Trends in Greater Inner Eurasian Transit Connectivity: Beyond BRI & EEU

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BEYOND BRI AND EEU

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A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The heartland of Eurasia,¹ the so-called chessboard over which new and revived transit connectivity plans for Eurasian transcontinental development are being devised, is an ill-defined territorial and psychological concept. At times, portions of this great super-region have been called Central Asia² or Inner Asia³—terms which the U.S. Library of Congress considers synonymous. A more recent designation is Inner Eurasia, which was utilized in 2019 for a 2019 Max Planck Society study released in *Nature Ecology & Evolution*.⁴ The study describes Inner Eurasia as the crossroads connecting Asia and Europe that includes areas of modern-day Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, but curiously omits the western regions of China. The term Outer Eurasia—which focuses on the Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean economically vibrant urban centers, states, and civilizations on the periphery of the continent—is used also, albeit rarely.⁵ For the purposes of this analysis and to embrace more completely the nations that straddle the Ural, Altai, Pamir, and Himalayan mountain chains as well as those of the grand Gobi, Karakum, Kyzulkum, Takla Makan, and Thar deserts—

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² Central Asia stretches from the Caspian Sea to the western provinces of China and from Afghanistan in the south to the Russian Caucasus in the north. The region is mainly associated with the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and often defined by the fact that its peoples historically were nomadic or lived in the Silk Road cities and today are Muslims. “Central Asia,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Asia. Accessed July 15, 2019.

³ Denis Sinor, late professor at Indiana University, was a great popularizer of the term “Inner Asia”. See *Inner Asia*, (London: Routledge, 1997). Sinor noted the changing borders of the region because of comparison and conflict with agricultural peoples, thus agreeing with a civilizational and economic division made famous by Owen Lattimore in his *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1940).


areas that must be crossed in order for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR), and the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU or EEU) to succeed—the diverse geography from Turkey and Iran through the Central Asian republics and Mongolia to the Korean Peninsula and south into India and South Asia will be termed Greater Inner Eurasia.

Greater Inner Eurasia

Executive Summary

Throughout Greater Inner Eurasia, geographic and geopolitical barriers historically have prevented integration, and long-standing transportation gaps or bottlenecks within the Eurasian “super” continent have persisted. Across the contemporary region, various development strategies that take the form of investments in sectors such as energy and transportation infrastructure construction, among others, seemingly have proliferated and accelerated in response to or in competition with China’s BRI and Russia’s EEU; all of these strategies seek to fill obvious gaps in security dialogue mechanisms, reduce isolation, and maximize and accelerate continental economic integration trends. Today’s dynamism, particularly in the transit sector, is full of possibilities for the nations that are impacted by or are driving these developments.⁷

However, the connectivity schemes conceptualized by states other than China or Russia should not be evaluated as BRI or EEU spin-offs, but should be understood as addressing much more localized needs and interests. The parochial nature of BRI and EEU both maximizes affected countries’ commitments to them and also maintains elements of historical antagonisms and trust deficits that temper their potentials for success.

The World Pensions Council (WPC) in 2017 estimated that, throughout the Eurasian continental region excluding China, rectification of the “infrastructure gap” to spur economic growth requires up to $900 billion of infrastructure investment per year over the next decade, mostly in debt instruments, which is 50 percent above current infrastructure spending rates in the region.⁸ This need for long-term capital explains why many Greater Inner Eurasian states have become interested in devising their own regional and continental projects to make certain that they are not left out of China’s and Russia’s grand schemes to maximize transit infrastructure-driven economic growth. The topics explored in this monograph are listed on the following page.

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⁷ One of the most optimistic studies of the emerging Eurasian “super” continent is Kent Calder’s Super Continent: The Logic of Eurasian Integration (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019).

GREATER INNER EURASIAN TRANSIT CONNECTIVITY

Increasing connectivity to foster commercial exchanges throughout the Greater Inner Eurasian space has been a long sought-after goal of numerous historical peoples for centuries. However, disconnectivity has persisted across the giant continent, defying repeated so-called “Silk Road” efforts to overcome it. This disconnectivity has been driven mainly by geographical features including great deserts such as the Gobi and Tarim Basin and steep mountain ranges such as the Indian subcontinental Pamirs—all of which restrict human movement and trade and in turn engender economic lifestyles on the grasslands, oases, and high mountain plateaus that differ from those of the agricultural peoples of Russia, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and India.

Other gaps are civilizational or cultural, exemplified by the successive Turkic populations that have looked westward toward the Mediterranean region and the Middle East for modernity and religious models instead of toward Inner Asia. Meanwhile, their Mongolian nomadic cousins turned eastward toward China, Siberian Russia, and Northeast Asia for inspiration and protection and, except during the Mongol Empire, rejected alliances with peoples in the west of the continent.

Political ideologies over the centuries also have played a role in creating disconnectivity throughout Greater Inner Eurasia. For example, the “Great Game”9 played by Czarist Russian, British, Japanese, and Chinese imperial authorities as well as twentieth century internecine communist and Cold War schisms still echo today. To fill in these persistent connectivity gaps and to facilitate trade, many distrustful nations in the Greater Inner Eurasian space, enabled by today’s technological opportunities to enhance connectivity, have devised their own transportation schemes that feed into their industrial and free trade zones and then move onward to customers at the fringes of the continent. Nations across Greater Inner Eurasia have called for differently routed Eurasian land bridges and transit corridors due to concerns about Chinese and Russian monopolies over economic development pathways. Ironically, without the massive financing that especially BRI promises, it is unlikely that most of these plans can be realized.

POINTS OF DISCONNECTIVITY WITHIN THE BELT AND ROAD AND EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION

Many proposals for connectivity within Greater Inner Eurasia have attracted the world’s attention during the last five years because of China’s and Russia’s promotion

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9 The term originally was used to describe the intense rivalry between the British and Russian Empires in Central Asia during the nineteenth century. A good analysis of this period can be found in Peter Hopkirk, The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia (Kodansha Globe, 1990).
of new transcontinental integrative economic strategies. China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Silk Road, subsequently renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with its transcontinental and maritime components, was proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in the fall of 2013. BRI is China’s framework for its vision of Asian continental leadership, wherein China claims that its intentions are a benign effort to promote successful development that is linked to the economic success of its neighbors, including their stability and growth. From May 2018 to June 2019, the World Bank Group has produced 20 analytical papers on BRI that examine all 71 economies including China within the various BRI transport corridors. In 2017, these economies received 35 percent of global foreign direct investment and accounted for 40 percent of global exports. Furthermore, the World Bank estimates that for the 70 BRI “corridor economies,” projects already executed, in implementation, or planned could total as much as US$575 billion.

Not long after Xi’s BRI announcement, Russian President Vladimir Putin proclaimed Russia’s Silk Road vision for a free market Eurasian continental transport network under the name of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU or EEU) on May 29, 2014. Its founding members were Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. This initiative was the realization of an idea first put forward in 1994 by President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev during a speech at Moscow State University, wherein Nazarbayev called for creating a “common defense” space and regional trading bloc in order to connect with the economies of Europe and East Asia. Putin has maintained that “the geographical position permits [Russia] to create transport, logistic routes of not only regional, but also global importance that permits attracting massive trade flows in Europe and Asia.” Through the EEU, Russia seeks to link its European eastern regions to East Asian markets so that the Russian Far East can become the backbone of the Russian economy—a goal all the more important since Europe and the United States imposed sanctions on Russia in response to the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. However, the U.S. has viewed the EEU as a regional trade and investment project to counter Western integration unions—a concept echoed by security strategist and former Moldovan Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration Nicolae Popescu who wrote that Putin sees the EEU as a vehicle for post-Soviet reintegration that could be turned into “a distinctive block of influence like the EU, NAFTA and APEC.”

Post-2014 strategic cooperation between usual historical rivals China and Russia, especially

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in the energy sector, has allowed both countries’ plans for connectivity to attract the attention of the other Greater Inner Eurasian nations without necessarily compelling them to choose between China and Russia. However, the peripheral states are increasingly concerned, even to the point of alarm, that a twenty-first century “Great Game” might be on the horizon, and that Eurasian continental integration—which is being energized by the rise of the Chinese economy, the need for energy resources, and new cooperation between mineral energy-rich Russia and newly powerful China—might generate trends that would limit more than catalyze the autonomy that small nations have in their developmental and strategic choices. These concerns have led the periphery states to be more proactive in promoting their own ideas for transcontinental political, economic, and transit integration in order to overcome obstacles to progress and to secure national security.

A 2018 World Bank study recommended that priority should be given to weak links—or points of disconnectivity—as the development of BRI corridors proceed:

The concept of the ‘strength of weak ties’ is fundamental to how the BRI corridors will impact regional and global connectivity... Strengthening weak connections to other networks brings benefits to the connected entities. In the context of BRI, identifying these particular ‘weak ties’ should guide the prioritization of investment needs, and with it the negotiation of trade and other agreements, and improving the regulatory and policy frameworks for the provision of services.

The various proposals presented by the majority of landlocked Central and South Asian nations identify the main weak links and corridors that are important to facilitating transit flows across the whole continent. China’s BRI and Russia’s EEU offer opportunities to integrate these corridors into a holistic physical infrastructure with cross-border coordination as well as to find necessary financing and foreign investment to realize such connectivity. However, it should be noted that the World Bank 2018 study of the network of BRI overland corridors suggested that only a few Chinese provincial cities can be real gateways to generate and/or mediate trade and people-to-people flows. Creation of such centers with high degrees of centrality are necessary to enable them to act as intermediate flows between China and BRI partners and will ultimately be key to the success of the various corridor proposals.

**Early Rail Transit Concepts**

Rail infrastructure corridors for freight transport remain the centerpiece of plans to realize continental trade. These proposed corridors have their origins in many early plans. One example is the Kunming-Singapore railway, today called the Pan Asia Railway Network,

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18 These are Baotou (Inner Mongolia), Zhengzhou (Henan), Xian (Shaanxi), Lanzhou (Gansu), Urumqi (Xinjiang Uyghur), Kunming (Yunnan), and Qujing (Yunnan).
which is a network of railways that would connect China, Singapore, and all the countries of mainland Southeast Asia. This concept originated in the nineteenth century when the British and French imperialist powers sought to link the railways that they had constructed in southwest China, Indo-China, and Malaya. Various twentieth century conflicts blocked the realization of even the single route from Kunming, China to Singapore. However, under the rubric of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the idea was revived formally in October 2006 under the Trans-Asian Railway Network Agreement, which designated the Kunming-Singapore railway as one of three planned trans-Asian railways. This proposed railway network was expanded to benefit all seven of the ASEAN member countries in mainland Asia—Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Singapore—by building on the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area that came into effect in 2010, the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program, and the 2015 ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) which aims at fostering greater economic integration within ASEAN itself.

In the 1950s, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) proposed a Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) to create an integrated freight railway network across Europe and Asia that would establish a continuous 14,080-kilometer (8,750-mile) rail link connecting Singapore, Istanbul, and Turkey and stretching onward to Europe and Africa. It was hoped that TAR would handle the huge increases in international trade among Eurasian nations as well as improve the economies and the accessibility of landlocked states like Laos, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and the post-Soviet Central Asian republics. At times this plan has been called the Iron Silk Road. However, political and ideological rivalries stymied this vision. When tensions defused between China and Russia at the collapse of the Soviet Union, UNESCAP’s Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development Division re-


vived the initiative in 1992 as part of its Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development project. Although a TAR Network Agreement was signed on November 10, 2006 by seventeen Asian nations and formally came into force on June 11, 2009, it still has not been realized. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) since 1992 also has advocated for greater regional integration along the Eurasian Land Bridge, including the development of rail links among the countries of South, Southeast, and Central Asia.

