



CICP Working Paper

No. 24

Implementing Southwest Corridor Linking Asia-Europe: A Cambodian Perspective

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Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace

October 2008

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Published with the funding support from
The International Foundation for Arts and Culture, IFAC

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Abstract:

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Implementing Southwest Corridor Linking Asia-Europe: A Cambodian Perspective

By Chap Sotharith

1. Introduction

The process of globalization and liberalization of national economies have greatly enhanced scope for intraregional and interregional trade, investment, transportation and tourism. However, developing countries are often constrained by inadequate transport infrastructure, and by transport legislation that differs from one country to another and cumbersome and time-consuming border procedures.

The whole world is closely watching the rise of Asian economies as for the last several decades, economic growth in the region accelerated rapidly, especially South East Asia, India and China. Trade between Asian countries and between Asia and Europe expanded to unexpected level. Recognizing the rapid growth in international trade and the pressure on the region's transport infrastructure, the Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) project was launched at the 48th session of UNESCAP (April 1992) to improve transport linkages within Asia as well as between Asia and its main trading partners in Europe. The project consisted of three main components, namely: the Asian Highway, the Trans-Asian Railway, and facilitation of land transport. With support from UNESCAP, two agreements, i.e. *The Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network* and *The Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network* were adopted and signed by many UNESCAP countries including Southeast Asian countries, South Asian countries and central Asian countries.

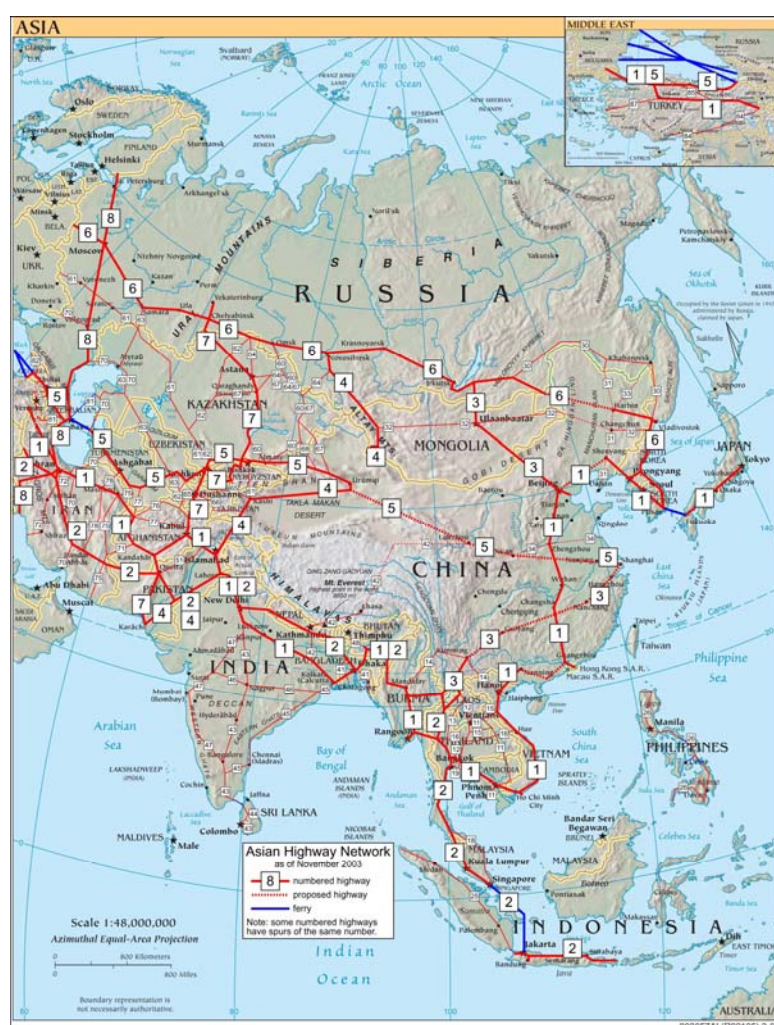
2. Impacts of the Southwest Corridor

The Southwest corridor will contribute to development of trade, investment, transportation and tourism among participating countries. Other sectors including cultural exchanges, cross-border market, people-to- people contact will promote peace and stability in participating countries.

