

Colombia Must Build Railroads To Link Up With World Land-Bridge

by Maximiliano Londoño Penilla

The author leads the LaRouche movement in Colombia.

In order to connect the various geographic regions of our country as well as to link up with our neighbors and the rest of the world, Colombia's wild and varied topography will have to be crossed east-west and north-south, by railroad lines that will form the axis of development and infrastructure corridors (**Figure 1**). These railroad corridors will have high-speed electric trains that move at 250 km per hour or more for the transport of passengers, and at 150 to 190 km per hour to transport cargo. Some higher-speed corridors will transport passengers by means of magnetically levitated (maglev) trains, moving at 400-500 km per hour.

These rail corridors will exponentially raise the physical productivity of the entire Colombian economy. The impact of the railroad corridors will be felt directly in a 100-kilometer span (50 kilometers on either side of the rail line), but the shock wave of infrastructural progress will radiate out the length and breadth of Colombia, and beyond our borders as well.

The routes of the railroad corridors will be determined, first, by the decisive role that Colombia will play as a pivot for the branching of the Eurasian Land-Bridge (**Figure 2**). After crossing the Bering Strait and passing from North America to Central America, the Land-Bridge will enter South America, boring through the Darien Gap at the Colombian border with Panama. Rail Corridor A will begin at the border with Panama, passing southward through Colombia into Ecuador, and continuing down to the extreme southern tip of Argentina, via Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile.

Rail Corridor B will also begin at the border with Panama, but will then head into Venezuela, and from there, will follow the Brazilian Atlantic Coast, ending in southern Argentina. Corridor C, also beginning at the Panama border, will go through Bogota to Villavicencio, then on to Colombia's southernmost tip, and from there, cross over into Brazil.

As has been elaborated elsewhere, the current Eurasian Land-Bridge links every country in Western Europe by rail to the extreme east of Russia, through the Northern Corridor or Transsiberian Railroad, and also joins the European countries with India and China, via the Southern and Central Corridors. Now the Land-Bridge is in a process of expansion, forming a network of increasingly dense railroad corridors, and

the leading strategic issue under discussion in the world, concerning the next 50 years, is how to achieve the physical connection of all the continental land-masses of the planet, by means of these railroad and development corridors.

Key to Colombia's Survival

If Colombia wants to survive as a sovereign nation, which can answer for the general welfare of its current and future generations, it will have to link up with Asia, via these kinds of railroad corridors. The railroad, the cheapest means to transport both passengers and merchandise over long distances, must integrate with water and highway transport routes as well. Highways cannot compete with, or replace, railroads; highways serve for shorter-distance transport, but railroads must be electrified, two-way, and wide gauge.

The modern railway as a means of transportation was eliminated in Colombia by decisions of Wall Street and City of London financial circles—decisions that have been implemented by the selfish ruling elites of our country, and endorsed by the passivity of the immense majority of our people. It is time to end this narrow view of ourselves.

Nominally, Colombia possesses 3,154 kilometers of rail, of which 1,013 kilometers are inactive and the rest were turned over to private concessions and are in need of rehabilitation. Only 680 kilometers are currently functioning, primarily for transporting coal to export ports.

During 2004, only 45.6 million tons of cargo were actually transported. This volume results almost entirely from transportation of coal, from the site of production to the port of export.

In 2003, railroads transported a microscopic 0.04% of all passengers. The average speed of the cargo trains of the Atlantic concession is 40.8 kilometers/hour, while that of the Pacific concession is 20.0 kilometers/hour. According to international criteria in the "Global 2002 Competitive Report," Colombia has a 1.5 rating out of a maximum of 7, with respect to its railroad infrastructure.

Because of the absurd economic policy decisions made, rail transportation in Colombia has languished, and today is almost gone. We do not currently have a railroad system that integrates the different regions of the country. Rather, there are small branch lines which have generally served the needs of such mining companies as Drummond, which extract and

FIGURE 1

Colombia: Great Rail Projects



export coal.

