

China's High-Speed Rail Reaches into Southeast Asia

By [Tony Cartalucci](#)

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There is a significant reason why political unrest fueled by US interference is flaring up across Southeast Asia – an attempt at derailing Beijing's ambitious One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative.

When completed, it will cement not only China's regional rise, but permanently replace the United States as Asia's largest and most influential power.

The "stitching" holding this emerging shift together is a regional high-speed rail network running from the southern Chinese city of Kunming, through Laos, and into the heart of Thailand. Construction in Laos is well underway with construction having already started in Thailand and expected to be completed in 2-3 years.

The brand new Bang Sue Central Station in Bangkok was built specifically to service high-speed trains.

While the West has heavily criticized this citing costs, debt, and low projections for passenger use – and while all of these issues are already being discussed by China and its Laotian and Thai partners – the West's own criticism is more owed to its inability to compete with China's regional rise and its vision for Asia's future than any legitimate concern regarding the project itself.

A Game Changer

Western criticism has focused on both debt incurred through this leg of OBOR, as well as a perceived lack of demand for high-speed rail passenger services along the routes being built.

However there are two points often left out of Western commentary – or more accurately – out of Western complaining.

First is the fact that infrastructure itself often creates demand simply by being built, existing, and creating options that had never existed before.

Travel along these high-speed rail lines may or may not be options existing travelers use in great numbers but those numbers will likely be joined by additional passengers who would have otherwise avoided the trip altogether because of the lack of appealing options in existence now – flying, conventional rail, buses, and vans – which are still expensive, time

consuming, and mostly uncomfortable.

Western critics, who mistakenly believe tourism is Thailand's largest industry - claim that the high-speed railway travels through areas most (Western) tourists are uninterested in.

However, there are two problems with this. Firstly, most tourists visiting Thailand no longer come from Western nations, but from Asia. More Chinese tourists visit Thailand each year than tourists from all Western nations combined.

Thailand's northeast region may currently be less appealing to tourists than other regions of the country, but this is simply because few have invested in making the region more accessible and more appealing.

Chinese tourists traveling into Thailand via high-speed rail could just as easily be persuaded to spend time in the northeast, provided investments are made in local infrastructure and attractions. Currently, little incentive exists. Completion of the Thailand-Laos-China high-speed railway will be the first as well as a major incentive in changing this.

Just as mass transportation networks in Bangkok have transformed little-known areas of the city into high-end commercial and residential districts, high-speed rail has the possibility of doing this on a much larger, national and even regional level.

Then there is the fact that in addition to moving passengers, this high-speed rail network could just as easily move freight.

In this regard, the benefits are undeniable. The network passes through one of Thailand's main agricultural regions and the ability of farmers in Thailand's northeast to move produce from their farms directly to China by rail would reduce time to market and increase exports - including exports that aren't practical at the moment.

Articles like [Bloomberg's](#), "Thailand forges new path for food exports to China," explains the current options available for moving Thai produce to Chinese markets. This includes moving goods by trucks through Laos and Vietnam. It also includes via air.

The article also notes more recent attempts to use rail in Vietnam, stating:

Thailand began a two-mode system by trucking products to Vietnam, then moving the goods into containers on trains, which complete the deliveries to China. It may sound simple, but this is a first for Thai shipments, according to Narapat Kaeothong, vice minister for agriculture.

How much simpler would it be to place goods on a single train and transport it at higher speeds straight to China, or anywhere else along high-speed rail lines?

Acknowledging possibly low passenger numbers, Thailand has already considered the utility of using the network to move freight as well.

The South China Morning Post (SCMP) would report [in its article](#), "Thailand pushes for high-speed rail link with China to be used for freight," that:

Vallobh Muangkeo, secretary general of the National Assembly of Thailand, told

the South China Morning Post that Thailand had concerns about low demand for the service and called for it to be used to transport freight instead.

High-speed rail services handling freight is not unprecedented.

France's TGV La Poste used dedicated trains specifically for moving mail across the country. Similar trains could be used by Thailand, Laos, and future countries in the region connected to the high-speed rail network to move large amounts of goods quickly and directly to China as well as receive goods from China.

China itself plans on using its own high-speed rail network to move freight. A SCMP [article titled](#), " China planning high-speed rail freight network to help e-commerce sector," noted:

China's state-owned railway operator is planning to accelerate the development of a high-speed freight network in the hope of bolstering the e-commerce network.

A development plan published in mid-August also includes plans to further expand the passenger network and build an advanced control system that will integrate home-grown technologies such as 5G telecommunications, the Beidou satellite navigation system and artificial intelligence.

It is not a difficult leap to imagine how easily this network could be extended into Laos and Thailand just as China plans on moving passenger services into both nations.

China is already Thailand and Laos' largest trading partner, largest foreign investor, largest source of tourism, and a key partner in defense and infrastructure.

Connecting these nations together with high-speed rail and giving the population of Southeast Asia a direct route into China's own massive domestic high-speed rail network will facilitate the movement of people and goods in ways that may not be immediately quantifiable.

There were similar doubts over China's own high-speed railway when it was first proposed, but it now moves billions of people a year, easily competes with domestic airlines, and has begun to play a role in China's development in ways not directly connected to simply collecting fares.

Arguments against the construction of Thai and Laotian high-speed rail based merely on passenger numbers and revenue projections are lazy arguments and are made primarily by a West otherwise unable to compete with China's growing influence and role in Asia - a region the US saw itself maintaining primacy over for another century.

The completion of high-speed rail in Southeast Asia - an admittedly massive project - will take time to prove its worth. But a look at high-speed rail anywhere else in the world indicates that such a network will undoubtedly become a major asset for each nation involved, and the entire region. It is no coincidence that detractors of the ongoing project are also deeply involved in promoting US-funded anti-government protests in Thailand and a generally anti-Chinese stance regarding any issue in the region.

For detractors, it is not doubts about the viability of this major leg of China's OBOR initiative

- it is certainty of how it will contribute to the end of Western hegemony in Asia permanently.

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Tony Cartalucci is a Bangkok-based geopolitical researcher and writer, especially for the online magazine "[New Eastern Outlook](#)".

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