
SPOTLIGHT: INAUGURATION OF BAKU-TBILISI-KARS RAILWAY REPRESENTS KEY LINK IN MODERN SILK ROAD

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A newly built railway line, which connects Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia in Azerbaijan's capital city of Baku, has been inaugurated Monday, linking central Asia and Europe through the Caucasus region.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) Railway, linking London to Beijing, will have the capacity to annually transport 1 million passengers and 6.5 million tons of freight at the initial stage.

The first train departed from Baku following an inauguration attended by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

"The BTK railway will not only connect Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, but also Europe and Asia. By this railway cargo and passengers will be transported nonstop from London to China," noted Erdogan during the official opening ceremony in Baku.

He also pointed out that the new railway will create great social and economic benefits for the entire region while his Azeri counterpart underlined the "historic" significance of the line.

"It is expected to transport 17 million tons of cargos at the next stage. And then larger volumes will be transported," President Aliyev said, adding that "the BTK railway is becoming an important part of Eurasia's transport map."

The BTK promises to provide an economic boost to the region, increase connectivity between Europe and Asia and encourage more freight to go by rail, as China is Europe's second biggest trading partner behind the United States, while Europe is China's biggest trading partner.

The date of the first official run of the 825 km line coincides with the liberation day of Kars, a city in northeastern Turkey and the last stop on the BTK line. The initial plan was to open the railway in 2010 but it was delayed several times, mainly for financial reasons.

Turkish Transportation, Maritime Affairs and Communication Minister Ahmet Arslan mentioned two obstacles in uninterrupted goods transport between Beijing and London via railways, which have been solved through multilateral efforts.

"The first was the Bosphorus Strait, in Istanbul, Turkey's economic hub. We have solved this problem, as you know. The other one was the missing line between Kars and Akhalkalaki in

Georgia. That link is now established through the BTK line," he said.

Arslan said that the railway would add significant value to countries hosting the line and revive the regional economy. It will also facilitate the delivery of goods to target markets. The new railway corridor, he said, will enable easier transportation between Turkey and Asia as well as the Caucasus and European countries.

"Transportation of goods manufactured and produced in China as well as raw materials will be facilitated via an uninterrupted line of railways," Arslan said.

"Investors who want to set up logistics centers in Eastern Anatolia and carry goods from the region to other areas are looking forward to the project," he added.

Turkey inaugurated in 2013 the world's deepest underwater railway tunnel under the Bosphorus strait in Istanbul, Marmaray, connecting the European and Asian continents for the first time.

Experts underlined the strategic importance of the BTK amid China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to build a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along and beyond the ancient Silk Road trade routes.

Turkey is also working extensively on the Middle Corridor plan, linking by railway Kars to its western city of Edirne, at Europe's gate on the Greek border.

"When this railway is operational, Turkey will play a major role in connecting London to Beijing, through new highways and railways. We always say that Turkey is a bridge between Europe and Asia, but this will then be physically true," said Altay Atli, researcher at the Istanbul-based Sabanci University's Istanbul Policy center.

"The BTK is very appropriate to the logic of the Belt and Road Initiative, and has a global importance in regards to the interconnectivity between the European and Asian continents," said Atli.

The BTK railway will reduce the transport time of goods from China to Europe and vice versa to 15 days, which is less than half of the time that it takes today through sea transportation.

"The BTK will offer easier, less expensive transportation options, will strengthen people-to-people contacts, contribute to developments to increase the welfare of the region with tourism, promote mobility of goods and people and integrate the region with the international community and markets," said Ozge Nur Ogutcu, an analyst at the Ankara-based Center for Eurasian Studies in a recent report.

"For centuries the Silk Road was the main focus. Even today, as it was in the past, any project that contains corridors passing through this region will benefit all actors. This route provided and still provides a good base for win-win trade and for Silk Road-built connections," added Ogutcu.