

Creating the Asian Highway

FIRST LAUNCHED in 1959, the Asian Highway (AH) network now encompasses over 130,000 kilometres of roads covering 31 countries in Asia. It is designed to develop road transport infrastructure in Asia and link Asia with Europe, thereby promoting regional and international cooperation for economic and social development, as well as opening up new potential for international tourism and trade.

In the late 1980s, with the return of peace to the Pacific Asia region, the need for reliable and efficient intraregional and interregional transport, including roads and railways, became more apparent. Road and rail transport remain critical to the development of the region's landlocked countries such as Lao PDR, Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia, Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics.

To help countries explore the emerging opportunities, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), based in Bangkok, created an integrated Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) project that includes the Asian Highway and the Trans-Asian Railway. ESCAP is now working at integrating the two with their inter-modal connections and links to inland waterways and maritime transport.

Further integration with airports will give the region huge advantages for tourism that come with upgraded transportation infrastructure, a major deficiency in realising the tourism potential of many of the developing nations.

Countries Covered

Three studies were undertaken for the formulation of the AH network. The first study covered 18 member countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China (PRC), India, Indonesia, Iran, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. These involve 29 AH routes totalling 69,000 kilometres.

A second study covered Central Asia and the South Caucasus countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These involve 13 AH routes totalling 21,000 kilometres. In 1999, the AH routes in Turkey were approved, adding a further 3,200 kilometres of roads to the network.

A third study covered China (PRC), Mongolia, DPR Korea, Kazakhstan, Korea (ROK) and the (then) Russian Federation. This formed the Northern Corridor of the AH connecting Northeast Asia with Central Asia, the Caucasus and Europe. About 40,000 kilometres of road networks were identified. Most recently, AH routes have been identified in Bhutan (2002) and Georgia (2001).

A full route-map can be seen at:

<http://www.unescap.org/tctd/ah/routemap.htm>.

Tapping the Potential

While roads are an essential prerequisite for economic and social development, they are often taken for granted and get less attention than air transport infrastructure. Roads sometimes receive less policy attention, and this is reflected in capital and particularly maintenance budget allocations.

In light of globalisation, it is essential that AH member countries work together to manage the growing potential for cross-border and transit-movements of goods and vehicles. The "Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure" in November 2001 noted the unprecedented level of demand for transport in the region and that inefficiency in the transport system was unnecessarily adding cost.

Hence, AH member countries are making efforts to develop and upgrade AH routes through appropriate strategies within their national plans and policies. Although the AH routes have received priority attention in most of the member countries, there is still a huge amount of work required to further develop and improve the network in terms of constructing missing links and

bridges, upgrading sub-standard sections and allocating adequate resources for maintenance of the routes. Policy makers and the general public need to be made aware of the importance of these developments to economic and social progress.

Asian Highway Route Criteria

The basic principle is to minimise the number of roads to be included in the network, primarily for cost reasons, and make the maximum possible use of existing infrastructure. This allows the countries to stay focused on developing and upgrading what exists, rather than adding new roads. The road, rail and road-cum-rail routes are based on maximising the potential of existing and possible trade and tourism flows. Hence, the routes focus on:

- Capital city-to-capital city links (for international transport)
- Connections to main industrial and agricultural centres (links to important origin and destination points)
- Connections to major sea and river ports (integration of land and sea transport networks)
- Connections to major container terminals and depots (integration of rail and road networks)

The main objective is to ensure that the roads identified as part of the AH network meet specific uniform standards and link up with each other at border crossings. At the many meetings being held to carry the project forward, each AH member country is asked to provide updated information on its national highways and submit country reports covering the following:

- General status of the national road network
- Status of the AH network in the respective country and proposals for revision and inclusion of new routes in the network
- Policies and plans for the development of road networks
- Regulations and standards
- International border crossing procedures and facilities
- Highway numbering system
- Promotional activities

Some Recent Developments

- China (PRC) has reviewed the proposed AH routes within its borders through a national study and is now seeking final approval for them from the central government.
- DPR Korea says that one of the proposed routes along the eastern coast of the Korean Peninsula passes through mountainous areas with over 100 tunnels that require upgrading.
- The Russian Federation has highlighted the importance of the 12,000-kilometre Trans-Siberian Highway that is being upgraded and should be fully operational in 2004.
- Cambodia has proposed including the road link from Poipet-Sisaphon-Siem Reap-Stung Treng-Oyadav because of the significant tourist attractions and the possibility of further connecting to the Quy Nhon seaport in Vietnam.

In several other countries, the poor condition of existing roads is a major problem. Key areas for deliberations include India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Central Asian republics.

Promotion of the Asian Highway Network

To increase visibility and awareness of the importance of the Asian Highway, ESCAP has been providing information to highway administrations, road developers, financing institutions, road users, tourists, private sector parties and the general public.

Asian Highway Database

Initiated in 1995, the AH database includes details of the AH network within 26 member countries. A cooperative arrangement between ESCAP and member countries for periodic maintenance and updating of the database is essential to maintain its usefulness and practical value to the users. Countries are expected to provide information about the status of routes periodically to ESCAP to facilitate updating.

