

Trans-Korean Rail Opens Way For Eurasian Development

by Mary Burdman

At mid-day May 17 on the Korean Peninsula, the new “Iron-Silk Railroad” opened for the first time. Two trains, one North Korean and one South Korean, crossed the 4-km-wide, heavily fortified Military Demarcation Line (MDL), the first trains to run between the two sides since early 1951. The brutal 1950-53 Korean War was only officially stopped by an armistice, and North and South Korea are still technically at war. North Korea, named part of the “Axis of Evil” by the Bush-Cheney Administration, has developed a nuclear capacity at Yongbyon facility, where it carried out a test in October 2006. Yet, these May 17 rail exchanges are the evidence of another strategic dynamic which can work, even in extremely difficult conditions, when what Lyndon LaRouche has named the “four key nations” Russia, China, India, and the United States cooperate against war and for development.

South Korea has gone forward with its “Sunshine” policy, even though the Feb. 13 accords on shutting down the Yongbyon facility have not yet been fulfilled. Seoul is taking this initiative in the context of the Six-Party talks of North and South Korea, with China, Russia, the United States, and Japan. These talks were launched in 2003, and laid the groundwork for this new breakthrough. The “Iron-Silk Railroad” was one of the key projects launched at the historic 2000 summit between then-South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. The “Sunshine” policy was to use economic and cultural initiatives to gradually reconcile the interests of North and South, despite profound economic and military differences. Over 1 million troops are stationed near the MDL.

South Korea’s economic future is also at stake. The South has no rail connections to the rest of Eurasia; the North has a single rail link, to China, and the potential to build a link to Russia and the Trans-Siberian Railway. Kim Dae-jung and Russian President Vladimir Putin had agreed on this project in February 2001. If South Korea could use rail instead of ships, it could reduce freight costs by some 25% and shipping time by 50%. The port city of Busan, at the southern tip of the Peninsula, is already expanding to become logistics hub for Northeast Asia.

In February 2003, in his inaugural speech, current South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun said: “The Korean Peninsula should turn into a peace zone for the peace of the entire world. The peninsula should be reborn as a Northeast Asian peace gateway linking Eurasia and the Pacific Ocean. The

day when the South Korean railway is linked with those of Russia and Europe via North Korea should be advanced as soon as possible.”

Trains Go Through

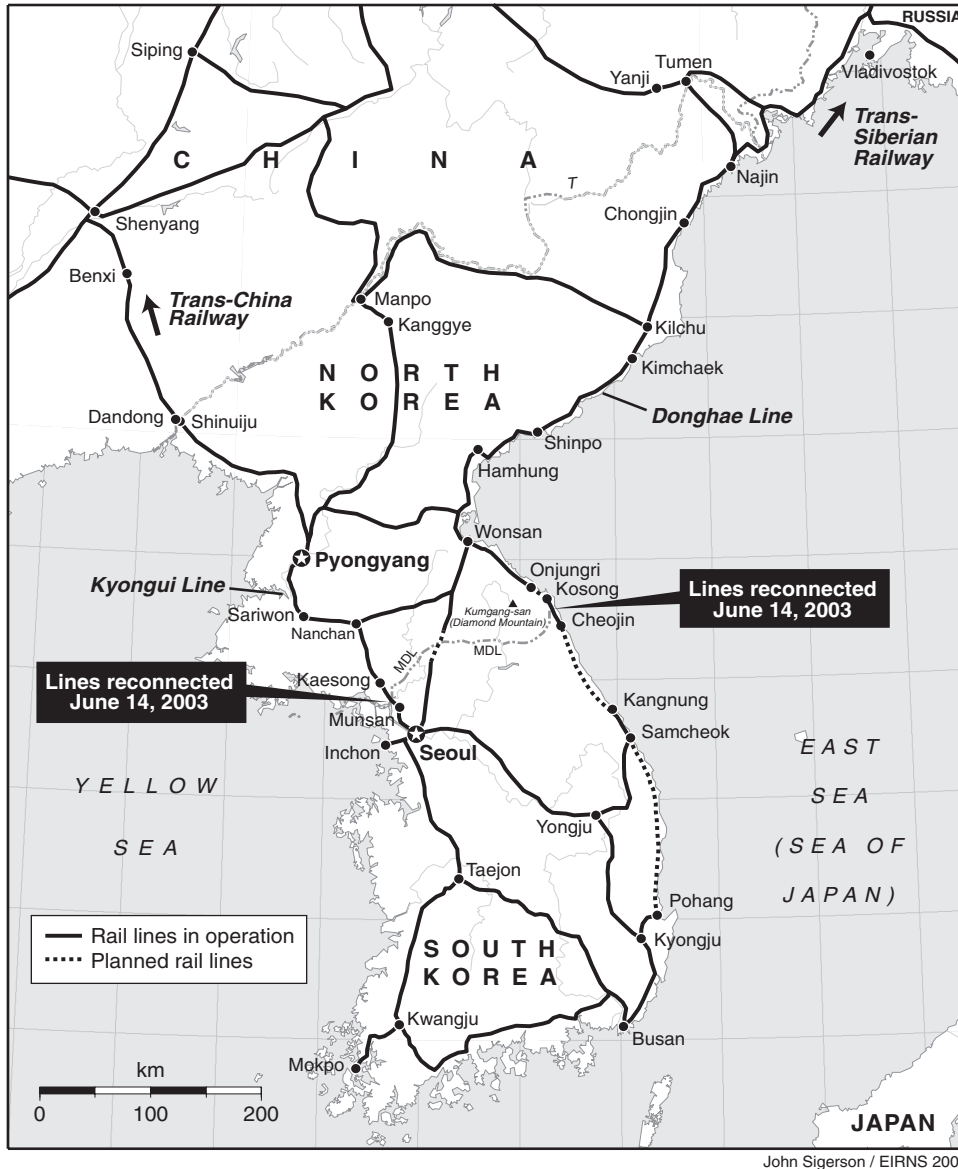
The rail connections—each just over 25 km long—were completed on June 14, 2003, one on the east and one on the west coast of the Korean peninsula. Three or four test runs were scheduled, the last in May 2006, but never carried out. Roads next to the rail lines were opened for limited traffic in 2005, and the Kaesong industrial complex, where 22 South Korean factories employ 13,045 North Korean workers, was built just north of the MDL. The other key project was to open tours to Mt. Gaeseong, an ancient capital city in North Korea, from the South.

