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**INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT CORRIDORS: GUARANTEES OF  
DEVELOPMENT AND STABILITY FOR EURASIA.**

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*I consider it a singular plan of the fates that human cultivation and refinement should today be concentrated, as it were, in the two extremes of our continent, in Europe and China, which adorns the Orient as Europe does at the opposite edge of the earth. Perhaps Supreme Providence has ordained such an arrangement, so that, the most cultivated and distant peoples stretch out their arms to each other gradually bringing to a better way of life those in between.*

Gottfried W. Leibnitz, *Novissima Sinica*, 1697.

The current state of the world economy is characterized by a constant transformation of the Asian-Pacific Region (APR) into the world's main developing region against a background of general slowing down of economic indicators inside the Atlantic area. Increasing European diplomatic overtures to China illustrate how the relations with the APR are a crucial aspect for the development of the European economy.

This situation has great outlooks for the post-Soviet space, which may become the main transit bridge between the APR and the other poles of the Eurasian macro-continent. By this way, the post-Soviet countries would transform their territories along the main railways lines to be set into "development corridors", thus leaving definitely behind the consequences of Soviet economic collapse.

Moreover, creating new flows of people, ideas and wealth, a real effort aimed at setting International Transport Corridors (ITC) across Eurasia would entail the definition of a new continental geopolitical order based on principle of mutual understanding.

However these developments, together with their enormous potential benefits for all the continental countries of Eurasia, have been up to now blocked by the general framework of structural international financial crisis linked to the falling position of the US dollar. The interconnected choice from the side of Washington to establish its presence in Eurasia by military means is an obstacle of no less momentum. One should also add that the most difficult impediment for ITC realization lies in the hegemony of "free trade" liberal doctrines, a fact that prevent Russia and European States from realize the massive investments needed for ITC. Indeed, ITC development is a major geopolitical and strategic task, requiring massive financial resources. Such a task could not be managed by private economic actors or specialized international agencies but require the direct and concrete involvement of all the countries placed between the European Atlantic shores and APR, in their capacity of sovereign subjects responsible for the fate of future generations.

Trying to demonstrate the above exposed thesis, this paper will offer an overview of the major issues associated with ITC development from the side of major Eurasian regions.

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## ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF TRANSPORT FOR CENTRAL ASIA AND KAZAKHSTAN

For Central Asian countries successful ITC development is probably the major guarantee of their future stability. Historically, Central Asia has always played the role of transit link in the system of interconnections between Asian and European countries.<sup>1</sup> Although being often mythicised, the Silk Road provided prosperity for the region which started becoming a "civilisational black hole" exactly when the world trade shifted to oceanic routes as a result of Christopher Columbus's discovery. After 1991, a similar decadence occurred again in the result of the Soviet collapse, due to which trans-Eurasian corridors provided earlier by the Union stopped functioning. Conversely, the railroad sector, that for Central Asian States represent one of the best heritage from the Soviet period, which, being the most advanced of the world,<sup>2</sup> endowed them with more than 20.000 kilometres, started to decline.

It would be reductive to attribute Kazakhstani exception from the Central Asian post-Soviet downfall only to the presence of natural resources in its territory. The country differs from other republics also by its efforts to integrate with its neighbours, first of all with Russia and China, and in the rate of the growth in railway transportation. Kazakhstan could not be such a successful example for economic growth in the region without this. The governmental decision to build new railway lines, as well as from the adoption of the transport strategy of Kazakhstan until 2020 show how Astana is aware of the fact that railways are a key factor for the national economy.<sup>3</sup> Strengthening of international transport corridors may become the drive of the national economy of Kazakhstan. The combination of physical features of the national territory (such as vast area, low density of population, availability of rich natural resources, the unique location between China, Iran and Russia) make the Kazakhstani economy one of the most freight capacious in the world and dependant on the transport system. Thanks to its location, Kazakhstan may provide substantial reduction of distances for all flows of freights moving from one side of Eurasia to the other.<sup>4</sup>

However, what a single country, which additionally suffers from the problems arising from the combination of scarce population and vast surfaces, may do for concrete promotion of the land transport potential is clearly insufficient. Again the point to stress is that the overall strategic dimension overwhelms the economic one.

### THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND TRANSPORT: A STRATEGIC CHOICE

On the Eurasian scale, in term of ITC development, China is the country that has set the tone for the rest of the continent providing an important example for all its capitals. Since the early 1990s, the Chinese political leadership made a stake on development of national transport infrastructures, intending this decision in a clear strategic perspective: ITC as a key factor for shaping the country's next century.<sup>5</sup> This effort immediately resulted in the opening of what Beijing has called the "Second Euro-Asian transcontinental bridge" (the first being Transsiberian railroad): an 11.000 kilometres steel artery starting from the port of Lianyungang (China Pacific

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<sup>1</sup> S. K. Kuškumbaev, *Geopolitika transportnyx kommunikacij centralnoj Azii*, «Šyryz», 2004, pp. 100-114.

<sup>2</sup> B. Drweski, *Le corridor de transport Europe-Asie*, 31/5/2003 ; <[www.paris-berlin-moscou.org](http://www.paris-berlin-moscou.org)>.

<sup>3</sup> A. Sadešov, *Šajman-arba gosudarstvennogo masštaba*, «Exclusive», n. 2 (35), 2005, pp. 6-10.

<sup>4</sup> R. Egorjan, M. Oganješjan, A. Manveljan, *Kazaxstan: sostajaie i perspektivy transportnyx koridorov*, «Central'naja Azija i Kavkaz», n.3 (27), 2003, pp. 170-178.

<sup>5</sup> *The Eurasian Land-Bridge*, EIR Special Report, Executive Intelligence Review, Washington, D. C., January 1997.

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coast), traversing all the country through Xinjiang, from there into Kazakhstan and then via Russia to Europe until Rotterdam. A new route, which is considerably shorter of the sea lanes and the existing Transsiberian, was thus opened between Europe and Asia.

However, until now the potential of this great overture has not been realized.<sup>6</sup> The absence of a common approach and of a clear strategy coped with the predominance of attempts to maximise national short sighted interests instead of the common interests from the side of the post-Soviet countries as well as the fact that China continued to perform its transshipments without taking enough into account the international conventions has created a situation where international standards are not meet. Thus only a small amount of goods went along the full-length extension of the new artery.

Nevertheless, the Chinese side has fully satisfied the posed objectives. The fast creation of transport communications became the essence of the Chinese success in development of its peripheral regions thus endowed with a massive “development corridor”. By creating a powerful infrastructure, Beijing has created preconditions required to make Xinjiang the future core of communications between APR, India and the rest of Eurasia. Misinformation on the problems of the Uighur minority cannot conceal the fact that the Chinese work in the region has transformed it from a marginal area into a bridge connecting neighbouring civilizations. Here and in the other territories crossed by the new arteries an enormous work was accomplished to full electrify a number of parallel lines and industrial projects.

In this way, the Chinese experience offered to the post-Soviet world a brilliant example of how to solve the most serious internal problems of continental countries having big discrepancies among urban poles and vast rural peripheries, a fact requiring huge infrastructure investments for their development. This example is particularly important on theoretical level. Without dirigist State policy of development – the real precondition to create the framework for successful private initiative – and public regulation of the financial market there could be no economic success similar to the one that China has realized in the last years. This is a lesson valid also for Europe.

It should be noticed also the importance of ITC development as a mean to positively orient Chinese foreign policy. This was especially true for Kazakhstani-Chinese relations as far as Beijing effort has met Astana’s parallel infrastructural engagements, leading to several concrete bilateral projects.

However, during recent years, China's aspirations grew against the background of rising instability stemming from the U.S. policy both in regional geopolitics and at the global macroeconomic level, where China's economic interests are affected by manoeuvres aimed to maintain the dollar's exchange rate.

The difficulties arising from this situation call for a more consistent involvement of Europe and Russia in ITC’s development.

## **THE MEANING OF TRANSPORT CORRIDORS FOR RUSSIA**

The development of Euro-Asian corridors is a vital question for Russia. As President Putin openly admitted in his address to the nation last year,<sup>7</sup> for Russia there is much more at stake than economic issues. For Moscow the real issue is having an effective network of transport infrastructure to improve a better spatial coherence of such a vast country.

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<sup>6</sup> I. Azovskij, *Železnye dorogi stran Central'noj Azii: problemy i perspektivy*, «Central'naja Azija i Kavkaz», n. 1 (31), 2004, pp. 148-154.

<sup>7</sup> *State of the nation address to Russian parliament*, Moscow, May 2004.

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As widely debated, the current Russian economic structure suffers from its strong dependence upon energy resources and it is hardly possible to call Russia's steps towards integration into the global economy successful - a situation that is the same also for other Central Eurasian countries.

This fact calls for a radical revision of Russia's economic strategy. The international financial market shows little interest to invest in Russian economy. To make up with this absence, Russia should fund the needed infrastructural improvement through internal reserves. This means that, as it has always been in Russian history, the State itself should manage the overall process by way of posing restrictions to the outflow of capitals and intervening directly in their redirection toward transport infrastructure.<sup>8</sup> Again one should not underestimate the negative role played by the liberal doctrines. The "liberal disease" was indeed about to be fatal to Russia, and the country is still not insured against reoccurrence of this disorder. The internal struggle between Prime Minister Fradkov and the liberal oriented ministries of finance and development reflect a more general one between partisans of true national renewal and the residual influence of oligarch forces interested in maintaining the country as an exporter of raw materials.

It is difficult to forecast a real Russian final recovery unless the Government will use national budget assets to encourage the economy by building and repairing transport communications with APR, Europe, Iran and India. In Moscow it is more and more realised that the Eastern development vector is not of less importance than the Western one. Russia's future depends upon the successful balance of those two vectors - if that balance cannot be achieved the country will lose global importance.<sup>9</sup> The strategic objective of Russia is to have several main route of trans-continental significance, crossing its huge space.

In addition, the rebuilding of the main transport routes is the main way to restore the technical level of national infrastructures, a big part of which have reached their final exhaustion point. If no steps are made in coming years, consequences may be unpleasant for all sectors of the Russian economy, accelerating the decadence of the country and hence jeopardizing the stability of the entire Eurasian space.

But if the opposite will be, becoming the main supervisor of the Euro-Asian transport system, it could be supposed that Russia would cover such a role at the international level for the benefit of all its neighbors.<sup>10</sup> Probably, the political and economic integration of the post-soviet region will take place via Russia. For Central Asia, Russia means access to the sea, to foreign markets, a source of technology and intellectual resources while being the only viable strategic warrant for the region.

As leading experts stress, it does not make sense to talk about competition between Russia and Kazakhstan in this regard. There is a need for different transit corridors serving customers in different regions: the Transsiberian orients on the Northeast-Asian markets while the Kazakhstani routes serve the markets in Southeast-Asia and in the rising provinces of Central China. Moscow and Astana should therefore coordinate their policies regarding railway transport and should push the establishment of harmonised logistics.

Generally, important transit routes for this region run through Central Asia, the Russian-Central Asian cooperation is a high priority in both Russia's and most Central Asian countries' policy.

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<sup>8</sup> V. Paramonov, A. Stokov, *Russia's Strategic Choice: Regionalization versus Globalization*, Conflict Studies Research Center of the Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, London, may 2004.

<sup>9</sup> A. D. Voskresenskiy (ed.), *Severo-vostochnaja i Central'naja Azija. Dinamika meždunarodnyx i mežregional'nyx vzaimodejstvij*, Rosspën, Moskva, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> V. L. Cymburskij, *Borba za «vrazijskiju Atlantidu»: geoekonomika i geostrategija*, Institut èkonomičeskich strategij, Moskva, 2000, pp. 35.

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In this context, Europe, and especially Germany, is a key partner for Moscow. Conversely for Europe Russia's stability is the precondition to further increase European business contacts with Asia. The same is true for an Asian point of view, as Russia's transport potential is the best base for contacts with western part of Eurasia.

### **TRANSPORT IN EURASIA: THE EUROPEAN PROBLEM**

In Europe the acknowledgement of the importance of ITC development for establishing a trans-Eurasian bridge from the Atlantic to the Pacific went a long an even more suffered path than in Russia.

The existing signs of goodwill in the relations with China are far from being sufficient, as they are simply reflecting the basic fact that the European economy is maintaining its world position thanks to contracts with the Asian-Pacific region.

In reality, Europe is more missing the historical opportunity opened by the end of the cold war rather than using it for the benefits of its citizens. It is a fate's irony that the Europeans decided to set up a policy of *Trans-European Network* (foreseeing the realization of works for 78.000 kilometers of railroad)<sup>11</sup> in the same town of Maastricht where they signed the homonymous liberal treaty which has resulted in blocking the capacity of the public sector as a creator of wealth up to our days. As a result, the European transport policy has generated only limited results. It should be added to this the fact that a big amount of Brussels's scarce transport investment resources have been concentrated on the realisation of the TRACECA corridor, a lane envisaging transport between Europe and Asia through Turkmenistan and the Southern Caucasus. Today, it is obvious to most experts that the conception of TRACECA has not proved itself valid as it does not correspond to the physical and economic realities of Eurasia – saying nothing about its geostrategic considerations aimed at rebuffing Russian and Iranian influence from Central Eurasia.