Asian Highway Network

The Asian Highway (AH) project is a cooperative project among countries in Asia and Europe and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) to improve the highway systems in Asia. It is one of the three pillars of Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) project, endorsed by the ESCAP commission at its forty-eighth session in 1992, comprising Asian Highway, Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) and facilitation of land transport projects.

Figure 1: Asian Highway Network



ESCAP has conducted several projects in cooperation with AH member countries step by step after the endorsement of ALTID in 1992.

The Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network (IGA) was adopted on November 18, 2003, by the Intergovernmental Meeting; the IGA includes Annex I, which identifies 55 AH routes among 32 member countries (see Figure 1) totalling approximately 87,500 miles (140,000 km), and Annex II "Classification and Design Standards". During the 60th session of the ESCAP Commission at Shanghai, China, in April 2004, the IGA was signed by 23 countries. As of 2007, 28 countries were signatories.

Source: UNESCAP

The Asian Highway project was initiated by the United Nations in 1959 with the aim of promoting the development of international road transport in the region. During the first

phase of the project (1960-1970) considerable progress was achieved, however, progress slowed down when financial assistance was suspended in 1975.¹

The project can be complemented with on-going ASEAN Highway network and infrastructure connectivity among Greater Mekong Sub-region.

Trans-Asian Railway

The **Trans-Asian Railway** (TAR) is a project to create an integrated freight railway network across Europe and Asia. The TAR is a project of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP).

Initiated in the 1960s, the project aimed to provide a continuous 8,750 mile (14,000km) rail link between Singapore and Istanbul, Turkey, with possible further connections to Europe and Africa. At that time, shipping and air travel were not as well developed, and the project aimed to significantly reduce shipping times and costs between Europe and Asia. Progress in developing the TAR was hindered by political and economic obstacles throughout the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. By the 1990s, the end of the cold war and the starting of normalized relations between some countries improved the prospects for creating a rail network across the Asian to Europe continent.²

The TAR was seen as a way to accommodate the huge increases in international trade between Eurasian nations and facilitate the increased movements of goods between countries. It was also seen as a way to improve the economies and accessibility of landlocked countries like Laos, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and the Central Asian republics.

Table 1: Trans-Asian Railway by sub-region

<i>South-East Asia:</i>	<i>Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam</i>	<i>12,600 km</i>
<i>North and North-East Asia:</i>	<i>China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation</i>	<i>32,500 km</i>
<i>Central Asia and Caucasus:</i>	<i>Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan</i>	<i>13,200 km</i>
<i>South Asia + Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey:</i>	<i>Bangladesh, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Turkey</i>	<i>22,600 km</i>
<i>Total:</i>		<i>80,900 km</i>

Source: UNESCAP

¹ UNESCAP website: <http://www.unescap.org>

² Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Asian_Railway_Network

Recognizing the new transport requirements resulting from globalization, UNESCAP and member countries have adopted a responsive strategy in identifying the Trans-Asian Railway network comprising 81,000 km of routes of international importance serving 28 countries. Although the network contains a number of differences in track gauges, the development of containerization has provided a solution to this apparent incompatibility. Like in the shipping sector, containers now provide the opportunity for speedy and efficient trans-shipment at break-of-gauge points.

Dr. Kim Hak-Su, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of UNESCAP said that *“the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network has provided new impetus for regional development. The Agreement identifies routes of international importance that serve the immediate transport needs of member countries providing regional connectivity as well as linkages to Europe. With the Agreement coming into force, common technical standards will increase the efficiency and viability of railway operation.”*³

Importantly, the Agreement has laid a foundation and played a catalytic role in defining a common vision, coordinating programmes of actions, and, in collaboration with international financial institutions, identifying investment requirements and sources to realize the project.

Much of the region's economic development has taken place in the coastal areas. With the implementation of the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network, member countries have already begun to identify stations of international importance that will have similar functions to ports away from coastal areas. These so-called ‘dry ports’ will act as consolidation/distribution centres creating new economies of scale, increasing the attractiveness of rail transport and promoting trade, investment and tourism. These dry ports can also spread the benefits of globalization and create employment opportunities for local populations.

³ He addressed at 62nd Session of the UNESCAP Commission Special Session on the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network, Jakarta, 12 April 2006.

