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History and prospects of the international East – West transport corridor

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ABSTRACT The Russian Federation has a promising transport potential, which requires the development of the transport infrastructure of Siberia and the Far East. The implementation of certain eastern transport projects has a long history. For two centuries, both Russian and foreign politicians, transport specialists, and enthusiasts have put forward infrastructural programmes for the development of the East of the country and the expansion of transport accessibility of its distant borders. The improvement of the infrastructure of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), the expansion of the railway and highway networks, the construction of a number of complex engineering structures, such as bridges and tunnels, the expansion of combined water and land transportation, and the increase in the number of border crossings enhance the international importance of Russian transport. Combining all promising transport projects into a single comprehensive programme creates conditions for expanding transport links between the world's leading economic centres. The successful development of the East–West transport corridor in modern conditions opens up new opportunities for Russia, which should be paid closer attention to.

Russian and foreign literature provides a historical retrospective of individual promising infrastructure projects for the development of the Far Eastern and Siberian sections of the East–West transport corridor. No single, comprehensive study has been undertaken to date.

KEYWORDS: transport corridor, Trans-Siberian Railway, Transpolar Railway, Northern Sea Route, transport infrastructure, Baikal–Amur Mainline, Northern Latitudinal Railway

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Научная статья

История и перспективы развития международного транспортного коридора Восток – Запад

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АННОТАЦИЯ Российская Федерация обладает перспективным транспортным потенциалом, для которого требуется развитие транспортной инфраструктуры Сибири и Дальнего Востока. Осуществление отдельных восточных транспортных проектов имеет долгую историю. Отечественные и зарубежные политики, специалисты транспорта, энтузиасты два столетия выдвигали инфраструктурные программы развития востока страны и расширения коммуникационной доступности дальних рубежей. Совершенствование инфраструктуры Северного морского пути, расширение сети железных и шоссейных дорог, возведение ряда сложных инженерных сооружений — мостов и тоннелей, расширение комбинированных водно-сухопутных перевозок и увеличение количества пограничных переходов усиливают международное значение российского транспорта. Объединение в единую комплексную программу всех перспективных транспортных проектов создает условия для расширения транспортных связей между ведущими мировыми экономическими центрами. Успешное развитие транспортного коридора Восток – Запад в современных условиях открывает для России новые возможности, на которые следует обратить более пристальное внимание.

В отечественной и зарубежной литературе в исторической ретроспективе рассматриваются отдельные перспективные инфраструктурные проекты развития дальневосточного и сибирского участков транспортного коридора Восток – Запад. Единого комплексного исследования до настоящего времени не предпринималось.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: транспортный коридор; Транссибирская магистраль; Трансполярная магистраль; Северный морской путь; транспортная инфраструктура; Байкало-Амурская магистраль; Северный широтный ход

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of the growing barriers of sanctions and duties, the established economic ties are going through a deep crisis. The world's leading economies are looking for new opportunities for selling their products. China, Japan, South Korea, India in the East and the European Union in the West are groping for common grounds. Changes in the centres of sales of finished goods will reroute transport flows. The expected growth of freight traffic along the East–West route affects Russia's main land latitudinal transport line, the Trans-Siberian Railway. The Trans-Siberian Railway is currently utilized to such an extent that any significant increase in freight traffic is impossible without a comprehensive modification of the entire transport infrastructure.

FINDINGS

Russia's eastern transport projects have a long history. Transportation services in Siberia and the Far East has been developing for thousands of years, connecting existing civilizations by convenient natural routes, such as rivers and valleys. It took Russian pioneers a few decades in the 16th–17th centuries to make their way from the Urals to the Pacific coast along the historically established routes, annexing new lands to the Muscovite state. The main route at that period ran in the North, from the Polar Urals to the East.

By combining water and land transport routes and building strongholds, colonizers brought their transport solutions to the indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Far East. The legacy of that period is found in languages and toponyms of the peoples of the Far North — for them, the term "Russian" was primarily associated with transport routes. The Buryats used it to refer to the route via Tobolsk. For the Khanty, Mansi and Selkups, this was how they called the route via the Yugra lands to the areas inhabited by the Komi. The Nenets, Evenks and Yakuts called the Mangazeya sea route "Russian" [1].

