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Vladimir Tsyganov: "No Sanctions Will Stop ITC Development"

At the recent SCO Summit in Tianjin Vladimir Putin and Xí Jìnpíng discussed a mega-project, which could change the habitual map of transport links in Eurasia. The project in question is construction of the Moscow-Beijing High-Speed Railway (HSR). BM.Moscow Foresight asked Vladimir Tsyganov, head of the Moscow Department of The Institute of Transport Problems of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Chief Researcher of the Institute of Control Sciences of the RAS, to comment on the event and tell about other ITC projects.

- Few people know that it was the Russian Academy of Sciences that had for the first time come up with the idea of construction of an HSR between our countries in 2015, - noted the expert. - A number of prominent RAS scientists together with top management of JSC Russian Railways came forward with the idea for implementation of a mega-project “United Eurasia: Trans-Eurasian Development Belt – Eurasian Integrated Transport System”. An HSR from the European part of Russia to the Far East was proposed as the central element of this mega-project. This HSR was given an important place in the process of integrated development of the territory of Russia, based on transport corridors. The railway, as envisioned by the project's authors, was supposed to go to the border with China. The idea of building a Moscow-Beijing HSR got its second wind at the SCO Summit.

The Russian capital gets many projects and proposals for building international transport corridors, but all of these require serious consideration by specialists, though Moscow receives a lot of interesting proposals.

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For instance, Sergei Tsivilev, Governor of Kemerovo Region, is keen on building a 600 km long railway, providing direct access to the Western provinces of China. The point is that Russia has a section of border with China between the border of Russia and Kazakhstan on one side and the border of Russia with Mongolia on the other side. This section could be used for construction of a railway to Urumqi station for direct deliveries of Kuzbass coal to the PRC.

However, implementation of the proposal by the Governor of Kemerovo would require addressing a few issues. First, China would not accept any initiatives that contradict its Belt and Road initiative, and Kemerovo proposes building a meridional road.

There is one more important thing to understand here: the Chinese traditionally think in terms of the so-called “latitudinal transport corridors”, stretching from east to west and back under the concept of the Great Silk Road, the Belt and Road initiative. But the Chinese are reluctant to build meridional transport corridors, going from north to south, they do not think they need such corridors. These are the reasons Beijing does not show any interest in funding the project **of Sergei Tsivilev.**

Second, to reach the border with China from our side would require building a railway through mountains. This means a lot of tunnels will need to be built. That’s why many competent authorities write negative reviews on the Kemerovo project.

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- In Tianjin the heads of Russia and China gave great attention to the development of pipeline transport. Particularly, a decision was made to resume construction of the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline through the territory of Mongolia. What do experts think of the project?

- The return to the Power of Siberia-2 project became the key economic event of the SCO Summit. Let me point out that the Power of Siberia-1 pipeline drew from the gas deposits of the Eastern Siberia, which needed further exploration and development. This required major capital investments into the project. The new gas pipeline will be based on the already explored gas deposits at Yamal, this is why its construction will be cheaper.

- But it's well-known that until recently Beijing has delayed making a decision on the start of the Power of Siberia-2 construction, saying that the Chinese economy does not need so much natural gas ...

- China has created a major global economy and is continuing active development of its manufacturing capacity. That’s why, naturally, PRC enterprises need more energy and fuel, including natural gas. Today the PRC imports about 176 bcm of gas per year. Up to 60% of this volume are supplies of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Asia, primarily from the Persian Gulf countries.

However, given turbulent international conditions, it would be short-sighted of China to rely on these LNG supplies only. At any time US Navy ships could block any shipments to China along this route. And how will this affect the economy of China, especially in the event of an international armed conflict flaring up?

Moreover, Beijing used to say that the Power of Siberia-2 project contradicts the very concept of Belt and Road latitudinal transport corridors.

Now, when the situation in the world has become noticeably more complicated, the planned channel for supplying Russian gas is becoming a reliable insurance of sorts for China, guaranteed strategic feedstock supply in view of possible economic sanctions and even blockades.

Long-term negotiations on the launch of the largest project by global standards concluded in Tianjin with the execution of a memorandum between Gazprom and China’s CNPC with participation of heads of the three countries, including Mongolia. Apparently, design and construction of the Power of Siberia-2 will begin soon.

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- Has it been determined who will be building the new pipeline?

- There is no contract yet, project costs have not been made public. The memorandum merely confirmed the intention of Russia and China to build the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that in the Russian territory the pipeline will be built by Gazprom with some degree of support from the state.

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In any case, experts believe that implementation of the project will take 5-7 years, though both Moscow and Beijing understand that they need to hurry. According to many experts, the USA will definitely “get to grips” with China in the near-term. It is for a reason that the US establishment accepted D. Trump’s coming into office, hoping to resolve the issue with the key competitor and ideological opponent.

- Do we know at least the length of the planned pipeline?

- It depends on how you calculate it. The total length of the pipeline is about 6700 km, of which 2700 km are across Siberia to the border of Mongolia. The Soyuz Vostok transit gas pipeline through Mongolia will require laying of another 700-1500 km of pipe. In China proper, the Power of Siberia-2 will most likely go to the Chinese provinces of Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang and others.