The PRC’s vision of a grand rail freight transport network encompassing the Asian continent as a way to extend Chinese economic power developed during the two decades prior to the announcement of BRI. In 2010 and 2011, China announced plans to finance the expansion of the rail systems in the Pan Asia Railway Network in Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam and to connect them to China’s rail system via Kunming, with a possible future extension to Bangkok. In 2012, Wang Jisi, President of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking University, Honorary President of the Chinese Association for American Studies, and member since 2008 of the Foreign Policy Advisory Committee of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, advanced the idea of “marching westwards” (西进 xī jìn) in response to the Obama administration’s pivot toward the Asia-Pacific. Wang advocated Chinese policymakers not limit their interests to the Asia-Pacific region alone, but rather advance relations with China’s western frontier neighbors as well—including Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East—to form a Eurasian cooperation framework stretching from London to Shanghai. The concept of this cooperation framework grew out of China’s domestic plan, launched in 2000, to accelerate its Great Western Development Strategy (also known as Opening the West) to boost economic growth in China’s western provinces which were lagging far behind the eastern coastal provinces.

Additional specific projects in Greater Inner Eurasia, often regional in scope or formed under the rubric of creating a modern Silk Road, emerged in the post–Cold War era. These projects usually emphasized the importance of developing transportation infrastructure, though they also incorporated sectors beyond transportation. In 2004, Kazakhstan Temir Zholy, Kazakhstan’s national railway company, announced that it was looking for investors to fund the construction of a railway stretching 3,083 kilometers (1,920 miles) from China across Kazakhstan to the Caspian Sea that would use the same size gauges as Chinese railways, allowing the two railways to connect and to finally link China and Europe via Central Asia. In 2009, President Lee Myung-bak announced South Korea’s New Asia Initiative aimed at expanding the role of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the ASEAN and Central Asian regions, reconnecting with


the Korean heritage communities in the Central Asian republics, and diversifying energy supplies away from the Middle East. These initiatives marked an effort by Seoul to build extensive cooperative networks to expand South Korea’s partnerships beyond the great powers and Northeast Asian states in order to amplify South Korea’s soft power. In December of the same year, the South Korean government announced that it would conduct an economic and technical study on the feasibility of constructing 129-kilometer to 370-kilometer undersea tunnels for transporting goods and people to and from the country directly to Kyushu, Japan and to Shandong, China—a much more ambitious undertaking than the 50-kilometer English Channel project. In 2011, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced that a rail link was being considered between Sakhalin Island and Japan that also would include an undersea tunnel to connect Japan to the Trans-Siberian Railway; in 2018, he alternatively proposed the construction of a 45-kilometer bridge to replace the tunnel.

At the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) Symposium in Seoul in 2015, South Korean President Park Geun-hye placed Lee’s initiative in a continental context, saying that, “In order to realize the infinite potential of Eurasia, it is important to properly connect transport and logistics networks across Eurasia.” Park encouraged countries in the region to share their visions and plans, such as China’s One Belt, One Road, Russia’s New Eastern Policy, and the U.S. New Silk Road Initiative via coordinated infrastructure projects. Promising that Korea would “actively share its high-end information and communications technology (ICT) with Eurasian countries in the process of technological development,” President Park touted the importance of building transport and logistics networks across Eurasia.

**GREATER TUMEN INITIATIVE (GTI)**

Some economists have maintained that post-Cold War proposals for the Tumen River region are rooted in the Tumen River Area Development Project (TRADP), which was


32 Yoon, “Make Eurasia one: President Park,” ibid.
meant to facilitate economic collaboration among China, the two Koreas, Russia, Mongolia and Japan.\textsuperscript{33} Established in 1992 for connectivity within the Greater Tumen River basin region that stretches from Yanji, China and eastern Mongolia to Cheongjin, North Korea and Vladivostok, Russia, this organizational framework to promote Northeast Asian integration is now called the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI). While the original vision may have come from Chinese academics in Jilin province, its target zone has expanded from the three northeastern provinces of China to the Rajin and Seonbong areas of North Korea, the maritime province of Russia, and the Korean East Sea.\textsuperscript{34} The Tumen River basin is at the crossroads of key Northeast Asian trade, transport, and energy routes. Rich in gas, oil, and minerals, the region has easy access to affluent markets and hundreds of millions of Northeast Asian consumers. Headquartered in Beijing, GTI focuses on priority areas of transport, trade and investment, agriculture, tourism, and energy, with environment as a crosscutting sector. The GTI regional cooperation mechanism, established in 1995 among the ROK, China, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), Mongolia, and the Russian Federation, is administered under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The GTI vision is to become an effective platform for promoting regional economic cooperation, expanding policy dialogues, improving business environments, and contributing to Northeast Asian peace and stability. In addition, GTI works closely with international partners to promote the region, and it hosts both the Northeast Asia Export-Import (NEA EXIM) Banks Association as a regional development financing mechanism and the GTI Local Cooperation Committee in support of cooperative initiatives among local governments in Northeast Asia.\textsuperscript{35}

For decades, progress on GTI has been slow-moving due to the fact that member countries lacked funding for developmental projects after the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s and intensifying political problems on the Korean Peninsula in the late 2000s. Many foreign experts regarded the Tumen River Initiative as a failure both as a regional economic scheme and as a mechanism to protect the Tumen River basin’s ecosystem,\textsuperscript{36} but in 2005 the launching of the GTI Baseline Study and Capacity Building for Energy Cooperation in Northeast Asia project fostered new momentum for cooperation in the energy field.


\textsuperscript{34} For a discussion of the origins of this UNDP initiative and its linkage to China’s management of its security interests on the Korean peninsula, see Carla P. Freeman, “Neighborly relations: the Tumen development project and China’s security strategy,” \textit{Journal of Contemporary China} (2010), 19 (63) January, pp. 137-157.


The energy focus from 2006 to 2008 moved forward via the Korean Energy Economics Institute’s energy cooperation training programs for the DPRK and Mongolia, and GTI sought to strengthen regional cooperation through organizing boards for energy, tourism, and the environment. However, the momentum that emerged came to a halt when military tensions on the Korean Peninsula increased and led to strained relations between the DPRK and Japan. Although North Korea withdrew from the GTI process in November 2009, in early June 2011 the DPRK and China agreed to establish three special economic zones (SEZs)—Hwanggumpyong Island and Wihwa Island, which are both in the Yalu River, and the Rason Economic and Trade Zone in North Korea—all of which had the potential to spur positive economic growth for the DPRK.

Several years without the participation of the DPRK blocked the implementation of specific GTI rail and port projects, and thus led to an increasingly pessimistic outlook for GTI’s path to becoming a vehicle for greater regional integration. For South Korea, though, GTI still represented an important opportunity to actualize President Park’s Eurasia Initiative. For Mongolia, the GTI transportation grid design to establish a new cross-border transportation network satisfied Mongolia’s intention to expand its customer base and its role as an economic transit corridor. As a result, Mongolian President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj in 2013 committed more time and resources to promoting the GTI vision. The fourteenth meeting of the GTI Consultative Committee and Northeast Asia Economic Cooperation Forum was held in Ulaanbaatar from October 30 to November 2, 2013. At the meeting, the Vice Ministers of GTI member states discussed regional cooperation and development strategies for Northeast Asia and affirmed their support for the GTI as a mechanism for building regional partnerships for common prosperity.

The 2013 round of consultations also established the NEA EXIM Banks Association, which consists of the EXIM banks of the ROK and China, the Development Bank of Mongolia (DBM), and Russia’s State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs (Vnesheconombank). The NEAEXIM Banks Association’s main function is to collaborate with GTI and member governments in financing needed economic projects in-
The establishment of the NEA EXIM Banks Association came on the heels of Chinese President Xi’s launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) while on a state visit to Indonesia in October 2013. One year later, China suggested that members “combine the development of the GTI with China’s Silk Road belt strategy to promote GTI regional development at a higher level.” Mongolia responded by announcing its support for “cooperation with China and other countries on big projects, especially on energy and railways,” while Chinese and Russian officials emphasized the need for additional financing channels, infrastructure construction, a tour-

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42 Also attending this meeting was the Association of Development Financing Institutions in Asia and the Pacific (ADFIAP). ADFIAP’s mission is to act as the focal point of all development banks and other financial institutions engaged in the financing of development in the Asia-Pacific region.

43 The AIIB concept was first suggested by the Center for International Economic Exchanges, a Chinese think tank, at the Bo’ao Forum in April 2009 as a formula to make better use of Chinese foreign currency reserves in the wake of the global financial crisis. See “The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: Multilateralism on the Silk Road,” China Economic Journal (April 4, 2016).

ism center, and reduced customs formalities to enhance cooperation on bilateral trade.45

In September 2013 the Russian government opened a 54-kilometer, double-track rail link between the district of Rajin in North Korea’s first SEZ and the nearby Russian town of Khasan on the Russian portion of Trans-Siberian Railway.46 Rajin had always been a key feature in the proposed GTI transportation network because its development would mean that South Korean and north Chinese firms could ship exports first to Rajin and then transport them to Russia. In a November 13, 2013 summit between Park and Putin in Seoul, Park stated that her rail transportation strategy included Eurasian energy linkage cooperation, and that “logistics and energy network in the Eurasian region will not only reduce logistics costs and stimulate global trade, but will also stabilize raw materials costs and contribute to the growth of the world economy. . . . If trade barriers are gradually taken down and Eurasia becomes a free trade zone, Eurasia could be made into a gigantic market like the European Union.”47 The two leaders signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that called for the steel giant POSCO, Hyundai Merchant Marine, and Korea Railroad Corporation (KORAIL) to participate in the Rajin-Khasan development project that was designed to turn North Korea’s ice-free northeastern port of Rajin into a logistics hub for sending cargo by rail between East Asia and Europe. This Rajin-Khasan plan seemingly merged President Park’s Iron Silk Road/Eurasia Initiative with the GTI plan. Rason Transnational Container Transportation (RasonConTrans), a Russia–North Korea joint venture, was to implement the rail and port renovation project. Russian Railways (RZD Logistics) has a 70 percent stake in this entity and the DPRK holds the remaining 30 percent. It was expected that a South Korean consortium of KORAIL, POSCO, and Hyundai Merchant Marine would buy about half of the Russian stake in the joint venture, but because this indirect investment in North Korea via Russia conflicted with Seoul’s 2016 ban on new DPRK investments, it was blocked.48

Nevertheless, GTI activity in 2016 was suddenly revived in a number of sectors. Tri-lateral cooperation among China, Russia, and Mongolia in the regional transportation infrastructure sector accelerated49 and the GTI energy project restarted when the first NEA Energy Forum was held concurrently with the fifth GTI Energy Board Meeting in Seoul.50

45 Wang, “Regional bloc urges better financing channels,” ibid.
49 A Northeast Asia International Conference for Economic Development (NICE) was co-hosted by Niigata Prefecture’s Northeast Asia International Conference for Economic Development Executive Committee, Niigata City, and the Economic Research Institute for Northeast Asia (ERINA) in January 2016 in Niigata. This prefecture is an observer member of the GTI NEA Local Cooperation Committee. International cooperation for development finance, transportation and distribution cooperation were discussed. The 16th GTI Consultative Commission meeting was held in Seoul on April 28. In attendance were the 5 GTI member states and the representatives of local NEA governments, financial and research institutions, and international organizations.
Furthermore, because Mongolia was hosting the eleventh ASEM in Ulaanbaatar in July 2016, the sixth GTI Transport Board Meeting was held in Seoul on July 12, co-organized by the GTI Secretariat and ROK Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport. At the first meeting of the ASEM Eurasia Expert Group Meeting on Transport and Logistics, board members agreed to implement the GTI Regional Transport Strategy’s extension of the Medium Term Transport Action Plan through 2018. Members also placed attention on financing the NEA EXIM Banks Association Logistics Sub-Committee’s pilot project of experimental rail transport along the corridor that passes through Mudanjiang and Suifenhe in China, Vladivostok in Russia, Donghae in South Korea, and Sakaiminato in Japan.51

Another significant GTI transport initiative is South Korea’s proposal of the Eurasia Transport and Logistics Partnership (EuTraLop), which is a platform for coordinating the activities of research institutions and international organizations that study Eurasian transport and logistics networks. The platform aims to identify ways to make the Eurasian network more efficient in order to maximize its contribution to long-term growth on the Eurasian continent. During the meeting hosted by Korea Transport Institute on October 14, 2016 in Jeju, participants reviewed the feasibility as well as the economic impacts and benefits of EuTraLop network construction.52 In June 2018, the GTI Consultative Commission focused on “strengthening regional connectivity to promote the integration process” via practical cooperation on trade and investment, environment, tourism, and transportation.53

Any Northeast Asian railway cooperation model likely would create an international transport network based on existing railway infrastructure and a cooperative consultation group mechanism. The GTI plan through the UNDP utilizes the existing international railway cooperation bodies and organizations and does not require the establishment of additional international organizations, thus minimizing the financial burden of manpower and equipment. As the 2013 project report, “Integrated Transport Infrastructure and Cross-Border Facilitation Study for the Trans-GTR Transport Corridors” emphasized, GTI “must be an organization that comprehensively deliberates on the bilateral and multilateral issues of international railway operation from the perspective of joint benefits in the Northeast Asia regions,”54 while simultaneously recognizing that the strategies and standards of the railway infrastructure and services in the concerned countries vary significantly. The first task is to develop multilateral cooperation in pilot projects to devise practical solutions for interfacing among the connected routes and customs operations to resolve bottlenecks in each country. Positive results from these projects should encourage financial partners to participate in the costly,


but necessary, expansion of the Northeast Asian railway network. Ultimately, GTI’s long-range goal is to facilitate what it calls a “Northeast Asia peace project” via a Northeast Asian railway cooperative consultation group. Once the group becomes a standalone organization, it would function to promote the operational improvement of railways, set freight and passenger railway rates, and improve railway routes and signal systems in the network.  

