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The PLA's "Orient Express": Militarization of the Iron Silk Road

by Dr. Christina Lin

China's rise on the international stage has been accompanied by an increase in its military's presence. Beijing's expanding ambition is prompting calls on the country's leaders to be more proactive in protecting its national interests. These calls by Chinese analysts have raised concerns about the military's capability to mobilize troops to defend the country's vast borders (*Ta Kung Pao* [Hong Kong], September 24, 2009; *Jing Bao* [Hong Kong], January 29, 2010).

For example, in the aftermath of the April 2010 Kyrgyzstan crisis when violent protests forced the collapse of the government, Chen Xiangyang, an associate researcher at the Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), called for a "Large Periphery" strategy to safeguard China's neighboring areas. Chen's call was echoed by senior Chinese military leaders about possibly intervening in Central Asia (*Ta Kung Pao* [Hong Kong], September 24, 2009). The Hong Kong-based *Jing Bao* back in a January 2010 article argued that railways – and their military significance – need to be infused into Chinese leaders' strategic lens when exporting railway technology as they enhance military power projection (*Jing Bao* [Hong Kong], January 29, 2010).

Indeed, in applying this strategic vision, on November 17, 2010, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) took the Shanghai-Nanjing express train for the first time to return to their barracks after completing security duty at the Shanghai World Expo 2010 (*China Army*, November 19, 2010). According to the Military Representative Office of the PLA stationed at the Shanghai Railway Bureau, the Shanghai-Nanjing express railway is an inter-city railway that can run at a maximum speed of 350 kilometers (km) per hour, and some Chinese military

analysts touted this is an ideal way for PLA to project troops and light equipment in military operations other than war (MOOTW) (*China Army*, November 19, 2010).

China has built rails to Tibet, is building rails to Nepal, and planning high-speed rails to Laos, Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma (Myanmar) (*Xinhua News Agency*, October 17, 2010; *Xinhua News Agency*, December 8, 2010; *Foreign Trade*, October 25, 2010). On November 15 last year, then Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki announced that Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan agreed to cooperate with China to build a China-Iran rail from Xinjiang, passing through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and finally arriving in Iran (*People's Daily Online*, November 18; *Press TV*, December 10, 2010; *Global Military*, November 20, 2010; *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper no. 4178, November 19, 2010).

The longer plan seems to connect westward into Iraq (where China has large oil & gas investments), Syria, Turkey, and onto Europe (*Press TV*, August 6, 2010; See Christina Lin, "Syria in China's New Silk Road Strategy," *China Brief*, April 16, 2010; August 19, 2010). This is based on an overall UN-sponsored Trans-Asia Railway (TAR) network to link China to Europe, using the Middle East as a transit hub (*Move On Inc*, November 15, 2010).

Although UN engineered the TAR agreement, China has done more than any other nation to reforge trade and transport links to reestablish the Silk Route. Negotiations are already underway with 17 countries across Eurasia. With China's high-speed trains having clocked speeds as high as 486.1 km/h (302 mph) (*People's Daily*, September 28, 2010; *People's Daily*, December 9, 2010; *Xinhua*, December 8, 2010), and the PLA aggressively upgrading its long-range combat capabilities by using rail as logistical support for its air force (PLAAF) and troop projection, this new 'Orient Express' across the revived Silk Road will have important military and strategic implications for U.S. and Western interests in the region.

Militarization of the Iron Silk Road

Military requirements are part of China's rail development, and the PLA actively participates in the design and planning of China's high-speed rail (*Xinhua News Agency*, December 7, 2010). For example, Chengdu Railway Bureau has 14 military officers to take lead positions in key departments at all major stations, such as coordinating railway planning, design, construction, timing of requirements and track implementation (*Xinhua News Agency*, December 7, 2010).

Also, Shenyang Railway Bureau, which is in the strategic location of Liaoning Province next to North Korea, Inner Mongolia and the Yellow Sea, has established a regional military transportation management mechanism with the PLA (*Xinhua News Agency*, January 12, 2010). According to the Military Transportation Department of the PLA General Logistics Department (GLD), over 1,000 railway stations have been equipped with military transportation facilities, thereby establishing a complete railway support network that enhances the PLA's

strategic projection capability (*PLA Daily*, February 4, 2010; *Defense Professional*, 4 February 2010).

