Expert Group Meeting on Transport Connectivity and Logistics: Emerging opportunities and challenges for enhancing rail connectivity along the Trans-Asian Railway network

29 and 30 April 2024
Bangkok and online

Meeting Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The Expert Group Meeting on Transport Connectivity and Logistics (EGM) took place in Bangkok, Thailand and virtually on 29 and 30 April 2024. It was attended by more than 48 participants from Ministry of Transport/Railways of invited countries including Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Georgia, India (online), Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Thailand, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam (online). The representative from following organizations also participated: Economic Cooperation Organization, International Union of Railways (online), Organization for Cooperation between Railways (online), Directorate General of Mobility and Transport, European Union (online) and Asian Transport Outlook (online).

2. The EGM comprised of three sessions - first on rail cybersecurity, second on connectivity between Southeast Asia and North and Central Asia, and third on pressing/emerging issues on strengthening rail connectivity in Asia and the Pacific. The event was organized with the support of the ESCAP regular programme of work and the capacity building project on Leveraging Trans-Asian Railway network for more efficient and resilient transport and logistics in ASEAN and beyond.

3. The representatives of ESCAP and ECO secretariat delivered opening remarks reaffirming the importance of rail digitalization and expanding rail connectivity within different subregions of ESCAP and invited participants to share experience, discuss and further agree on coordinated actions for promoting rail transport in the region for more sustainable transport supporting countries in realizing SDGs.

4. At the beginning of the session one, the participants discussed the recent development pertaining to rail digitalization namely the new annex to the intergovernmental agreement on Trans-Asian Railway network and Strategy 2030 on Accelerating Rail Digital Transformation in Asia-Pacific region that were adopted at the eighth meeting of the Working Group on Trans-Asian Railway network in September 2023. The meeting invited the countries to complete their internal processes and submit the instrument of acceptance for new annex as soon as possible for it to enter into force.

5. The secretariat presented comprehensive assessment of the state of rail cybersecurity maturity in the region. As considerable rail investments were being made the need for taking cyberthreats into consideration since the beginning was recommended. Based on the global experience, the importance of regional cooperation on the issue of rail cybersecurity was emphasized. Ten countries shared their national experiences in addressing rail cybersecurity highlighting the growing importance of the issue due to rising cyberattacks happening on their rail digital infrastructure. They expanded on the national policies and other regulations that have been put in place to deal with cyberthreats.

6. As recommended by the Strategy 2030 on Accelerating Rail Digital Transformation, a draft regional framework strengthening rail cyber security (attached as annex) was presented by the secretariat elaborating on the challenges to rail cybersecurity in the region and key actions. The participants reiterated the need for regional cooperation on rail cybersecurity in the region and the draft framework was considered as an appropriate step in that direction.

7. As way forward – the meeting agreed that comments and suggestions to the draft will be shared by countries by **31 July 2024** and thereon the finalized draft regional framework on strengthening rail cybersecurity would be placed for consideration of the Working Group on Trans-Asian Railway network at its next meeting to be held in 2025.

8. For session 2, the secretariat presented planned outputs of the second component of the project on leveraging Trans-Asian Railway for efficient and resilient network in ASEAN and beyond. Thereon the findings of the study on rail connectivity between Southeast Asia and North and Central Asia along with a road map to deepen the rail connectivity between the two subregions were elaborated. The study expanded on the rail corridor among Malaysia- Thailand-Lao PDR- China – Kazakhstan as the one having high potential for further development for fostering rail connectivity between Southeast Asia and North and Central Asia.

9. The participants considered the present physical and non-physical barriers along the identified rail corridor and reviewed a draft road map containing recommendations for further strengthening rail connectivity between two subregions. Thirteen countries made presentations making several suggestions to strengthen rail linkages between two subregions of ESCAP. The meeting, accordingly, recommended to finalize the draft road map taking the suggestions into account by **October 2024** and present finalized road map for further consideration of the countries at the appropriate platforms.

10. The meeting took note of the railway development in other sub-regions of Asia-Pacific, provided by Bangladesh and Pakistan. In this context, the secretariat reminded the participants of the procedure for amendments to the annex I to the intergovernmental agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway network and urged upon the participants to submit the proposals as soon as possible, particularly, those involving the changes to the border stations, since for such amendments to be adopted by the working group a written consent of the neighboring countries was required. The secretariat confirmed its readiness to provide related advisory and capacity building assistance.

11. In addition, the participants were presented with the preliminary draft of classification of the routes of Trans-Asian Railway network expounding the tentative taxonomy with such parameters as gauge, electrification, and number of tracks. Such a classification would enhance the utility of agreement by making it possible to have more detailed analysis of challenges along the rail routes along the Trans-Asian railway network.

12. Furthermore, a preliminary draft of the study on electronic database for rolling stock admitted for international traffic along the Trans- Asian railway network for facilitation of international rail transport was also presented. The proposed electronic database will support the implementation of the recently adopted annex to the intergovernmental agreement on Trans-Asian railway network on the *guiding principles on electronic information exchange among railways and between railways and control agencies.*

13. The participants were informed that the two studies are still under draft stage and will be finalized in due course it and the participants were invited to share inputs and comments by 31 July 2024 to the secretariat so that they can be considered while finalizing the studies. The recommendations of these studies will be presented at the next meeting of the Working Group on Trans-Asian railway network in 2025.

14. An example of railway connectivity profile being developed under the project for countries of Southeast Asia and North and Central Asia in partnership the Asian Transport Outlook were also presented during the meeting, and it was informed that these profiles would be shared with the countries for their inputs soon before being finalized.

15. The representative of the ECO requested to consider developing a coordination mechanism between ECO and ESCAP to contribute to the objectives of rail digitalization and rail connectivity of between SEA and ECO countries.

16. The representative of the OSJD and the DG MOVE shared experience of their organizations in promoting rail transport and in this regard expressed their desire to cooperate with ESCAP.

17. These EGM conclusions and recommendations were finalized through online consultations on 10 May 2024.

18. The participants expressed their appreciation to ESCAP for organizing the meeting and to the Government of China for financial support to the project on Leveraging Trans-Asian Railway network for efficient and resilient transport networks in ASEAN and beyond.