The only electrified branch, which covers some 150 kilometers, can be found in Cerrejón, and goes directly from the mine to the port. Furthermore, the existing rail networks are all narrow gauge, which makes it impossible to connect our railroads with the systems of other countries, which use a wider rail gauge.

Rail transport is the cheapest and most efficient means of transporting large quantities of cargo over long distances. The fact that Colombia's geography includes three distinct mountain ranges, is not a disadvantage but an enormous advantage, because a country with lots of mountains also has lots of rivers. And, indeed, Colombia has the fourth highest

hydropower potential on the planet. Of course, we would have to bore through the mountains, using modern tunnelling technology, in order to be able to build the modern rail lines and highways we need.

The Vision of Rafael Núñez

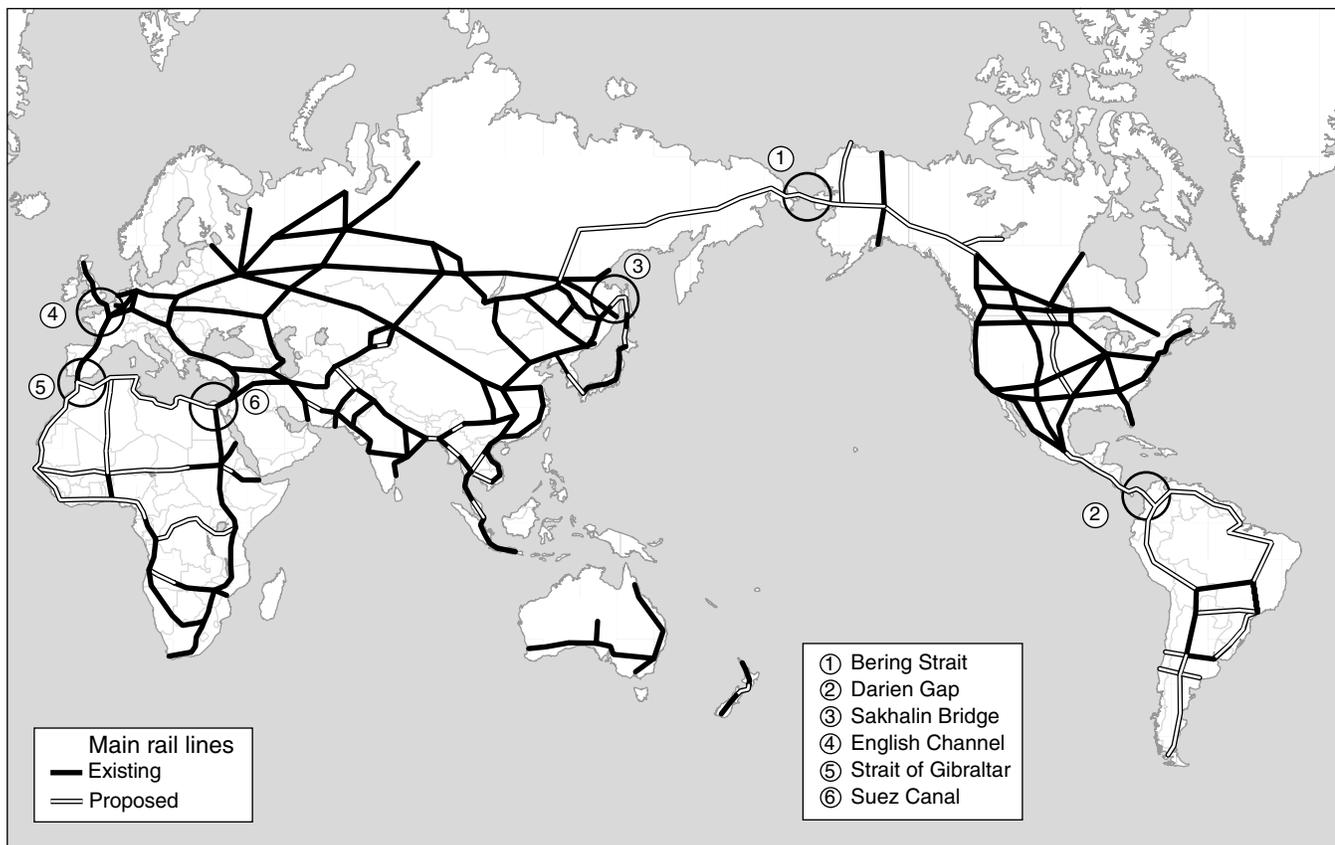
Rafael Núñez, the great Colombian patriot who visited the United States during the Lincoln period, before he became President of Colombia in the 1880s, understood the significance for the United States of the development of the rail land-bridge that eventually spanned the United States, from east to west. As a great visionary, Núñez launched what he conceived of as the railroad backbone of the country: a network that would link the Pacific and Atlantic coasts with the interior. Núñez intended that Colombia would produce not only the rails, but also the locomotives, and this was one of the reasons he gave for promoting the construction of steel plants in the cities of Boyacá province.