The broad scope for the renewal of GTI activities in many sectors has silenced, at least temporarily, the question of whether or not the GTI framework can be utilized by partner countries as a springboard for new regional cooperation in transportation construction and logistical projects. However, concerns remain that its structural model is too government-aligned and government-financed, so there have been discussions about transforming GTI in the future into an international nongovernmental organization, which also could encourage the DPRK to rejoin. Regardless of GTI’s type of governance, the GTI countries individually should benefit significantly from GTI transportation initiatives. For the DPRK, proposed projects will activate the local economy of Rason by restoring some parts of the old railways and improving economic ties with northeast China, Russia, and Mongolia. As for Russia, GTI proposals may resolve the congestion at Far Eastern ports and modernize the Eurasian logistics network of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Russia’s economic and political influence in the DPRK and Northeast Asia as a railway and energy power are likely to further increase. GTI can benefit the ROK by easing political tensions on the Korean Peninsula through encouraging development around Rajin. Projects also will link South Korea more closely to Mongolian and Siberian mineral and energy resources and stimulate greater economic growth. For China, GTI cooperative actions are predicted to promote the economic development of the three northeastern provinces on the Manchurian peninsula and to permit China’s acquisition of energy-related commodities from Russia and the DPRK. For Mongolia, GTI will accelerate economic development for this landlocked nation, as northern and eastern exits are made more accessible by better transportation links. Even for Japan, especially in its western regions of Niigata, Tottori, and Kanazawa, GTI integration can serve as a tool for commercial entry into northeast China, Russia, Mongolia, and Europe.

**Land Bridges**

**Eurasian Rail Land Bridges**

The concept of Eurasian rail land bridges linking the east and west of the huge continent with Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific peripheral regions is not new; however, the lessening intensity of the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1970s as well as the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 stimulated interest in turning this concept into concrete plans for connectivity. In the last few decades, several Eurasian land bridges have been identified:


57 Greater Tumen Initiative, “Integrated Transport,” ibid., pg. 68.

58 For a discussion of how the PRC got involved in land bridge projects initially in 1979 and throughout
1) North: A 13,000-kilometer route from eastern maritime Russia to Rotterdam, in the Netherlands.

2) Middle: A 10,900-kilometer route from Lianyungang in the Jiangsu province of China to Rotterdam. This runs through China’s Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in the west to western Russia via Kazakhstan, Belarus, Poland, and Germany.

3) South: A 15,000-kilometer route from the Shenzhen SEZ in the Guangdong province of China to Rotterdam. This route would allow freight from India and Myanmar to travel overland and link into the Chinese rail at Kunming and then move on to Europe. It would give China rail access to the Indian Ocean.

Author Richard Pomfret in a January 2019 article agrees that the establishment of China-Europe land bridges predates the announcement of BRI. He explains that progress in reducing international border-crossing fees, customs duties, and inspection formalities that have limited transshipments from the Pacific to Europe “has been market-driven, as service providers identified and responded to demand for efficient freight services along pre-existing railway lines. Governments’ role was trade facilitating, that is reducing delays and costs at border crossing points, rather than investing in hard infrastructure.”

Freight service providers have linked European and Asian value chains to reduce costs for transcontinental traders. Pomfret pointed out that so far there has been an absence of major rail investment, since the BRI rail land bridge runs on a twentieth-century rail track.

The north and middle rail land bridges favor China and Russia. Although the countries’ horizontal spread across much of the Asian continental land mass—one to the south and one to the north—would facilitate connectivity, they exclude certain regions such as the Korean Peninsula and the huge landlocked

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grasslands of Mongolia and Kazakhstan. The South Land Bridge, which originates in China, extends through India and other South Asian nations and benefits from the major Indian Ocean seaports that dot the shorelines.

**North Land Bridge: Eastern Russia**

This rail land bridge already exists, but is very slow—it includes a seven days’ journey from Vladivostok to Moscow, for example—because it utilizes the old and rapidly deteriorating rail structures of Russia’s 9,297-kilometer Trans-Siberian Railroad, built between 1891 and 1916, which is the longest railway in the world. This track then is linked to spurs from Ulaanbaatar, Beijing, and Pyongyang. The advantage of this route for freight traffic is that there are no customs procedures on the western border of Russia until the Moscow region, but the Far Eastern ports of Vladivostok, Nahodka, and Bostochyni are very congested due to dilapidated railyards adjacent to the port facilities which cause huge backlogs of freight *en route* to Japan and other Pacific destinations.62

In 2018, Japan and Russia formally announced a plan to launch a rail freight transport route between the two countries via the Trans-Siberian Railway. Russian Railways and Japan’s Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism already have tested a multimodal transport service through the Far Eastern ports of Russia. In the past five years, Russian Railways has invested $5 billion to develop the Trans-Siberian Railway network, which has made possible a one-third increase in freight volume. Test rides were conducted in August 2018, with five to ten Japanese dis-

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TRENDS IN GREATER INNER EURASIAN TRANSIT CONNECTIVITY: BEYOND BRI AND EEU

distribution companies participating. Studies considered factors such as the cost and time of transportation, customs administrative procedures, and import and export processes. The journey was expected to take between 20 and 27 days, or about half of the time needed to take the sea route via the Suez Canal, and could reduce transportation costs by as much as 40 percent.64 Russian Railways and FESCO Transport Group in May 2019 launched the first transit service for the delivery of goods from Yokohama, Japan to Poland and to Brest, Germany through Russia’s Far East via the Trans-Siberian Railway.65 Russia announced on July 17, 2019 that its Trans-Siberian Land Bridge transit service successfully completed its first commercial test run in just 20 days, which was a 50 percent reduction in journey time.66

Middle Land Bridge: Jiangsu, China

The Middle Land Bridge most closely parallels the continental rail transit route for BRI. However, BRI originally called for the bridge terminus to be in the old Chinese capital of Xi’an (Chang’an), as it was in historic Silk Road times. Domestic pressure from administrative authorities in Chinese port cities compelled authorities to extend the 12,000-kilometer route to the Pacific coast, and so the Middle Land Bridge under BRI was renamed New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor. The Chinese section of the line comprises the Lanzhou-Lianyungang and Lanzhou-Xinjiang railways and stretches through eastern, central, and western China. After exiting China, the new land bridge passes through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, and onward to several European coastal ports. As it was for the construction of the North Land Bridge, the hard infrastructure of rail, road, and ports basically was already in place, although renovations have been needed and, more importantly, new rail infrastructure was added to assist the Central Asian republics in updating their rail gauges to conform to the international gauge which China and Europe already use. Due to a break of gauge—a malfunction that occurs when a line of one gauge meets a line of a different gauge—currently all containers must be transferred from Chinese to Kazakh railway cars using truck-mounted cranes at Dostyk on the Chinese-Kazakh border and again at the Belarus-Poland border where the use of


67 As originally portrayed even as late as 2016, the One Belt One Road (OBOR) was conceptualized in maps by PRC government entities as ending at Xi’an instead of going all the way to a Pacific port such as Lianyungang in Jiangsu. See map made with data from China Xin Hua news agency and public domain world map, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Chinas-proposed-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-including-a-land-route-One-Road-red/_fig3_330604654. Accessed January 25, 2019.
the standard gauge begins in western Europe.\textsuperscript{68}

Complementing the vast railway infrastructure development is the recent proposal for a Central Asia energy connectivity plan for oil and gas pipelines which links into the China-Turkmenistan gas pipeline.\textsuperscript{69} It is essential for the Middle Land Bridge to include strengthening its information and communications technology (ICT) sector in order to provide fiber-optic digital communication channels to achieve connectivity via the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS),\textsuperscript{70} which is "aimed at achieving available and affordable Internet and broadband networks by strengthening network infrastructure in Asia and the Pacific. In addition, AP-IS also provides seamless integration among these networks to develop a regional information and communication system."\textsuperscript{71}

\textbf{South Land Bridge: Shenzhen, China}

The third Eurasian land bridge, first suggested by Chinese experts in 2007, will start from Chinese port cities in the Pearl River Delta, including Shenzhen, and then travel west to Yunnan province, through Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and across Europe, and will end at Rotterdam in the Netherlands. The entire route is expected to stretch 15,000 kilometers and run through seventeen countries, and could eliminate up to 6,000 kilometers of its alternative maritime journey. According to Duan Gang, director of Yunnan Academy of Economics, the project would not be as costly as some think since ex-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Sarwar, “China’s One Belt,” pg. 137, ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Meiya Pico, “Middle Land Bridge,” featured in “New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB),” Belt & Road Express, July 18, 2018, http://briupdates.com/regional/detail/2e7a1dedbef46cea80593d8aaeb9d. Accessed July 1, 2020.
\end{itemize}
isting railways and highways are ready for use and only about 621 miles of new railways and highways would need to be built.73

Nevertheless, little progress on the South Land Bridge has been made. This is explained by economist Yu Guangyuan who has noted that this route faces many difficulties, such as limited capacity from the affected countries, complicated and time-consuming border procedures among countries, and lack of financing. The PRC’s Yunnan provincial government has suggested that authorities in Beijing should assist Myanmar in building more than 300 kilometers of railways and highways to link the railways in Yunnan with South Asia’s highway network, in addition to building a channel to the Indian Ocean.74

China signed a high-speed railway deal in 2011 with Myanmar’s military government, but the project was suspended three years later, citing public objections. State Counsellor of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) Party government resumed discussion of a cross-border Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor76 train project in 2015.

74 Li and Guo, “Third land link,” ibid.
76 First discussed in 1999 under the label of “Kunming Initiative,” the multi-modal corridor is a combination of road, rail, water and air linkages in the region. A 2013 plan that emphasized physical connectivity was approved by the four nations, and there have been regular BCIM Forums where linkage to the ASEAN Free Trade Area, ASEAN–China Free Trade Area and the ASEAN–India Free Trade Area have been considered.

It was not until 2018 that an agreement was reached among the governments on a 431-kilometer rail link from Muse in northeastern Myanmar’s Shan State to Mandalay.

77 Tom Miller, “Gateway to the Bay of Bengal,” featured in Nan Lwin, “Analysis: Muse-Mandalay Railway Agreement with China Raises Debt, Conflict
Muse borders China’s southwestern city of Ruili in Yunnan province and is on the 1,700-kilometer land route for bilateral trade between Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan, and Yangon, the capital of Myanmar. Although this region has seen fighting among rival ethnic armed groups in recent years, it has been argued that the north of the country between Muse and Mandalay is seen as crucial to improving the connectivity of Myanmar, since it is also part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor that includes the Kyaukpyu special zone in Rakhine state, where China wants to build a deep water port and where it already has a cross-border oil pipeline. In late December 2018, China completed a 1,608-foot railway arch bridge across the Nu River in southwest China’s Yunnan province. The bridge is a key project of the Dali-Ruili railway in the China-Myanmar international railway corridor. The Dali-Lincang railway, scheduled to be completed by 2021, also has moved forward in 2019 with the completion of a double tracked bridge and the Xinhua tunnel.

ECONOMIC CORRIDORS INITIATIVES

Countries excluded from or periphery to the above-mentioned land bridges have promoted the concept of corridors, economic belts, and initiatives and put forward several specific plans for implementation in order to accommodate the major gaps in Greater Inner Eurasian connectivity or to maximize their leverage with China and Russia. It is important to understand that these plans did not originate in reaction either to the European Economic Community (EEC) or to BRI, but were mainly derived from already formulated foreign policy strategies by the concerned countries which wanted their voices heard in continental development proposals. This can be seen clearly in the cases of the Korean Peninsula, India, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, the Central Asian republics, and Afghanistan.

Korea’s New Economic Map Initiative

The Korean Railroad Research Institute (KRRI), South Korea’s railway sector think tank, researched how to connect trans-Korean and

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intercontinental rail networks within a borderless Eurasian economic bloc. It concluded that the construction of a logistics and transportation system is a key economic issue for the two Koreas and recommended that logistics bottlenecks be resolved first in order to secure a stable and cost-effective transportation route. According to this KRRI analysis, in the long run, the completion of a trans-Korean rail would “lead to the development of a strategic international multimodal transport route connecting to Northeast Asia and Europe.”

Such railway planning has been central to development plans for North Korean SEZs, which have been predicated upon creating a new rail axis beginning between the two Koreas and continuing on to Russia, China, and Mongolia.

Building on the New Asia Initiative of his predecessor President Lee Myung-bak several years prior, South Korean President Moon Jae-in in July 2017 enunciated his administration’s vision to build an inter-Korean economic community with a “New Korean Peninsula Economic Map.” This was a detailed reformulation of his 2015 plan to unify the two Koreas into one single economic region. This single zone seeks to link the two Koreas via land and sea routes, build joint industrial zones and traffic networks along the eastern and western coastal areas and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), double the size of


the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), and reopen the Mount Kumkang Tourist Region in the DPRK. President Moon Jae-in made his announcement of this initiative at a conference attended by experts from Russia, China, and Mongolia, all of whom discussed ways in which their countries could cooperate in the implementation of this plan.

Six months later, noting that the Korean Peninsula historically has served as a bridge between the continent and the Pacific Ocean, ROK Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon explained that the New Economic Map Initiative was a comprehensive approach to shape the future of the Korean Peninsula by “change through cooperation” and “peace through cooperation.” He stated that “the New Economic Map Initiative for the Korean Peninsula seeks change in the surrounding environment through reciprocal cooperation, and . . . a future strategy for the Korean economy.” He emphasized that the initiative seeks to ease conflicts and tensions through cooperation that highlights common interests not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in Northeast Asia, and that it was for these reasons that South Korea had established the Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation to work with the development strategies of other nations in the region. He revealed that ROK and Russian officials were already involved in working-level discussions on economic cooperation and that some ASEAN countries and the EU also were showing interest.

The initiative envisions three belts along the Korean Peninsula that join in the shape of the letter H—a West Sea logistics industry belt that connects the capital regions in South and North Korea with the Kaesong and Sinuiju cities in North Korea, an East Sea energy resources belt that connects the Korean Peninsula with China and Russia, and a border-region belt for environmental protection and tourism along the DMZ. The east coast of the Korean Peninsula will become an axis of development for North and South Korea, China’s northeast region, and Russia’s Far East through energy cooperation and joint resource development. In the West Sea, an industry-logistics belt would take advantage of population resources, industrial infrastructure, and existing trade connections. The plan recommends that the DMZ be developed “into an ecological and eco-friendly tourism belt while pushing for cooperation with the North in disaster management and prevention, and joint use of water and forest resources.”

In his remarks, Minister Cho also mentioned President’s Moon’s plan to connect and modernize roads and railways on the East Sea and Gyeongui lines. With North Korea’s support, South Korea joined the Organization for Cooperation of Railways (OSJD) which established the institutional foundation for the East Asian Railroad Community. In 2018 South Korea and China discussed a railway link among Seoul, Sinuiju, and Beijing, and in the same year South Korea and Russia completed their deliberations about a railway link between Rajin and Khasan. According to Ahn Byung-min, a senior researcher with the Korea Transport Institute, “It would be possible to integrate the region by linking the region’s railways to enable the smooth flow of personnel and material. This would help promote economies, culture and peace,” and would

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play an important role in “the process of overcoming the lack of standardization in the region’s railway systems.”

From a national security point of view, Seoul believes that railway expansion was essential to persuade Pyongyang to improve its bilateral ties separately from the denuclearization process and the state of DPRK-U.S. relations. This initiative can promote economic development for the DPRK because it involves the establishment of what President Moon referred to as “special unification economic zones” in the border regions of Gyeonggi and Gangwon. It proposes that from Yongsan, the juncture of the Gyeongui and Gangwon lines, a regional railway community would arise for the six countries of Northeast Asia—namely South Korea, North Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and Mongolia together with the U.S.—“to expand inter-Korean economic cooperation into a multilateral system for peace and security and an economic community in East Asia.”

According to a Blue House ROK official unidentified in the Korean media, “The ultimate objective of the East Asia railway community is a multilateral security system in Northeast Asia. U.S. cooperation and involvement are essential because the U.S. is important not only for peace on the Korean Peninsula but also for a multilateral security regime in Northeast Asia.” It was speculated in the South Korean press that the inclusion of the United States was a deliberate attempt to minimize potential American resistance given U.S. strategic rivalry with China in the region.

Moreover, Moon’s New Economic Map Initiative is designed to have commonalities with China’s BRI, Russia’s New Eastern Policy, and Mongolia’s Steppe Road initiative. President Moon asserted that “this community will extend our economic horizon into the lands to the north and will become the principal artery of coexistence and co-prosperity in Northeast Asia. This will lead to an energy community and economic community in East Asia and will be the starting point for a multilateral peace and security system in Northeast Asia.”

Progress in the past year was evident. Be...
Between November 30 and December 5, 2018, Seoul and Pyongyang conducted a 16-day joint on-site survey of a 400-kilometer section of rail between Kaesong and Sinuiju on the east and west coasts of the peninsula as part of plans to connect and modernize the Gyeongui railway line. Joint inspections of an 800-kilometer area between Mount Kumgang and the Tumen River were conducted from December 8 to 17. The goal was to hold a groundbreaking ceremony to link the inter-Korean Peninsula roads and railways within a year, as agreed upon by President Moon and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un in the Panmunjom Declaration on April 27, 2018. However, this timetable has been sidetracked by the breakdown in U.S.-DPRK negotiations since the Hanoi Summit in February 2019.

**India and the International North-South Transport Corridor**

India believes that Central Asia has historically been a zone of its civilizational influence. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, India developed a re-engagement strategy towards the Central Asian republics which was known as the Extended Neighbourhood Policy. It involved providing cooperation agreements as well as substantive development aid and technical support to landlocked Eurasian countries. In 2000 the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) agreement among India, Iran, and Russia was announced, and it came into force in 2002. Subsequently, eleven additional nations joined the corridor project: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria (which held observer status), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Ukraine. INSTC is a land- and sea-based 7,200-kilometer network which encompasses rail, road, and water routes. It aims to reduce the cost and travel time for freight transiting among Russia, Iran, Central Asia, India, and Europe.

A decade later in June 2012, India’s Minister of State for External Affairs Shri Edappakath Ahamed gave a keynote address in which he announced the new “Connect Central Asia” policy that featured political, security, energy, economic, and cultural components at the India–Central Asia Dialogue, a track-two diplomatic initiative. Among the policy’s main points was the promotion of land mega-connectivity through the reactivation of INSTC, so that India and the Central Asian nations might jointly discuss ways to bridge the missing links in the corridor and cooperate on connecting spurs along transit routes. India also decided to join the UN Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover

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96 This policy was in response to great power diplomacy in Central Asia. India promoted military training, transport connectivity initiatives, and supported capacity building and human resource development. See Phunchok Stobdan, “Mongolia and Asian Security,” The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs, No. 7 (Ulaanbaatar, 2000), pp. 61-62, http://dx.doi.org/10.5564/mjia.v0i7.140.


of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention).\textsuperscript{99} India’s Foreign Trade Policy (2015–20) highlighted the importance of INSTC in expanding India’s trade and investment links with Central Asia. However, progress on building trade and transit infrastructure along this corridor has been very slow because of erratic cross-boundary coordination. Nonetheless, since 2015, India has invested $500 million in the development of the Chabahar multi-modal transport port in the Persian Gulf, will invest an additional $16 billion in the Chabahar free-trade zone, and has agreed to construct a 600-kilometer railway within Iran, from Chabahar to Zahedan, to take freight to Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries.\textsuperscript{100}

India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been a strong supporter of INSTC since his 2015 visit to five countries in Central Asia—Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—during which 21 agreements to enhance defense, trade, and energy links were signed. In 2018, a major milestone was achieved when the first consignment of Indian goods was transported from Mumbai to Saint Petersburg in less than 25 days, a reduction of the previous transportation time by 30–40 percent. It was claimed that this was a direct result of India’s Connect Central Asia policy.\textsuperscript{101}

\textbf{INSTC Corridor Routes}\textsuperscript{102}

A strong motivation that India has for reinvigorating INSTC is its interest in securing both Eurasian cross-continental trade and reliable energy supplies in particular, including oil, gas, and uranium.\textsuperscript{102} Some experts maintain that INSTC will deeply impact India’s engagement with Eurasia and the Central Asian region both geo-economically and geo-strategically in response to China’s increased engagement in the region and to take advantage of opportunities for trade and investment.\textsuperscript{103} Such objectives necessitate strong relationships with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia, as well as with India’s longtime partner, Rus-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{99} TIR (Transports Internationaux Routiers) or International Road Transport. With over 50 countries using the procedure, the TIR system is the international customs transit system with the widest geographical coverage. The TIR procedure enables goods to move under customs control across international borders without the payment of the duties and taxes. A condition of the TIR procedure is that the movement of the goods must include transport by road. See https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/business/customs-procedures/what-is-customs-transit/tir-transports-internationaux-routiers-international-road-transport_en. Accessed June 24, 2019.
  \item \textsuperscript{103} Jha, “India’s Eurasia Policy Gets a Boost,” ibid.
sia. Although many Indian researchers believe that India is utilizing INSTC not only to link into BRI transportation infrastructure but also to balance against China, it must be noted that India has no direct border with Central Asia nations, and so for now it must transit China. The shortest land route through Pakistan and Afghanistan is beset with instability and is not presently in use. Indian strategic studies expert P. Stobdan has stated that “India has been slowly coming up with its own Eurasian agenda. It has taken some significant steps with enormous implications for realizing a strong potential connectivity link between India and Eurasia.”

The Central Asian response to INSTC has been quite positive as Central Asian nations have become wary of China’s growing economic monopoly across the continent in the wake of aggressive BRI projects. For example, Uzbekistan has offered to provide special incentives and zones for Indian businesses and to expand defense and counterterrorism partnerships. Uzbekistan’s President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, on a state visit to Delhi in October 2018, confirmed the importance of the strategic partnership with India and announced that the two countries “have agreed to closely cooperate in the sphere of developing a new transport connectivity corridor.” To access landlocked Central Asia, the two leaders discussed connectivity in the region and agreed to explore options to enhance linkages by road and rail besides air. “We have agreed to closely cooperate in the sphere of developing a new transport connectivity corridor,” Mirziyoyev said, adding that the strategic partnership with India is “one of the most important priorities” of Uzbekistan.

The Connect Central Asia policy and INSTC have not prevented India from joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRI, or EEU, all in the name of enhanced transcontinental connectivity. Modi on all his foreign visits has clearly outlined the importance of commerce, trade, and connectivity for future India-Eurasia relations by expanding economic cooperation. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that India is motivated both by recognition of its geopolitical position in the Eurasian arena and by the desire to present an alternative to China’s BRI.

**Mongolia’s Steppe Road Economic Corridor (the China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor)**

The overarching concept guiding Mongolia’s political and national security has been its Third Neighbor policy of balancing relations with its two border neighbors, Russia

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105 Elizabeth Roche, “India, Uzbekistan ink agreements to bolster cooperation, ibid.

106 Roche, “India, Uzbekistan ink agreements to bolster cooperation, ibid.


108 The term, first used by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker when visiting Mongolia in August 1990, has political, military, economic, and cultural components. The “Third Neighbor” is a powerful notion that politically and economically that seeks to balance Mongolia’s historical dependence upon its two geographical neighbors, Russia and China, by forging ties to other major nations. For an in-depth discussion see, Alicia Campi, *Mongolia’s Foreign Pol-
and China, while reaching out to other democracies, including the U.S., Japan, the European Community, and South Korea, for political and economic support. Mongolia historically viewed its landlocked position as a national security advantage and developed political and economic mechanisms to play the two border neighbors against each other.\footnote{Alicia Campi, “Mongolia and the Dilemmas of Deepening Continentalism,” ISA Hong Kong, June 2017, http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/23fed564-7c1e-4b05-9c5f-7198b7a3151d.pdf. Accessed August 7, 2020.} This strategy, if in many ways essential for ensuring cultural and national independence, was not without high costs. It inhibited development, consigning the population to poverty while putting the country in the position of pursuing a reactive foreign policy. During the early years of the 21st century, Mongolia began to pursue policies aimed at maximizing the economic benefits from its rich mineral and animal resources. It began to recognize, moreover, that to prevent it from becoming marginalized politically, it needed to find ways to use its geographical position to become a significant and cost effective transit link between its massive neighbors.\footnote{Teh-Kuang Chang and Angelin Chang, Routledge Handbook of Asia in World Politics, Chapter 5, 2018. Accessed August 7, 2020.} Although in the mid-2000s, both Beijing and Moscow had rejected Ulaanbaatar’s suggestion that it become a pipeline “transit corridor,” a decade later both countries had reconsidered their positions, seeing potential in Mongolia as a less expensive conduit for their bilateral trade.

Mongolia’s interest in a rail connectivity corridor originated in the multidimensional Transit Mongolia program of May 2008. It included construction of a secondary railway line, railway electrification, construction of Asian highway routes AH3 and AH4 in Mongolia, facilitation of transit transport through Mongolian territory, and construction of transport and trade logistics centers and cargo terminals.\footnote{“Sustainable transport. Challenges, Strategy of Mongolia,” Fourth Regional Environmentally Sustainable Transport (EST) Forum (Seoul, Korea: February 24-26, 2009), http://www.unccd.or.jp/content/documents/4EST-B1G102.pdf. Accessed January 24, 2019.} In 2012 the Mongolian parliament passed a resolution authorizing the construction of phases one and two of the country’s railway project, but this plan was impacted a year later when Mongolia and China agreed to establish a Mongolian-Russian-Chinese Northern Railway working group to oversee the construction of new road, rail, and pipeline infrastructure connecting the two countries with Russia. It was suggested to build a “Ж”-shaped railroad transportation network with mixed gauges in order to allow Russian and Chinese trains to enter and exit Mongolia without changing train wheels.\footnote{Jargalsaikhan Dambadarjaa, “Mongolia is the next Panama” UB Post, February 27, 2013. Accessed January 24, 2019.} If Mongolia constructed all of the northern railway lines with wide Russian gauges and those from the south with narrow Chinese gauges, the western rail portion could become Russia’s gateway to India and Pakistan through Mongolia and China. A leading Mongolian economist suggested that, “If we build a safe, fast and cheap international trade transit route, Mongolia will naturally prosper from its fees without having to pay a single penny. . . . The time would eventually come where our neighbors are dependent on us, not the other way around.”\footnote{Jargalsaikhan, “Mongolia is the next Panama,” ibid.}

After twenty years of unsuccessful efforts to find new export customers other than its two
border neighbors, Mongols of all political persuasions came to realize that they would not be able to break their overwhelming economic dependence on China without dramatic improvements to their transport and pipeline infrastructure. However, to do so required a longer-term strategy for building transport infrastructure north to connect to the Trans-Siberian rail system and promoting Mongolia as a less expensive, reliable alternative to Sinorussian transit traffic within a greater Eurasian transit zone. After the Ukrainian crisis diminished Russian economic links with Europe, Russia and China entered a new era of rapprochement and cooperation. Mongolian policymakers believed that the development of Sino-Russian energy ties was the most important factor driving this strategic convergence of China and Russia and recognized that Chinese-Russian political rapprochement could only profit Mongolia if Mongolia were also at the negotiating table participating in drafting new continental transport and energy growth models. Concerned that a new strategic relationship between its superpower neighbors would cut it out of lucrative Eurasian pipe and rail infrastructure projects and potentially strangle its economic freedom, Mongolian President Tsakhia Elbegdorj in 2014 chose to utilize the emerging continentalist trends to expand the landlocked country’s role in Eurasia and to take advantage of its encirclement in ways beyond the original Third Neighbor strategy. Thus began the Mongolian strategy of utilizing bilateral and trilateral summit meetings to promote rail connectivity to Mongolia’s two large neighbors.

116 Chang and Chang, Routledge Handbook of Asia in World Politics, ibid.
Elbegdorj announced at separate bilateral summer summits in Ulaanbaatar with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin that the Mongolian Steppe Road, which was later renamed the China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor, should run from northern China to the Russian Far East and center around both the “economic circulation of Mongolia” and the creation of an economic corridor through Mongolia. Such a Steppe Road involved developing rail lines, roads, energy grids, and natural gas and oil pipelines through Mongolian territory to link Russia and China in more economical ways. This could be achieved by recognizing Mongolia’s geopolitical position as a transit nation to rationalize physically linking Mongolia to its neighbors and the rest of the world. All of this was explained under the principle of zam sudal (“roadology”), which seeks to elevate Mongolia’s regional profile by proposing linkages to BRI and EEU while still carving out its own space independently from these two initiatives.

During the August 21–22, 2014 summit visit of President Xi in Ulaanbaatar, five new transportation agreements that related to Sino-Russian-Mongolian cooperation on regional rail projects were signed. Six Chinese sea-ports, including Tianjin, Dalian, and Jinzhou, were designated to transit Mongolian exports to overseas markets. A key breakthrough was the agreement that two-thirds of Mongolian goods transported on Chinese rails would be destined for the Chinese market, while one-


120 See ‘Entangled Lines: Railways, Resource Booms, and Transnational Politics in Mongolia,’ https://www.socanth.cam.ac.uk/directory/research-clusters/citizenship-political-life/entangled-lines-railways-resource-booms-and-transnational-politics-in-mongolia. This was a British Academy funded international network and mobility project between the Inner Asia Studies Unit of Cambridge University and Institute of International Affairs of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences from 2013-2015.

121 The term “roadology” previously was used in Japanese Silk Road research literature. For example, the Research Center for Silk Roadology in Nara, Japan was opened on July 1, 1993. The expression gained further acceptance in China and some foreign academic research centers for Belt and Road Studies. See “Roadology – and The Art of Economic Co-op-


third would be for export to third countries via Chinese seaports. The agreements also promised border-crossing cooperation and access to rail capacity within China, and four new Mongolian port entries were opened for rail transport. Furthermore, these agreements established new tariffs and additional volume for Mongolian cargo on Chinese railroads, and China gave Mongolia a 40 percent discount on current transportation tariffs. These rail projects were supported by Russian President Putin two weeks later in his Ulaanbaatar summit with President Elbegdorj. He agreed to help Mongolia upgrade the capacity of the Ulaanbaatar Railway (UR) to 110 tons per year by 2020 as part of Moscow’s pivot towards Asia. 123 On that visit, leaders also signed a strategic partnership agreement for the development of the UR. By proposing linkages to OBOR/BRI and EEU to elevate its regional profile, Mongolia obtained the verbal endorsement of the World Bank for the Steppe Road Economic Corridor a few weeks later.

When in April 2015 Mongolian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lundeg Purevsuren visited Beijing, he announced Mongolia’s “interest to actively participate in important initiatives to establish an economic corridor linking China and Russia and develop the regional economy and make them integrate with Mongolia’s ‘Steppe Road’ [a.k.a. Prairie Road by the Chinese] initiative.” 124 Foreign Minister Wang Yi replied that the Chinese “are confident that this would bring economic benefit to our three countries and serve as a major boost to the economic advancement of Eurasia as a whole.” 125 The Chinese Foreign Ministry supported this new platform, since “the construction of the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor would connect China’s Silk Road Economic Belt to Russia’s transcontinental rail plan and Mongolia’s Prairie Road program.” 126

In the July 2015 trilateral summit on the sidelines of the SCO meeting in Ufa, Russia, the leaders of Mongolia, China, and Russia formally agreed to Mongolia’s proposal for an economic corridor connecting the Silk Road of China, the Steppe Road of Mongolia, and the Eurasian Economic Union of Russia. Chinese, Russian, and Mongolian rail authorities also announced plans to implement cooperation on railway transit and transport, improve existing railway freight volume, conduct research regarding the construction of a trilateral transportation logistics company, develop railway transport capacity, promote cooperation among railway educational institutions, and support personnel training and scientific research cooperation. 127 During the Tashkent, Uzbekistan trilateral summit of these same leaders in 2016, the Plan for Construction of the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor was signed to “construct and develop


125 Alicia Campi, “Mongolia, Russia and China Work to Boost Transcontinental Rail Transit,” ibid.


international land transportation corridors and improve the potentiality of railway and road transportation capacity.” The corridor will consist of eight rail segments and will include cooperation on improving three auto roads and three railway transit corridors in the western and eastern regions of Mongolia, as well as cooperation on modernizing other forms of transportation. However, construction on these transportation projects has moved very slowly because of financing needs and political indecision.

In an April 2018 visit to Beijing, Mongolian Prime Minister Ukhnaa Khürelsükh raised the trilateral economic corridor plan with Chinese officials. Mongolia proposed implementing the first three of the 32 proposed projects—the Ulaanbaatar Railway Joint Venture reform project, the Asia Transport Road AH3 project, and an energy project between Mongolia and Russia. The Mongolian cabinet in the summer of 2018 again supported a draft resolution on the creation of a new transit and transport corridor that connects Europe and Asia. It recommended the construction of a southern railroad spur of 281 kilometers from Zuunbayan to Khangi, designed to transport iron ore and other raw materials, and a northbound 780-kilometer rail spur from the Erdenet copper mine to Artssuuri. However, with regard to creating new transit infrastructure for Mongolia, there remain impediments to the establishment of the country as an economic corridor. Pressing challenges are that appropriate transit agreements still must be concluded, the domestic railroad and roads system needs to be expanded and modernized, border and port infrastructure and transshipment capacities should be increased, transit tariffs and regulations require revision, and more financing and significant investment must be secured for hard infrastructure development. At present, priority is given to railway facilitation measures, regional rail transport agreements, and rail border-crossing procedures. In Moscow in December 2016, the governments of Mongolia, Russia, and China signed the Intergovernmental Agreement on


129 The ADB is providing a $170 million loan for construction of a western regional highway connecting Ulaanbayshint along the Russian border in northwest Mongolia with Yarantay, 743 kilometers south on the Chinese border. This project, co-financed by the governments of Mongolia and China, will cut travel time from north to south by half, as well as fill a gap in the 6,024 kilometer Asian Highway 4, which runs all the way from the port city of Karachi in southern Pakistan through Mongolia to the Russian city of Novosibirsk in southwestern Siberia. “New highway to open up trade, investment in western Mongolia,” December 23, 2015, blogs.adb.org/blog/new-highway-open-trade-investment-western-mongolia. Accessed June 19, 2019.

International Road Transport along the Asian Highway Network, which indicates that there is progress in negotiating road-transport agreements to permit Mongolian, Russian, and Chinese trucks to operate in one another’s territories.  

