
Iron silk road may become giant highway between East & West

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Regional cooperation between the South Caucasus and Turkey has moved into a new phase as the deal over Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway finally concludes. Nicknamed "the iron silk road," the railroad will connect Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey while bypassing Russia and Armenia.

This project has formulated and clarified power relations among these countries. Although it took longer than expected for Georgia to join due to pressure from the Armenian lobby on American foreign policy to halt the project, the railway is scheduled to be completed by 2010 at an estimated price of \$500 million.

The occupation of northern and southern routes by so called "problematic" countries Iran and Russia drew American and European attention to the South Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan, as a potential bridge between East Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey stepped forward to serve as a protected corridor for Europe and to strengthen transportation between Asia and Europe via the BTK railway.

At a July 24 ceremony in Kars, Turkish President Abdullah Gül said, "The line not only links three countries, it links China and London."

"This project is putting trilateral cooperation in the region one step ahead," said Zeyno Baran, senior fellow and director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Eurasian Policy. Speaking to Sunday's Zaman, Baran said that the railroad, in allowing direct access from China to Europe, is important in terms of stability and economic development. According to Baran, a project of this kind is unique in the region. "Contributions from the West were huge in oil and gas projects; however, BTK is completely a result of the visions of the leaders of these three countries," she said.

Transit railways linking Europe to Asia crossed through Armenia to Turkey in three routes until Azerbaijan and Armenia went to war over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. One route passed through Kars-Gyumri-Ayrum-Marneuli-Tbilisi, finishing in Georgia. The other two traveled via Icevan-Kazakh-Baku and Kars-Yerevan-Nakhchivan-Baku. Armenia has also closed all routes to Central Asia, Russia and China. Thus the only trade connection that Armenia has left open is through Iran.

Construction of the final section of the BTK railway, connecting Kars with the Georgian border, began in July with a ceremony in which the leaders of all three countries participated. 105 kilometers remain left to build, 76 kilometers within Turkey and the remaining 29 between the Turkish border and the city of Ahelkeleki in Georgia. Georgia also plans to rehabilitate rail between Ahelkeleki and Tbilisi.

The railway is expected to transport 1.5 million passengers and 3 million tons of freight per year. Forecasts predict that by 2034 it will transport 3 million people and more than 16 million tons of goods. The total cost of the project is estimated at \$500 million, with \$200 million to be covered by Georgia and the remaining cost to be covered by Turkey. Georgia will also receive support from Azerbaijan and the US.

In an interview with Sunday's Zaman, Professor Rovshan Ibrahimov, chairman of the international relations department at Qafqaz University in Baku, said this project is crucial for all three countries involved. "It is noteworthy that this is not the first regional project uniting political and economic interests of the three countries," he added.

An expert on political science and international relations in Azerbaijan, Dr. Ibrahimov optimistically puts this trilateral relation in a special setting. "The realization of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, as well as their successful exploitation, provided the groundwork for ideas for Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia to further deepen their relations, the result of which was the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad project."

He added, "It is noteworthy that President G?Ä?¼l, during his official visit to Azerbaijan, said that it is time to think about setting up a special economic zone between the three regional countries."

The project had stalled, but it accelerated after the three countries agreed on the deadlines for the railroad to be finished in Tbilisi on Nov. 29 of last year and subsequently in Kars on July 24.

After the signing ceremony in Tbilisi, Erdo?Ä?an said the venture would be a model for regional cooperation and that each of the railway's stations would send messages of peace and friendship to the world. He stressed that the railroad would revive the historic Silk Road and would serve the interests of all three regional countries. ?Ä?°lham Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan, in turn, stressed that the new railroad would strengthen stability and resolve issues in the region.

Considering that the railway will connect China with the West, interest in the project is increasing. Ibrahimov said, "This project has already attracted the interest of such countries as Kazakhstan and China, which have expressed a desire to use the BTK railway to transport their goods to European markets." Essentially a train from London will pass without interruption to China. In this sense, the BTK railway will play a significant role in East-West trade.

Dr. Vakhtang Maisaia, the chairman of the Foreign Policy Association of Georgia, said: "The 21st century begins with the realities of new geopolitics for world society. Globalization and economic interdependence are making international relations more prudent and dynamic. Global integration is no longer a pure realization of enormous political and economic projects, but simple regional ones." Speaking to Sunday's Zaman, Maisaia added that "the BTK railroad fits into that dimension in that it further promotes one of the efficient East-West transport and energy corridor systems."

Pointing out that the BTK railroad will deepen regional integration, Dr. Maisaia goes on to say, "The railroad newly implies the full integration of the South Caucasus region into the world globalization process and of the developing potential of the involved parties [Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey] for true strategic cooperation, not only with such a global economic zone as the EU but also with the remote ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] and the Pacific Forum."

While the three countries of the region are trying to establish a common area for trade and suitable conditions for the exchange of goods, the plan to exclude Armenia from all regional projects has been a consistent policy of Azerbaijan and Turkey. Dr. Ibrahimov asserted: "Because of the conflict with Azerbaijan and the historic dispute with Turkey, Armenia in fact does not have any economic relations with its closest neighbors. Because of the

unresolved Karabakh conflict, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline were built bypassing Armenia, although its territory would provide the shortest route. In the event of the completion of the construction of the BTK railway, Armenia will be finalized in the economic impasse."

Similarly, Professor Kamer Kasım from Abant İzzet Baysal University in Bolu classifies Armenia as the only unsatisfied country. "This project means that Armenia will be out of both transit routes and energy projects," he said.

President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili noted at the July 24 ceremony in Kars that, through the project, Georgia had opened a window to Europe. In this regard it was not surprising that Armenia would employ its strong lobby in the US to try and block funding for Georgia. Thus the expected deal was twice interrupted. At last on Nov. 21 of last year President Gül went to Georgia and signed the deal. Azerbaijan promised to fund some part of the project on the Georgian side.

The railway is also significant for Georgia in that, as it attempts to behave more independently in the South Caucasus, Georgia's recent problems with Russia will require new projects in order to decrease Russian dominance. "The one who benefits the most out of the regional cooperative effort is certainly Georgia," argues Ilyas Kamalov, expert on Russia and Ukraine at the Ankara Strategic Research Center. According to Kamalov, energy-poor Georgia is planning to pay its energy needs and carry out its projects independent of Russia.

Azerbaijan estimates that through this project, trade relations will advance as well as long distance transport of goods will be replaced by railway, which in turn will affect the efficiency and quality of transportation. Kazakhstan also agreed to connect itself to the railway. China and Kazakhstan signed support protocol agreements with these three countries in 2006. According to Musa Panahov, deputy minister of the Azerbaijani Transportation Ministry, Kazakhstan stated that they would always be ready to support the railway. "According to initial news, Kazakhstan is planning to transport 10 million tons of goods a year," said Panahov during a press conference in March of last year in Baku.

"The project will establish a direct link between Turkey and Azerbaijan. It is crucial that all shipping in the region reach Europe and Asia via Turkey," explained Turkish Transportation Minister Binali Yıldırım at the July 24 ceremony in Kars.

This giant project will contribute hugely to the development of trade between East and West as well as deepen the economic, social and cultural integration in the region.
