

Uzbek company completes construction of the first rail line in Afghanistan

In mid-September, Uzbekistan's state railway company finished the construction of *de facto* first rail line on Afghanistan's territory, running from the border to Mazar-i-Sharif, the biggest city in the north, which is 75 km away. The end of the construction work is very important as it eases transport for the US/NATO northern transport corridor (Northern Distribution Network) which runs through Russia and the Central Asian countries; around 30% of the goods used in the stabilisation mission in Afghanistan (ISAF) already run along it.

Construction began on 22 January this year. The US\$170m project was financed by the Asian Development Bank (the biggest investors in which are the USA and Japan). Linking Mazar-i-Sharif to Uzbekistan's rail network will increase ease of transit on the border (by up to four times, according to forecasts) and reduce transport costs. This will bring a further growth in this route's economic importance (it currently hosts around 50% of all Afghanistan's imports), and also an increase in the amount of cargo delivered by the northern transport corridor to coalition forces in Afghanistan. In connection with the opening of the line to Mazar-i-Sharif, the importance of the transit countries (above all Uzbekistan in Central Asia) can be expected to rise, as can the potential influence of Tashkent in the north-west part of Afghanistan, which is inhabited by ethnic Uzbeks. The line to Mazar-i-Sharif is the first in a series of planned rail projects for Afghanistan. Laying more lines, such as a route from Mazar-i-Sharif to Herat, or a north-south Chinese line, will permanently alter the geography of communication and business lines in this part of Asia, and thus the balance of powers there. <MMat>