

Trans-Asian Railway network and Bangladesh

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE intergovernmental agreement on Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) network came into force on 11 June 2009. The agreement comes into effect ninety days after China has ratified the treaty as its eighth party in March, 2009.

By the end of 2008, twenty two countries have signed the agreement and seven have become parties namely, Cambodia, India, Mongolia, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Thailand.

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), an office of UN in the region, arranged a meeting on 11 June 2009 for the occasion at the United Nations Conference Centre, Bangkok. According to UNESCAP news the railway ministers of all parties participated in the ceremony through video messages.

The event was presided over by Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, under-secretary-general of the United Nations and executive secretary of ESCAP. Barry Cable, director of ESCAP's transport division featured a presentation on the Trans-Asian Railway followed by a question-answer session with Heyzer and Cable.

While many governments planned to invest in road construction to facilitate their growing cities and populations, Dr. Heyzer said the Asian Railways network would be a better mode of transportation which could help reduce the negative environmental impact or road vehicles and concern over energy-dependency during periods of oil price fluctuations.

The objective of TAR is to spur growth, yield economic benefit and ensure social development of a wider population.

With the Inter-governmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network already in place, the two accords are expected to help in realising an international integrated inter-state modal transport and logistics system for the region.

The link offers immense potential to shorten the distances and reduce transit time between countries and regions, being a catalyst for the notion of international transport as a tool for trade expansion, economic growth and cultural exchanges.

The agreement also identifies stations of international importance most of which are located inland and have similar

functions to that of seaports. These so-called "dry ports" will act as consolidation and distribution centers in the hinterland, creating new opportunities for growth and benefits of economic and social development to a wider population.

TAR Background

The Trans-Asian Railway network, which was initiated in the '60s, comprises 114,000 km of rail routes of international importance. It aims to offer efficient rail transport services for goods and passengers within the ESCAP region and between Asia and Europe.

The plan has sometimes been called the "Iron Silk Road" in reference to the historical Silk Road trade routes. UNESCAP's Transport & Tourism Division began work on the initiative in 1992 when it launched the Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development project.

International events that punctuated the '60s, '70s and early '80s influenced the momentum of the TAR concept. However, with the political and economic changes in the region between '80s and early '90s, the development of the concept was revived.

The Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) Network agreement was signed on November 10, 2006, by seventeen Asian nations as part of a UNESCAP's effort to build a transcontinental railway network between Europe and Pacific ports in China.

Of 30 landlocked countries, 12 are located in Asia with nearest ports often several thousands of kilometers away. The network will provide improved access to major ports for the countries. Countries throughout Asia will commit to coordinate the development and operation of international rail routes linking twenty-eight countries of the region.

This is the second treaty developed under the auspices of ESCAP - the other being the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network (AHN) that entered into force in July 2005.

Railway Routes

The network was initially divided into four major components, which were studied separately. They are:

(i) A northern corridor connecting the rail networks of China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, the Russian Federation and the Korean Peninsula.



The TAR offers immense potential to shorten distances between countries and regions.

(ii) A southern corridor connecting Thailand and the southern Chinese province of Yunnan with Turkey through Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Sri Lanka.

(iii) A sub regional network covering the ASEAN and Indo-China sub regions, and

(iv) A north-south corridor linking Northern Europe to the Persian Gulf through the Russian Federation, Central Asia and the Caucasus region.

The proposed three routes to be passed through Bangladesh are:

Route 1 - Gede (West Bengal, India) Darshana (Chudanga, Bangladesh) - Ishwardi-Jamuna Bridge-Joydevpur-

Akhaura-Chittagong-Dohazari-Gundhum-Myanmar,

Route 2 - Singabadi (West Bengal)-Rajshahi (Bangladesh)-Ishwardi-Jamuna Bridge-Joydevpur-Akhaura-Chittagong-Dohazari-Gundhum-Myanmar and

Route 3 - Radikkapur (West Bengal)-Dinajpur-Ishwardi-Jamuna Bridge-Joydevpur-Akhaura-Chittagong-Dohazari-Gundhum-Myanmar.

Bangladesh and TAR

In May 2007, the Council of Advisors of the Bangladesh caretaker government reportedly approved the proposal to join the Trans-Asian Railway Network (TAR), aiming to expand its rail communications with other Asian countries, and subse-

quently with Europe in the near future and in November of that year, Bangladesh has signed the TAR. However, it has not yet ratified the treaty.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stated in April that the two sea ports Chittagong and Mongla would be modernised and a deep sea port would be setup for potential use of the neighbouring countries - Nepal, Bhutan and India and even China could use it. The plan of the Prime Minister demonstrates a vision of Bangladesh playing a key role in regional economic development.