This time, the trains went through. Each carried 100 South Koreans and 50 North Koreans, the North Korean train travelling south on the eastern Donghae rail line, and the South Korean train travelling north on the western Gyeongui (Seoul-Sinuiju) line, and returning over the same track. Passengers included political leaders and journalists from both sides, and also a conductor from one of the last trains that made the crossing before the rail link was severed in 1951.

Whatever the reactions from the Bush-Cheney war party will be, this was a profound development for Koreans. “It is not simply a test run. It means reconnecting the severed bloodline of our people. It means that the heart of the Korean peninsula is beating again,” Unification Minister Lee Jae-joung, who led the South Korean delegation to the North, said on May 17 after he boarded the North Korean train in Kumsongsan Station for the trip across the MDL. North Korean Railway Minister Kim Yong-sam said, after his arrival at Jejin Station in the South: “It took more than half a century to cross this short, approximately 20-kilometer distance. We have to prevent anyone from blocking the railways. They were so hard to reconnect.” Kwon Ho-ung, chief councillor of the North Korean Cabinet, led the 50-member delegation to the South, and boarded the train at Munsan Station with his South Korean counterpart, Lee Jae-joung. The trains were decorated with flowers and greeted with celebrations.

Unification Minister Lee said of the rail test: “I hope it will contribute to forming a joint economic community and making balanced development on the Korean Peninsula. A new

Major Railways of South and North Korea



Source: Ministry of Construction and Transportation (MOCT), Seoul, Korea.

curtain of peace has been raised on the peninsula. We should make great contributions to everlasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, and begin a new era by establishing a new inter-Korean transportation system. We have no time to waste over this great mission.” Councillor Kwon said that the two Koreas “should not be derailed from the track or hesitate” to ensure that the “train of unification” runs along a “track” of inter-Korean collaboration, with its emphasis on peace and understanding.

But he also warned: “Right at this moment, however, the challenge inside and outside is continuing from divisive forces at home and abroad who don’t like reconciliation and unifica-

tion of our people. We should not waiver or be derailed from the track of national sovereignty and inter-Korean collaboration.” President Roh Moo-hyun issued a statement that, “From now on, the government will gradually develop inter-Korean relations with patience.”

Both sides took immediate measures to sustain the momentum. On May 18, South Korean Unification Minister Lee Jae-joung said on Seoul radio that joint rail services were definitely being opened, no matter if in a phased process. “The North has shared the view that the test runs are based on the opening of the rail services between the two sides. South and North Korea agreed to do so step by step,” Lee Jae-joung said. There will be inter-Korean ministerial talks on May 29-31, where a formal opening of the rail lines will be discussed, Yonhap news service reported. “I hope the two Koreas can begin train operations on a regular basis this year, even if it’s only partially allowed on a short-distance track,” Lee was quoted by the *Korea Times* on May 18. He said that there is “no problem with using the Gyeongui (Seoul-Sinuiju) line” which “serves the Kaesong industrial complex right now.” Yonhap also cited a government source proposing to use the railways to transport raw materials for Kaesong to the North.

The *Korea Times* also quoted Lee Churl, CEO of the Korea Railroad Corp. (KORAIL), saying that senior North and South officials will meet their Russian counterparts by late June, to discuss linking the Trans-Korean Railway (TKR) and the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR). “We’ve already reached an agreement with Russia and received a positive reply from the North,” he said. At the beginning of May, President Roh officially invited Russian President Vladimir Putin to visit Korea, to discuss speeding up the rail connections. Roh’s handwritten letter was carried by former Prime Minister Han Myeong-sook, the envoy to the funeral of former Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Han also met

Russian Railways president Vladimir Yakunin.

