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Trans-Asia railway project firmly on track to success

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THE Malaysia-mooted Trans-Asia railway network has been set in motion with the acceptance of an inception report and consensus on its first route by a special working group which concluded its meeting on Sept 30.

The report is on the background and status of the railways of the countries through which this service will pass.

Completing one route first even as various reports are being readied was a suggestion by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a strategy to make the project a reality.

First proposed by Dr Mahathir at the inaugural Asia-Europe Meeting in Bangkok in 1995, the 5,513km railway linking Singapore and China, and passing through Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, has not been without its bumps and grinds getting this far.

Consultancy in Cambodia came to a halt when the country went into turmoil in July. Occasional fighting on the Thai-Myanmar border by anti-Yangon guerilla fighters also tested the relationship between the two nations.

Political differences and disagreements over the methods of funding and alignment of rail tracks almost derailed the project several times. Land-locked Laos and Myanmar with its massive railways indicated they wanted to be part of the project and had to be accommodated.

As a major project of the Mekong Basin development plan initiated at the 1995 Asean summit in Bangkok, the Trans-Asia network is expected to boost trade, tourism and ties in the region.

Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik spoke at the Asean Transport Ministers Meeting in Cebu, Philippines, last month on the role of transport in facilitating intra-Asean movement of people and goods to help create a "borderless environment" within the Asean region.

Dr Ling said this would also assist in the promotion of better understanding through social and cultural interaction in addition to economic integration.

The Trans-Asia railway is also a prelude to linking the region with Europe via railroads through north and south Asia. The northern corridor will link the Singapore-Kunming route to Beijing and then on to the Trans-Siberian Railway in Russia while the southern corridor will pass through Myanmar to the Indian sub-continent, into West Asia and on to Europe.

Much awaited now is the commercially viable package on the agreed initial route that is being put together by consultants. This link is estimated to cost RM1.5 billion.

This package is expected to be ready in November, and presented to Asean nations at their informal summit in December so that private companies of the member countries can participate in the project.

As co-ordinator of the project, Malaysia is taking this initiative in the Asean spirit of "prosper thy neighbour" and letting anyone interested get aboard.

Academician Abdul Rahim Mohd Nor of the Department of Geography, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, last year cautioned that building a "mammoth linear" project crossing international borders of culturally and geo-politically diverse nations would not be an easy task.

So doubts linger about the private sector response to the project, leaving availability of funds, as the biggest stumbling block.

As investors, private sector concerns will be on returns on their

capital input. They will worry if, like our country, the others will offer some concessions on their investments.

Also looming large are land codes of the countries involved and how they affect the private sector, especially the foreign ones. If land laws have to be amended it could be a long drawn-out affair.

Legal systems will have to be looked into.

Cross-border facilitation involving customs clearance and immigration processes have to be fast and efficient to make railways the chosen and effective mode of transport. Otherwise, its purpose will be defeated.

One technical issue that has to be resolved is that of track axle-load which relates to how much load a track can take. Ours take a very heavy load while those of some of our northern neighbours is less.

Border agreements have to be looked into. Ours with our immediate northern and southern neighbours have been in place for years and work well. Others have borders that have been a source of strife and suspicion for years.

Investors will roll in only if these issues are streamlined.

The roles of railwaymen must be backed by the resolve of Governments to see the project to its rightful end.

Still, one thing is clear - railways have always opened up lands just as they did in the American Wild West, the Indian sub-continent and countless other areas, including the jungles of Malaysia.

So it is hoped the Trans-Asia railway does the same for the region for greater trade, better ties and increased tourism.

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