

The international north-south transport corridor: history, modernity, prospects

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Abstract. Since ancient times, the trade route "from the Varangians to the Persians" and on to India was used by caravans of merchants from all over the multifaceted Eurasia. This route also served as a means of cultural and religious exchange, spreading knowledge and everyday habits. The history of this issue shows that the political and economic elites who initiated diplomatic and trade missions were primarily interested in developing and optimizing trade. The current drive to revive this route in the form of the International North-South Transport Corridor (ITC) is designed to bring integration processes to a higher geopolitical and geo-economic level. The paper analyzes the current status of the project, contains proposals for its optimization and expresses confidence that its implementation will enhance the integration of the Eurasian continent and increase its security.

Keywords: North-South ITC, history, trade, geopolitics, hub, integration, security, elites, international relations.

1 Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, the process of diversification of the main international transport corridors intensified, manifesting itself in the emergence of a whole group of alternative projects that make it possible to reduce and optimize the process of delivering goods to consumers. The transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world requires the diversification of global logistics constants, which have been under the monopoly control of the Anglo-Saxons for a long time.

The object of this study is the North-South ITC project, and the subject is the history and prospects of trade relations between Russia, Iran and India. The objective is to show that the proposed project has a deep historical tradition and brings undeniable political and economic benefits to all its participants. The methods used to achieve this goal represent a wide range, from the general scientific (dialectics, hermeneutics, comparativism) to such methods as historical, statistical, systems analysis, situational, action, etc. Moreover, all geopolitical concepts (H. Mackinder, K. Haushofer, E.A. Vandam) always rely on historical facts, without which a modern geostrategy would not be entirely clear for modern understanding.

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2 The international north-south transport corridor

As political history shows, trade proves to be the engine of geopolitical relations. And it should be at the heart of relations between the RIC (Russia, India, China) in the first place. But this project is designed to bring together other countries of the region interested in developing and expanding trade and cultural ties in a single integration.

Back in 1999, a general agreement for the transport of goods along the international transport corridor *Sri Lanka - India - Iran - Caspian Sea - Russia - Western Europe* was signed in a trilateral format (Russia, India, Iran). The International North-South Transport Corridor (ITC) was conceived as a multimodal logistics freight and passenger route to link the Baltic countries to India via Iran and Russia. It was planned that the ITC could become an alternative to the Suez Canal in the future. Its length (from Mumbai/Bombay to St. Petersburg) would be 7,200 kilometers [8]. According to experts, its advantage over other routes is a shorter and safer transport distance. It not only significantly reduces the delivery time, but also makes it approximately 30% cheaper.

According to the Russian Ministry of Transport, the North-South ITC should be implemented "in order to develop a strategic partnership between Russia and the countries of the Caspian region and to improve communication with the countries of the Persian Gulf and South Asia, as well as to ensure the development of Eurasian transit traffic through domestic transport communications"[7]. The Agreement on the North-South ITC "was signed between Russia, Iran and India on 12 September 2000. In May 2002, in St. Petersburg, the Ministers of Transport of the participating countries signed a protocol on the official opening of the corridor. Later, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Oman, and Syria joined the Agreement [7].

According to Russian experts, the North-South International Transport Corridor "in its southern part involves several cargo routes using rail transport: (1) Trans-Caspian route - using Russian seaports of Astrakhan, Olya, Makhachkala and Iranian ports - Bender-Enzeli, Nowshehr and Bender-Amirabad; (2) Western branch of the corridor - direct railway connection through border crossings Samur (Russia) - Yalama (Azerbaijan), with further access to the Iranian railway network through the border crossing Astara (Azerbaijan) - Astara (Iran);(3) the eastern branch of the corridor - a direct rail link through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan with access to the Iranian rail network through the Serakhs (Turkmenistan)-Serakhs (Iran) and Akiala (Turkmenistan)-Inche Burun (Iran) border crossings" [7].

The problems of rail transport and the formation of a multimodal route India-Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia, along which the organization of containerized cargo shipments is planned on a regular basis, are of great importance for the development of the North-South ITC. In the first decades of the XXI century JSCo "Russian Railways" has carried out continuous work to develop and modernize the railway network along the St. Petersburg - Astrakhan line. In accordance with the General Scheme, it was planned to develop express and high-speed traffic for passenger trains, build bypass railway junctions and comprehensively reconstruct certain road sections. "The "weak link" of the direct railway connection along the western branch of the North-South ITC was the Resht-Astara (Iran)-Astara (Azerbaijan) railway line" [7].

We know from history that the trade route from "Varangians to Persians" existed and functioned for a number of centuries. This route has very deep historical roots. The Northern trade route (Persia - the Caspian Sea - the Volga - the Northern Europe) was known since the antiquity and the early Middle Ages and was promoted even during the reign of Shah Abbas the Great of Persia (1587-1629). Numerous embassies were sent from Persia to Russia along this road in order to organize duty-free trade [1, p. 183]. Moscow was well aware that the route to Persia also opened the way to trade with India [2, p. 37].

