The Silk Road Superhighway: Kazakh Transportation as Geopolitics

It is entirely common for a federal government to make budgetary promises to improve infrastructure. Indeed, every country around the world is full with both promises and jokes lampooning said promises to ‘fix roads, fill potholes, and make it easier to get around and do business.’ Kazakhstan in 2015 is no different in that case from any other government. But there are some interesting regional, transregional, and truly global infrastructure projects Kazakhstan is including alongside the standard local fixes that could carry significant geopolitical weight moving into the future. Indeed, just how successful Kazakhstan is in ‘fixing the potholes’ across its country could become incredibly important to countries like Russia, China, Turkey, Germany, and the United States. Who knew road work could be so exciting!

First consideration goes to the Western Europe – Western China International Transit Corridor, which is a massive construction endeavor aiming to reinvigorate what is basically a modern ‘Silk Road,’ only with all the amenities of modern highway construction. The 7.5 billion USD infrastructure investment will basically connect Western Europe with an efficient superhighway to Western China (and subsequently through China’s highway system all the way, theoretically, to the Pacific Ocean) through Kazakhstan. The 2,840 km transit system has approximately 2/3 of the cost coming from the World Bank, ADB, EBRD, and IDB. Kazakhstan for its part highlights the importance of this corridor not just in its economic reports but in its foreign policy and national security briefings, with its ultimate goal to decrease the delivery of goods from China to Europe from the current road travel time of 45 days down all the way to just 10. This new Silk Road ostensibly rests on Kazakhstan for being the crucial ‘middle passage’ that makes the Europe to Asia connection possible. In its own policy briefings Kazakhstan emphasizes this need not just as a better conduit for improving business and trade but literally connecting the world via roadway in a peaceful and open endeavor. It is somewhat surprising much of the Western world has not capitalized on this massive human geopolitical transportation project more heavily.

Kazakhstan also intends to improve its national rail system, hoping to increase its operating efficiency and reach by being the main connector of the Caspian Sea to the Pacific Ocean and the chief conduit for China to reach Central Asia and beyond to Western Europe. Many fine scholars and analysts in the past have made note of Kazakhstan’s irrefutable central location as the connection point between Europe and Asia. While history has often made reference to Istanbul (nee Constantinople) as the ‘Gateway to the East,’ that is largely a contextual reference based on a history that is now past. The true ‘gateway’ with proper infrastructural development, both economically and politically, could be Kazakhstan. It finally seems fully aware of this potential, given the new emphasis within its budget, foreign policy, and national security policies. More interesting still will be to see, if this comes to fruition, how much there will be a cascade or copy-cat effect on the rest of the Central Asian ‘Stans. Kazakhstan perhaps more than any other Central Asian country has focused on open trade, transnational communication, participation within the global economy, and the rejection of radicalization and extremism. Perhaps most importantly, it has done this with a much less heavy-handed approach when compared to its immediate neighbors in the region.

Even more fascinating has been the launch of a completely new project called the ‘Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran’ (KTI) railway. In the past decade this project could have run afoul of the United States, what with its adamant stance on keeping Iran limited and constrained in terms of economic development as long as it was still under suspicion with its nuclear energy/weapons program. Recent improvements in Iranian-American relations, or at least the prospect of those relations warming up and becoming more tenable, could prove to be of tremendous benefit to
Kazakhstan and especially the KTI railway. Most in the West have viewed the softening of relations between Iran and the West strictly from the much larger perspective of global geopolitics and conflict. Much less time and attention has been paid to the numerous payoff effects such a thaw may have on the immediate region. Kazakhstan clearly has not missed this relevance and is deftly trying to position itself to capitalize on potentialities.

Kazakhstan is not without its problems. Any country that has been ruled by the same leader, and his commensurate favorites, uninterrupted since 1991 cannot be absent the typical corruption, nepotism, waste, and bureaucratic inefficiency notorious with any government so dominant and assured of its place and future. But time and accomplishment has clearly shown Kazakhstan to be a fairly ‘dull’ country. And in this case, ‘dull’ is quite positive: it means it is relatively stable, reliable, and absent the turbulence that has been seen more than once in several of its neighbors: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Iran just to name several. Kazakhstan may not be the most open or the most perfectly democratic of systems. But it clearly values calm stability and economic progress, not in the sycophantic and somewhat irrational way that Turkmenistan does, but in a way that sees its future as an active member of the global economic system and wanting to be considered a valued partner in the larger global community of politics. Until recently, only Azerbaijan in the Caspian region could consistently lay claim to that goal. Kazakhstan seems intent on making that club now a twosome. As the saying goes - once could be an accident, but twice would be a trend. If Kazakhstan continues to play out this new role as Central Asia’s stable giant, as the Caspian’s reliable ‘Stan, then it may just end up finding itself in a much more important geopolitical role: the conduit from West to East, the solidifier of a new Silk Road, and the foundation upon which a new era of communication, trade, and transportation develops between the two dominant civilizations in human history. Not bad for a strategy that basically started with a desire to just fix a few potholes.

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