

## Build Railways for Peace in Africa

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As dramatic events, like the bread riots in Egypt and the unprecedented Darfur rebels' assault on the Sudanese government in Omdurman, have grabbed headlines over the past weeks—and rightfully so—other, more positive developments have unfolded, which have gone virtually unnoticed by the international press. And, yet, it may turn out that these other developments will provide a more profound and long-lasting impact on the future of both countries, and beyond, if the immediate crises can be overcome.

In the “good news” department is the announcement that Egypt has founded a committee with the Government of Sudan, to sign an agreement in the third week of May, on establishing vital railway links. The Egypt-Sudan Railway Committee plans to arrange for the construction of 500 km of track, 450 on the Egyptian side, and 50 in Sudan, to connect the railway systems of the two countries. The main problem in the initiative has been that the two countries have different railway gauges. However, as Volkhard Windfuhr, chairman of FREA (Friends of the Railways of Egypt and the Arab World) told me in Cairo in mid-May, the problem can be readily solved. Similar gauge differences exist, for example, between Spain and France, but by building coaches which can change axes, the 12-centimeter difference has been overcome, and one can ride from the Gare de Lyons to Madrid with no difficulties. The same kind of problem arose between Russia and Poland, and between Ukraine and Poland and Rumania. In the former Yugoslavia, three different gauge railway networks were interconnected by rolling stock. Again, the gauge problem arose in plans to connect Russian rail to China's. In all these cases, new ideas have made it possible to bridge the gap.

In the case of Egypt and Sudan, the gauge difference is quite substantial, 38 centimeters, and will require new technical devices, as well as special coaches (rolling stock) and diesel locomotives, Windfuhr explained. There are two companies in France currently tackling this problem, and it may be that parts of the Sudanese railway line will have to be “corrected,” i.e. that some sharp curves will have to be ironed out. Be that as it may, the plan is for the Sudanese railway chief to go to Cairo in late May, to sign the agreement. And that will be a bombshell.

Establishing viable rail links between the two nations is a prerequisite for enhancing their bilateral trade, but it is also part of a vaster “Grand Design” for African-wide transportation networks, which can contribute to the economic integration, and development, of this great continent. From Egypt, the rail links will also be extended westward and eastward. As Windfuhr said, Egypt has started “modernizing, refurbishing and renewing its rail lines along the northern coast, and can go as far as Libya.” Although there has been an agreement with the Libyans to rejuvenate the military railway line built by Rommel in the Second World War, from Tobruk to Solloum, a stretch of 125 km, progress has been somewhat slow. However, Russia seems to be keen on enhancing Libya's transportation capacities. On the occasion of the visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Libya on April 16-17—the first visit of a

Russian president-, an agreement was signed with Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, in the presence of the chiefs of the railway agencies of both countries, to build a 500-km line from Sirt (midway between Benghazi and Tripoli) to Benghazi, at a cost of 2.2 billion euros. Another agreement waiting to be signed, will deal with the continuation of this line to Tobruk, opening the way for travel to Egypt. At the same time, the Russians signed an agreement for a 400-km line from Sirt to the harbor city of Misrata (the city with a long Roman, Greek and Italian history also known as Misurata) and on to Khums on the outskirts of Tripoli, then continuing on to the Tunisian border. Windfuhr said that the Tunisians have not yet reached agreement with the Libyans, but that, if they did, then Gabes would be the first station on the Tunisian side.

So much for the line going west; Egypt is also going east. In the year 2001 it set up the "Orient Express," which goes from Verdem on the western bank of the Suez Canal, over the Suez canal, by way of a new bridge for rail traffic, then on to Rafah, on the Israeli border. The intention of Egypt, which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1978, is to extend its rail lines across Gaza, through Israel and beyond. Construction on this line has reached Bir el Abd, but has gone no further, due to political constraints. Until there is a real peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, the railway project cannot be completed. At the same time, the commitment by both sides to such a project should serve as further impetus to reach peace.

Were the Egyptian railway line to be extended, it could then link up with the networks planned for the Arabian peninsula. As Egyptian Professor Mohammad Seyyed Selim, told an international conference in Germany in 2005, leading Arab Gulf states are working on expanding and integrating their own rail grids. Saudi Arabia has a plan for a national grid, including a line from Jeddah to Damman, which would then be connected to Iran. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Planning has conducted studies on connecting Kuwait to the Eurasian landbridge via Iran and Iraq and is keen on pursuing this perspective.

### **Railroads Criss-crossing Africa**

The Egyptian-Sudanese line, and the east-west vision, crossing Egypt, are just two components of a much larger, and ambitious project to integrate major parts of Africa through railway connections. Libya is also a nodal point for expanded communications. According to Windfuhr, "Qaddafi is very keen on financing a railway line, with double track, connecting Tripoli and southern Libya Sebha, 800 km south of the Mediterranean coast, and then continuing to Niger and Chad and the Central African republics." The man in charge of the project is a former prime minister, Abu Zeid Durda, who has been involved for four years, seeking to identify technical problems and their solutions. Just one month ago, said Windfuhr, the first single track had been agreed on, with the Chinese Railway Corporation, and work on the first trunk line should start next year.

Moving now in the opposite direction, from the southern tip of Africa northwards, there is an idea to develop a railway line originating in South Africa to Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. From Uganda another stretch could link up with southern Sudan, in Nimule, thence to Juba, Malaka and Costi (south of Khartoum), and then join the national Sudanese rail network. There already exists a rail link to Wadi Halfa on the Egyptian border, but it is in need of modernization.

These are separate projects, negotiated on a bilateral or trilateral basis; however, if they are

conceptualized as various parts of one whole, then what emerges is the design of a transcontinental rail network joining major African states together. Egypt is the geographical fulcrum of the process: from Egypt rail lines radiate out along the Mediterranean coast westwards, and from Egypt, the connections originate all the way down to South Africa, through Sudan, and so on. It will be through Egypt, too, that this de facto continental structure will be linked up, moving eastwards, with the grand project of the Eurasian landbridge—the project to link China with western Europe, through three main trunk lines (north, central and south).

If political conditions of an Israeli-Palestinian peace were to prevail, it would finally be possible to join the major nations of Africa with the Eurasian continent. One day, it would be possible to jump on a train in Cape Town and travel all the way to Beijing. Or, at least from north Africa.

This is not what the Germans call “Zukunftsmusik”—a fantasy of the future—, but a reality. The FREA is, in fact, planning to organize a 20-day voyage from Alexandria to Beijing. The “Silk Rail” trip slated for 2010 will originate in Corinth, on the Venice Steamship, then travel to Alexandria, Cairo, Sinai and Bir el Abd. From there, passengers will board a bus to Taba, and a boat from the Israeli border to Aqaba, then travel on a Jordanian train to Amman, thence to Damascus, Aleppo, Turkey, Erzerum, Kars, Yerevan, Baku, and then, with a ferry boat across the Caspian Sea, to Ashgabad, further overland to Samarkand, Tashkent, Almaty, and on to China.

The implicit message of the planned caravan is unambiguous: transportation links joining countries which are in a politically adversary relationship, —like Israel and Palestine, or Turkey and Armenia—can transform enmity into reconciliation. So, any news about progress on building such transnational rail lines, must be classified in the “good news” rubric and all possible political efforts must be made to ensure their success.

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