Discussion of another potential extension of the TKR is also being revived. On May 15, the Busan City government and Busan Development Institute sponsored an international conference to discuss constructing a tunnel to connect Busan under the Korean Strait, to Japan, *Chosun Ilbo* reported. There are three proposals for the tunnel systems, which would run over one of the two Japanese Tsushima Islands. All three of the tunnel systems would be more than 200 km long, three times the length of the Channel tunnel in Europe, and by far the longest undersea tunnel in the world. Costs are estimated to run between \$50 billion and \$100 billion. The tunnels would take 15-20 years to build. The project could create an industrialized economic zone including the Busan region of South Korea and the Kyushu region of Japan, *Chosun Ilbo* quoted Prof. Jung Hun-young of Busan National University saying.

A Way Out

The Six-Party talks led to an agreement on Feb. 13 for North Korea to shut down its Yongbyon nuclear reactor, allowing inspections within 60 days, in return for help which would make up the energy difference. The deadline of April 14 was set to shut down the reactor, but this was not done, due to the ongoing dispute over North Korean funds worth \$25 million, held at a Macao bank which is accused by the United States of laundering money and other financial crimes. But the agreement has not been cancelled. The whole process was of strategic importance, as former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov described in the *Moscow Times* on Feb. 24. The key element of the Six-Party talks, Primakov wrote, was the U.S. shift from its "regime change" policy towards North Korea. In the end, he wrote, "the U.S. faced up to reality and started moving away from its 'unipolar' line." These talks were held amidst international reactions to Vladimir Putin's February speech on international security in Munich. While much still has to be done on the Korean Peninsula, Primakov wrote, the Beijing talks were "nothing short of success, but this success should not only be reduced to North Korea's nuclear weapon problem. I am confident that no matter what might happen in the future, the Beijing breakthrough has a broader dimension." The "first signs of progress emerged when the United States started moving away from its original position of dictate and ultimatum with respect to North Korea, including the threat to use military force. At first, the U.S. apparently expected that its line would be endorsed by other mediating/negotiating parties, but that did not happen for quite an obvious reason: Russia, China, Japan, and North Korea strongly object to regime change and chaos in the D.P.R.K. [North Korea]." Next, he proposed, "based on the experience gained from the negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program, perhaps it would not be a bad idea to set up a group, comprised, for example, of the U.S., Russia, China, India, and the EU, to facilitate negotiations with Iran."

The Power of Humor

The last barrier to the test runs, was the necessary agreement by the North and South militaries, to provide security and open up the MDL to allow the trains to pass. In this process humor played a surprising role. The ultimately successful three-day talks were opened May 8 when North Korean Lt.-Gen. Kim Yong-chol told his South Korean counterparts at the Panmunjom peace village a well-known joke about George Bush.

Earlier, on April 23, the Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation Promotion Committee had decided in Pyongyang to hold the railroad test run. The South Korean Unification Ministry report on these talks did mention the Feb. 13 Six-Party agreements, but the Agreement signed by both sides made no reference to North Korea fulfilling any commitments made on its nuclear capabilities. The statement said that long-standing barriers in transit, telecommunication, and customs continue, and therefore, "the two sides agreed to cooperate to remove such barriers. The two sides agreed to actively cooperate so that the military guarantee measures can be implemented before the test run of the railways. Following the test run, the South will strengthen technical aspects of the railways and actively discuss opening of the railway with North Korea." The two sides held further discussions on cooperation in developing light industry and North Korea's mineral resources, as well as potential joint ventures with other countries, especially Russia and China.

The subsequent military talks—the first in over a year—were prolonged, difficult, but ultimately fruitful. General officers of both militaries signed a provisional agreement to open the border—the first joint statement by the two militaries since 2000, Yonhap reported. While no renewed border openings are provided for, the joint statement does say that the "two sides have decided to discuss the issue of adopting the statement of agreement on the military security for the operations of railways and roads." They also agreed to further negotiations on their western coastal border, on the Yellow Sea. "The two sides have shared the view that preventing military conflict and creating a joint fishing zone in the West Sea is an issue to be urgently resolved in the course of easing military tension and establishing peace," the statement said.

General Kim's joke must have been another element in the rapidly shifting political dynamic. He greeted his colleagues by telling them: "Bush goes out jogging one morning and, preoccupied with international affairs, fails to notice that a car is heading straight at him.

"A group of schoolchildren pull the President away just in time, saving his life, and a grateful Bush offers them anything they want in the world as a reward.

"We want a place reserved for us at Arlington Memorial Cemetery," say the children. "Why?" asks Bush.

"Because our parents will kill us if they find out what we've done."