GLD had cooperated with the PRC's Ministry of Railway in 2009, and fulfilled over 100 military requirements for 20 odd railways in China with the capability of military transportation. (*PLA Daily*, February 4, 2010). In 2009, large sums of money were invested to build military transportation facilities for a few railway stations and military platforms for materials loading and unloading. This is to meet military requirements used for activities such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'s Peace Mission 2010 (*PLA Daily*, February 4, 2010; *Defense Professional*, 4 February 2010).

GLD is actively involved through the entire process of the railway construction, varying from the programming to the completion of the railways. For example, when building the railway from Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province, to Nanning, capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, in order to meet troop maneuver requirements the Ministry of Railway had to revise a partial route and prolong 12.4 km of railways at an increased cost of 1.55 billion yuan (*PLA Daily*, 4 February 2010).

With China's expansionist policy and infrastructure projects toward its neighbors, some analysts are beginning to sound the alarm of militarization of these projects.

Central, Southeast, and South Asia

For example, Konstantin Syroyezhkin, in Kazakhstan's Institute of Strategic Studies, points out the rapid development of road and railroad infrastructure in Central Asia with Chinese participation may be used for future PLA troop deployment in case of a serious conflict threatening China's security or strategic interests (See Farkhad Sharip, "China's Expansionist Policy Toward Kazakhstan Takes a New Turn", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 17, 2010; *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, November 9, 2010). This concern is corroborated by the recent SCO Peace Mission 2010 military exercise, whereby China used rail to transport troops to Kazakhstan (See Roger McDermott, "China Showcases Expeditionary Military Power in Peace Mission 2010", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, September 28, 2010).

Likewise, other countries such as Vietnam, India, and Tibet Autonomous Region share the same concern. Vietnam for one rejected China's high-speed railway technology (\$32.5 billion) in favor of Japan's Shinkansen technology (\$55 billion) despite its higher cost (*Comhaha*, December 7, 2010). On June 19, 2010, Vietnam's National Assembly voted down China's high-speed rail plan. According to Chinese language magazine *Yazhou Zhoukan*, some Vietnamese politicians oppose adopting Chinese high speed rail technology for fear that China might use them to transport PLA troops to invade Vietnam, in reprise of its 1979 Sino-Vietnam War (*South China Morning Post*, July 19, 2010).

In the Tibet Autonomous Region, China's high altitude Qinghai-Tibet railway that opened in 2006 is being used as a supply line to enhance PLAAF mobilization capability (*People's*

Daily, 4 August 2010; *PLA Daily*, 3 August 2010; *The Hindu*, August 6, 2010). On August 3, 2010, *PLA Daily* reported that a train loaded with important air combat readiness material for the PLAAF arrived in Tibet via the railway. China is rapidly upgrading railways and airports in Tibet, with four operational airports and a fifth one under construction (*South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper No 3966, August 5, 2010; *Defense Update*, December 20, 2010). During the March 2008 Tibetan protests, the Qinghai Tibet rail enabled rapid PLA deployment. Within 48 hours, at the start of Lhasa riots, T-90/89 armored personnel carriers and T-92 wheeled infantry fighting vehicles appeared on the street – apparently from the 149th Division of the No. 13 Group Army under the Chengdu Military Regional Command (*UPI Asia Online*, June 27, 2008). This was indicated by the “leopard” camouflage uniforms specifically designed for mountain warfare operation from the 149th Division (*UPI Asia*, June 27, 2008).

Should Sino-Indian relations ever deteriorate to the verge of military confrontation and riots in Tibet spread, the PLA’s Mountain Brigades can rapidly deploy to the region via the railway. Indeed, railway and road building have been China’s Himalayan strategy for decades – as the PLA prepared to annex Tibet, Mao Zedong advised it “to advance while building roads” (*Asia Times Online*, October 16, 2010).

PLA’s Military Rail Transport to Greater Middle East?

