

Trans Asian Railway: Opportunities & challenges

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

ON 5th May, the govern-ment has reportedly deci-ded to sign the inter-governmental agreement on Trans-Asian Railway Network (TAR). It is a commendable decision because it puts Bangladesh on the map of a railway network within and beyond the region. The impact of the decision is far-reaching and will be felt as the years go by. Eighteen Asian countries have signed it since 2006.

Under the agreement, the trans-border railway will enter Bangladesh from India in three routes and get out through a single gateway on to Myanmar (Gundum). The three routes reportedly passing through Bangladesh are:

- (a) Gede (West Bengal)-Darshana (Kushthia), Iswardi-Jamuna bridge-Joydevpur-Akhaura-Chittagong-Dohazari (Bangladesh)-Gundum (Myanmar)
- (b) Singbad (West Bengal)-Rajshahi, Iswardi, Jamuna Bridge-Joydevpur-Ahaura-Chittagong-Dohazari (Bangladesh)-Gundum (Myanmar)
- (c) Radhikapur (West Bengal)-Dinajpur-Iswardi-Jamuna Bridge-Joydevpur-Akhaura-Dohazari (Bangladesh)-Gundum (Myanmar).

It took more than 40 years to get to the stage of signing of the inter-governmental agreement. For Bangladesh, the signing of the agreement will only be the first step. It will subsequently require bilateral agreements among the countries for making the TAR network operable. Much work needs to be done in future but the move towards the goal has commenced.

Importance of inter-connectivity through trans-port

During the days of globalization, interconnectivity with surrounding countries and economic integration with regional and global economy is the path to progress, prosperity and peace. For trade and movement of capital, the boundaries that separate one state from another are no more real than the equator. They have become convenient demarcations of

geographical and political territory.

The boundaries of state do not currently define business requirements or consumer trends. To the world outside, the home country is no longer viewed as a series of disconnected customers and prospects for its products, but as an extension of a single global market. For example, a tour of the market place in Bangladesh will demonstrate the availability of numerous foreign products for sale.

The interconnectivity between distant regions is nothing new. More than thousand years before Marco Polo (1254-1324), trade existed between the two great empires: the Roman Empire and the Han Empire in China. There were courageous individuals who created the "silk route" across the mountains, desert and steppe between the two continents through the Central Asian region.

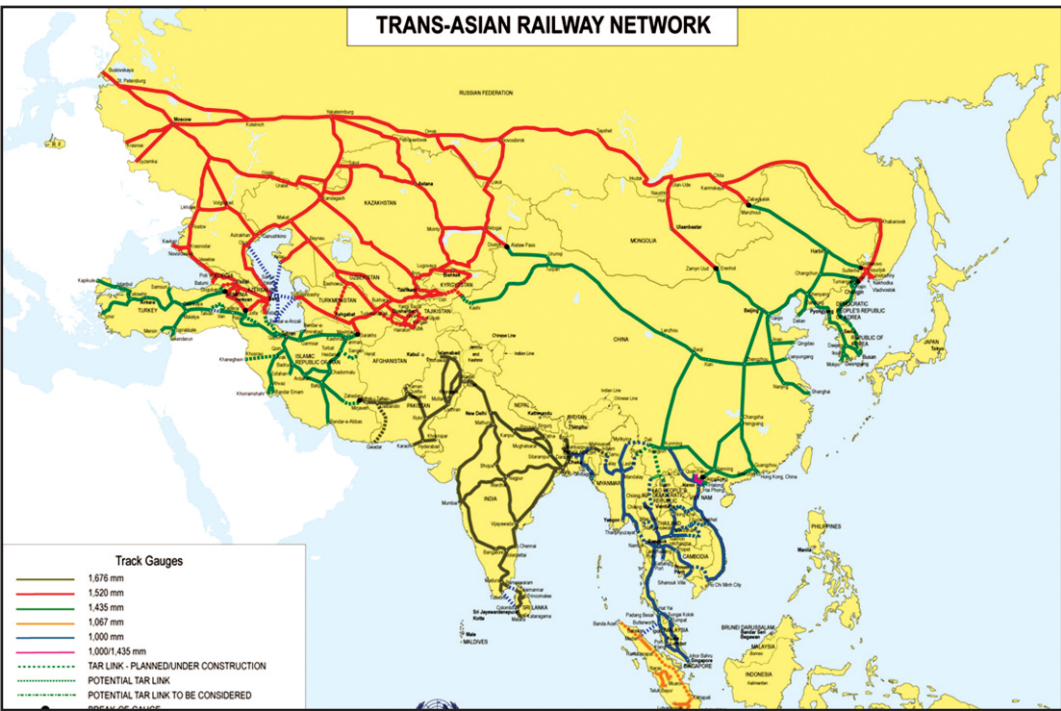
In the wake of merchandise came ideas and works of art and all the features of distant civilizations. The TAR network appears to be the modern version of organizing immense possibility of traffic of goods, movement of people and exchange of cultures.