Asian Highway Web Site

The AH Web site is <http://www.unescap.org/tctd/ah/>. Since ESCAP has begun adding information from the AH database as well as AH-related publications in a downloadable format, visitor numbers to the site have increased. Web sites containing information and files related to the AH, country data, tourism along the AH, and the AH study on the Northern Corridor are proving very popular, with more than 4,000 hits per month.

Asian Highway Auto-Venture

From 1978 to 1998 the Asian Highway Auto-Venture, a car rally, was jointly organised by the Automobile Association of Singapore and the Tourism Authority of Thailand, under ESCAP sponsorship. This event took place annually along AH Routes 1 and 2 through Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Participants included families of all ages. Everyone enjoyed the event while exploring the major tourism attractions along the routes.

Regional and Sub-regional Cooperation

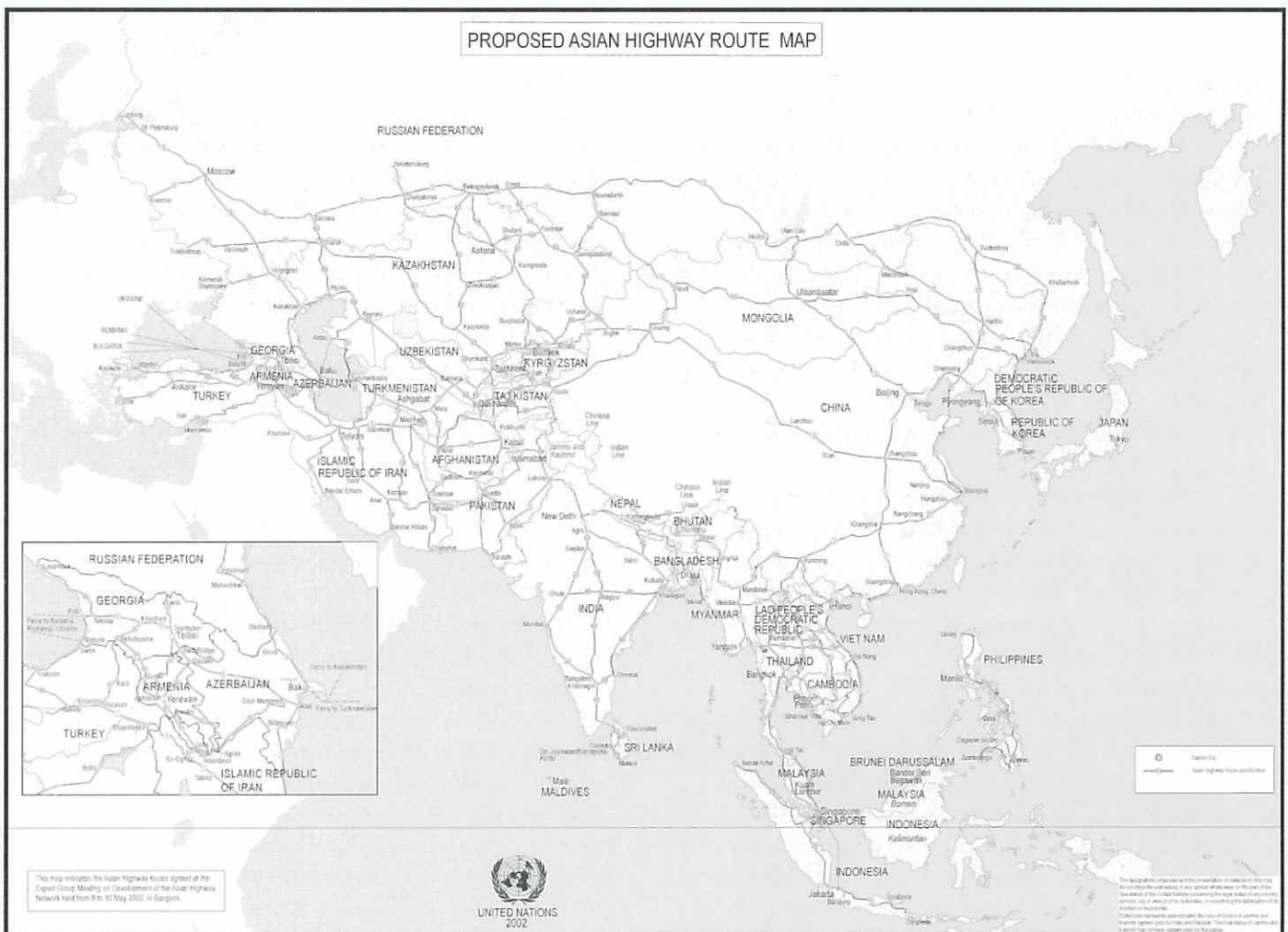
To further support cooperation, a dialogue among the national policy makers and road development agencies could be facilitated through regional and sub-regional meetings to assist the countries in the coordination of AH development as well as exchange of information and sharing of experiences.