**Mongolian-Russian-Chinese Northern Railway**

Under United Nations auspices, only seven project meetings were devoted to a transit transportation agreement among Mongolia, Russia, and China from 2000 to 2011. Frustrated by the lack of movement on rail projects, in 2013 Mongolia moved to create a new trilateral rail system—the Mongolian-Russian-Chinese Northern Railway Corridor—and recommended the building of four new access points to China and another two access points to Russia for around $1 billion total, with over $400 million needed to undertake the first stage.

The Northern Railway Corridor is designed to increase rail capacity from Mongolia into Russia via the Russian border site of Naushki, into China at the city of Erenhot in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and onto Jining in China’s Shandong province. Although transit traffic is the most profitable means of transportation for the Mongols, their north-south UR system is mainly used to move domestic coal to the nation’s electric power stations at artificially low rates. The UR is now 1,800 kilometers long and plans call for building an additional 5,600 kilometers.

Because of the lack of existing railway freight-loading capacity along the Trans-Siberian line, Mongolia invited representatives of Russia and China to launch the Northern Railway Corridor to devise a comprehensive strategy for improving railway efficacy and to establish a joint stock company called RZD, a subsidiary company of Russian Railways Logistics, to construct an east-west transit corridor. The Mongols proposed creating two more transit corridors in addition to the existing one—one to connect Russia and China and the other to transport domestic cargo to Mongolia’s neighbors. Improvements on the Trans-Mongolian Railway would allow up to 33 tons of freight per year of Mongolian mineral products to transit China to overseas

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133 A Rail Pre-Feasibility Study on the Erdenet to Ovoot railway was completed in February 2012, and a revised Rail Pre-Feasibility Study was completed over the western portion of the rail path in April 2013 by SMEC International Limited, which confirmed the cheaper capital cost estimate of $1.2 billion plus contingencies for the entire line. “Aspire’s Northern Railways LLC Receives RAIL PFS Revision,” Aspire, April 10, 2013, http://member.afraccess.com/media?id=CMN://6A631195&filename=20130410/ AKM_01398771.pdf. Accessed August 9, 2020.
markets in Japan or South Korea through eight additional seaports. Mongolia already had access to Tianjin’s container site, but sought break bulk shipping\textsuperscript{135} for the overseas transport of many tons of minerals, which would increase its Sino-Russian transit cargo. The railway from the current terminus in Erdenet was to be extended to the Mongolian/Russian border at Artssuuri as a public-private partnership. Mongolian officials pointed out that if the Northern Railway line could be extended even further north to the Russian city of Kyzyl and linked to Russia’s wider rail network, then “Russia and China are looking for 2.5-times expansion of trade. We want to facilitate all this trade.”\textsuperscript{136} In November 2013, work commenced on the first phase of UR renovation which required $257 million in expenditures to replace mechanical linkages, widen stations, and lengthen railroad junctions in order to increase the UR’s capacity from 20 million to 34 million tons.

A month later, the first trilateral conference of the Mongolian-Russian-Chinese Northern Railway began in Ulaanbaatar. In the conference’s joint statement, conditions for transit and transportation through the Mongolian railway system were introduced. It was proposed that there be two phases of UR rail track investment. The parties agreed to work out an integrated action plan to develop a transit railway that included the key spur from the Tavan Tolgoi coal mine at Ukhaa Khudag to the border


\textsuperscript{135} Break bulk shipping is cargo that is transported in bags, boxes, crates, drums, or barrels – or items of extreme length or size. These goods must be loaded individually, not in intermodal containers nor in bulk as with liquids or grains. Loading and unloading break bulk cargo can be very labor-intensive and requires more resources and coordination – longshoremen, loading and unloading cranes, warehouses, specialized ships, transport vehicles, etc. “What is Break Bulk Shipping,” Logisticsplus, March 8, 2017, https://www.logisticsplus.net/what-is-break-bulk-shipping/. Accessed August 9, 2020.

at Gashuun Sukhait that connects to the Chinese rail network. This 230-kilometer spur faced financing and ownership problems, but the main roadblock was Mongolian reluctance to build the rail spur with a Chinese gauge rather than with a Russian one. Russia enjoys strategic control over the UR, which it built in the 1950s. The president of Russian Railways, Vladimir Ivanovich Yakunin, wrote directly to Mongolia’s prime minister that, “To create a railway with narrow gauge is the wrong decision,” and had insisted that the present line “represents Russian interests as much as Mongolia’s in terms of the railway.”

At that first meeting, seemingly in response to Russian objections, Deputy Director of Chinese Railways General Authority Chen Lanhua indicated that China had been working on blueprints for reconstructing the railroads with dual-gauge rail beds and electrical power. Discussions included in-depth analyses of railway transport conditions and recommendations for technical innovation along the main routes, trade goods and turnover between China and Russia and between China and Europe, the role of railway transportation through Mongolia, tripartite cooperation in the technical reforming of the UR, plans to develop the Erlian-Jining railway, and the development of modern transportation logistics through Mongolia to connect China with Europe via Russia.

Implementation of the Mongolian-Russian-Chinese Northern Railway plan has accelerated during the past few years. On March 1, 2015 RZD and the Mongolian Ministry of Road and Transport agreed to terms of reference and appointed consultants to prepare financial and technical feasibility studies for rail modernization and construction projects that are expected to be completed by 2020.

From April 9–10, 2015 in Ulaanbaatar, deputy ministers of railway and transportation from Mongolia, China, and Russia met at the second symposium of the Mongolian-Russian-Chinese Northern Railway and agreed upon a protocol for a three-party consultation mechanism for cooperation among the three countries’ railway transportation sectors, which was finalized in July 2015 at the trilateral summit in Ufa, Russia.

The railway has been linked publicly to BRI by various Chinese officials. At the Transit Mongolia-2018 forum


140 The main projects identified were 1) modernization of the 1,100 kilometer north–south route from Sühbaatar on the Russian border to Zamiin Üüd/Erenhot on the Mongolia/China border, including electrification and/or construction of a second track; 2) construction of the 549 kilometer Northern Railway west from the Erdenet branch to Ovoot to support coal mining developments; 3) construction of a 215 kilometer Ovoot–Arz Sur line, which would connect at Kyzyl in Russia’s Tuva Republic with a planned 411 kilometer line to Kuragino and the Trans-Siberian corridor; 4) studying the increasing use of the 239 kilometer Choybalsan—Ereentsav line in the northeast; and 5) planning a western railway line “linking Russia and China through Mongolia to export from Russia to China, India, Pakistan, and other countries in the region.” “Ulaanbaatar Railway modernisation strategy,” railwaygazette.com, September 4, 2014. Accessed June 5, 2019.

TRENDS IN GREATER INNER EURASIAN TRANSIT CONNECTIVITY: BEYOND BRI AND EEU

held from April 17–19, 2018 in Moscow, Secretary of China International Freight Forwarders Association Ling Bei Zhang stated that “We will establish a corridor that connect China, Mongolia, Russia and Europe while increasing volume of freight and creating mechanism to coordinate constructions. It is crucial to formulate engineering design of ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative based on practical need of the three countries and their collaboration and studying market feasibility.”

A build-operate-transfer concession with 51 percent Mongolian government ownership for the Erdenet-Ovoot section was awarded in September 2015 to the Australian company Aspire Mining and its subsidiary Northern Railways (NR). NR was established in 2010 to build 549 kilometers of track west from Erdenet City to the Nuurstei and Ovoot coal deposits. This spur would provide a direct route to the Chinese market for Russian freight transit and a 40 percent reduction in the distance travelled from Russia’s Elegast coking coal field to Chinese markets as well as in the distance for freight to and from Kyzyl. Aspire Mining and NR signed an agreement with the Chinese contractor China Gezhouba Group International Engineering Company (CGGC) and China Railway First Survey and Design Institute (FSDI) in mid-October 2017 to develop a bankable feasibility study and find investors. On April 25, 2019, NR and the joint venture of CGGC and China Railways 20 Bureau Group Corporation (CR20G) signed the engineering, procurement, and construction agreement during the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. CGGC expressed interest in sourcing up to three-fourths of the required $165 million from Chinese commercial banks such as China Development Bank and the Silk Road Fund, while Aspire must raise the remainder.

Northern Railways separately entered into an agreement with the Russian design institute Mosgiprotrans to jointly complete a preliminary assessment of the rail spur from Ovoot to Artissuuri and Kyzyl. The results will be presented to Chinese institutions to seek funding for a feasibility study. The 412 kilometer line from Kyzyl, the capital of the Tuva Republic in Russia, to Kuragino, Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway is due to open in 2022. This 1,520 millimeter Russian gauge spur will be open for bulk and intermodal freight trains and for passenger services. The above-mentioned railway project clearly indicates that Mongolia is now well positioned to profit from exploding Sino-Russian trade as these neighboring countries expand their transportation cooperation throughout the Eurasian region. Mongolia believes that it can collect substantial transit


fees which could be an alternative to falling foreign investment. By increasing its role as a transit corridor in the region, it simultaneously develops its dual rail gauge infrastructure in a more balanced manner so that its products are better able to reach new trade partners. Also, a modernized internal rail system would permit Turkey, the Middle East, Iran, and Europe to grow their trade with Mongolia in a substantive fashion.

**Kazakhstan’s Nurly Zhol Initiative**

To bolster the legitimacy of Kazakh independence in the post-Soviet space, Kazakhstan under its President Nursultan Nazarbayev pursued what he described as a “multi-vector” foreign policy rooted in “good neighborly relations of confidence on the whole of the Eurasian continent.”148 Kazakh researcher Maxat Kassen believes that the paradox of Kazakhstan’s landlocked yet transcontinental status is key to understanding its foreign policy strategy, and how its desires to play an intermediary role in global politics “at the intersection of major transportation and logistical routes between the two most economically developed regions of the globe, Europe and East Asia, affect the development of its foreign policy and trade.”149 As a part of its nation-building process as a transcontinental hub situated between the two global markets of China and Europe, Kazakhstan has developed a policy of trade-partner diversification. Other researchers have claimed that Kazakhstan’s embrace of Eurasianism—a political movement with origins in the 1920s which claims that Russian civilization cannot be classified as either European or Asian, but that it can be defined instead as linked to the geopolitical concept of Eurasia.150 This is the explanation underlying its multi-vector foreign policy strategy as a way “to change its periphery status and re-imagine it both as a bridge between different cultures and a locus for harmonious co-existence of various ethnocultural groups” as a newly built nation-state in the post-Soviet space.151 Thus, the concept of Kazakhstani Eurasianism is viewed as arising from its geopolitical and geographical location and explains the basis for its transcontinental economic linkages and foreign policy directions.152

For the last twenty years under its recently retired long-time president, Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan has sought to be the intellectual and energy center of Eurasian continentalism. Since 2008, it has organized the annual Astana Economic Forum, sometimes called “Asia’s Davos,” which emphasizes the historical role of cities and populations along the Silk Road.153

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150 Eurasianism is a political movement that traces its origins to the 1920s. Neo-Eurasianism, which emerged in the 1990s and is supported by Russian President Vladimir Putin, seeks Russian integration with its neighbors on the continent based on common cultural elements.


