

## Work Starts on Iran-Russia Railway

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Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has inaugurated construction work on a new 900-km railway line linking Iran with Russia across Central Asia.

Berdymukhamedov ceremonially began the construction by laying a section of gilded rail in the northwestern border city of Bereket, near Iran.

He said the line would enable goods to be transported more cheaply between Russian and Central Asia and on to Europe.

According to Turkmenistan's railway ministry the new line will have an annual capacity of between 10 and 12 million tons of freight when it opens in four years.

The railway, seen as an economic boon for the oil- and gas-rich Caspian Sea region, will be some 600 km shorter than the present route.

It will improve Turkmenistan's connections with Russia via Kazakhstan and to the Persian Gulf coast via Iran.

Regional states have adamantly ignored US pleas to bypass Iran and find new routes for Central Asian hydrocarbons export.

Turkmenistan has been opening up to its neighbors in the past year since Berdymukhamedov succeeded former ruler Saparmurat Niyazov.

It is the second-biggest natural gas producer in the former Soviet Union, after Russia.

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