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High Speed Rail and Geopolitics

By Lord Howell of Guildford

The age of the high speed train has clearly arrived, with projects operating, under construction or being planned in numerous countries. The number has doubled since 2010 and could well double again by the mid-2020s

But there must be realism about how the evolving global pattern is working out .

Just as the modern world is roughly divided between the democracies and the autocracies, or even more roughly between West and North as against East and South, so the developing high speed rail world is also split .

At the geo-political level we have the Chinese economic model posed against Western free market capitalism (often called the Washington consensus), with much talk of a Chinese challenge to the supposedly Western dominated world institutions of the 20th century. For example, Chinese planners call for the dollar order to be matched by the yuan as a global trading currency.

Turn to the high speed railway world and we have the same division reflected. In one camp we find the systems across the world which either emulate or are inspired by the original Japanese Shinkansen model, the unquestioned progenitor of dedicated high speed, with far the most experienced, successful, super-efficient and safety record, with its complete no-crash embedded technology and with its environmentally highest quality standards.

In the other camp we have the much more recent Chinese network , with a staggering 27000 kilometres of high speed track (out of a world total of 43000km) , and with relentless efforts to promote Chinese design (itself ‘borrowed’ heavily -to phrase it politely – from Japan) and expand the Chinese model through ambitious Belt and Road plans across the whole of Asia. This includes building the longest high speed line in the world between Beijing and Moscow, purportedly with nine new cities being generated along the track.

The demarcation between the two systems is not precise and there is much overlap. For example Saudi-Arabia is not a recognised democracy yet it is looking for a big inter-city system on Shinkansen patterns . This will join up Mecca, Medina, Jeddah and the massive new ‘green’ King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC), now being constructed.

Indonesia, a huge multi-faith and broadly democratic nation , has gone for a China-based HS system after fierce competition -mostly on price. How this works out, and whether this produces disappointment and regrets, remains to be seen.

India, the world’s largest democracy, is at present going the Shinkansen way. So is the USA, the world’s richest. The Europeans have built up their own high speed systems, drawing on much older notions of rail safety , such as much heavier rolling stock, but are anxious to learn from Japan and to respond to their electorates’ demands for high speed transportation to match towering Japanese operational standards.

The UK, the original pioneer of the railway but late in catching up with very high speed train technologies, is hovering between traditional European and Asian rail philosophies , with no final decisions. Some compatibility with Continental systems through the Channel Tunnel is obviously desirable. An odd and disturbing factor is that it is the Chinese who currently appear most visible in the bidding queue for main HS2 operators , while engineers from Japanese highspeed are quietly working in and with various parts of the British rail industry.

But at the global level one can see how the train technologies are broadly shaping in line with the great interplay of political forces. A central feature in this is India, the vast nation which quite suddenly everyone on all sides wants to woo and align with.

The American view is that the containment of the Chinese giant requires a line-up of the USA itself, plus Japan, Australia and India – the so-called Quad – in some kind of security and defence pact. The Chinese view is clearly the opposite, Beijing suddenly wants India as a partner and is pouring out smoothing talk about ending border squabbles, and forming a partnership.

What India itself wants is another matter. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has warmed to stronger Western, and particularly strong Commonwealth network connections. But he has also been to China to have long and friendly talks with Xi Jinping. Understandably he wants India to carve its own path and not be pushed around by anybody else.

For global railway development ,especially high speed systems, the message from the international scene is clear. It is going to be a tough competitive struggle with the Chinese giant , especially when costs are going to be distorted on the Chinese side by half-hidden political subsidies and other devices. Going for the cheaper option is always a temptation, especially in lower income countries who are easily enticed by the open and unconditional Chinese cheque-book.

But against that, the US is firmly set for the present to keep Chinese companies out – out of of railways as well as everything else. Donald Trump and his team has set up a barrier in what he calls ‘industrially significant technologies’. American high speed rail projects, of which there are several, are looking , and will continue to look, in the Japanese direction.

In the 21st century and the digital age a new great game is being played out world wide. High speed railway development is caught up in it as much as, or even more than, other areas of advanced technology.

One thing is certain. Amidst all the political jostling the demand for the easy, comfortable transportation which high speed offers, along with continued innovation development, will grow strongly . Once it was believed and forecast by many transport experts that cheap air travel would push railways into the past. Now, with endless airport delays, jammed airports, long queues at security and other frustrations the ease of fast rail travel is pulling customers back to trains, back to train stations offering every facility and back to a clear railway future.

Not for the first time, the expert forecasts were wrong.
