

Kazakh President Proposes New High-Speed Link From Asia to Europe

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Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev (L) and Chinese President Xi Jinping chat before a wreath laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Victory Day in central Moscow, Russia, May 9, 2015.

Entering into a budding debate over the future face of the Eurasian landmass, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev on Friday proposed creating a transport corridor that would run from Asia to Europe across Kazakhstan.

"I propose creating a new, high-speed combined transport route — the Eurasian transcontinental corridor," Nazarbayev said at an economic forum in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, Kazakh news agency Tengri News reported.

"It will extend across the entire territory of our country, enabling unhindered transit of cargo from Asia to Europe and back. It's a much shorter way than across the ocean," Nazarbayev said.

The Kazakh president's proposal appears to fall in line with China's scheme to create a Silk Road Economic Belt from China to Europe via Central Asia, for which China has been steadily lobbying Kazakhstan.

Russia, meanwhile, has its own candidates for an Asia-Europe transport link: the Trans-Siberian Railroad and its tributary, the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), which the government has pledged to modernize.

President Vladimir Putin said in 2013 that the railways stood to become "the main transportation artery between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region," giving "a powerful boost to development for Siberia and the Far East."

Chinese President Xi Jinping made a daylong stopover in Kazakhstan on his way to Russia earlier this month. During his visit, he declared that China is ready to align its Silk Belt initiative with Kazakhstan's Nyrly Zhol economic policy, a plan that aims to raise Kazakhstan into the world's top 30 most developed countries, the official Chinese news agency Xinhua News reported.

Economic ties between the two nations are also growing, with China and Kazakhstan in March signing 33 deals worth a total of nearly \$24 billion, according to The Astana Times, a Kazakhstan-based newspaper.

Even as China takes an increasing interest in Central Asia, Russia is seeking to consolidate its influence in the region through the fledgling Eurasian Economic Union, an economic association that now lists Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia among its members.

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