- How economically viable would the Power of Siberia-2 launch be for Russia and China?

- Ramping up imports of pipeline gas from Russia would enable China to adapt to increasing demand for gas on the global market, and also to hedge risks of LNG supply shortages, looming at the background of trade wars and the unfolding confrontation of the USA and the PRC.

When the Power of Siberia-2 with the capacity of 50 bcm of natural gas per year is commissioned and gas supply through the Power of Siberia is increased from 38 bcm to 44 bcm per year and the supply via the “Far Eastern route” goes up from 10 bcm to 12 bcm, the volume of pipeline gas supply from Russia to China could reach up to 106 bcm of gas per year. This will make up for about a half of China’s gas imports in 2024.

The Power of Siberia-2 is based on the Yamal deposits, which used to be the source for gas deliveries to Europe. Here we are talking about natural resources in lower demand, which need to be used today. This is why construction of a new gas pipeline is a very good option for Russia.

On the other hand, the liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the north of the Western Siberia is still purchased by France, there are ongoing deliveries to Belgium and other European countries. Moreover, just recently three tankers with the Yamal LNG came to Shanghai via the Northern Sea Route. So, yet another supply channel for Russian gas to the PRC is being set up. This is very good news for Russia.

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- The North-South International Transport Corridor, which is supposed to link Saint-Petersburg in Russia and Mumbai in India, has not yet reached full project capacity. Why hasn't it?

- Let me remind you, that the Agreement on developing the Corridor was signed in Petersburg in the year of 2000 by representatives of Russia, India and Iran. Later on, the project was joined by more than 12 countries, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Syria, Turkey and Oman.

The North-South ITC is a multi-modal route spanning over 7 thousand kilometers, designed to connect Saint–Petersburg with seaports of Iran and India, competing with the cargo routes through the Suez Canal.

The corridor is divided into western and eastern branches, bypassing the Caspian Sea, and also includes a trans-Caspian multimodal section.

Initially it was expected that the western ITC branch will be in greater demand. The Iranians decided to build the Rasht-Astara road section closer to the Caspian shore, rather than cut tunnels through mountainous terrain on the mainland. Nevertheless, the Iranians had opposed this option for quite some time, assuming that is the road goes close to the shore, it would harm the surrounding nature and infrastructure. Now the work is in full swing there.

Moreover, the development of the western ITC route is hindered by a suboptimal system of currency settlements and inconsistent norms and rules of border and customs controls.

- And what is the situation on the eastern route of the North-South ITC?

- Starting from 2022, this route is actively operated by RZD Logistics, a subsidiary of the RZD holding. The first pilot train of RZD Logistics traveled for 34 days from the border of Russia through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to the seaport of Bandar Abbas in the Southern Iran on the coast of the Persian Gulf. The transit was paid for by the company.

In 2025 the transit time on this route was reduced to 15 days, and its costs went down by two times. Now the route is used by 6-7 trains per day. Given these rates, the traffic volume by the results of 2025 could reach up to 10 million tons. With this in mind, RZD Logistics expects significant profits from cargo transit through the eastern ITC route. Goods, delivered to the port of Bandar Abbas, travel to India, North Africa, China and even to South Korea.

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Further reduction of transit time and costs at the eastern North-South ITC route would require fast and seamless transit. A uniform electronic customs document for transportation from Russia to Iran via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is required. The quality of service to cargo owners needs to be improved. For example, a shipper from Russia, being a customer of RZD Logistics, can at any time find out the location of his cargo, expected delivery time etc. This service needs to be made available for the eastern route as well.

To resolve this and other issues, last year Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran and Turkmenistan signed a roadmap for synchronous development of the potential of the eastern North-South ITC route. Implementation of this document, as noted by experts, will enable traffic volume increase up to 15 million tons per year by 2027, and up to 20 million tons by 2030.

- Why do Western media claim that the North-South ITC is about to be diverted from India to Africa?

- The New Delhi authorities have never said anything about leaving the North-South project. Just the opposite, today, when the USA are trying to dictate to India who to be friends with and where to buy their energy resources, further cooperation with Russia under the North-South ITC is only getting stronger.

The question of a possible extension of the ITC was considered at the Russia-Africa Summit, successfully held in July 2023 in Saint-Petersburg. There were only a few media reports about this in our country, but it is known that at the initiative of a number of African countries a project for railway connectivity restoration for the Trans-African Railway was presented at the forum. Russian President Vladimir Putin said that once the ITC is launched to full capacity, the question of extending its routes will definitely arise. There will be an opportunity to go further. But where to? Let’s say, the port of Bandar Abbas that I have already mentioned, will have to be reconstructed. The very same grain and fertilizer could be transshipped to special vessels and delivered to African ports, connected to railways, and then on to countries of the continent.

Of course, this is a conversation for the future. But even today Russia is helping in upgrades of African railways. Our corporations, businessmen and experts are already operating there, despite severe sanctions from the West.

Sergei Kron.

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