Recently, China built a railway from Beijing to Tibet and, reportedly, it has a plan to extend the railway line from Tibet to Nepal. If Bangladesh is linked with Nepal through railway, Dhaka could eventually be linked with Beijing. The possibility of interconnectivity through railway is immense given the technology of the time.

The proposed network of Trans-Asian Railway

The TAR was initiated in the 1960s with the objective of providing a continuous 14,000-km rail link between Singapore and Istanbul, with possible onward connections to Europe and Africa.

The link offered the potential to greatly shorten the distances and reduce transit times between countries and regions, while being a catalyst for the notion of international transport as a tool for trade expansion, economic growth and cultural exchanges. With the political and economic changes that took place in the region in early 1990s, the development of the TAR concept was revived.



Given the extent of the territory covered, the differences in standards, and differences in the levels of technical development between railways in the region, the Bangkok-based UN agency, ESCAP adopted a step-by-step approach to define the TAR network that cover a distance of almost 81,000 km in 26 countries distributed as follows:

South-East Asia:	Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam	12,600 km
North-East Asia:	China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation	32,500 km
Central Asia and Caucasus:	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	13,200 km
South Asia + Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey:	Bangladesh, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Turkey	22,600 km
Total:		80,900 km

The countries comprising the southern corridor of the TAR actively participated in and provided inputs for the study. These countries are: Bangladesh, China, India, Iran, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Turkey.

The feasibility studies were prepared: to (i) identify the major links of international importance, (ii) assess

their conformity with a set of technical requirements (e.g. loading gauges, axle-load, speed), and (iii) appraise the compatibility of operational practices on both sides of different national borders to evaluate the possibility of cross-border movements (e.g. couplers, length of trains).

In addition, the "software" aspects of transport were reviewed with

apparent technical incompatibility, and (ii) the existence of so-called 'missing links' making end-to-end movements impossible on some of the linkages.

Some of the opportunities

There is a growing acceptance that rail has an important role to play in the national and international move-

- (i) The reliance on ports to connect national economies to the world's markets with the need to clear landside port areas quickly to avoid congestion, especially in the context of growing containerization and the development of inter-modal transport,
- (iii) A number of countries are major exporters of mineral resources in the logistic of which rail transport plays a crucial role,
- (iv) The continuing surge in the volumes of goods being exchanged, and
- (v) The recognition of rail as an environmentally friendly and safe mode of transport.
- (vi) 12 land-locked countries in Asia will have easy movement facilities with their neighbouring countries through railway

Some of the challenges

Experts believe that there are many challenges to implement TAR. Some of the significant challenges are:

*Joint operationalisation of the corridors should be established in a coordinated manner at financial, operational and commercial levels.

*Institutional and technical bottlenecks have to be identified and specific remedial measures defined and implemented.

*The development of common information technology systems has to be given proper attention along with the development of ports and inland container depots for efficient access.

