

Iran, Russia, and India Build N-S Rail Corridor

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

While the attention of the world press has been rivetted on accusations that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, the Islamic Republic has actually been busily developing capabilities of a more important sort, contributing to establishing regional peace. Continuing its policy introduced in 1991, Iran has been concentrating on expanding its railway connections to the newly opened, former Soviet territories of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and thence, to Asia, along the new Silk Road.

One leading link in this grand transcontinental network, is the North-South corridor, which connects India, Iran, and Russia. The participating countries are speeding up their work on it, in the interests of enhancing trade, economic cooperation, and peaceful relations.

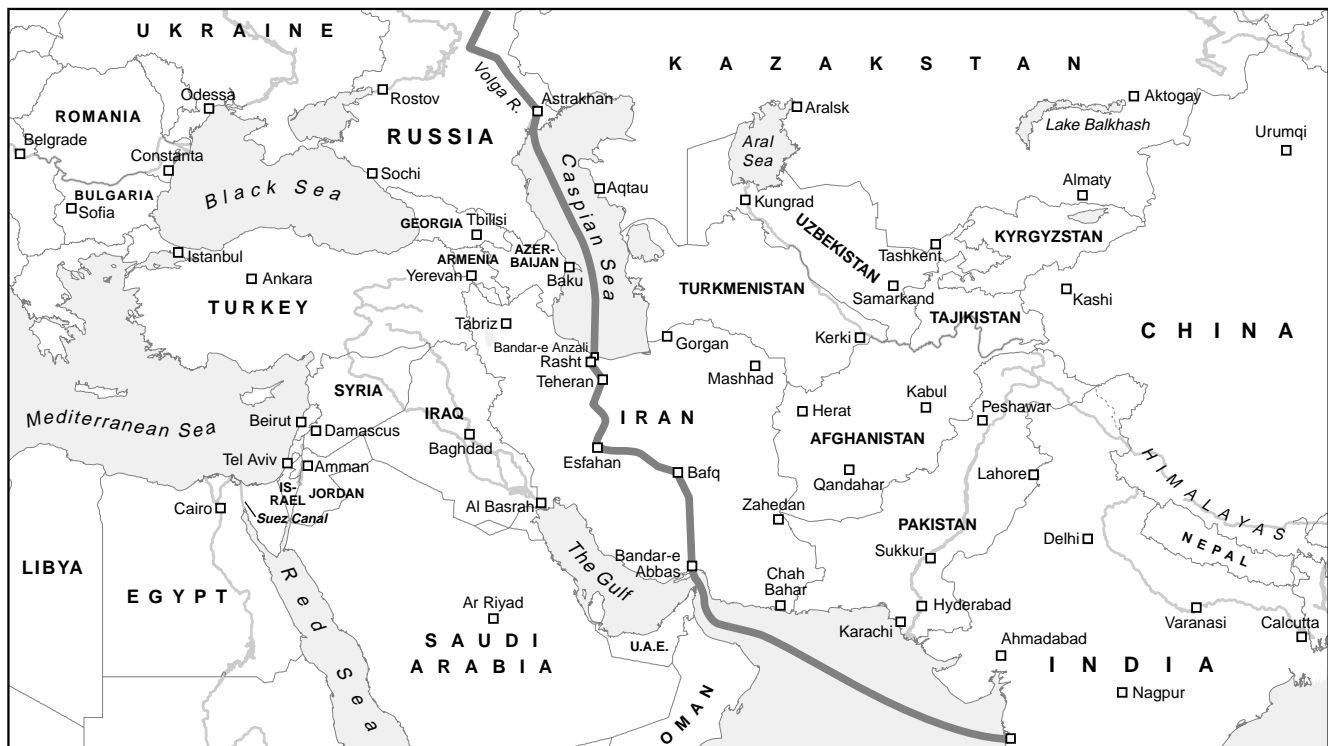
‘Transport Corridors From India’

On July 22, the India-Iran Joint Business Council (IIJBC) met in New Delhi. As reported in the Iranian paper *Ettela’at* the following day, A.K. Srivastana, chairman of the Indian section, stressed the importance India places on transport links to the Islamic Republic. In his welcome address to the group, which included Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Asia and Pacific Affairs Mohsen Aminzadeh, Srivastana said that Iran has emerged as India’s potential gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Europe. He added, “India and Iran are working together to develop transport corridors from India . . . through Iranian territory.”

Srivastava said complementarity of interests between the two countries in the energy sector should be developed also as a strategic area of their future relationship. He said that investment in upstream and downstream activities in the oil sector, LNG/natural gas hook-ups and secure modes of transport are the areas to further strengthen the relations.

Aminzadeh, in a meeting with Indian businessmen and exporters, said, “The issue of the North-South transport corridor between India, Iran, and Russia is one of the most important fields for development of regional cooperation, which will further link Europe and Asia with the adjoining countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Syria, and all other countries of the region.” According to *Ettela’at*, he said that Iranian-Indian strategic cooperation in transit and transport “would enter an infrastructural phase with the development of Chah Bahar port and the construction of the 600 kilometer-

FIGURE 11

The New Russia-Iran-India Transport Corridor

John Sigerson / EIRNS 2001

long Chah Bahar-Fahraj railway line that will link this port to the nationwide railway and road network of Iran, that will also establish a link between the countries of Central Asia and Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, Russia, and Turkey.”

Talks between Russia and Iran focussed on the same project. On July 24, Iranian Ambassador to Moscow Gholam Reza Shafei met with Russian officials, and stated that Iran is adamant about construction of the North-South corridor. Significantly, Shafei called on Armenia and Azerbaijan and their neighbors to resolve the Karabakh issue, “hence removing the hurdles in the way of railroad transportation and agreement by Russian officials to let the Iranian-registered trucks travel on the northern Caucasus.” At the same meeting, Russian Transportation Minister Sergei Frank, stressing the importance of the corridor, outlined Russian plans for expansion of facilities in the Russian ports.

Build Corridor in Two to Three Years?

The agreement on the North-South international transportation corridor which connects India, Iran, and Russia to Europe has been signed by Iran, India, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Oman and Tajikistan are expected to join the treaty in the near future. On Aug. 12, Russian and Central Asian news wires announced that the transport ministers of Pakistan and Afghanistan had signed an intergovernmental

protocol along with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan on various aspects of the project, including providing security for the operation of the corridor. The joining of Afghanistan and Pakistan opens perspectives for establishing shorter land transit routes between the eastern Baltic and the Indian Sea.

As for the financing of the project, the Farsi paper *Qods* reported on Aug. 5 that Germany, Russia, and Iran are discussing the establishment of a consortium to build the corridor within two to three years. The consortium would build the rail and road corridors linking India, Iran, and Russia; lines going through Astrakhan; and transport lines from Russia to Europe and northern Europe.

Iran, which is the pivotal nation in the transportation grid, is also expanding its own internal lines, to maximize the advantages of its geographical position. IRNA reported on Aug. 12 that Iran plans to build 5,000 kilometers of tracks over 20-25 years. At present, 3,300 kilometers are being built, including the 1,000 kilometer stretch between Bafq and Mashhad (into Central Asia). Managing Director of the Islamic Republic Railways Mohammed Saeednejad announced Aug. 11 that 500 kilometers have been laid annually since 2000. He said the Iranian network should grow six-fold, from 15 million passengers and 26 million tons cargo per year, currently, to 80 million passengers and 56 million tons.