The Russian “Meridian” Makes the Eurasian Space Stronger

It is common knowledge that Russia for a long time now has been a proponent of the idea of Eurasian integration, and the project that is being implemented the most energetically on the continent is the Chinese transportation infrastructure and economic initiative dubbed One Belt, One Road (OBOR).

OBOR is supposed to unite as many states as possible into a single economic space, with almost all countries in Africa taking part in it, while Australia, Oceania, and some Latin American countries are involved in OBOR maritime subprojects. However, the main field for OBOR activities is still Eurasia, which is where its most important land transportation projects are being implemented that are designed to connect China with European countries, and thereby give Chinese products access to the European Union (EU) market. Up to this point, most goods between China and the EU have been transported by sea, along the southern coast of Eurasia, through the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal. This route is also included in OBOR’s sphere of interests within the framework of a subproject called the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, however developing land routes to Europe is still very important for the PRC. Maritime transport is indispensable for some types of cargo, but if freight can be delivered by land then land transport is much faster, and in most cases it is cheaper.

Russia could play a key role in connecting China and the EU. Travel routes from many Asian regions can go through the Russian Federation’s tremendous territory, spanning west to east, right up to the EU’s borders. If routes of travel
from the PRC circumvent the Russian Federation, then on their way to the EU trains and cars from China have to cross a much larger number of national borders, which requires a great deal of different formalities and increases lost time and financial costs. So the fact that the Russian Federation is set on actively cooperating with China, and is a proponent of OBOR and Eurasian integration as a whole, can be considered a great stroke of luck for China.

It is worth remembering that there is already one land route from East Asia that leads to Europe through Russia: the renowned Trans-Siberian Railway, which crosses virtually all of Russia’s territory. It was integrated with OBOR’s transportation system a long time ago. However, to use it to get to Europe from Chinese centers of commerce like Beijing or Shanghai, a certain “detour” needs to be made. China needs a shorter route. In addition, it is difficult to set up railway traffic so that it is as heavy as motor vehicle traffic. Railways have a wide range of applications, and are best suited to ship large volumes of goods. However, road transport is better suited to support a heavy flow of small freight shipments. In addition, road transport is not as closely tied down to a certain route as a train is, and that can be adjusted if necessary. This means that with today’s tight deadlines and intricate logistics, railways are very beneficial as a supplement to road transport.

The project for a motor vehicle route from China to Europe that passes through Russia has already been prepared, and has been known for several years as the Shanghai-Hamburg Expressway; starting in China, it is supposed to go through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, and Poland, ending in Germany.

The Russian section of this motor vehicle highway is dubbed the “Meridian”. It is supposed to start from the Russian-Kazakhstani Sagarchin border crossing point, and head in a northwest direction through the Russian Federation’s Orenburg, Samara, Saratov, Tambov, Lipetsk, Orel, Bryansk and Smolensk provinces. It will be about 2,000 kilometers long, while the total length of the Shanghai-Hamburg Expressway is about 8,500 kilometers. The highway will consist of both existing roads and new sections built to connect them into a unified route.

It is believed that the Shanghai-Hamburg Expressway will reduce the time needed to deliver goods between the EU and the PRC by about five times.

Some experts say that the Meridian project will only allow the Russian Federation to make money off goods in transit, and will not bring much benefit for its domestic transport routes, since the highway will bypass major Russian cities.

However, it is possible to disagree with this opinion: Russian companies also need transportation routes that run between the country’s southern and northwestern regions, so among Russian carriers there will most likely be those that become fans of the Meridian route.

One contribution of no small importance for Russia’s transportation infrastructure development that can be pointed to is the fact that, within the framework of this project, a new bridge that spans the Volga River, one of the country’s widest rivers, is slated for construction in Russia’s Saratov Province.

What is interesting is that the motor vehicle road is going to be made into a toll road. This means that in addition to the revenues associated with developing freight transportation and trade, the “Meridian” will be profitable just by being used. It should also be taken into account that a 2,000-kilometer highway, besides the asphalt road itself, requires creating extensive infrastructure to create conditions that are comfortable and safe for traffic. This infrastructure includes gas stations, motels, food service establishments, repair shops, stores for spare parts, etc. This means that the Meridian road, along its entire length, can be considered to be an enormous business center, where numerous companies will be able to offer their services, bringing income to the economy at the federal and regional levels, and creating many jobs. It is not surprising that the Meridian highway project is included in the Comprehensive Plan to Modernize and Expand Trunk Infrastructure up to 2024, which was approved by the Russian government in 2018. The project cost is more than $8 billion.

As of January 2021, the start of construction work on the “Meridian” is scheduled for 2021. It is anticipated that operations will begin for the expressway in 2024.

Whatever the financial prospects are for the Meridian project, it should be kept in mind that this road, designed to connect China with the European Union, will also connect Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus - three partner states in both the EAEU and CSTO. And no matter what direction Chinese-European trade takes, these three countries will be able to use the new route to bolster the extent to which they cooperate in various fields, including those that go beyond the boundaries of trade and commercial activities.
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