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INTERNAL AND REGIONAL ADVANTAGES AND IMPORTANCE OF RAILWAY LINES IN AFGHANISTAN



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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INTERNAL AND REGIONAL ADVANTAGES AND IMPORTANCE OF RAILWAY LINES IN AFGHANISTAN

INTRODUCTION

From one point of view, human civilization is outcome of communication and trade that has progressed through transportation. Among the types of transportation systems, the invention of railway lines in the early 19th century led to the industrial revolution first in England and then in other European countries and America. Today, there are few countries in the world that do not have railway lines, because all kinds of railway networks are spread within the countries and they are connected with others. In general, it can be said that today, most of the countries, regions and even continents are connected to each other through railway lines, and a large part of the transportation of passengers and commercial goods is done through railway lines. Despite the advancements in sea and air transportation that have been used by major part of world. An attention of countries has not decreased from the development of rail networks. Huge investments are made in this sector by countries, the prominent example of which is China's "One Belt One Road" plan which has been allocated nearly one trillion dollars of investment. Unlike other countries, Afghanistan is so far behind. After two centuries of the invention of the rail transportation system, this system still does not exist inside Afghanistan. However, in the past few years, attention has been paid to this phenomenon, despite the fact that Afghanistan still lacks a domestic rail transportation system. In the international dimension, Afghanistan is connected with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran through the railway line. In the continuation of this article, while introducing Afghanistan's international railways, its domestic and regional benefits and advantages are discussed.

INTRODUCING AFGHANISTAN INTERNATIONAL RAILWAYS

As mentioned in the introduction, although Afghanistan unfortunately still does not have a domestic rail system, it is connected to three neighboring countries on three routes, the specifications and dimensions of each are briefly described below.

SARHADABAD-TURGENDI RAILWAY LINE:

This railway is the first railway built by the Soviet Union. This 10 km long railway line connected Shardabad in Turkmenistan to the town of Turgandi in Afghanistan. This line was renovated in 2007 and is still in use. Recently, the Afghan government has requested the extension of this railway line to Herat city, and preliminary meetings have been held between the officials of the two sides in this regard. Currently, a huge amount of commercial property is transported through this railway line.

TEMREZ-MAZAR-E-SHARIF RAILWAY LINE:

The Tremez-Haraitan railway line was also built by the Soviet Union in the 1980s. This line connected the town of Termez in Uzbekistan to the port town of Haraytan in Afghanistan through the bridge of friendship. The development work of this railway line, which was from



Hayratan to Mazar-e-Sharif, was completed in 2010. This network, whose main line is 75 km and its subsidiary lines is 31 km, has 5 operational and transit stations (Hirtan, Jirtan, Tashe Omid, Naib Abad and Mazar-e-Sharif).

KHAF-HERAT RAILWAY LINE:

This railway line, whose original design dates back to the era of the Mohammad Dawood Khan Republic in the 1350s, was stopped due to the outbreak of wars in Afghanistan. Through this project, which has a total length of 225 km, the city of Khaf in Razavi Khorasan will be connected to the city of Herat in Afghanistan. This line has facilities and facilities such as a two-story station with an infrastructure of 1,600 square meters in Rosenak and a passenger station with standard facilities and services for passengers at the end of the third section. Also, a large building has been built at the border of Shamtigh, where all passport, customs and border services can be done. For the passenger sector, coordination should be done between the two countries of Iran and Afghanistan in the sector of ticket sales and passenger transportation. According to the data, the initial traffic volume of this railway line is six million tons of cargo and one million passengers per year.

