

Discussion of "Linking Europe and Northeast Asia"

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by James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay ["Linking Europe and Northeast Asia"](#) by James Goodby, former U.S. ambassador to Finland and current Senior Fellow at the Center for Northeast Asian

Policy Studies at The Brookings Institution, and Markku Heiskanen, a senior Finnish diplomat, who is currently Associate Senior Fellow of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen, which appeared as [Policy Forum Online 06-17A](#) : March 2nd, 2006.

These comments are by Aidan Foster-Carter, honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at Leeds University in Britain. He has been following North Korean affairs for more than 35 years.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Comments on "Linking Europe and Northeast Asia" by Aidan Foster-Carter

- Discussion of "Linking Europe and Northeast Asia"
by James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen

Slow Train to Pyongyang

"Tread softly because you tread on my dreams", wrote the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. As someone whose own reverie has long included traveling by train from Pusan to Paris, the theme of James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen's recent PFO, "Linking Europe and Northeast Asia", is close to my heart - which beats faster at the words "Iron Silk Road."

But although judicious cheerleading can help move a project from imagination to fruition, hype may also backfire. Talk a few years ago of the Tumen river delta as a "Rotterdam of the East" looks pretty embarrassing today. Wisely, Goodby and Heiskanen eschew such hyperbole. Yet one must ask, coolly if not coldly, just how realistic a project the Iron Silk Road is, and what time frame we are talking about. So here are some questions that nag me.

First: Though two relinked railways now span the DMZ, when will any trains actually run? The track is ready, but Kim Jong-il is not. So far, I gather, some ROK aid goods have gone as rail freight to Kaesong - but no further. Kim Dae-jung's request to revisit Pyongyang by train is a clever ploy; yet the latest inter-Korean railway and military talks found the North stonewalling and prevaricating as usual. Five years to reconnect a railroad is not exactly the galloping "Chollima speed" (a mythical winged horse) of which Kim Il-sung used to boast.

The DPRK firmly nixed the idea of a Reds football fan train trundling through to Germany this summer for the soccer World Cup. So how about a Seoul train to the Beijing Olympics in 2008? Not even ex-unification minister (and presidential hopeful) Chung Dong-young, a fervent beacon of sunshine, is sure about that. What's the point of a railway with no trains?

Second: Serious regular traffic, like ROK-Europe freight trains, requires not just punching a hole in the DMZ (done) but also upgrading the entire decrepit DPRK rail network. Double tracking, modern electrification and signals, every last bridge and tunnel probably needing rebuilding; no wonder figures of US\$2-3 billion are mentioned. But is anything actually happening? Russian surveys have been reported in the past, but nothing recently. Moscow seems reluctant to sink any more money into North Korea: understandable historically since they're owed US\$3bn plus, yet surely short-sighted both economically and geopolitically.

Or maybe, third, Russia realizes that if and when all this really does come to pass, chances are that the main line will bypass Vladivostok and instead head straight for Shenyang, in China. Speaking in his country's far east, President Vladimir Putin spelled this out frankly in 2002 just before he met

that noted if furtive long-haul train traveller, the Dear Leader:

"If we don't link [the railway] up here ... it will still go ahead - but through the territory of our dearly loved neighbor China" - a touch of sarcasm, perhaps? - via "a different junction, and parts of Russia's Far East will just not see those freights, that's all."

A map is useful here. See e.g. www.pyongyangsquare.com/railway/index.html, though alas site founder Tom Tobback stopped updating this a year ago. As I argued in Asia Times in 2002 (www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/DI10Dg01.html), the peninsula's geography means that the ROK's spine, namely the Pusan-Seoul axis, extends most naturally on via Kaesong to Pyongyang and Shenyang. Quite apart from China's greater economic dynamism, this is also the shortest route to Europe - rather than going all the way round via Khabarovsk.

Fourth, that raises another routing puzzle. Of the two new trans-DMZ rail links, while the western Kyongui route has clear merit, what is the point of the eastern Donghae corridor? Given South Korea's economic geography, this is a branch line which goes nowhere much.

Freight from Pusan to Vladivostok will never crawl along South Korea's hilly east coast. It will take the main line to Seoul, then head northeast on a third, middle line which no one, curiously, seems in any hurry to reconnect: the Kyongwon line, linking Seoul to Wonsan. Before partition in 1945, this was the main route from the capital to the industrial northeast.

Fifth: Whatever the long-distance lure of an Iron Silk Road to Europe, surely a much more immediate rationale lies closer to home - in the long overdue post-Cold War reintegration of North-east Asia as an economic region. While South Korea tries to market itself - rather implausibly, let's be frank - as a "hub", a glance at the map shows that actually it's North Korea that is destined to play that role, if only it will pluck up courage and grasp the nettle.

Currently a black hole - literally, in those famous pictures of the peninsula's night sky - it is the DPRK that physically borders and can connect South Korea, China and Russia. The already burgeoning ROK-PRC business ties, sustained logistically thus far by already dense air and sea links, will grow all the closer when trucks and trains once more start to run from Pusan and Seoul via Pyongyang to Sinuiju, Shenyang - and then on to Beijing and beyond.

I say when, not if. Of course this will happen, sooner or later. While Kim Jong-il's caution is understandable, it carries a huge price in lost opportunities. This suspicion extends even to minimally intrusive infrastructure. When regional oil and gas pipelines were first mooted over a decade ago, the Hyundai group founder, Chung Ju-yung, was keen to bring Siberian gas to South Korea via the North. Though the DPRK could have gained much-needed fuel, rents, and even (some feared) leverage over ROK energy supplies at minimal risk and cost, it never evinced the slightest interest. So now the pipelines will run elsewhere.

True, trains and passengers are a higher order of risk. Yet if Kim Jong-il really understood what he saw recently in southern China - a big if; after his Shanghai trip in 2002 he sent architects to train abroad, which suggests a serious confusion between form and substance - he must realize that reform and opening are the only real way forward, and are ultimately indivisible. Guangzhou, Shenzhen et al are aswarm with foreign devils - yet the CCP is still in charge, and China grows more powerful by the day. Let us hope that the dear leader can neutralize hardline military opponents and give the order: Full steam ahead. Otherwise at this rate the reunification express may never even leave the station, far less reach Europe.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org