On 21 May, 2009, it has been reported that the Bangladesh government has decided to ratify the Asian Highway Network (AHN). On June 15, the cabinet

decided to sign the AHN agreement and accept the proposed routes. Bangladesh would become a member of the UNESCAP once it has signed the agreement. The Prime Minister also said after being a party to AHN, Bangladesh could raise and debate about possible route changes.

It is appropriate that Bangladesh may ratify the TAR and may become its ninth member. This will be consistent with the Prime Minister's plan for building modern and fast-track communication networks across the country and also her desire that Bangladesh would act as a "bridge between East and West".

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

A Friend in Need

JACOB WEISBERG

SINCE the first stirrings of the Arab-Israeli peace process after the Yom Kippur war in 1973, America's relations with Israel have been characterized by a paradox: those presidents regarded as the least friendly to the Jewish state have done it the most good. Its strong allies have proved much less helpful.

This history begins with Jimmy Carter, who threatened a cutoff of American aid to pressure Menachem Begin into returning all of Sinai to Egypt, which made possible the 1979 Camp David agreement. The other significant U.S. contribution to Mideast peace came under the first George Bush. When the Israelis refused to participate in the 1991 Madrid conference, Secretary of State James Baker withheld loan guarantees and said that Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir should call him when he got interested in peace. Madrid led to a peace treaty with Jordan, the recognition of Israel by many other countries and the first face-to-face negotiations with Palestinians.

By contrast, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, all trusted friends, often encouraged Israel's worst tendencies. Reagan looked benignly upon biblically based claims of ownership over the West Bank, Israel's occupation of Lebanon and its refusal to talk to the PLO. Under Clinton, "we never had a tough or honest conversation with the Israelis on settlement activity," former peace negotiator Aaron David Miller writes in his memoir, *The Much Too Promised Land*. George W. Bush continued to ignore the settlements, neglected the peace process and condoned Israel's military misjudgments in the West Bank, Lebanon and Gaza. The actions of these presidents steadily built up Arab resentment while fostering Israeli illusions that there was an alternative to trading land for peace.

Happily, President Obama seems poised to defy this old dichotomy. That he means well for Israel there's little doubt. "I haven't just talked the talk, I've walked the walk when it comes to Israel's security," Obama told a Jewish group during the campaign. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, special envoy George Mitchell and Vice President Joe Biden can make the same claim. White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel has an Israeli father and once served as a civilian volunteer for the Israeli Army. That this crew is serious about pressuring Israel is equally apparent.

Being a good friend to Israel today means leaning harder on the Jews and the Arabs to get serious about a deal. And even if they don't produce a peace agreement, Obama's personal commitment and evenhanded reframing of the conflict could have large benefits. The perception that the United States is pushing its ally Israel as well as the Palestinians should help America's standing in the Middle East enormously. But to carry off this coup, Obama will have to do the nearly impossible several times over.



In his Cairo speech, Obama demanded that Israel freeze its settlements in the West Bank and enter peace negotiations with the Palestinians based on the principle of two states.

This is a gutsy step forward. Being a good friend to Israel today means leaning harder on the Jews and the Arabs to get serious about a deal. And even if they don't produce a peace

agreement, Obama's personal commitment and evenhanded reframing of the conflict could have large benefits. The perception that the United States is pushing its ally Israel as well as the Palestinians should help America's standing in the Middle East enormously. But to carry off this coup, Obama will have to do the nearly impossible several times over.

First, he needs to force either a

change in Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself or a change in the Knesset. In Israeli politics, Bibi has always stood for the proposition that the Palestinians will settle only for the destruction of the Zionist state. After a decade out of power, his hostility to an independent Palestine clearly hasn't dimmed, and has been compounded by a dangerous fixation on striking militarily against Iran's nuclear capability. But Netanyahu is also a cunning politician who knows he can't survive mismanaging his country's most important relationship. Obama's gamble is that the Israeli public, if not Bibi himself, will take the threat of diminished American support seriously.

At the same time, the president needs to assuage nervous American Jews. If this were any other ally, the next diplomatic steps would be fairly simple. You want us to keep supplying nearly 20 percent of your defense budget? Selling you our most advanced weapons? Sticking up for you at the U.N.? Enough with the settlements. But a too-overt use of leverage courts a dangerous backlash from Christians and Jews who suspect the president of clandestine Muslim tendencies. Conservatives are keen to encourage those doubts. So far, Team Obama has gone at the problem in a canny way by lining up Israel's allies in Congress in support of his tough-love policy. When Netanyahu visited Capitol Hill last month, he was surprised to discover that many of Israel's strongest backers were on Obama's side.