TRANS-AFGHAN RAILWAY:

This railway line, which is the continuation and supplementary part of the Temrez-Mazar-e-Sharif railway line, is supposed to be extended to Pakistan. The total length of this railway is 648 kilometers, which is extended in a north-south direction from Mazar-e-Sharif in the north to Paktia province in the southeast and Kharlachi port in Pakistan, and it will have the capacity to transport up to ten million tons of cargo annually. This initial design of this project was proposed by Uzbekistan in 2018. Since the establishment of the Islamic Emirate, it has received more attention from the concerned countries, and after holding joint meetings between the officials of the three countries of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the agreement on its establishment was signed between the officials of the three countries. If the "Faroo-Afghan" railway project is implemented, the countries of the European Union, Russia, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan will be connected to the ports of Pakistan in the Arabian Sea, and a new way will be opened for the export of goods to the countries of the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

DOMESTIC BENEFITS AND ADVANTAGES OF INTERNATIONAL RAIL LINES FOR AFGHANISTAN

As a consuming and importing country, Afghanistan can get several benefits from railway lines. The first advantage of using railway lines for Afghanistan is that this country can have multiple access to products of neighboring countries. Also, the use of railway lines to transport goods, which is done at a cheaper cost, has led to a decrease in the prices of goods exported from neighboring countries to Afghanistan, and they are available to the people of Afghanistan at a cheaper price. Another benefit of using railway lines is that the heavy traffic that exists on the roads of the ports due to the traffic of cars with heavy loads is significantly reduced. Another advantage is the use of railway lines for passengers. At present, the movement of passengers between Afghanistan and neighboring countries, especially Iran, is carried out from the road



port, which is cumbersome and time consuming. Utilizing the Khawaf-Herat railway line that has the capacity to carry one million passengers per year will reduce traffic, travel cost and will improve passengers' comfort.

Another advantage of extending railway lines for Afghanistan is that it will be connected to the railway networks of neighboring countries. For example, Afghanistan is connected to the Mashhad-Zahedan-Chabahar railway through the Khawf-Herat railway. Afghanistan can also be easily connected to Iran's sea ports in the Caspian Sea through this line. On a larger scale, Afghanistan is connected to the Turkish railway network and through it to the European continental railway network in a very short way through the Iranian railway network. On the Central Asian side, Afghanistan is practically connected to the national network of Central Asian and Russian railways through the railways of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Obviously, Afghanistan is connected to China through the Uzbekistan railway line, and cargo transfers are actually carried out through this route. On the other hand, Afghanistan can develop the Lazord route through the railway of Turkmenistan, and experimental transfers from Afghanistan to Europe have also been made from this route.

MUTUAL BENEFITS OF RAILWAYS FOR AFGHANISTAN AND NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

On a bilateral scale, the importance of railways for Afghanistan and neighboring countries has many benefits, which are addressed in several cases. One of the mutual advantages of using railways is the reduction of transportation costs. First of all, one of the basic factors that has a positive effect on the prosperity of bilateral trade between countries is low transportation costs. Previously, when Afghanistan and neighboring countries were only transporting by roads, the cost of transporting goods added an additional price to commercial goods and thus reduced the purchasing power of the customers at the destination. On the contrary, by using the railway transportation system, the cost of transporting goods is much lower compared to road transportation, and the goods could be available to the consumer at a cheaper rate. The use of railways also reduces the time of transfers and movement of goods. Since in the rail system, the goods are loaded from the destination in large volume and at one time and are loaded or unloaded by traveling a non-stop route at the destination, it takes less time. This advantage, in addition to providing more security for the transfer of goods, increases the level of trade exchanges between the two countries on a large scale by transferring more goods in less time. Another advantage is the reduction of pressure and congestion in the customs offices of Afghanistan and neighboring countries. Currently, the stoppage and accumulation of cargo vehicles to go through customs procedures has created a lot of congestion in the customs offices and the goods are stopped in the customs offices for a longer period of time. In addition to the waste of time, it has a negative effect on consumable items with a low expiration date, especially food items, some food items may spoil as a result of a long stop, which naturally, these problems will be solved if railway lines are used.