Asian Highway Route Signage

Once a consensus has been reached on the route alignments, numbering and signage, countries will install AH route signs along the routes on a step-by-step basis and according to each country's national activities for road signage. This will facilitate recognition of the Asian Highway for road users in the region and the general public alike.

Road Maps

To increase visibility of the AH through road maps, the



following initiatives have been suggested: (i) at the national level, countries should indicate the AH routes in their respective national road maps and also request commercial map publishers to indicate these routes in their maps; (ii) at the regional level, the ESCAP secretariat has been asked to publish an updated set of AH maps and assist in disseminating the information to highway administrations, road developers, financing institutions, road users, tourists, private sector parties and the general public. All international map publishers have also been asked to indicate the AH routes in their maps.

Trans-Asian Railway

Recognising that efficient railway services are equally as significant as good roads, and building on the political will to enhance the role of railways, the Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure in 2001 encouraged ESCAP to pursue the progress of the Trans-Asian Railway network. The network has an equally significant role in providing interregional transport services and reaching out to wider regional hinterlands as part of

an integrated inter-modal transport system.

However, the quality of Asian railways is inferior to those in Europe for passengers. Current improvements are being made primarily to railway services for cargo and goods. The Ministerial Conference has thus requested ESCAP to give priority to the demonstration runs of container-block trains along the Trans-Asian Railway Northern Corridor (China (PRC), Kazakhstan, Mongolia, the Russian Federation and the Korean Peninsula).

ESCAP has undertaken activities to do this. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on project implementation was presented during the Ministerial Conference and was signed by the relevant ministers. To date, most of the countries participating in the project have signed the MOU, along with the two international organisations participating in the project – the International Union of Railways (UIC) and the Organisation for Railway Cooperation (OSJD).

This MOU marks an important step toward establishing cooperative arrangements among railway organisations in the

Trans-Asian Railway network to ensure its efficient operation, as envisaged in Phase 2 (2002-2006) of the New Delhi Action Plan on Infrastructure Development in Asia and the Pacific.

It is predicted that once railway improvements progress in the right direction, upgraded passenger facilities and services will follow. There is considerable potential. Train services like the Eastern and Oriental Express between Singapore and Thailand, and the Palace on Wheels in India are hugely popular with elite travellers. They are laying the groundwork for similar projects in other countries such as Vietnam. ASEAN countries are also moving ahead with plans to link their railway network to the Singapore-Kunming route aimed at fulfilling missing links such as Phnom Penh-Ho Chi Minh City, joining Cambodia and Vietnam.

Integrating Asian Land Transport Networks

To translate the vision of an integrated international transport network into practical reality requires cooperative effort at every step. This network would link virtually the whole of Asia, including landlocked countries and the wider hinterland, to international markets.

Important steps include the following:

- Identifying the interconnectivity of the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway networks, including their links to seaports, airports, major river ports and inland freight terminals
- Reviewing the existing networks and identifying infrastructure development projects of international interest
- Identifying the requirements and selection of criteria for inter-modal freight terminals, which would ensure the interconnectivity and the interoperability of the different transport modes
- Promoting effective combinations of transport modes and efficient operation of intermodality

The Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure in 2001 formally recognised the Asian Highway as a priority activity under the Regional Action Programme (2002-2006). A working group was set up under the aegis of ESCAP to develop an intergovernmental agreement for the AH network to ensure regional ownership of the project and improve its implementation mechanism.

The first meeting of the working group was held in Bangkok on November 11 and 12, 2002, to discuss and formulate an initial draft of the intergovernmental agreement. Four sub-regional seminars are also planned to provide details of the formalisation of the Asian Highway and to achieve broader involvement of the member countries in the drafting process. The seminars will be administered in:

- 1) The Association of Southeast Asian Nations
- 2) South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

- 3) Economic Cooperation Organisation and the Caucasus, and
- 4) Northeast Asian sub-regions.

A second meeting of the working group is scheduled for the third quarter of 2003 to consider the draft prior to submission to the Commission in 2004.

A similar mechanism was established within the UN Economic Commission for Europe to coordinate planning and development of the European road network. This was accomplished through the European Agreement on Main International Traffic Arteries and more recently in the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia through the Agreement on International Roads in Arab Mashreq, 2001. Such an intergovernmental agreement for the Asian Highway would define routes of the network and technical standards, and is expected to play an important catalytic role for coordinated highway development in Asia.

Agreed AH routes and technical standards could provide useful references to bilateral and sub-regional initiatives. This in turn could regulate cross-border and transit transport, for example in ASEAN, the Economic Cooperation Organisation (which includes Iran, Pakistan and Turkey) and the Greater Mekong Sub-region.

Coordination among member countries as well as with donors and other regional and international organisations and the ESCAP secretariat is a critical component of the entire project. Other organisations involved in the project include the Intergovernmental Commission of the Transport Corridor Europe-the Caucasus-Asia (IGC-TRACECA) and the UN Development Programme's Silk Road Area Development Programme, all five United Nations regional commissions, ASEAN and SAARC. Other groupings involved in the project are the UN Conference on Trade and Development and the Islamic Development Bank.

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