Núñez's railway program was part of a great project, which included not only maintaining and expanding navigation the length of the Magdalena River, but turning Colombia into an industrialized nation. He designed the National Bank as an instrument for generating long-term and low-interest credit, to encourage manufactures and the mechanization of agriculture. To stop Núñez's industrialization program, the free-trade oligarchy of that time, in association with foreign interests, provoked what came to be known as the

War of 1,000 Days.

The oligarchic families wanted to keep Colombia as an agricultural and mining colony, a sad condition of backwardness that still exists in Colombia. When Canadian economist Lauchlin Currie arrived in Colombia in 1949, heading up the first world mission of the World Bank, his principal purpose was the destruction of all that remained of the Núñez legacy. Currie opposed, although unsuccessfully, the construction of an integrated steel mill in Boyacá (what is today Paz del Río), with the argument that it would be cheaper to buy the steel from abroad than to produce it locally. Currie did manage, however, to make sure that the blast furnace that Colombia purchased was already outmoded at the time of its purchase.

FIGURE 2
The World Land-Bridge



Source: *EIR*.

As the first step toward wiping out the rail system, Currie set the highways in competition with the railroads. His disciples took responsibility for blocking any investment in the renovation and expansion of the railroads, such that they slowly disappeared for lack of maintenance and improvements—just as has occurred in the present period with the Institute of Social Security, and with the state oil company, Ecopetrol. The later pseudo-explanation was that “labor costs” were to blame for eating up the national railroads.

Now is the perfect moment for intersecting ongoing preparations for the Presidential and Congressional campaigns, by initiating a discussion on how to carry out, as quickly as possible, the construction of a vast national railroad network, in the context of the great infrastructure projects our country needs to become a fully sovereign nation committed to scientific, technological, and industrial development.

In effect, the railroad will unite Colombians.

In the beginning of the 1880s, Rafael Núñez already understood this. He said: “These days, the railroad is the true measure of progress. There is a generating force in the railroad, whose marvelous effects are like those of compound

interest. The railroad needs industry to feed it, and industry needs the railroad to move and grow. Each track of rail that is laid down is, therefore, a new incentive to industry, broadening its radius of action. The final result must be amazing, just like the progressive power of compound interest. There is between the railroad and industry—and when we say industry, we also refer to agriculture, mining, ranching, etc.—there is between the railroad and industry, I repeat, the same relationship as between the chicken and the egg. Industry is the former and the railroad is the latter, and, in the end, they are nothing in truth but one and the same thing. Just as there are vicious cycles, so too there are fertile ones. The vast network of railroads that encircle, like a titanic musculature, the body of the North American Union, is the primary and decisive cause of its prodigious production and wealth.”

And in what would appear to be a reprimand of contemporary blindness, Núñez explains: “Without railroads, how would our businessmen transport our Andean agricultural products advantageously abroad: And if they can’t transport them at moderate cost, how would they survive the competition of other, better endowed countries?”