China-Iran Railway

In October 2010, transport ministers of China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran signed an agreement in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, for a China-Iran railway construction (*Asia Plus* (Tajikistan), October 28, 2010). The railway from Xinjiang, China, would pass through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, arrive in Iran and split into a southern line to the Gulf and a western line to Turkey onto Europe (Global military, November 20, 2010). Earlier in August, China and Iran had signed a \$2 billion agreement on construction of the railway network in western Iran, which will continue westward into Iraq, eventually connecting with Syria, Turkey and the Mediterranean coastal countries (*People’s Daily Online*, 18 October 2010; *Press TV*, 28 August 2010).

China-Turkey Railway

Around the same time, in October 2010, Turkey and China elevated their relations to one of “strategic partnership,” signed deals for high-speed rails in Turkey to eventually link with China, upgraded their military ties, and participated in the traditional NATO air combat exercise of Anatolian Eagle – with China replacing Israel and the United States (*The Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 2010; See Chris Zambelis, “China-Turkey Strategic Partnership: Implications of Anatolian Eagle”, *China Brief*, January 14).

China will extend \$30 billion to construct 7,000 km of high-speed rail lines across Turkey, as well as upgrading rail links between Turkey and Pakistan and planning a railway around Lake Van to Iran and Pakistan (*Asia News*, October 28, 2010; *China Daily*, October 9, 2010;

Today's Zaman, October 15, 2010; *Hurriyet*, October 15, 2010). Moreover, China has invited Bulgaria to join Turkey in its Eurasian high-speed rail plan (*China Daily*, October 29, 2010). China offered huge loans for construction in return for use of Bulgarian rivers, seaports and airports, as a transit hub onto Western Europe (*China Daily*, October 29, 2010).

Given Sino-Turkey strategic partnership and anticipation of future military exercises, Chinese railways could enhance PLA military projection and presence in the Middle East and wider Black Sea region. In addition to Chinese warplanes over the Black Sea region during the October 2010 Anatolian Eagle exercise, Chinese special op forces conducted joint exercises at a Turkey commando school in early November (*World Tribune*, November 12, 2010; *South China Morning Post*, November 9, 2010). With reports of PLAAF refueling in Iran en route to Turkey, high-speed rail could enable logistic support and transport of combat readiness materials in the future (*Hurriyet*, October 11).

Missing Links – Iraq and Afghanistan

While China is constructing railways across Eurasia, Iraq and Afghanistan still present significant missing links due to the security situation and large presence of U.S. and Western troops. Yet, when U.S. troops draw down, China will try to push for UNPKOs to take over and deploy PLA under blue berets to protect China's energy and strategic interests (*China Daily*, September 28, 2010). It has large investments in the Aynak copper mine in Afghanistan as well as various oil and gas fields in Iraq (*China Daily*, September 23, 2010; *China Daily*, June 10, 2010). China will also likely use SCO to foment regional cooperation for constructing the railways through Afghanistan to Iran, eventually linking with Iraq. China and Iran are not interested in joining western-led initiatives, such as the Transport Corridor of Europe, Caucasus, and Asia (TRACECA) which is also known as the "new Silk Road." Rather, they want to forge their own projects and not be beholden to Western interests or sanctions.

Conclusion

China's ambitious high-speed rail projects across Asia and the Middle East have important strategic implications. It links up poorer regions with more prosperous regions, provides jobs during an economic downturn, and allows Chinese military and security services to better project power both within and without the country's borders. While air transport is faster, it is limited to fewer people and lighter gears, whereas rail is a crucial means of moving soldiers and heavy equipments, and much easier to sustain logistically.

As China's economic and energy portfolio continues to increase in the Greater Middle East, there may be future conditions under which PLA would deploy troops using high-speed rails for MOOTW to protect its strategic interests. Indeed, in January this year there were reports that the PLA has deployed troops to the economic zone of Rajin-Sonbong in northeast North Korea in order to "guard port facilities China has invested in" (*The Chosun Ilbo*, January 17,

2010). Whether this is a telltale sign of what may happen with China's interests in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, remains a mystery on the PLA's Orient Express for now.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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