*In the long term, corridor-based organizations with the authority to act on behalf of their constitutive railway administrations in areas such as service-definition, tariff-setting and marketing as well as the possibility of bulk-selling trainload-based capacity to private sector need to be considered.

*The development of joint border stations to implement a "one-stop-shop" concept under which all rail and non-rail operations by the relevant administrations of two neighbouring countries are performed at one single location would also be a step towards greater operational efficiency.

Bangladesh and TAR: Assessment

Bangladesh is a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. Bangladesh and Myanmar recently signed an agreement to connect through high-

way from Gundum in Bangladesh to Bawli Bazar in Myanmar. The construction of all-weatherproof 130-kilometer road ushers in immense opportunities between the two countries not only in trade but also movement of people and capital.

The northeast corner of India and Bangladesh needs to be rejuvenated with economic activities; the current stagnation in the region has been giving rise to armed insurgency out of frustration and deprivation in the Indian land-locked 'seven sisters' states. Once this area is opened up investment is likely to flow.

The TAR is perceived an infrastructure for augmenting economic progress for the people of Bangladesh and the northeast Indian states. Bangladesh is likely to become the major transit route in a transitory economic unit and a transport zone.

There is another dimension to the impact of the railway network. For building uniformity in infrastructure through Bangladesh, considerable funds will have to be spent. This will generate economic activities within Bangladesh.

As a result of TAR, Bangladeshi investors will have more opportunities to diversify, businesses will have more markets to serve, and more locations for production and individuals can look for work within and outside their countries.

However there are certain concerns in Bangladesh that were aired in the past in opening up for cross border transportation. One of them is the threat to security. The other is movement of arms and weapons; in these days of growing number of militants and rebels in the triangle of northeast India, north of Myanmar and south of Bangladesh, the apprehension cannot be ruled out altogether. Many people suggest to let the security people pen down their concerns so that they are adequately addressed through discussions and finalization of regional protocols.

One fact is that there are international conventions that regulate the cross-border transport and in Europe this has been a routine feature of transportation from one country to another. Only the rules of protocol require to be scrupulously implemented.

Another concern is that Bangladesh will not gain much from the TAR network. Bangladesh appears to be highly sensitive to the possibility of its giving more concessions to another state than it perceives as necessary or warranted.

The trade-off or balancing benefits in opening borders is a delicate and complicated task. The gains in each and every case are unlikely to be equal for the countries in the region through the TAR network.

Bigger economies tend to gain more than smaller economies but this does not mean Bangladesh should not be a party to the railway network. It is noted that sector wise concessions should not be a measure for distribution of benefits. It may be that Bangladesh gains more in one area and not at all in other areas. The benefits should be measured in total and should cover, among others, trade, investment, labour migration, exploitation of natural resources and economic productivity.

Conclusion

It is good to see that Bangladesh's borders are gradually opening up for cooperation and economists believe the TAR network will be a window of opportunity for Bangladesh.

No country including Bangladesh can remain isolated from the regional economy and technological development. Alternatively, Bangladesh may shut the rest of the world out and sit idle watching the rest connect with global and regional markets. This is not possible during the 21st century as globalization has linked the world through communications, migration, investment and trade.

Bangladesh cannot achieve the economic revolution in the country without interconnectivity within the region. Given the right policy and leadership, Bangladesh has the potentiality of becoming an "economic tiger" within the region. In that context the decision to sign the TAR agreement is very significant and is to be welcomed.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

What are the militants upto?

BRIG GEN JAHANGIR KABIR, ndc psc

SOME misguided few thought it right to explode low intensity bombs targeting the deserted part of three railway stations on May 1. The instant reaction is that these are work of novices with nuisance value only. Their ability has once again faulted their motivation. Last year the people bravely faced over four hundred explosions that steered the national resolve for a series of corrective measures. If they are hoping that God will do the rest, for they have a false pretense of a cause, they should realize that God never fights against His own creation. Who is God by the way if not Allah- the Creator? He has a day of resurrection here after, to judge. The believers must have faith in His system and should not take over the responsibilities of pronouncing judgment He kept to Himself. Meanwhile we must go by the law of the land for greater good of the society.