The Project is also complementing the on-going Singapore-Kun Ming Rail link under the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC), in which China, Japan, ASEAN and Asian Development Bank (ADB) are playing leading roles.

3. Status of Cambodia in Southwest Corridor

Cambodia is one of signatories of the *the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network* and *The Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network* in the framework of Southwest Corridor. Cambodia has been actively engaged with ASEAN projects in linking regional development corridors such as ASEAN Highways and Singapore-Kun Ming rail link under the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC).

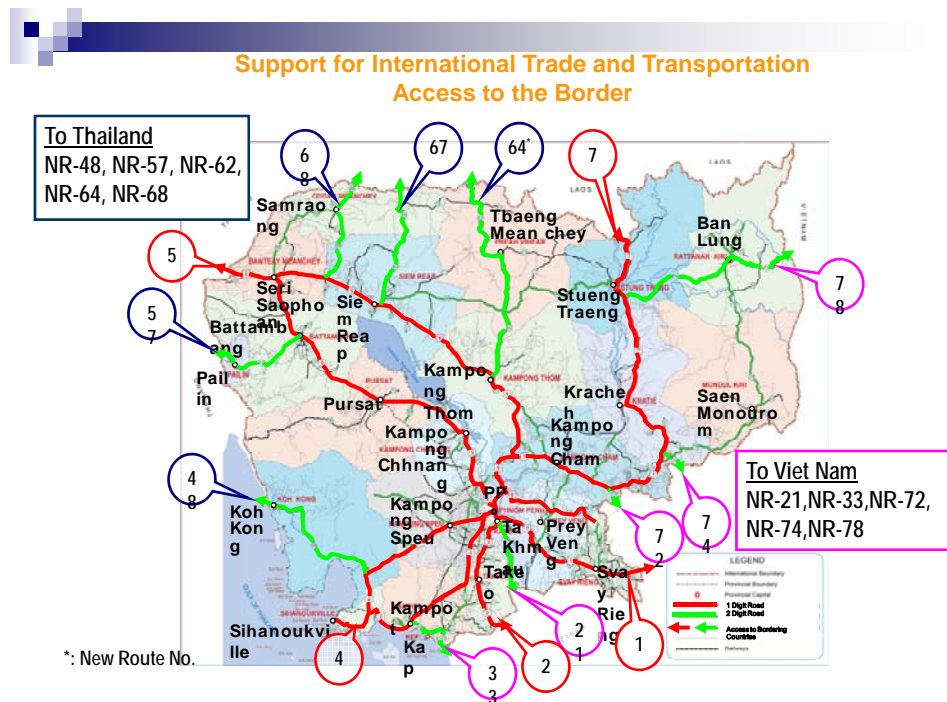
Cambodian government has set infrastructure development as one of the highest priorities in the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP 2006-2010), especially road and railways rehabilitation and construction. The Government has set out five road network development strategies:

- Strategy 1: Multi Growth Pole Development
- Strategy 2: National Integration
- Strategy 3: Development of International Corridor
- Strategy 4: Enhancement of Rural Economic Development
- Strategy 5: Regional Development for Poverty Reduction

Following are status of Cambodia's highways and railways in participating regional projects.