Under Abbas "about a thousand caravanserais were built along this route and a system was put in place to ensure the safety of merchants and goods. A road was built on the southern coast of Caspian Sea towards Mazendaran, which was 270km long" [3, p. 71]. In other words, the countries of this region have experience in organizing this kind of logistics route and it has worked very effectively in the past.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the resumption of the North-South project is reviving Russophobic sentiments in the West. Russia is once again declared the main threat to the monopoly on trade that the Anglo-Saxons have established by creating the Panama-Suez Canal logistics system. The main American naval bases are located along this equatorial route (A. Mahan's "blue lagoon" concept). Putting the North-South ITC into operation threatens to bring down the well-functioning mechanism of world trade of the Anglo-Saxons. They can incur average losses of 20 to 30 per cent that is tantamount to a declaration of war. We recall the words of the English publicist Thomas Joseph Dunning (1799-1873), quoted by K. Marx in "Capital" that in the pursuit of profit, capital is prepared to commit any crime. K. Marx quotes T.D. Dunning: "Capital avoids noise and swearing and is characterized by a fearful nature. This is true, but it is not the whole truth. Capital fears no profit or too little profit, just as nature fears emptiness. But once sufficient profit is available, capital becomes bold. Provide 10 % and capital gives in to every use, at 20 % it becomes lively, at 50 % it is eager to break its head, at 100 % it breaks all human laws, at 300 % there is no crime which it would not venture to commit if only for fear of the gallows. If the noise and the swearing is profitable, the capital will contribute to both. Proof: smuggling and the slave trade" (T.J. Dunning, *Trades' Unions and Strikes*. London, 1860, pp. 35-36).

Therefore, a new wave of Russophobic sentiments in the Anglo-Saxon media and the establishment is dictated by the threat of losing the leading positions in international politics, economy and humanitarian field. It should be recognized that they objectively assess the threat posed to them by the North-South ITC. All the more so, in order to achieve its own national security and defend its national interests, Russia should make every effort to put this project into practice as soon as possible.

In this connection, we should also remember the words of the famous British geopolitician H. Mackinder who said in the early 20th century that Eurasia is the "Heartland" in the center of which there is a certain axis region (the Caspian Sea) [12]. North-South ITC practically repeats those geographic configurations and that adds to its geopolitical significance. The formula worked out by H. Mackinder says, "*whoever controls the Eastern Europe controls the "Central Continent" (Heartland), whoever dominates the "Central Continent" dominates the "World Island", and whoever rules the "World Island" rules the world*" ("*Democratic Ideals and Reality, 1919*") [12]. We may add to this: whoever controls the North-South ITC is in a position to solve the most important problems of Eurasia. Russia proposes collective rather than sole ownership of this project, which distinguishes it to a large extent from the hegemonic aspirations of the US, that considers itself the only God-chosen world power [5].

3 The Astrakhan hub

A key element of this project could be the creation of a kind of "anchor point" for development in Astrakhan to coordinate and optimize joint activities, as well as to diversify cargo traffic routes in the West-East direction. Astrakhan occupies an advantageous location on this route. It is its midpoint. Therefore, in order to coordinate and manage the ITC, it is advisable to locate the relevant international structures here. We should also add the cultural and psychological peculiarities of the region, namely, that for many centuries Astrakhan has been the most tolerant city in Eurasia. Moreover, tolerance is historical (i.e.

natural) here, and not formal legal (as in some Western democracies). Diversity of ethnic groups, cultures and religions has always been the norm here. Astrakhan is truly the "Babylon of Eurasia" (the natural territory of the united nations). Its psychological portrait corresponds to the main national Eurasian ideologies [6].

The first step in the implementation of this project should be the establishment of a special international bank, headquartered in Astrakhan. Russia, India and China already have experience in implementing joint financial projects. For example, up to \$100 billion has been accumulated in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, where China, India and Russia have the largest voting power (20.06%, 7.5% and 5.92%, respectively). Another source of funding for joint projects is the New BRICS Development Bank established in 2014 (headquartered in Shanghai, the first president of the bank was a native of India, Kundapur Vaman Kamath, and the Chairman of the Board of Governors was the Indian Finance Minister Arun Jaitley), which aims mainly at infrastructure development in the BRICS countries [6].

One of the aims of this institution is to provide financial support for the development and functioning of the ITC. As the main actors in this project are Russia, Iran and India, the primary focus should be on using the national currencies of these countries. De-dollarization will exclude undesirable interference of competitors (primarily the US and the UK) in the business areas of this project, prevent risks and threats from the global financial institutions under their control and the temptation to impose traditional sanctions against undesirable competitors.