Road and their place in global value-added chains, national institutions, and the labor market.\textsuperscript{154} Respected Mongolian economist and journalist Dambaadarga Jargalsaikhan has noted that “although Eurasia technically includes all countries in Europe and Asia, the Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, have become the key platforms to discuss about integration and cooperation.”\textsuperscript{155}

Regarding the Middle Land Bridge, it is clear that Kazakhstan is the crucial player in the strategy to achieve Greater Inner Eurasian rail integration, and since this land bridge most closely represents the BRI land route, Kazakhstan for China is all important. Because President Nazarbayev understood that this route gave his nation great leverage to bridge the gap between China and Europe, he expanded and diversified his country’s export capabilities along 11,313 kilometers of oil pipelines and 12,432 kilometers of gas pipelines.\textsuperscript{156} Well before the emergence of BRI, the Chinese government provided financing to build new pipelines through Kazakhstan to connect China with oil- and natural gas–rich Central Asia, and many of these projects today are amalgamated within BRI planning. Kazakhstan is using its own sovereign wealth fund to develop additional infrastructure projects. It is considering the construction of a pipeline that would run under the Caspian Sea from Aktau, Kazakhstan to Baku, Azerbaijan to connect to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipelines to the Black Sea and Turkey. This construction capabilities along 11,313 kilometers of oil pipelines and 12,432 kilometers of gas pipelines.\textsuperscript{156} Well before the emergence of BRI, the Chinese government provided financing to build new pipelines through Kazakhstan to connect China with oil- and natural gas–rich Central Asia, and many of these projects today are amalgamated within BRI planning. Kazakhstan is using its own sovereign wealth fund to develop additional infrastructure projects. It is considering the construction of a pipeline that would run under the Caspian Sea from Aktau, Kazakhstan to Baku, Azerbaijan to connect to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipelines to the Black Sea and Turkey. This construction


\textsuperscript{156} Major oil export pipelines include: 1) the Caspian Pipeline Consortium pipeline to the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk; 2) the Kazakhstan-China pipeline (opened 2006); and 3) the Uzen-Atyrau-Samara pipeline to Russia. See Jeffrey Hays, “Pipelines and Export routes from Kazakhstan,” 2008 and updated 2016, http://factsanddetails.com/central-asia/Kazakhstan/sub8_4e entry-4678.html. Accessed June 20, 2019.
also would allow the Central Asia Oil Pipeline to transfer oil from Kazakhstan through Turkmenistan and Afghanistan to Pakistan’s Arabian Sea port of Gwadar. Additionally, there is an oil pipeline proposal for the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea that would facilitate the movement of Kazakh products to Iran in oil-swap deals, as well as a proposal for an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan across Iran to the Persian Gulf.\footnote{157 A Chinese-Kazakhstan consortium is building a $3.5 billion, 2,900 kilometer-long (1,860 miles) oil pipeline between Atyrau near the Caspian Sea in western Kazakhstan to Alashankou in western China to connect with the pipeline to China’s east coast. Pipelines in Kazakhstan also could be used to transport oil from Siberia to China. Dmitriy Frolovskiy, “Kazakhstan’s China Choice, thediplomat.com, July 6, 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/kazakhstans-china-choice/. Accessed June 20, 2019.}


In 2016 the Kazakh government established the Khorgos Eastern Gate special economic zone near its old capital of Almaty, built warehouses and factories within its industrial area, and developed both the dry-port rail container terminal at the Altynkol railway station and the Kazakh-Chinese International Border Cooperation Center into a sprawling logistics hub for Chinese goods to transit to European markets.\footnote{160 China is planning to invest $600 million over five years to build up this zone. Wataru Suzuki, “China’s Belt and Road hits a speed bump in Kazakhstan,” Nikkei Asian Review, April 24, 2019, https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/China-s-Belt-and-Road-hits-a-speed-bump-in-Kazakhstan. Accessed June 22, 2019.}

This hub project near the border with China clearly demonstrates Kazakhstan’s multi-vector approach to the development of its own transit potential. For example, Astana has attracted experienced managers based in the United Arab Emirates from Arab Dubai Port World, one of the world’s largest port operators that operates 65 terminals worldwide, to help to turn Khorgos into a powerful logistics center.

Scholars from the Romanian newspaper Nine O’Clock have pointed out that transit “is an area where the Kazakh economy is closely interlinked with politics. The itineraries of cargo movements are determined not only in accordance with the business logic, but also with a certain strategic calculation.”\footnote{161 “The bright road of Kazakhstan,” November 25, 2015, Nine O’Clock [Romanian newspaper], https://www.nineoclock.ro/2015/11/25/the-bright-road-of-kazakhstan/. Accessed June 22, 2019.} The Kazakh rail industry has the capital resources from oil money to develop its own railroad sector and to introduce foreign rail technologies such as those from Alstom, General Electric, and Talgo. Simultaneously, the Kazakh rail industry holds indispensable po-
sitions within two of the BRI rail routes—one that goes through Russia, Belarus, and greater Europe, and another that goes across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and Europe, as well as to Iran through Turkmenistan. Thus, despite other options now under consideration, “Kazakhstan stands out as the best alternative for China and Russia for rolling stock transportation.”

Although it can be speculated that China’s BRI may have stimulated Kazakhstan in November 2014 to commit $21 billion to the Kazakhstani Bright Path Nurly Zhol Initiative, a development program that extends beyond infrastructure to include energy, finance, housing, education, and healthcare, the government of Kazakhstan likened the modernization of the Nurly Zhol multi-sector transport network to its multi-vector foreign policy framework. President Nazarbayev publicly announced that, in response to both a downturn in oil prices and the slowdown of the global economy, the country was launching the Nurly Zhol Initiative to create efficient transport and logistics corridors within the country to turn it into a transit state, stating that, “The project of a hub on the border with China clearly demonstrates Kazakhstan’s multi-vector approach to the development of the own transit potential.”

This strategy is geopolitical as well as economic and aims at cooperation with the widest possible range of partners. Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Eraln Idrissov urged listeners to “forget about the concept of the ‘Great Game’ – it is outdated. . . Kazakhstan adheres to the philosophy of ‘Great Gain’ for all – for Russia, China, USA, Europe, India, Iran, Turkey, and, of course, Kazakhstan.”

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Roman Vassilenko in 2017 further explained that Nurly Zhol and BRI working together is a vision of how trade should be recreated along the ancient Silk Road, arguing that, “As the world’s largest landlocked country, we naturally want better connections with other parts of the world through transport-logistics linkages, so that our products can reach the world faster and safer.”

Kazakhstan is now developing transit corridors through its territory with a northern route that has access to Russia and to European markets and a southern or a trans-Caspian route to the Aktau port that has access to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. The Nurly Zhol Initiative has five specific objectives, two of which directly involve transit infrastructure. The first of these two is the construction of dry-port and SEZ infrastructure at both the Khorgos Eastern Gate and National Industrial Petrochemical technological parks, and the second is infrastructure construction in Astana and its capital airport.

The emphasis of the initiative was to connect the country with its capital via new railroads,


164 Minister Yerlan Idrisov quoted in “The bright road,” ibid.


highways, and air services. When President Nazarbayev proclaimed the new policy, he said that:

improving interconnectivity between the regions will eventually lead to a greater domestic well-being. It will strengthen trade and economic ties between the regions. New markets will emerge from within the country. The New Economic Policy ‘Nurly Zhol’ will become a driver of growth in our economy during the coming years: 200,000 new jobs will be created by the construction of roads alone. And this means greater employment and growth of income for the population.\(^{167}\)

The first sector of the initiative involves the development of road transportation, which includes eleven road-sector projects with more than 7,000 kilometers of roads to be reconstructed and built by 2020 at a cost of $8 billion, $3.3 billion of which will be financed with international loans. The largest road project, finished in 2016, was the international automobile transit corridor’s 8,445-kilometer four-lane Western Europe–Western China Highway, of which 2,787 kilometers are in Kazakhstan.\(^{169}\) Radial highways will connect Astana with the major logistics centers in Almaty, Ust-Kamenogorsk, and Atyrau. According to China Global Television Network (CGTN), “the identical ‘rays’ will link together the regional transport hubs themselves – the state program involves the creation of a network of transport and logistics centers throughout the country. The chain of Hubs in Aktau, Pavlodar, Kostanay, Semey, Aktobe, Atyrau will help Kazakhstan to become a key goods distribution hub.”\(^{170}\) An important part of the Nurly Zhol infrastructure program is the modernization of the country’s only seaport, Aktau, on the Caspian Sea. Aktau port is a strategic point in the southern route which goes around Russia.\(^{171}\)

The Nurly Zhol rail-vector program, designed to be constructed from 2015 to 2019, will double the traffic volume of transit rail cargo through Kazakhstan by 2020. The Borzhakty-Ersai railway line was built to the under-construction Kuryk ferry complex on the Caspian Sea coast

\(^{167}\) Nazarbayev, “Nurly Zhol,” ibid.


\(^{170}\) “The bright road of Kazakhstan,” ibid.

\(^{171}\) Throughput of the port for 2014 amounted to about 14 million tons and after renovation, the port’s transshipment capacity is expected to increase to 19 million tons by 2020. “The bright road of Kazakhstan,” ibid.
with a capacity of 4 million tons of cargo per year. The new project is aimed at the development of transport along the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR).172 According to the Kazakh national railway company Kazakhstan Temir Zholy (KTZ), rail freight volumes in 2018 between Kazakhstan and China increased by 38 percent compared to 2017. Eastbound traffic increased by 54 percent, “a positive milestone for Eurasian railway traffic, which has seen the majority of traffic in westward direction.”173 Moreover, in 2018, out of over 20,000 kilometers of total rail track, more than 1,000 kilometers of track were upgraded.

**Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Corridors**

The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program is a consortium of eleven countries (composed of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, the PRC, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) cooperating on projects that have created “multimodal transportation networks, increased energy trade and security, facilitated free movement of people and freight, and laid the groundwork for economic corridor development.”174 The project is designed both to renovate existing infrastructure in Inner Asia including parts of Mongolia, western China, and eastern Russia and to connect this region to East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Established in 2001, CAREC gained new momentum after the creation of BRI and, partnering with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), as of September 2018 has mobilized more than $32.9 billion in investments for 185 projects. The goal outlined in the CAREC 2030 framework is to establish the momentum for the CAREC countries “to emerge as a center for trade and commerce, to achieve higher levels of economic growth, and to reduce poverty.”175

CAREC has defined six transport corridors for building regional connectivity to expand trade, improve competitiveness, and augment regional economic cooperation. Among the transit projects from 2001 through 2017 were 9,964 kilometers of roads built and upgraded, 1,995 kilometers of new railways built, and 3,433 kilometers of railways improved. The port of Aktau was completed and two border-crossing points (BCPs) in Dusti, Tajikistan and in Guliston, Uzbekistan were modernized. Work is continuing on upgrading infrastructure, including the Turkmenbashi International Seaport, two logistics centers (one in Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan and one in Zamyn-Uud, Mongolia), and four BCPs (in Karamyk, Kyrgyzstan, in Torkham, Afghanistan, in Chaman, Pakistan, and in Wagha, India). The program also has prepared a railway strategy to guide the long-term development of railways in the CAREC region as well as a road safety strategy for the CAREC corridors. A second major form of cooperation involves the simplification and harmoniza-

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172 In Kazakhstan Railways the potential for container traffic along TITR is estimated at TEU 300 thousand by 2020. “The bright road of Kazakhstan,” ibid.


tion of customs procedures and pilot testing of both the CAREC Advanced Transit System and Information Common Exchange (CATS/ICE) project and the CAREC Regional Improvement of Border Services (RIBS) project. Infrastructure improvements and the procedural streamlining of border-crossing clearance operations have been implemented in four countries—Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.

A third priority sector for CAREC is to support the adoption of clean energy technology in the upgrading of Central Asia’s Unified Energy System. The breakup of the Soviet Union in late 1991 did not destroy the dependence of the five Central Asian countries on the old energy grid, but after Turkmenistan withdrew in 2003 and the power system experienced a crash in 2009, these nations with limited success attempted to create independent energy production systems. In 2016 efforts were revived to recreate a regional energy grid that previously had been blocked by Uzbekistan’s political leadership and the continuing conflict in Afghanistan. International financial organizations, including the ADB, have financed the modernization of domestic power stations and transmission lines and developed new power stations and power lines to connect to export markets. In the first quarter of 2017 alone, CAREC claimed to have installed or upgraded 1,697 kilometers of the existing 645,428 kilometers of transmission lines. CAREC projects have increased

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regional electric energy generation capacity, installed 870 new substations, and upgraded another 206 substations. The conflict in Afghanistan and the massive amount of financing needed to achieve the CAREC 2030 goals are major challenges to realization of a fully functional regional energy grid. This was underscored at the CAREC Energy Ministers’ Dialogue in late September 2019 in Tashkent when the ADB stated that some $400 billion in cumulative investments up to 2030 would be required.