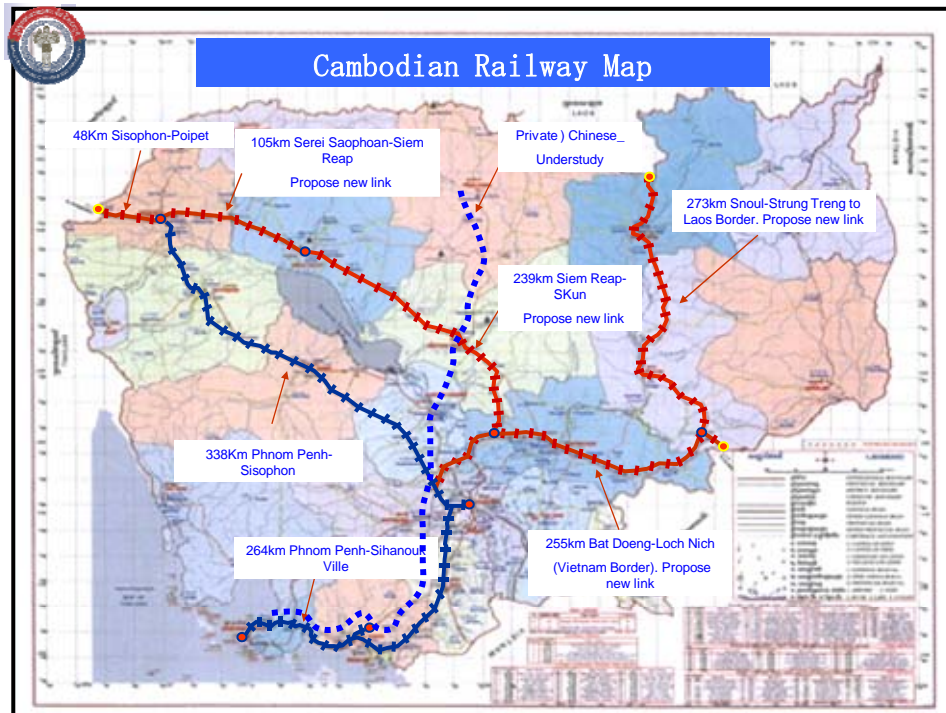
Highways and Roads

- National Roads(1 digit) : 2,052 Km (Highway)
- National Roads(2 digit) : 2,643 Km
- Provincial Roads(3 digits) : 6,615 Km
- Rural Roads are managed by Ministry of Rural Development : 18,948 Km
- Total Roads managed and maintained by MPWT: 11,310 Km

Figure 2: Cambodia Road Network**Railways**

- Reconstruct the 48 km missing link from Sisophon – Poipet (to connect to Thai railways)
- Rehabilitate two railway lines:
 - Phnom Penh to Sisophon (338 km)
 - Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville (264km)
- Build a new railway line from Phnom Penh to Loc Ninh (255 km), Vietnam as part of the SKRL project
- Select and award a concession contract to a private company to operate the railways of Cambodia

Figure 3: Cambodia Railways Network



4. Challenges

Opponents of the Southwest corridor concept also invoke darker scenarios as many challenges are in the way of realization. While the bulk of the trade on the Southwest corridor is fully facilitated with less restriction, some analysts have expressed concern about the potential for growing cooperation in arms trade and nuclear power development among some countries. This loop hole will created threat to domestic, regional and global security.

Much of the railway network already exists, although some significant gaps remain. A big challenge is the differences in rail gauge across Eurasia. Four different major rail gauges (which measures the distance between rails) exist across the continent: most of Europe, as well as Turkey, Iran, China, and the Koreas use the 1,435 mm gauge, known as Standard gauge; Finland, Russia, and the former Soviet republics use a 1,520 mm gauge; most of the railways in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka use a 1,676 mm gauge, and most of Southeast Asia has a metre-gauge. For the most part the TAR would not change national gauges; mechanized facilities would be built to move shipping containers from train to train at the breaks of gauge.

A big obstacle is also the need of sea transport to Japan and South Korea. A container ship has room for much more containers than a train. Therefore ships must go less regular than

trains, creating a big delay. There are hopes to create an overland connection through North Korea, however there is still a break-of-gauge.

The other challenge is that the transportation from a country to another, as experienced in many parts of the world faces constraint with complicated and different procedures and regulations for trade and transportation. It is generally believed that cross-border transportation involved problems of corruption.

Last but not least, the biggest challenge is the lack of financial resources in a number of countries. With huge development gap, some countries find it difficult to implement and construct the missing links in their parts. For example, Cambodia still have many missing links both railways and highways. With lack of maintenance some parts of highways and railways in some countries are still in poor quality.

5. Conclusion

The connection in highways and railways network among member countries is one of the building blocks towards the realization of the vision of an International Integrated Intermodal transport system for the whole region as envisaged by the Ministers at the Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure in November 2001 and embedded in the Seoul Declaration on Infrastructure Development in Asia and the Pacific. Already the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network came into force in July 2005 and provides the other fundamental building block for the region's intermodal transport network.

Significance of such inter-regional transport resource as Southwest corridor lies not only in its profit for participating countries. It is also the most powerful force of geopolitical influence on a multitude of countries and international arena. First, Southwest corridor strongly pulls together countries in both continents, to interdependent and to complement one another. Secondly, from the point of view of international relations, participating countries will understand each other through land bridge and linkages in trade, transportation, tourism and other exchanges. And Third, the Southwest corridor also contributes to promote peace and stability in participating counties.