Since Astrakhan occupies a median position on the North-South route, it would be advisable to consider establishing a trade and transport hub here - a central warehouse, a transshipment center for goods, and a wholesale market. It is known that Russians have been using Astrakhan as a trade hub since the 17th century. The Swedish diplomat Johann Philipp Kilburger specifically noted: "The city of Astrakhan, lying by the bay of this sea [i.e. the Caspian Sea], in Nogai, is a warehouse place for trade"[11, p. 150]. Historically, Astrakhan has always been a crossroads of trade routes from Europe to Asia and back. Therefore, the logistics itself suggests where on this route an intermediate hub, i.e. a transshipment point for goods delivered to both sides, should be arranged. Such a hub would make transport even cheaper and increase the competitiveness of imported goods.

The idea of air transport should also be seriously considered. This would require the creation of a special (cargo) airport in Astrakhan, and the development of routes from Mumbai/Bombay to Astrakhan and Astrakhan to St. Petersburg and back. Such a project will not only speed up delivery times and make goods even cheaper, but will also become an important stimulus for development of Russian transport aviation and aviation infrastructure, creating additional jobs and collecting additional taxes and customs duties. All this will lead to an increase in the role of Astrakhan as a transport and logistics hub.

Thus the phrase "Astrakhan hub" envisages the creation here of "hubs" in finance, transport and trade. In addition, Russia can also offer military and political security in the region, and the Astrakhan region (represented by the Caspian Flotilla) can act as such a guarantor.

4 Geopolitical self-sufficiency and the problem of security

It is well known that there is no such thing as sentiment in geopolitics. Geopolitics is governed by rigid laws of cynicism in defending its national interests, including at the expense of levelling the interests of opponents and potential competitors. Therefore, it should be recognized that the main objective of the North-South ITC is to weaken the positions of the Anglo-Saxon world in the international arena by switching the flow of goods and finance from the route under their control (Panama Canal - Suez Canal) to the

alternative Trans-Arctic and Trans-Caspian routes. Only strong equal economic positions will force the Anglo-Saxons to recognize the competitiveness of their opponents. But until then, they will have to try all means of suppressing them, not excluding means of force (including military).

In 2021, the destabilisation of political relations in India's neighbouring Afghanistan has led to a deterioration of international relations in that region of Eurasia. The rise of the Taliban in Kabul has disrupted the balance of power in the region, with the potential for increased risk of political-military conflict. This in turn could postpone the implementation of the North-South ITS project indefinitely and jeopardize India's economic growth.

In order to implement these plans, a key political condition must be met - maintaining sovereignty in international relations. To effectively defend one's national interests in the international arena, one must efficiently resist the interference of third countries that are not interested in such autonomy, which still continue to think in terms of colonialism and view the region as their imperial province.

The rapid development of the Indian and Russian markets offers prospects for growth and trade between them. Russia and India are also drawn closer by their desire to rely on their own resources and capabilities. N. Modi's government has adopted a new industrialization program, "Make in India" [13], which aims to accelerate the country's industrial development. In particular, "The program supports Indian production, aimed primarily at exports, under the motto: IT + IT = IT (Indian Talent plus Indian Technology equals India Tomorrow)" [4]. In addition, the Indian authorities decided to give considerable preferential treatment to foreign enterprises that would bring their production to India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi appealed to the international community: "I say to the world: make in India! Sell anywhere, but manufacture here! We have both the skill and the talent for it!" [10]. In the near future, India's economic miracle could become a serious international challenge, not only for the US, but also for neighbouring China, with which official Delhi has very uneasy relations.

5 Conclusion

The North-South ITC is designed to provide integration opportunities. But the issue of politico-military security is no less important. It is a question of politico-military cooperation between the countries of this region. Russia traditionally plays the role of a leading seller of modern arms. In addition, Russia can offer its services to protect these countries from outside interference. These are primarily air and missile defense systems, and the emergence of Russian military bases in the southern part of this route will ensure security and create the necessary balance of power. At the same time, the strengthening of collective security of the countries participating in this project may come from the profits they derive from the exploitation of this route.

Security of the countries participating in this project will directly depend on the rate of economic development and financial well-being. Russia is fundamentally interested in the entire route (from Bombay to St. Petersburg) as a demilitarized zone, as well as in the fact that only the armed forces of the countries that are implementing the project are present here. Therefore, security issues are primarily a concern for Moscow, Tehran and New Delhi.

Authors' Contributions

The article has been written by a team of authors, all authors have taken equal part in the theoretical analysis of the problem and in carrying out the research.

K.A. Markelov considered the historical features of the subject, analyzed and summarized the ideas of researchers on this issue. P.L. Karabuschenko included modern aspects of the study of the international transport corridor and wrote the original manuscript. R.Kh. Usmanov was responsible for prospect research, analysis and data collection. V.G. Golovin contributed to the revision and editing of the article.

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