



AFGHANISTAN AND TURKMENISTAN OPEN FIRST RAIL CONNECTION

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The first section of a proposed 400km track across central Asia was hailed as a significant milestone

Afghanistan and Turkmenistan have opened the first part of an ambitious new railway connecting the two countries for the first time.

It is hoped the \$2bn (£1.6bn) project will boost trade and make it easier to export the rich energy resources of Turkmenistan, which currently relies heavily on China and Russia.

The railway, if completed, will extend all the way east to Tajikistan.

However, construction of the full line is hampered by security concerns.

The 88km (55 miles) of railway is the first of 400km of planned track. However, neither Tajikistan or Afghanistan have built their parts of the route, as Afghanistan contends with a resurgence of Taliban activity.

Tajikistan has said it will not construct its part of the line until Afghanistan returns to relative stability.

If completed, the railway will run through three Central Asian nations, and possibly link to China

But if the link is completed, both Kyrgyzstan and China have expressed interest in connecting to the railway, which could have a powerful influence on a landlocked region that has little transport infrastructure.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani thanked Turkmenistan for its support in promoting stability in his country.

He said Turkmenistan had given "the gift of trust in the future of Afghanistan."

"In the past two years, the esteemed president of Turkmenistan decided to make investments of millions and billions of dollars in a stable Afghanistan," he added.

Portraits of Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov (L) and Afghan president Ashraf Ghani were erected at the new customs point for the ceremony

He called the opening of the railway an important step in strengthening relations between the two nations, and in promoting regional economic co-operation in Asia.

Turkmenistan, a former Soviet republic, exports natural gas, but its exports have fallen since Russia stopped buying from the country earlier this year.

Its exports to China are also limited by the capacity of the existing pipeline.

The country hopes to increase its exports to other foreign markets, while Afghanistan is seeking lower energy prices as a result of the new link.

Kaynak/Source: