

Friendship Span

BRIDGE LINKS CENTRAL ASIAN NATIONS, BOOSTS TRADE
BY MATTHEW ASADA AND JACKIE MCKENNAN

In August of last year, Hamid Karzai and Ismoili Rahmon, presidents of Afghanistan and Tajikistan respectively, joined U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan William B. Wood and U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez at a barren border crossing in northeastern Afghanistan to dedicate the new Tajik-Afghan Bridge that spans the river that is the border between the two nations.

The bridge, which cost the United States \$42 million, links South Asia with Central Asia through Afghanistan, and is stimulating trade on both sides of the border. Over the past year, the value of trade has been more than double the bridge's cost.

The bridge got its start in 2002 after the U.S.-led military coalition secured northern Afghanistan. Then-Ambassador Franklin

Huddle asked the U.S. Department of Defense to fund a bridge, and U.S. Ambassadors Richard Hoagland, Zalmay Khalilzad and Ronald Neumann continued the advocacy until the bridge's ground-breaking in 2005.

Trilateral Involvement

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers managed construction of the bridge and

border crossing points, and the U.S. embassies in Kabul, Afghanistan, and in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, worked with Afghan and Tajik customs and border police officials to improve operations and border security. Officers in the Economic Section of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul urged Afghan government officials to open the bridge as soon as possible after construction was completed, and an officer of the Provisional Reconstruction Team in Kunduz, Afghanistan, later organized trilateral meetings between Afghan, Tajik and U.S. officials at the border that tripled the bridge's hours of operation.

For the bridge to become the integral link in a new Central Asian trade route, the diplomats engaged the governments and private sector. In April 2006, the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe's deputy chief of mission accompanied a delegation of Tajik businessmen to Kunduz, Afghanistan, a city

The new bridge towers over a temporary bridge used in its construction.



President Karzai, in shawl, and President Rahmon, in blue suit and red tie, with Secretary Gutierrez, in gray suit with blue tie, center, at the bridge opening.

60 kilometers south of the border, to explore trading opportunities. In October 2007, the embassies in Kabul and Dushanbe jointly sponsored an Afghan-Tajik trade fair in Kunduz that took place shortly before the bridge opened to commercial traffic. In June 2007, the U.S. Agency for International Development sponsored an international agriculture fair in Kunduz that drew more than 23,000 people and resulted in estimated sales of \$90,000 and more than \$7 million of potential contracts.

The European Union financed and built a new Afghan commercial customs facility 1.4 kilometers southeast of the bridge. That \$18 million project will enable the provincial customs office to relocate to Sher Khan Bandar and provide a facility for clearing goods and paying customs duties. The facility and its connector road will be finished by November 2007.

Traffic Soars

The bridge has created a sevenfold increase in vehicle traffic and tenfold increase in Afghan customs revenues at this port of entry since opening. A ferry used to transport 30 trucks a day from Afghanistan to Tajikistan. The bridge now averages 200 trucks a day and recorded a one-day high of 700 trucks.

The bridge has brought the Afghan and Tajik governments closer. In May, the nations' Ministries of Transportation agreed to launch a bus route from Dushanbe to Kunduz, and the Tajik government plans to open a consulate there.

Meanwhile, the border town of Sher Khan Bandar is booming. An Afghan investor has committed \$1.5 million to \$5 million in a public-private partnership to develop a 1,600-shop bazaar that will focus on cross-border trade. Restaurants, hotels, gas stations and transportation companies are springing up to cater to the new travelers. In Kunduz, investors are optimistic and have built five- and six-story buildings throughout the city.

While the bridge will eventually operate nonstop and accommodate 1,000 vehicles per day, it is currently open only for commercial traffic 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Border crossing points were completed in April, and the Afghans inaugurated their facility in May. However, neither the Afghans nor Tajiks have moved into their facilities. The Afghan customs and border police are still negotiating which agency will occupy the new dormitory facility and have access after hours. No Tajik ministry has yet accepted the U.S.-built border crossing point and barracks from the U.S. government.

No Pedestrians

Afghanistan says it is willing to facilitate pedestrian use of the bridge, but Tajik officials have balked, citing health concerns for pedestrians crossing a 670-meter-long bridge. Trucks and private vehicles with valid road licenses for both countries, and passengers with visas, may use the bridge. All others still must use the pedestrian ferry.

The toughest issue on the Tajik side is

reconciling the need for security with the pressure on the government to expand access and allow trade. Fearing an importation of illicit goods and crime, Tajik officials refuse visas to Afghan traders. To protect Tajikistan's highways from the damage caused by cargo traffic, in May the nation's Ministry of Transportation imposed weight limits for cargo trucks. The restriction put some truck drivers out of work because they cannot afford to drive half-empty trucks. Local media reported that in March, \$2.3 million worth of cargo transited the bridge. After the weight limit was imposed, only \$1.4 million worth of cargo crossed.

The bridge is the centerpiece of a new Central Asian trade route and could become Afghanistan's most convenient border crossing point in terms of facilities, ease of transportation and security of transportation routes. Cars can now travel from the bridge at Sher Khan Bandar to Kabul within seven hours on smoothly paved roads. This route is one of the safest and most secure in the country and is an ideal supply route for the international community. The planned construction of a \$3 billion railroad from Sher Khan Bandar to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border will enhance the bridge's importance. ■

Matthew Asada was a member of a provisional reconstruction team in Afghanistan and organized the meeting that increased the bridge's hours. Jackie McKenman is the public affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe.