

Trans-Afghan Corridor: A Path Leading Uzbekistan To The World's Seaports

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Tuesday, March 27, 2007 - The only option for a country with no access to the sea to surmount its insularity is to build transport routes to seaports. Creating convenient transit conditions for its neighboring states is also regarded as one of essential factors that fuel its economic development.

This is a pressing problem not only for the Republic of Uzbekistan situated at the very heart of Central Asia but for other countries in the region, as well. It is for this reason that specialists consider the Trans-Afghan corridor to be one of the most promising international projects that will enable these states to transcend their landlockedness.

Initiated by the President Islam Karimov of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the project unites Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Iran. The major advantage of this transport route lies in the fact that Uzbek goods will be delivered to ports on Iran's seashore using logistically sound and commercially profitable routes.

By substantially shortening the transportation distances between destinations in Europe and Asia, the project will turn the countries in the region into a central chain of the efficient transcontinental route. As a consequence, the efficiency of various cooperation forms is expected to increase exponentially. This will affect, in the first instance, the economic linkages between the countries situated along the Trans-Afghan corridor, which are sure to become more fruitful and multifaceted. For Uzbekistan with its diversified, rapidly developing economy, the project opens up the opportunity to develop large-capacity exports of mineral fertilizers, chemical produce, fuel and lubricants, equipment, motorcars, and other.

The Trans-Afghan idea stirs other countries, which are among its apparent proponents. For example, India has already appeared in the role of a serious donor in Afghanistan, while continuing to intensify its activity as such in other parts of the region. Pakistan, in turn, participates in the construction of a motor-road between the port of Gwadar and Afghanistan.

The Trans-Afghan corridor is the shortest route linking Uzbekistan with the Caucasus and southern destinations. It is twice as short as the Far East routes and 1.8 times shorter than the Baltic route, which provides Uzbekistan with access to Europe.

The Trans-Afghan Corridor Project stipulates the construction of a direct route from the Uzbek town of Termez via Mazari-Sharif and Herat and Iranian communication systems to the seaports of Bandar-Abbas and Chor-Bahor.

The foundation of relations between the region's countries has been laid in 1996 with the construction and putting into operation of the Tedjen - Serahs - Meshhed branch-line, which linked the railway systems of the Central Asian states and Iran.

Commissioned in 2006, another railway route - the Bafk - Bandar-Abbas branch-line - made it possible to shorten the distances between Tashkent and Bandar-Abbas (the Iranian port on the Persian Gulf) by 800 kilometers.

Prior to 1997 the traditional transportation routes were used to export goods, above all, the cotton fiber from Uzbekistan. They were first delivered to the Baltic States via Belarus and the Ukraine (in transit through the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation). The Uzbek exports reached Europe after passing through the border passages of Chop (Ukraine) and

Brest (Belarus). The Ukrainian port of Ilyichevsk provided access to the Black Sea. The eastern arm of this port caravan lay through the People's Republic of China and the port of Nakhodka (the Russian Federation).

As a result of dramatic drop in the volume of freight transportation via the stations and ports of the Ukraine and Latvia, the role played by traditional transport routes running through the territory of Russia and Kazakhstan has started to dwindle since 1999. Given high transportation costs the Uzbek exporters refused to use the Far East port of Nakhodka, shifting instead the center of gravity in their exports operations towards the Iranian port of Bandar-Abbas.

Unfortunately, the unstable situation in Afghanistan makes it impossible to launch the project in full. Nor can the date of its completion be fixed. Meanwhile other signatories to the agreement - Uzbekistan and Iran - ensure the entire fulfillment of their portion of obligations.

The readers are regularly informed of how the construction of roads under the Trans-Afghan Corridor Project proceeds in Uzbekistan. This time we're going to highlight what the Iranian side has accomplished within its framework in 2006, with the information being presented by the Embassy of Iran in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Additionally, we'll dwell on the country's further plans and steps in this direction.

Apart from fulfilling its contractual obligations in full measure, Iran lends a helping hand to Afghanistan in the construction and reconstruction of border roads as part of the Trans-Afghan corridor.

In 2006 another construction project was finalized - a 123-km Dagaran - Herat motor-road, which is 11 meters wide. Its width and associated infrastructure fully meet the internationally accepted standards. Iran invested US \$60 million in this project. What is more, another motorway, a 60-km road between Herat and Faryab, was also built last year.

The work has been started under a project to erect a branch-line Herat - Hof, which will connect Afghanistan with a network of railways in Iran and European countries. Its construction was launched in June 2006. Seventy-seven kilometers of the branch-line's total track of 191 kilometers will run across the territory of Iran with the remaining section being located in Afghanistan. Thanks to its construction the latter will get the access to the sea via the former's southern ports.

One more project, which has been realized last year, is worth mentioning. It is the construction of the Herat - Armalak motor-road.

Estimated at US \$30 million, it allowed link Iran's arterial road with the regions in the north and northwest of Afghanistan. In 2006 a new bridge was built across the Parishon River. Called Melak the bridge is 320 meters long. It is based on one of the most important motorways between Zarang, Milak and Chor-Bahor.

Four new automobile bridges were put into operation between the towns of Herat and Neimana.

Other projects, whose implementation was continued in 2006, included the construction of a Herat - Neimana motor-road; construction of a 40-km motor-road between Serakhs and Kerman on the territory of Iran and construction of several control-allowing passages in an effort to make communication between the countries more convenient.

What should be observed in conclusion is that the Republic of Uzbekistan and Iran are keeping track of the way the Trans-Afghan Corridor Project is brought about, which is reflected in the Eighth sitting of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Trade-Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and Iran held in Tehran on February 19 this year.

The Trans-Afghan Corridor Project is of a special importance for many countries not to mention their direct participators. It is viewed as one of the most pivotal social and economic projects. Apart from their direct beneficiaries, its realization meets the far-reaching economic interests of many countries such as India, Azerbaijan, Armenia, as well as several European and Asian states.

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