Although ideological burden of the 1990s are still spreading their influence in Brussels, the feeling of the necessity to build the trans-Eurasian land-bridge grows in Europe as well. At the difference of Brussels bureaucrats, this feeling is today high in Berlin and Paris national leaders. Germany in particular is today a leading partner for both Russia and China in advanced technology projects. A proof can be found in the latest negotiations between the Russian President and the German Chancellor where the railway sector was a leading subject.

The perspectives associated with the development of ITC are no less important for the French economy, for which hi-tech industries such as railways as well as nuclear technology and equipment for big industrial complexes are of extraordinary importance. In his New Year speech to the Nation, President J. Chirac said that the industrial policy should continue to be a key factor of national development. One could expect that Paris would continue to be active in supporting leading French enterprises in the realisation of projects that shall ensure the future development of the continent, a process in which France could become the main engine together with China.<sup>12</sup> The future of France, like the one of Germany, lies in the extension of these sectors and demands according investments.

The problem is that the Europeans do not seem aware of the geopolitical implications of ITC development. Considering German interests party in the development of contracts with Russia and China through a direct bridge on the Berlin-Beijing route, one could expect a more active role from the side of Berlin. From another side, France is showing an increase in its efforts in

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<sup>11</sup> E. C. del Re, *Corridoio VIII. Realizzazione, finanziamenti, lavori, impatto*, ANAS, Rome, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> B. Drewski, *op. cit.*

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strengthening the Russian and Chinese vectors of its diplomacy. But a strategic view of the importance of establishing contacts with Russia, for the future development not only of Europe but for all Eurasian in its larger meaning, is still dramatically lacking.

A proof could be found in the still dominant perception of Central Asia only as a supplier of energy resources. It is a fact that Europe's increasing energy dependence should shape the establishment of relations with Eurasian countries based on principles of long-term partnership. But it is in parallel high time to consider Central Eurasia as a strategic pivot, the situation of which could influence the global geopolitical balance. It is so important for Europe to act together with a Russian Federation engaged in recomposing the post-Soviet space in order to give a clear positive response to the Chinese effort.

### **THE TRANSCONTINENTAL BRIDGES AND THEIR GENERAL SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE FUTURE**

From the above said stems that the importance of transit corridors' development through Eurasia could not be underestimated. The link between infrastructure development and the general course of policy of the countries involved in it is maybe the main point that should be taken into account. A comprehensive project with such a number of implications as the Eurasian land-bridge could only be realised through long-term agreements regulating the direct involvement between the governments of the leading nations of the Eurasian macro-continent.

A general revision of the economic and geopolitical structure of interrelations between Europe, Asia and Eurasian space, is required. It should be guided by the consciousness that at stake there is not only the economic recovery of post-Soviet space and the welfare of Eurasian nations at large but also the perspectives for an alternative security system of this crucial region of the world. Until now, there has not been awareness of the fact that shifting good shipment from the Suez-Channel route to the Eurasian now is not only a matter of economic consideration but also of political factors. This is of a paramount importance in the current international situation characterized by growing instability as a result of the opening of the U.S. basis in Central Asia. The final outcome of this deployment is a shift of international cooperation accents from the economic to the security aspects. On the background of recent degeneration of Kyrghiz and Uzbek internal situations, this fact could result in final permanent destabilization of the whole region.

At the opposite, the development of the land-bridges could act as a catalyst process for the avoidance of the U.S. ambiguous strategic tutelage. Building transport corridors linking the Chinese economy with Russia and Europe via Central Asia will definitely strengthen regional security. The corridors will be the geo-economical underpinning for dialogue between the civilisations. Should the Eurasian transport system develop with Russia, China and Iran ad leading players having a stake in its permanent and smooth functioning, this system in itself will produce a mechanism guaranteeing each player against incorrect behaviour of the others. In this way ITC will act as a powerful factor in building confidence among Shanghai Cooperation Organization's member countries, easing in particular China's pressure on Kazakhstani and Russian lands.

By this way, the security of Central Asia will be guaranteed, each power considering it as its strategic rear. Moreover, the regional progress will be ensured by its transformation from a semi-colonial periphery provider of raw materials into the world's key space in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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