Of course, brokering a comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict has been the fantasy of every president since Nixon and the achievement of none of them. Even as he presses for peace, our supremely confident president should bear in mind that the odds overwhelmingly favor failure.

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From 'No First Use' to 'No Nuclear Use'

FIRDAUS AHMED

'Resolve' is cardinal to ensure nuclear deterrence. If the 'will' to use nuclear weapons were seen to be lacking, this would impact adversely on deterrence. The Draft Nuclear Doctrine encapsulated this principle thus, "2.6. Deterrence requires that India maintain... (e) the will to employ nuclear forces and weapons." The other pillars of deterrence are 'capability' and 'communication' of the capability and will to the opponent. India is seen as doing well in capability building, even if its peer competitor, China, is way ahead. Recent reports suggest that Pakistan is doing equally well.

The lament is on the limitations in India's 'will'. India, being a democracy, is at a disadvantage with respect to centrally-administered potential adversaries. Pakistan has the military taking decisions, while in China it is the Communist Party. Presumably, these entities have greater capacity to display 'resolve' since they are less concerned about their citizens and internal politics. Besides, India is seen as a 'soft state'. The spate of terror attacks, culminating in 26/11, is advanced as evidence. Its historical restraint in using force is seen as amounting to dithering, which could be fatal if push comes to shove.

This explains how the Indian decision maker has tied himself down in using nuclear weapons through the nuclear doctrine, approved by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in January 2004. The then CCS expressed its approval of this formulation after a review that included the targeting strategy of a retaliatory strike. The manner of retaliation is incorporated in the doctrine as, "(iii) Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage." The introduction of the term "massive" was perhaps to compensate for India's self-perceived weakness.

A doctrine is only a guide; as acknowledged in the Draft, "Details of policy and strategy concerning force structures, deployment and employment of nuclear forces will flow from this framework and will be laid down separately and kept under constant review." Therefore, departures from the doctrine can be expected in execution of the nuclear strategy appreciating the dictates of the conflict situation. Besides, the intent of the doctrine is deterrence. In the case of its breakdown, the manifestly new physical and psychological situation that emerges has its own drivers and compulsions. Therefore, even if Assured Retaliation makes sense in the logic of deterrence, scope must exist in a conflict for responding with non-nuclear

means if the situation so warrants.

In case, India chooses a limited offensive in response to a 26/11-like situation, the 'Surprised Pakistan' scenario may emerge. In this case a stampeded Pakistan, possibly under grave provocation from an Indian conventional attack, and under pressure from Islamists both outside and inside the military, may reach the nuclear level against its strategic judgment. Pakistan would have in this case have disregarded a critical formulation of India's nuclear doctrine, "Credibility: Any adversary must know that India can and will retaliate with sufficient nuclear weapons to inflict destruction and punishment that the aggressor will find unacceptable if nuclear weapons are used against India and its forces."

However, if such nuclear first use is not overly provocative, damaging or disruptive of its military thrusts, while India "can" retaliate with nuclear weapons, there is a case for thinking through whether it should. Nuclear punishment is not a persuasive reason to persist with this doctrinal tenet, particularly since it would expose Indian forces and cities to a heightened nuclear threat. The only rational reason for nuclear retaliation would be to deter nuclear attack by Pakistan. Would in-conflict deterrence break down in case of non-retaliation? This is less likely since Pakistan's nuclear assets would be severely degraded by a conventional attack. Deterrence would continue to operate with the decision maker knowing that Pakistan could expect an all-out Indian nuclear attack in case the Indian nuclear restraint goes unheeded.

India would have acquired the moral high ground thereafter. It could also press home its conventional advantages to their logical conclusion. On account of its restraint in not indulging in a nuclear exchange, the international community would support it in punishing Pakistan for breaking the nuclear taboo. A democratic government's primary responsibility in a war turning nuclear is to ensure the least damage to its population.

The nuclear doctrine, though not a binding document, does appear to cater for the possibility of restraint in face of nuclear use by stating, "Highly effective conventional military capabilities shall be maintained to raise the threshold of outbreak both of conventional military conflict as well as that of threat or use of nuclear weapons." India would do well to keep the No Nuclear Use option open; even if it is not discussed publicly, so as to not dilute deterrence.

Source: IPCS, New Delhi