Facing the new challenges of the world financial crisis and recession, all member countries should accelerate building the missing lines so that the project can be fully implemented to add infrastructure linkages and promote economic development.

Annex 1: Stock Taking 50 Years of Trans-Asian Railway

1960	<p>The United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far-East (ECAFE) initiates the Trans-Asian Railway project with the objective of providing a continuous 14,000-km rail link between Singapore and Turkey, via South-East Asia, Bangladesh, India , Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.</p> <p><i>Prefeasibility studies are undertaken by participating railways.</i></p>
1976	<p>At its 32nd Commission session, UNESCAP, which replaced ECAFE in 1974, extends the scope of the project to include intermodal aspects to link rural areas and ports.</p> <p>UNESCAP initiates the Asian Railway Master Plan aimed at forming a coherent system of railway trunk lines to satisfy transport requirements likely to arise by the decade 1990-2000 and beyond.</p>
1992	<p>Recognizing the profound economic changes taking place in the region and their impact on transport infrastructure, the 48th session of the Commission (Shanghai, April 1992) launches the Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) project.</p> <p><i>The three components of ALTID are the Trans-Asian Railway network, the Asian Highway network and Transport Facilitation. To implement the project, UNESCAP adopts a step-by-step approach based on corridor studies to reflect the size and diversity of the region .</i></p>
1994-1995	<p>UNESCAP carries out the first corridor study “Feasibility Study on connecting the rail networks of China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, the Russian Federation and the Korean Peninsula”. The routes identified form the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor.</p> <p><i>A policy-level expert group meeting endorses the routes and route requirements for the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor (Bangkok, October 1995).</i></p>
1995	<p>UNESCAP carries out the study “Trans-Asian Railway Route Requirements: Preliminary study on Development of Trans-Asian Railway in the Southern Corridor of Asia-Europe Routes”.</p> <p><i>An ad hoc expert group meeting reviews the routes identified and recommends that UNESCAP carries out a detailed study of the corridor (Bangkok, December 1995).</i></p>
1996	<p>UNESCAP publishes a second corridor study “Trans-Asian Railway Route Requirements: Development of the Trans-Asian Railway in the Indo-China and ASEAN Subregion”.</p> <p><i>A policy-level expert group meeting endorses the routes and route requirements for the Trans-Asian Railway in the Indo-China and ASEAN Subregion (Bangkok, February 1996).</i></p> <p>A Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure is held in New Delhi , India (October). The Conference launches the New Delhi Action Plan on Infrastructure Development in Asia and the Pacific defining a set of activities to be implemented at the regional level during the decade 1997-2006.</p> <p><i>Phase I (1997-2001) of the Regional Action Programme is marked by the formulation of rail and road linkages of international importance across the UNESCAP region.</i></p>
1997	<p>The 53rd session of the Commission endorses a refined strategy for the implementation of the ALTID project focussing on the formalization of the Trans-Asian Railway and Asian Highway networks through related agreements and giving emphasis to improving operational efficiency of the routes identified.</p> <p><i>One major project adopted is the “Joint UNESCAP/OSJD demonstration project on container transport on the routes of the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor”.</i></p>