The bombing does not fit as the appropriate retaliation against the hanging of the JMB leaders. Size and destructive quality of the bombs, targeted area, immediate motive of revenge (good three weeks later) had not adequately delivered the message to the people that they are capable of taking revenge. If anything, the determination shown by the government in executing decisions of the court of law over the condemned JMB leadership has impressed the necessity to abide by the law. The bombs went off like crackers and could not obliterate the message of the law and determination of the government. Like last year, the railway station bombings will come back heavily on the offenders and their cohorts. It, however, works as a reminder to the law enforcing agencies that they have more extremists to flush out and destroy the incubating nests.

If these are the instigators of JMB, adding al-Qaeda with their name for psychological gain, or a splinter gang, it also indicates that the rogues are much weakened in their organisation, motivation and ability and are on the run, thanks to the security forces. It is time to think about the psychological dimension of the war against terror. When they stand defeated, a comprehensive program of amnesty and rehabilitation can open a window of normal life for those who best fit in as camp followers. Given an option for normal life, the remnant leaders on the run will have difficulty in holding the camp followers and finding new recruits.

These zealots are missing the point every time in their failed efforts that some people in the Republic of Bangladesh may still be homeless or jobless but they are not under occupation; nor people in the refugee camps respond to their hollow slogans. Everybody has only one life; it is not fair to call people to give their lives for a non-starter cause. For the wrongs done in the political field, corrective measures are already on; the sick democracy is on the operating table for the sole purpose of the restoration of the lost health. If someone thinks guns have a solution, I am confident the security forces will outgun the challenge.

When somebody wanted to advise the media, many vehemently objected. As a result, media and government have the best of understanding today. Bangladesh could hardly demonstrate so much understanding of the national priorities among

people, media, intellectuals, interim government, and of course the security forces. Clearly, Bangladesh is on a reform agenda; where is the need for bombing. If there is a public cause, there are other ways to draw attention.

Nobody has the right to bomb out a situation. Social architects have the right to think; nevertheless they cannot be wild horses on the fragile health of Bangladesh. The start may be slow, but surely we must maintain an upward swing of our society with special care to the poor and weak, which will generate eventual momentum towards prosperity and peace. We must focus on human resource development strategy that will wash away all poetic and destructive distractions.

In four decades if the present generation has achieved freedom and anchored democracy, they will go down in history as the golden generation. Reform is a must, but unnecessary restlessness is absolutely undesirable.

Education is the vehicle of human resource development. Bengali medium, English medium, Madrassa - Ebtadi, Quami, Hafezees, Forkania, Bangladesh has many education systems. A young person without employment is a dangerous drifter. He or she with no hope for life is vulnerable to all the illusions and false promises. The earlier we understand this simple reality and workout a deal with our aimless education system, the safer it is for the nation. Are our educational institutions oriented towards the job requirements? Democracy, Human Rights, press freedom, just about every thing the modern civilization stand for, is hinging on this factor alone in Bangladesh. Abraham Lincoln rightly said, limbs are there to work, keeping them idle is to abuse them. Bangladesh education system is neglecting the responsibility of preparing our youth for future engagement.

Like giving right without responsibility, giving food without work is even more dangerous. It is time to undertake the basic responsibility of educating our young minds for work according to their abilities. We all serve God; serving God is no excuse for not working. Thousands of orphanages and all types of religious institutions spread over Bangladesh must not turn into Taliban (Islamic fighters) production machines as was cunningly done out of the religious institutions among the refugees of war ravaged Afghanistan. Series of follies by the Afghan leadership over decades has not only brought foreign armies, it has taken Afghanistan back to the medieval age. Afghan, Iraq quagmire is spitting blood and life everyday with no apparent solution at hand. The bitter reality is the withdrawal of foreign forces that will plunge the societies in ethnic and sectarian cleansing of Balkan (erstwhile Yugoslavia) type; that may turn into a fearsome firestorm engulfing the entire Muslim belt. The Iraq-Afghan human tragedy is a revelation that politics must remain within the bounds of unarmed bargaining. If Islam means peace and accommodation, the religionists must not monger for blood and jihad. Jihad among the Muslims is haram (forbidden). How can Muslims be pitted against Muslims in the name of Jihad in Bangladesh?

