurasia.

Initially, a conception of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to diversify trade and supply routes of his landlocked Central Asian country, Trans-Afghan Railway Line has ever since become a dream of all stakeholders in the region for boosting connectivity.

“Termez-Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar Railway is our common future. When the construction of this route is completed, we will create the closest, cheapest and safest corridor connecting Pakistan to Central Asia,” Mirziyoyev said during his visit to Islamabad in 2020. Uzbekistan’s major purpose behind the project was to gain access to Pakistan’s Karachi Port, Port Qasim and Gwadar Port for its trade outreach to Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Pakistan and Afghanistan found it more amenable to their economic revival plans.

Even Kazakhstan and Russia took immense interest when the feasibility study of the project was launched in July 2021. The Russian Railway promised to develop a digital model of the project, besides agreeing to help in laying a 1520-millimetre gauge wide rail track up to the Pakistani territory. While working on the proposal, Uzbekistan had three options to reach out to the world. Iran’s Bander Abbas and Chabahar Ports were given thorough consideration. But international sanctions against Tehran did not encourage Tashkent to take that route. Iran’s relations with the Arab world might also have been a disadvantage.

The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan rail-road economic corridor has already been made functional.

Similarly, Turkmenistan had much tougher import-export processing and higher transit tariff. So Pakistan and Afghanistan were found the viable option to materialise the dream. Media reports at that time quoted Uzbek officials as describing Pakistan as a more stable partner than Iran and Turkmenistan. Trans-Afghan Railway Line also turned out to be the shortest and most economical route for Uzbek freight. In fact, Uzbekistan had already constructed, in 2011, a 75-kilometre rail track between its border city, Termez and Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, though the railway line has, for some reasons, remained non-functional and its cargo has been diverted to the road.

The 2018 Uzbek plan envisages shipment of goods from Termez to Afghanistan’s border town of Hairatan from where it is to be moved to Pakistan’s Landikotal town after passing through Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul and Jalalabad. At Peshawar, the shipment will be offloaded and transported through Pakistan’s rail system to Karachi and Gwadar.

Afghanistan’s rugged terrain, tough climate and security hazards pose challenges in the implementation of the project. But both the previous government in Kabul and the present Taliban dispensation have vowed their commitment to undertake the project.

The project route in northern Afghanistan also includes the three-and-a-half-kilometre Salang Pass, which mostly remains closed due to heavy snowfall and avalanches in the winter season. To avoid that, a second tunnel, parallel to the existing Salang Tunnel has been proposed, albeit at a higher cost. In January this year, the Taliban cabinet approved a plan to sideline the Salang Pass and pass the railway through Baghlan and Bamyan provinces. This will make the 573-kilometre railway line a bit lengthier but will ensure its topographic safety.

Besides security problems, a big challenge in the implementation of the project is the arrangement of funds. Uzbekistan is trying to secure financial support from the World Bank, Asia Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, besides the US International Development Finance Corporation.

Of late, there are reports that besides most of these financial institutions, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and International Finance Corporation have also indicated their willingness to finance the $4.80 billion five-year project. With the Central Asian geopolitics disturbed by the Ukraine war, supply routes in the region have been largely destabilized, making such infrastructure projects rather more feasible. Located at the centre of major regions, the Trans-Afghan Railway Line is also poised to provide linkages to major export markets from the European Union boundaries down in China.

In 2021, Uzbekistan’s Ministry of Investment and Foreign Affairs had, in a statement, said, “once the Trans-Afghan Railway Line project is completed Pakistan’s trade with Central Asia will rise up to $six billion. It also projected high growth in India’s trade with the region.”

The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan rail-road economic corridor has already been made functional: only with willpower as infrastructure for the project is yet to be developed. The first convoy of Chinese goods left Kashghar in southwestern China via Osh in Kyrgyzstan and Termez in Uzbekistan on September 13 this year and reached Afghanistan’s Hairatan border town on September 23. This 523-kilometre supply route is estimated to reduce China’s distance to Europe by 900 kilometres with a shipping time of seven to nine days.

Once connected with the prevailing and potential supply routes of the region, the Afghan rail corridor will go a long way in bringing lasting economic prosperity and cultural diversity, making the region a meeting point of eastern and western civilizations. If nations in the region opt to shift the paradigm of their national policies from geopolitics to geoeconomics, they will use such linkages as highways of prosperity and development for their people.

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