NEW WESTERN LAND–SEA CHANNEL

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The New Western Land–Sea Channel New Passage is located in the hinterland of western China, connecting the Silk Road Economic Belt in the north and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in the south. It coordinates and connects the Yangtze River Economic Belt, which plays an important strategic position in the regional coordinated development pattern.

General Plan

In August 2019, China's National Development and Reform Commission issued the “General Plan for the New Western Land and Sea Passage” (hereinafter referred to as “the Plan”). This is an important measure to form a new pattern for deepening the land–sea two-way opening-up, and promoting the development of western regions. The planning period is from 2019 to 2025, and looking forward to 2035. According to the Plan, the world is currently in a period of great development, great change and great adjustment, and China’s development is in an important strategic opportunity period for a long time. With the deepening of the regional coordinated development strategy, the western development still faces tough and arduous tasks. It is necessary to further strengthen the transportation infrastructure construction in the western region, expand the existing channel capacity, coordinate the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, and improve the quality and efficiency of logistics development. Accelerating the construction of a new land–sea channel in western China is of great practical and far-reaching historical significance for giving full play to the role of tie between the Belt and Road in western China, deepening the two-way opening of land and sea, strengthening measures to promote the development of western China to form a new pattern, and promoting the high-quality development of the regional economy.

According to the Plan, three passages will be built; from Chongqing to Beibu Gulf estuary (Beibu Gulf Port and Yangpu Port) via Guiyang and Nanning, from Chongqing to Beibu Gulf estuary via Huaihua and Liuzhou, and from Zicheng to Beibu Gulf estuary via Luzhou (Yibin) and Baise, which will form the main channel of the new land–sea channel in the west. The focus is on: Building an international comprehensive transportation hub; giving full play to Chongqing’s location advantage at the intersection of the Belt and Road and the Yangtze River Economic Belt, and building a channel logistics and operation organisation center; giving play
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to the role of Chengdu as an important national trade logistics center and enhancing its leading role in the development of the channel; building an international gateway port in Guangxi Beibu Gulf; and giving full play to the role of Yangpu as a regional international container hub port, and enhancing the function of the channel to the sea.

According to the Plan, the comprehensive transportation network in southwest China will be improved around the main channel, and the important node cities and logistics hubs in southwest China, such as Guiyang, Nanning, Kunming, Zunyi and Liuzhou, will be closely connected with the main channel, which will strongly support the high-quality economic and social development in southwest China. The focus is on: Strengthening the connection between the main channel and the comprehensive transportation corridor in northwest China; strengthening the connection between the New Western Land–Sea Channel and the Silk Road Economic Belt; and enhancing the radiation linkage effect of the channel on northwest China. At the same time, attention is paid to the role of Zhanjiang Port, the traditional seaport in southwest China, and to strengthening the connection between the channel and the Yangtze River Economic Belt.  

By 2020, according to the Plan, a number of major railway and logistics hub projects will be started; Chongqing Inland International Logistics Distribution Center will be initially built; the resource integration of Beibu Gulf Port and Yangpu Port in Hainan will achieve initial results; the “last mile” of rail–sea intermodal transport and multimodal transport will be basically opened; the customs clearance efficiency will be greatly improved; the logistics organisation level of the corridor will be significantly improved; and the supporting role of the new land–sea corridor for the western development will begin to appear. By 2025, the economic, efficient, convenient, green, and safe new western land and sea passage will be basically completed. By 2035, the new land–sea corridor in western China will be completed in an all-round way, with stronger transport capacity, more reasonable hub layout, and more convenient multimodal transport. The efficiency of logistics services and customs clearance will reach the international first-class level, with a sharp drop in logistics costs and a significant improvement in overall development quality, which will provide strong support for the construction of a modern economic system.

The Plan also gave an explanation on speeding up the construction of transportation channels, strengthening the construction of logistics facilities, improving the efficiency of channel operation and logistics, promoting the integration and development of channels and regional economies, and strengthening the opening-up of channels and international cooperation.

Connecting with the Belt and Road and its Prospect

The “General Plan for the New Western Land and Sea Passage” is the action goal of promoting the formation of a new pattern of comprehensive opening in the new era, and it is also the roadmap for the development of the western region and regional linkage. The New Western Land–Sea Channel has opened the connecting line of “One Belt” and “One Road” in west China, and has become the main axis of linkage opening in west China. It has built a multimodal transport system with land–sea connectivity, promoting new trade with logistics channels and hubs as engines, and further promoting China–ASEAN economic and trade cooperation.

When State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi went to Chongqing for investigation in August 2019, he went to Chongqing International Logistics Hub and Digital Economy Exhibition Center of the Belt and Road to inspect the construction of the Belt and Road international logistics corridor. He pointed out that it is necessary to fully rely on Chongqing’s
location advantages, deeply explore the historical resources of foreign affairs, better accelerate the construction of inland open highlands, build a new land and sea channel in the west, and integrate high-quality services to the construction of the Belt and Road.4

In August 2019, the State Council issued the “Overall Plan of China (Guangxi) Pilot Free Trade Zone” to deepen cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN), promote the construction of new international land and sea trade channels, and explore the development and opening-up of border areas. Subsequently, Guangxi has continuously issued a series of policy documents in finance and infrastructure, such as “Several Policy Measures for Financial Support to the Construction of New Western Land and Sea Passage in West China” and “Several Policy Measures for Accelerating the Construction of New Western Land and Sea Passage (revised edition)”, so as to build a new land–sea passage in west China in an all-round way and help the construction of the Belt and Road.5

Driven by the New Western Land–Sea Channel, port cargo transportation has been rising. As of December 31, 2019, the total annual cargo transportation of Guangxi coastal railways was 66.11 million tons, of which 56.6566 million tons of goods were sent, an increase of 127% year on year. The sea–rail combined transport train in the New Western Land–Sea Channel sent 1.147 million tons of goods, an increase of 163% year on year, both of which set a new record in history.6 Gansu, located in the northwest inland, is becoming the frontier of opening to the outside world with the promotion of the Belt and Road construction. Through the international festival platforms such as Lanzhou Fair, Dunhuang Cultural Fair, and Chinese Medicine Expo, and the new international land and sea trade channel, Gansu deepens international cooperation in production capacity, and exchanges increasingly with countries along the Belt and Road. From January to November 2019, the trade between Gansu and the countries along the Belt and Road continued to expand, reaching 18.63 billion yuan, accounting for 54.2% of the total import and export value of the province.7

On September 21, 2019, the 16th China–ASEAN Expo and China–ASEAN Business and Investment Summit opened in Nanning, Guangxi. With the theme of “Co-Constructing the Belt and Road and Co-Drawing the Cooperation Vision”, this Summit focused on the construction of new international land and sea trade channels, free trade zones, financial open doors, and comprehensive docking with Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area.8 On October 13, 2019, Chongqing, Guangxi, Guizhou, Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Ningxia, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Hainan Province, and Zhanjiang City of Guangdong Province signed a framework agreement in Chongqing to jointly build a new land–sea corridor in the west.9

Practice has proved that the promulgation of the Plan has pointed out the direction of industrial development. From logistics industry to emerging trade, from infrastructure to business environment, from export-oriented to domestic demand, from cooperation linkage to collaborative innovation, the New Western Land–Sea Channel has moved from concept to practice, and all participating parties are rapidly advancing its strategic layout along the corridor. The new corridor is developed from logistics to trade, which drives the western region from large-scale development to large-scale opening.10

Notes