The author is a freelancer.

Iraq's new guns for hire

BAKAB DEHGHANPISHEH

IT wasn't a subtle warning. Two weeks ago a convoy of 12 cars bristling with AK-47s rolled through Elam, one of the last mixed neighborhoods in Baghdad, in broad daylight. The young men cranked a dirge like song on their stereo praising Moqtada-Al-Sadr and shouted at residents to get off the streets. To reinforce the point, they unloaded their AKs into the air. And they left behind a very clear message in black graffiti: DEATH TO NAWASIB, a derogatory term for Sunnis.

Three days later Ibrahim, a Sunni man in his early 20s, was walking home from a neighborhood soccer match. A black Hyundai sedan pulled up and the passenger pumped three bullets into Ibrahim's chest with a handgun. By the time a crowd gathered around, blood had seeped through Ibrahim's beige and yellow tracksuit and formed a pool on the ground. The gunmen raced off toward a nearby highway. "He got in a fight with someone during football and talked bad about the Mahdi Army and Moqtada Sadr," says an Elam resident who does not want his name used for safety reasons.

Drive-by shootings are nothing new on Baghdad's streets, but petty murders like Ibrahim's are a sign of a more worrying development. Weeks ago Sadr issued orders for his fighters to lie low as thousands of new U.S. and Iraqi soldiers deployed throughout Baghdad. For the most part they've obeyed and the resulting drop in sectarian killings was the best news that U.S. commander Gen. David Petraeus had to report last week, as he pleaded with congressional leaders to give his security plan time to work. Now individual gunmen, and sometimes whole units from Sadr's Mahdi Army are breaking off on their own. The militia-men "are under a lot of pressure, so it's natural for them to shed pieces," says a Coalition official familiar with the group who asked for anonymity when discussing sensitive material.

The freelancers add a new dimension to Iraq's already brutal kaleidoscope of violence. In Baghdad, after an initial dramatic drop, the number of corpses being found each morning is on the rise again. Outside the capital, fighters fleeing south have linked up with local Mahdi units; their presence is upsetting the uneasy balance of power struck between various Shiite groups in the region. Coalition officials worry that Iran's Revolutionary Guards will use their ties with the Mahdi Army to recruit rogue units for attacks on American troops. Last week Petraeus claimed that a Mahdi splinter group was responsible for the killing of five Americans in Karbala in January.

Sadr, who has not been seen in public since the security plan was

launched, himself has hinted at the divisions within his organization. Just before a massive Sadr rally in Najaf on April 9, he issued a statement pleading for his followers to stay loyal: "If you love the Sadr movement," he wrote, "then listen and obey." Lower-level Mahdi commanders are even more frank. "There are some groups who do not obey the orders of Seyed Moqtada," says Abu Hawra, a Mahdi commander in west Baghdad. But he adds, perhaps self-servingly, "We've given the green light to government forces to arrest or punish them. Those who break [Sadr's] orders are certainly excluded from the Mahdi Army."

The refrain is a familiar one and so are the stories coming out of neighborhoods

well. A U.S. military source who isn't authorized to speak on the record says criminal activity in southern Iraq has spiked as American and Iraqi forces have concentrated on securing Baghdad. At least some of this is presumed to be linked to the number of Mahdi fighters seeking refuge with tribes in the area. "We have much more of the fighters here than it would be," says Maj. Gen. Pawel Lamla, the Polish commander of multinational forces in "central-south" Iraq, which includes Wasit and Qadisiyah provinces. The smuggling of weapons and cigarettes is up in Al Kut and Nasiriyah, and clashes between drug-runners have also increased near the Iranian border.