1999	<p>UNESCAP and the Organization for Railways Cooperation (OSJD) sign a Memorandum of Understanding to promote cooperation and strengthen the impact of their respective work programmes on the development of railway infrastructure and services.</p> <p>UNESCAP publishes the study “Development of Asia-Europe Rail Container Transport through Block-trains – Northern Corridor of the Trans-Asian Railway”.</p> <p><i>A policy-level expert group meeting endorses the findings and recommendations of the study and recommends that the routes of the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor be considered for demonstration runs of container block-trains with the active involvement of private sector (Bangkok , February 2000).</i></p> <p>UNESCAP publishes the corridor study “Development of the Trans-Asian Railway: Trans-Asian Railway in the Southern Corridor of Asia-Europe routes”.</p> <p><i>A policy-level expert group meeting endorses the routes and route requirements for the Trans-Asian Railway in the Southern Corridor (Dhaka , May1999).</i></p>
2000	<p>UNESCAP and the International Union of Railways (UIC) sign a Memorandum of Understanding to promote cooperation and share expertise.</p>
2001	<p>Railways along the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor agree to implement demonstration runs of container block-trains along the corridor. At a policy-level expert group meeting (Bangkok, September), they formalize their commitment towards this objective in a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to be presented for signature at the Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure scheduled later that year.</p> <p>A Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure is held in Seoul , Republic of Korea (November). The Conference mandates activities to be undertaken during Phase II (2002-2006) of the Regional Action Programme of the New Delhi Action Plan.</p> <p><i>Phase II mandates UNESCAP to formalize the Trans-Asian Railway and Asian Highway networks, and promote the development of intermodal transport systems at the national, subregional and regional levels.</i></p> <p>At the Conference, the ministers of Kazakhstan, Mongolia , the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation and the Executive Secretary of UNESCAP sign the MOU on the planning and implementation of demonstration runs of container block-trains along the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor. In so doing they lay the founding stone for the operationalization of the Trans-Asian Railway network</p> <p>UNESCAP publishes the corridor study “Development of the Trans-Asian Railway: Trans-Asian Railway in the North-South Corridor Northern Europe to the Persian Gulf”.</p> <p>The study identified rail and land-cum-sea routes forming part of a network of routes connecting Northern Europe with the Persian Gulf through the Caucasus region, Central Asia and/or the Caspian Sea. It carried out an initial evaluation of the transit times that these routes can reasonably offer under the current circumstances of average operating speeds and time for border operations.</p>
2002	<p>Belarus, China , Poland , the International Union of Railways (UIC) and the Organization for Railways Cooperation (OSJD) sign the MOU on the planning and implementation of demonstration runs of container block-trains along the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor.</p> <p>The 1st Steering Committee Meeting planned under the MOU is held in Vladivostok (Russian Federation) in June.</p> <p><i>The Meeting assesses recent activities undertaken by the countries to develop services and facilities with respect to container operations and maps out future implementation of demonstration runs of container block-trains along the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor..</i></p>

2003	<p>The 2nd Steering Committee Meeting planned under the MOU is held in Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia) in October.</p> <p><i>The Meeting agrees on a schedule for four demonstration runs of container block-trains to take place along key sections of the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor between November 2003 and June 2004.</i></p> <p>In November, the 1st demonstration run of a container block-train takes place between the port of Tianjin (China) and Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia). A number of freight forwarders express their interest in the work of UNESCAP to develop Asia-Europe rail freight corridors and indicate that potential volumes already exist.</p>
2004	<p>The 60th session of the Commission (Shanghai, April) endorses the development of an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network.</p> <p>In April, the 2nd demonstration run of a container block-train takes place between the port of Lianyungang (China) and Almaty (Kazakhstan).</p> <p>In June, the 3rd demonstration run of a container block-train takes place between Brest (Belarus) and Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia).</p> <p>In July, the 4th demonstration run of a container block-train takes place between the port of Nakhodka (Russian Federation) and Malacewice (Poland).</p> <p>In November, at a Regional Meeting, UNESCAP launches the negotiation process on the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network.</p> <p><i>The Meeting welcomes the proposal for subregional meetings to be convened to further review the draft agreement at the subregional level.</i></p>
2005	<p>In April, the first expert group meeting to review the draft Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network is organized by UNESCAP and the Ministry of Railways, Government of India, in New Delhi . The second such meeting is jointly organized by UNESCAP and the Ministry of Transport of the Russian Federation in Moscow in September, .</p> <p>The 3rd Steering Committee Meeting on the implementation of demonstration runs of container block-trains along the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor is held in Moscow (Russian Federation) in September.</p> <p><i>The Meeting notes that the successful implementation of the four demonstration runs of container block-trains is the result of enhanced cooperation among railways and greater awareness of international trade patterns arising from globalization.</i></p> <p><i>An Intergovernmental Meeting on the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network is held in Bangkok in November.</i></p> <p><i>The Meeting finalizes the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network. With the negotiation process concluded, the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway network is now ready for adoption and signature.</i></p>
2006	<p>At its 62nd session (April), the Commission passes a resolution adopting the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network.</p>

Source: UNESCAP

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