**Lapis Lazuli Southeast Asian Corridor**

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is a $2 billion international transit route linking Afghanistan to Turkey via Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia that was opened in 2018 and is funded by the ADB. Its name is derived from the historic 2,000 year-old route that brought Afghanistan’s lapis lazuli and other semi-precious stones to the Russian Caucasus, the Balkans, Europe, and North Africa along the ancient Silk Road. Today’s Lapis Lazuli Corridor begins in Aqina in the northern Faryab province and Turqundi in the western Herat province of Afghanistan and continues through to Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, and onward to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, to the Georgian ports of Polti and Batumi, to Kars and Istanbul in Turkey, and finally to its end in Europe. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor’s goal is to connect with Turkey’s Middle Corridor project, the Trans-Caspian East-West Trade and Transit Corridor. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, “the Route is the shortest, less expensive, and secure passage connecting Caucasus and Central Asia. It seeks to improve and streamline transport infrastructure and customs procedures, increase trade, create employment opportunities and bolster economic ties between the concerned nations benefitting from this trade route.”

After three years of discussions, the Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade and Transport Route Agreement was signed on November 15, 2017 on the sidelines of the Seventh Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA-VII) in Ashgabat. The purpose of the corridor is to stimulate regional economic cooperation and connectivity among Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, which in turn can expand economic and cultural links with Europe. This initiative also will serve to reinforce the Afghan government’s National Infrastructure Plan (NIP) (2017–2021) to improve transport infrastructure and procedures for road, rail, and sea transport and to increase exports along this new transport corridor. Lower trade barriers, reductions in transit costs, improved cross-border harmonization, increased trade and transit, and enhanced regional cooperation are all major aims of the project. According to the NIP, “given the enormous geopolitical shift in the region, Afghanistan is now in a unique position to utilize its geographic dividends and serve as the regional hub connecting between Central Asia and South Asia as well as connecting China to Europe in an east-westerly direction.”

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178 CAREC website, ibid.

181 The text was finalized the preceding year. See “Text of the Lapis Lazuli Route Agreement Finalized,” ibid.
183 “National Infrastructure Plan,” ibid., pg. 41.
the six CAREC corridors call for linking into Afghanistan’s national highway system. The NIP also includes visualizing Afghanistan as an energy corridor to connect energy-rich Central Asia to energy-poor South Asia through oil, gas, and electricity transmission lines.

The creation of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can be understood as a direct response to the ongoing destabilization of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border due to the rise of various terrorist military forces. This corridor has obtained the support of the U.S. government because it covers “the key security constellation in the Caucasus (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey) through which the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the South Caucasus gas pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad already traverse.”\(^{185}\) Regional trade and transit costs will be reduced through new cross-border customs procedures and agreements. The corridor’s projected impact is considerable not only because most of the needed infrastructure is already in place, but also because most of the investment required will focus on improving policy and governance. While Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are not yet members of this new framework, since they already have the road and rail infrastructure necessary to facilitate the movement of goods, it is speculated that they may soon join the corridor.\(^{186}\)

President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani inaugurated the corridor in a ceremony in Herat on December 13, 2018. The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI) claims that 80 percent of goods shipped from South Asia to Europe will travel by this route, which involves rail routes in Afghanistan and the South Caucasus countries and ship routes that cross the Caspian and Black Seas. The corridor is lower in cost, safer, and closer to Europe.

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186 Korybko, “The Lapis Lazuli Eurasian Corridor and the Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA 1000),” ibid.
than the Karachi, Pakistan port for the transit of Afghanistan’s goods.\textsuperscript{187} If this route proves its viability, it also will illustrate the fact that reimagining and updating old historic trade patterns can provide modern solutions to overcome contemporary impediments to Eurasian connectivity.

**Asian Super Grid**

Although this study concentrates on transit connectivity throughout Greater Inner Eurasia, it is crucial to point out that connectivity trends in other sectors are essential to mention because of the strong impacts that they have on the pace and demand for transportation infrastructure. One key proposal is of particular note—the Asian Super Grid (ASG) with its six ultra–high voltage electricity grids that include wind power and hydropower resources spanning China, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and western parts of Asia. It is predicted that electricity demand in Northeast Asia alone will increase 1.7 times from 2010 to 2030, mostly owing to rapid growth in China.\textsuperscript{188} This grid proposal aims to interconnect consumer countries in Northeast Asia with electricity generation areas in the Gobi Desert. The Asian Super Grid project has the large potential to decarbonize the power supply in the region, which would reduce the continent’s dependence on fossil fuels of all types and thus potentially impact the future necessity of certain pipelines and energy-related mineral rail freight lines.

The Asian Super Grid concept of establishing an environmentally friendly and low-cost electrical power transmission network, or super grid, that connects China, South Korea, Mongolia, Russia, and Japan was first proposed by the founder of Japan’s Renewable Energy Institute and CEO of SoftBank, Masayoshi Son, on September 12, 2011 in response to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident. The proposal’s emphasis is on renewable energy, but nonrenewable sources also are accommodated. The Renewable Energy Institute has conducted research on the Asian Super Grid in cooperation with the Energy Charter Secretariat in Brussels and the Ministry of Energy of Mongolia. The research findings were compiled in a joint 2014 report.\textsuperscript{189} SoftBank signed an MOU with companies from China, South Korea, and Russia in 2016 to create a framework for conducting feasibility studies. Thereupon, the Chinese Global Energy Interconnection Development and Cooperation Organization (GEIDCO) was established in cooperation with the State Grid Corporation of China (SGCC) to develop global transmission interconnections for the cross-border usage of renewable energy from wind and solar power. These organizations have made major investments to interconnect the grid in order to address significant transmission and distribution losses and to reinvigorate regional energy trade and cooperation. The Renewable Energy Institute joined GEIDCO as one of its council members. China expects that this will lead to Japanese companies expanding cooperation with China and tapping into China’s BRI.\textsuperscript{190}


\textsuperscript{189} See full text of “Gobitec and Asian Super Grid,” ibid.

The ASG represents the strategy of connecting locations of high energy demand with regions of large renewable energy potential. Therefore, the proposed grid connects renewable energy sources in the Gobi Desert with hydropower electricity in Irkutsk, Siberia in the north of the region. It will link such electricity production to the places of greatest demand in Shanghai, Seoul, and Tokyo. While a continental super grid could offer electricity access to Asia, according to author Charles Zhang, “there are significant geopolitical and market barriers that could hinder its implementation. . . . In a new model, communities could consist of many linked microgrids, harnessing local solar and wind power, and the regions of microgrids could then be interconnected by long-distance HVDC lines.” However, an advantage is that microgrids have local control systems with the ability to disconnect from the central grid and operate independently when necessary.

Although a super grid could ameliorate the problem of intermittent renewable power generation during downtimes and bring clean energy to remote parts of the continent, “achieving political and regulatory consensus across regions and countries with different economic aims and cultures might be difficult.” Furthermore, one of the main challenges to the project is the huge capital cost of nearly US$300 billion, which involves complicated financing.

The architects of the Asian Super Grid recommend a “strategy to start with developing smaller projects and aligning them along the Gobitec/ASG vision. Such projects could be started nationally and later be evolved into bilateral projects.”

194 “Gobitec and Asian Super Grid,” pg. 20, ibid.
195 “Gobitec and Asian Super Grid,” pg. 21, ibid.
STRENGTHENING POINTS OF TRANSIT DISCONNECTIVITY

The many localized transit connectivity concepts described in this article may lead to legitimate concerns about the disjointed and at times conflicting nature of Greater Inner Eurasia’s quest for integration. The reason that Central Asian nations and other landlocked neighbors within Greater Inner Eurasia are not well linked by developed and integrated transportation systems is mainly geographical. The continent has major mountain chains, high plateaus, and numerous deserts which, from historical times, have separated peoples rather than been conduits of connectivity. In response, nations have become culturally and politically oriented in specific and separate directions, and these patterns still influence today’s modern trade exchanges and foreign investment policies.

At the same time, the continent’s few historical memories of integration over the past one thousand years are linked intimately to military conquests, including the Mongol empire’s Silk Road, Czarist Russian and Soviet expansion to the Pacific, Manchu Qing imperial western expansion, and unity under a Maoist communist PRC. Military imperialism established first political and then a measure of economic connectivity. With the disintegration of a specific military power, the integrative synergies, especially those propelling intrastate trade, fell apart because of the lack or deterioration of expensive transportation infrastructure across the geographic barriers. Multilateral projects ultimately rely on geopolitical trust, especially in areas such as costly energy supply, transit infrastructure, and security. Asia has not experienced through peaceful means the establishment of cohesive economic institutions like the European Union that could facilitate grand multilateral infrastructure development. The institutional structures that do exist, such as the Asian Development Bank, were created by great economic powers on the periphery or, such as ASEAN, at most are regional and not continental in scope. China’s BRI and Russia’s EEU are contemporary attempts to break the patterns of the past and to strengthen the bonds of cooperation in nonmilitary ways to promote integrative economic and transit trends across Greater Inner Eurasia. However, both grand concepts are visions of the continent’s main superpowers and thus are distrusted by small and medium-sized Eurasian nations and their competitive superpower rival, the United States, as covers for Chinese and Russian ideological and political ambitions.

Asia’s fragmented political structure, both in the past and today, has blocked or delayed a number of regional integration projects such as the construction of gas and oil pipelines and railroads. During a round-table discussion on Eurasia’s integration at the 2019 Eurasian Media Forum, participants pointed out that the five Central Asian countries, with a potential joint market of nearly 70 million consumers, have not been able to resolve border disputes, despite the commonalities of their historical and Soviet-era experiences, and thus still have land mines buried along their borders. There is concern in these landlocked Inner Asian states that China’s BRI is being implemented via large-scale projects that accrue high levels
of debt, so that in order to strengthen communications and transportation, these countries must first have cooperative mechanisms and build up mutual dialogue and trust. 196 Although it is clear from the above discussion that there have been many plans for connectivity bridges and corridors proposed in the past few decades to solve the numerous transportation gaps, it is equally evident that the dynamism and explosion of interest in building new Greater Inner Eurasian transportation infrastructure can be correlated to the meteoric rise of China, its willingness to fund costly BRI projects that are in China’s self-interest, and its new cooperative instead of competitive relationship with the continent’s other great power, Russia. Many Greater Inner Eurasian nations recognize these phenomena and are attempting to latch on to China’s economic momentum for their own specific purposes.

Commentators on Eurasian integration usually focus on the grand designs for integration that have been advocated persuasively by China, Russia, and economic powers on the continental periphery. However, less attention is paid to the various proposals devised by the nations, some of which are landlocked, across Inner Eurasia and Southeast Asia that reveal the weak links or points of disconnectivity that are still blocking the facilitation of smooth transit flows across the whole continent. To ignore such disconnectivity by creating corridors may be financially reasonable but potentially politically dangerous because it perpetuates instability and widens the wealth gap among mineral-resource rich versus mineral-resource poor nations.

At the 2019 Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, 35 different economic corridors were mentioned, and some corridors, such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), 197 were not discussed although they had been previously included. Along each corridor there are well-placed or well-connected centers in BRI partner countries that stand to benefit from BRI. Based on World Bank analyses, the most well-positioned centers across the priority corridors are in Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Yekaterinburg, and Krasnodar (Russia); Almaty and Nur Sultan (Kazakhstan); Tehran (Iran); Istanbul (Turkey); Kabul (Afghanistan); Yangon (Myanmar); Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia); Bangkok (Thailand); Hanoi (Vietnam); Singapore (Singapore); Rawalpindi, Bahawalpur, Islamabad, and Karachi (Pakistan); Dhaka (Bangladesh); and Kolkata (India). If this analysis is correct, the challenge is to determine where Mongolia, Manchurian China, the Koreas, and the Central Asian nations (excepting well-connected Kazakhstan) fit into the Greater Inner Eurasian transit connectivity picture. These regions and states boldly declare that they will not be excluded by the larger nations that have traditionally dominated continental affairs—but how to achieve substantive transit integration in Greater Inner Eurasia, without leaving out geographically-challenged nations that are mineral-energy rich or energy-consumption poor, still remains a major dilemma.