In the 18th century, when the route via the Southern Urals quieted down, it becomes a priority route for the transportation of goods and passengers from the centre of Russia to Siberian and Far Eastern provinces and back [2]. Until the end of the 19th century, the more than 8,000-km long Great Siberian Route was used to transport so-called "colonial" goods from Japan, Korea and China to Russian and European markets.

The Trans-Siberian Railway was built along the established transport corridor, enhancing its importance for both the Russian and global economies. For more than a century, the Trans-Siberian Railway was gradually upgraded. However, the artery has its limits. The capacity of the Siberian and Far Eastern railway network can only be expanded if alternative lines and branches leading to economically important centres and new border crossings are built.

The first attempt to expand the East Siberian railway network was the construction of the Baikal–Amur Mainline (BAM) which began in the 1930s. The project was completed half a century later, by the end of the 1980s. Due to the increasing importance of BAM in the early 21st century, it was modernized [3]. The new BAM expands Russia's transport capabilities, but there is a bottleneck to the West of Taishet station on the Trans-Siberian Railway, which offsets the achievements.

In the 1940–50s, the project for the construction of the Transpolar Railway was carried out. By 1953, when construction was stopped, tracks had been laid between Chum and Pur (Urengoy) stations and the Turukhan–Yermakovo section had been built. A significant part of the railway was abandoned [4]. Since the 1960s, some sections have been operated for oil and gas companies. Since 2003, a number of sections have been operated by Yamal Railway Company OJSC created by the Administration of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Sverdlovsk Railway and Sevtyumentransput OJSC. The company is expanding the regional railway network [5]. In 2015–2020, RZhD OJSC (Russian Railways) planned to build the Northern Latitudinal Railway (NLR) — a connecting line from the Northern Railway to Sverdlovsk with access to Yamburg and Ig-

arka. However, the project was excluded from the investment programme of RZhD OJSC in 2020 [6].

The most significant and promising railway projects in the East are associated with access to the supporting points — the ports of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and access to new border crossings.

The NSR ports of Naryan-Mar, Sabetta, Igarka, Dikson, Dudinka, Tiksi, Pevek, Uelen and Anadyr cannot ensure the full-fledged operation of the NSR without a permanent land connection with economic centres of Russia [7]. These connections can only be provided by railways. Projects for the construction of steel mainlines were developed for almost all ports. The Prospective Plan for the Development of Railway Transport in the Far East and Transbaikalia until 2030 has been developed for the easternmost ports of the Northern Sea Route[1, 2] [8].

The project has a promising continuation involving the construction of bridge crossings or building a ferry crossing from Chukotka towards Alaska via the islands in the Bering Strait. The project was first put forward by American politician and businessman William Gilpin in 1894 [9]. The project is revived from time to time but is not being implemented [9].

A more realistic project is connecting Japan with continental Eurasia by land crossings — bridges. As an island, Japan is closest to Russia's Sakhalin. The La Perouse Strait between Sakhalin and Hokkaido is 43 km wide and is quite passable for bridge builders. The project was announced at the III Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in 2017. Later, RZhD OJSC and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport of Japan set up an expert group to discuss the project. However, political problems do not allow for continuing the dialogue on the subject and moving from a "pipe dream" to the implementation of a mutually beneficial plan in real life [10].

The Russian Federation does not abandon the prospect of building a bridge to Hokkaido. This is proven by the fact that the project work to build a bridge between the continent and Sakhalin has been ongoing since 1999. The first project, which involved the construction of a dam across the Tatar Strait, was presented in the late 19th century. In 1950, the construction of a tunnel under the Nevelsky Strait began, but in 1953 it was stopped [11]. By 2019, the Sakhalin Railway was converted to the standard Russian gauge (1,520 mm) [12]. Before that, between 1945 and 2019, the gauge on the Sakhalin Railway was 1,067 mm, which is the standard track gauge in Japan.

A promising project for the implementation is the Russian Federation's proposal for the Governments of North and South Korea to build a railway from the Russian border to the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula. But the construction of an economically important railway line is not possible in the near future because of the political discord between the North and South of the Peninsula.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the above projects will significantly expand the railway network in the East of Russia and will give it an important international transit status. Steel tracks can connect ports of the Northern Sea Route, increasing its cargo traffic[3] [13]. Transport routes in the direction of the United States, Japan, North and South Korea combine the world's leading economies (China, North America, Japan and South Korea) via Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East into a single land transport complex. The expansion of land routes in Central and Western Siberia will connect the eastern economies with those in Europe.

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