REGIONAL BENEFITS AND IMPORTANCE

With the assumption that Afghanistan is located in the center of Asia and has the dignity of a crossroads, connecting Afghanistan to the railway networks of neighboring countries at the



regional level has great benefits and importance. On the east-west side, by connecting the railway lines of Central Asia with the railway network of Iran, which is done through the extension of the Khaf-Herat railway line with the Temrez-Mazar-e-Sharif railway line, Any of the Central Asian countries can connect to Iran through this network by passing through Afghanistan and use the advantages of Iran's location to connect to Southwest Asia and the Persian Gulf. On the north-south side, Central Asian countries can connect to South Asia through Afghanistan. On a larger scale, with the extension of the east-west and north-south railway lines, regional corridors such as the Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway, the Panj railway corridor, the Trans-Afghan corridor, and the complementary part of the One Belt One Road project are practically coming to fruition:

IRAN-AFGHANISTAN-TAJIKISTAN RAILWAY CORRIDOR:

This plan was agreed between the leaders of the three countries in 2011 and the agreement was signed by the responsible officials of all three countries in 2018. It is the first and most urgent plan that is just waiting to be implemented. This project, which can connect Tajikistan to Iran through Afghanistan, is considered an urgent priority for the three countries that speak the same language.

CORRIDOR OF FIVE NATIONS:

The Five Nations Corridor, which includes the three countries of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, as well as the countries of China and Kyrgyzstan, is a grand plan that connects East Asia to West Asia. If this transit line is built, the countries of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and China will be connected through a railway network. The countries along this route will benefit from the benefits of goods transit in addition to the more convenient access of the railway to other countries.

THE SUPPLEMENTARY PART OF THE ONE-WAY BELT PLAN:

This big global plan, which has billions of dollars of investment to support its implementation, is supposed to connect China as the world's largest economy to other parts of the world. Although China had almost excluded Afghanistan from this plan due to political and security reasons in the past, but the extension of the railway lines inside Afghanistan, especially by connecting the two networks of Khaf - Herat with Tamerez - Mazar-e-Sharif, will increase China's desire to place this route as a main route. In trans-regional dimensions, it can be said that with the implementation of the mentioned plans, Asia will be connected to Europe through Afghanistan, passing through Iran and Turkey. This issue, which is one of China's major goals in the one-way belt plan, can easily be implemented through Afghanistan. At present, when there is an active and large railway network of Iran and beyond it the Turkish railway network and in the eastern part of the Central Asian railway network, the only small task is to connect Herat to Mazar-e-Sharif inside Afghanistan, which by completing this part of the old silk road in dimensions Newer and bigger will be revived.



CONCLUSION

On the one hand, Afghanistan is a landlocked country and it has been almost isolated from the commercial and economic side and it is even considered one of the factors of its underdevelopment, but on the other hand, this country is in a position that can connect the four big regions of Asia and also access other regions and open waters through connection with them. Despite this great advantage, Afghanistan has not yet been able to reach its proper position. Certainly, along with other factors, one of the serious factors of Afghanistan's underdevelopment is the lack of transportation, especially railways, the benefits of which were briefly highlighted in this discussion. As stated in this article, fortunately, in the last few years, attention has been paid to this important and vital issue that can turn Afghanistan's economy upside down. The three main networks that were mentioned in this article are small but firm steps that Afghanistan has taken in order to realize and implement becoming the crossroads of the region. Through these railway lines, Afghanistan can encourage other countries to take practical measures in order to connect the region through Afghanistan, along with the growth of its bilateral and multilateral trade with neighboring and peripheral countries. In this context, the good opportunity that has been provided is to provide security in the country and the great interest that the Islamic Emirate shows in this field. Afghanistan's neighboring countries should make good use of this opportunity and make large and immediate investments to extend railway lines in Afghanistan, because if the existing projects are completed and developed, East to West and North to South will be connected through Afghanistan and a revolution in the field of regional transit will take place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Afghan government should allocate the necessary investments for the construction of domestic railways.
2. The Afghan government should pay more attention and make the necessary investment to extend the international railway lines into the country.
3. The government of Afghanistan should undertake special diplomacy in the field of encouraging neighboring countries to participate in the extension of railway lines.
4. The Afghan government should provide the necessary facilities to encourage investors in the construction of railway lines.
5. Establishing railway lines in Afghanistan will benefit the neighboring countries as well, so they should have more joint efforts in this field.

End

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