Political conflict is an even greater



like Elam these days. On April 23 a man was shot while driving with his wife and son through the area. Residents took the injured woman and child out of the car to a nearby hospital but didn't dare touch the driver, who was still alive, for fear of being targeted. (Iraqi police eventually picked him up; he died en route to the hospital.) Two days later, gunmen shoved a young Sunni man out of a maroon Opel and executed him on the side of a road leading into Elam around 6 p.m. It wasn't the first time they'd killed someone on the spot. "You can set your watch by it," says Ali, a young man who lives nearby. A source in the Ministry of the Interior who is not authorized to speak on the record says that 15 to 30 corpses are being found in Baghdad daily now, about half the number before the security plan went into effect.

The violence has spread south as

danger. All across central and southern Iraq, Sadr loyalists coexist uneasily with partisans of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its former Badr militia, as well as a few other Shiite groups like the Fadhlia Party that has a strong presence in Basra. All are competing for power, patronage and a piece of the region's massive oil revenues. Intra-Shiite fighting could well flare into the next civil war. "Iraq holds huge potential for Shia-against-Shia conflict," says Joost Hiltermann, an analyst with the International Crisis Group. "It has everything to do with power." Senior clerics in Najaf, including Ayatollah Ali Sistani, have tried to cool things off with little success. "There's more in-house fighting [in the south]," says a U.S. military official who didn't want to be quoted discussing security matters about the tensions between Shiite groups.

not confronted U.S. troops head-on. The U.S. military has zeroed in on the activities of Qais al-Khazali, a cleric once close to Sadr, and arrested him in March. Last week, Petraeus claimed that Khazali was running a "secret cell network" that received money, training and "advanced explosive munitions" from the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. He also said a 22-page memorandum discovered as part of the investigation into Khazali "detailed the planning, preparation, approval process and conduct of the operation" in Karbala in January, when assailants dressed like Westerners killed five U.S. soldiers.

Petraeus stopped short of accusing Tehran of having ordered the ambush. "We think that records are kept so that the individuals that carry out these attacks can demonstrate what they're

doing to those who are providing the resources to them," he said at a Pentagon briefing. But he added, "we did not find ... a direct [Iranian] fingerprint."

A separate U.S. military source who isn't authorized to speak on the record says fighters linked with the Mahdi Army continue to cross the Iran-Iraq border unarmed in ones and twos; on occasions, groups have traveled by bus through the border crossing near the city of Zurbatia (Mehran on the Iran side). He says the six-week training course they receive includes sharpshooting practice as well as training in assembling IEDs. There are also workshops on communication methods like cell phones and using the Internet.

According to this source, dozens of Mahdi-linked fighters detained in recent weeks have admitted that they trained in Iran. In a recent interview, the Iranian ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi insisted Iran did not play a role in the Karbala attack and is not arming or training any militias. "If there is any evidence then show this evidence," he said.

Shortly before the Baghdad security plan was launched, a sobering Pentagon report declared that the Mahdi Army was the greatest threat to stability in the capital. But dismantling Sadr's forces obviously poses its own problems. In Ad Diwaniyah, for example, the Mahdi out-of-towners offered locals \$50 each to lay IEDs, a significant amount of money in southern Iraq. And those payouts quickly helped destabilize the entire town. "It's like the mafia," says one U.S. military source who didn't want to be quoted on security matters. "Once you get a taste of the money, there's no going back."

Sadr, whom U.S. officials contend is in Iran, may be trying to stabilize his organization. His decision to withdraw six ministers from the cabinet two weeks ago was an attempt to distance him from ineffectual Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, whom Iraqis are fed up with. "The Maliki government is very weak," says Baha al-Araji, a prominent member of the Sadr bloc in Parliament. "The chances of its success are decreasing." Within the Mahdi Army, say fighters, Thahabiya, or Golden Units, have been tasked with hunting down renegades. One such unit may have been involved in clashes between Mahdi gunmen in Baghdad last week. Still, the forces Sadr has already unleashed are going to be hard for anyone to control.

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