THE POTENTIAL EFFECT OF TRABZON-TABRIZ COMMERCIAL TRANSIT ROAD ON BLACK SEA ECONOMY AND AN OVERVIEW FOR ITS FUTURE

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Abstract – Trabzon–Tabriz Transit Commerce Road has been active since ancient times. One of the most important point of view of this route is the Trabzon port. This port is in a strategic position among all other ports in Black Sea. Turkey has invested in developing the infrastructure of this route both during Ottoman and Republican times in order to gain advantage over other alternative routes. These investments were partially successful. For the development of Eastern Anatolia Region of Turkey, Eastern Anatolia Project (EAP) was conducted by Atatürk, Firat, İnönü, Kafkas and Yüzüncü Yıl (Van) Universities between 1988 and 2000. The purpose of this study is to prepare comprehensive list of activities that will accelerate the development of the Eastern Anatolia Region to achieve a sustainable development, which comprises an integrated body with its social, cultural and political dimensions throughout the country. One studied sector under this plan was transportation. The plan envisages improvements in the region’s East-West road links including improvements to the Erzurum-Trabzon line which is a part of the Trabzon-Tabriz Transit Commerce Road. The sustainability of advantages of this ancient route depends on the establishment of “smart transport systems” integrated to national and international networks (land, sea and air). To the extent that this integration is implemented, this route will contribute both to Turkish economy in general and Black Sea region economy in particular due to location of Trabzon. In this study the importance of the Trabzon–Tabriz Transit Commerce Road and the route strategy plans investigated in Eastern Anatolia Project (EAP) will be discussed and some recommendations will be provided.

Keywords – Trabzon-Tabriz Transit Road; Turkey- Iran Relation

1. INTRODUCTION

Trabzon-Tabriz commerce transit road route has been used since ancient times (HEYD W, 1975: 50). European countries were in the quest of new roads and routes for transporting their products to the East and raw materials from eastern countries to the West at the beginning of the 19 centuries. England and then other European Countries began to use this road and this increased the volume of trades in the Black Sea (ÇİĞDEM, 2007: 133-155).

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The reasons for decreasing of importance of the road are: I. the Ottoman Empires did not repair the road that passes through Erzurum and also did not make necessary investments in the harbor of Trabzon, and the Ottoman Empires could not control the Pashas who collected taxes arbitrarily. II. At that time Tbilisi-Tabriz road and the roads of England were attraction centers versus Trabzon-Tabriz road (ISSAWI, 1970: 18-27). Additionally, the Black Sea Trades lost their importance because of the occupying of Egypt by England, as well as heavy usages of Suez Canal which was opened in 1869 for transporting goods to Far East.

The Ottoman Empires prepared projects to establish railway in this route in the 19th century but they could not implement it (Map 1). During the creation of Republic of Turkey, namely during the time period of Atatürk and Rıza Shah between 1925 and 1941, they tried to improve this route. The road that lies until Doğubeyazıt district has improved since 1950s. According to the development targets between 2011 and 2023 of the Ministry of Transportation, Marine and Communication the works using smart road application have continued (UHD, Highway 2013:13). The national and international transportation systems (road, marine and airway) should be integrated with “the smart transportation systems” if a sustainable development of this is considered.

2. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ROAD AND ITS POTENTIAL

2.1. Financial Infrastructure

A natural infrastructure was created because a caravan route was used from the Antiquity until 19th century. Therefore, industrialization was begun that yielded modernized railway construction on this route (Map 1).

Map 1: The map shows that the Railway Construction planned between Trabzon and Tabriz that lies until Doğubeyazıt (1880), Source: TTSO, Date, 1854-1950 s.105

The railway concessions were given to Russia at that time (1900). However, this attempt failed because Russia decided to opt out of the benefit of European countries. In addition, the issues of concessions that were given to Iran for renewal of the trades were unsuccessful (TTSO.2009:105).

In the first years of Republic of Turkey, namely time period of Atatürk and Rıza Shah (1925-1941), some works were done for improvement of Trabzon and Tabriz Transit Trade roads. There were some bureaucratic problems. These problems were partially solved and the road transportation capacity was increased. Therefore,
the duration for travelling between Trabzon and Tabriz decreased to 3 days which was previously 4 days (AYDIN, 2012: 189-190).

2.2. Institutional Infrastructure

At that time, the institutional infrastructure of Trabzon was strong because Akhism, an organized brotherhood in Anatolia related to trade was established in 17th Century in Trabzon (TTSO, 2009:30). Also, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Trabzon was established in 1854 and Trabzon was the center of export and import in the direction of East and West. These characteristics of the city yielded Trabzon to be strong in the manner of institutional infrastructure. On the other hand, Tabriz lies on a commercial transit road that Iran had an economical commerce central.

Iran opened a diplomatic mission a consulate in Trabzon while Ottoman Empire opened a diplomatic mission in Tabriz in 1853. Nowadays, Trabzon city is strong position in manner of the commerce of institutional infrastructure and lot countries have industrial and commercial relationships with Trabzon city. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Trabzon City has a good relationship with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Tabriz. The Summit of the business people is an example for this relationship. Free Foreign Investment Zone in Tabriz, established in 2005, which unique and the first Zone of Tabriz where Turkish business people have 38 investments. Two of them were established with hundred percent of Turkish capital (IRAN ÜLKE RAP.2011:21). The development of trade with Iran has been had discussed for long time (TTSO, Tr. Gel. Taşıyan Son on Yıl, 2009:14, 28, 5879, 102, 140.)

2.3. Transportation Cost Advantages

The route had transportation expense advantages during the 19th Century. For example: One Branch of English company located in East India calculated that road transportation cost would decrease % 1 to % 2.5 if Iran silk would have been transferred over Trabzon Harbor instead of Buşehr Harbor. It means that marine transportation cost between Trabzon and England was less than cost between Buşehr and England (KÜTÜKOĞLU, 1988:98-99). According to Issawi, between 1850 and 1860, the Iran’s trade volumes done over Trabzon-Tabriz had a value of %40. But, in 1900 this percentage decreased until %10. Germany that withdrew its soldiers from Afghanistan used Trabzon harbor as military base on February 06, 2014.

3. CURRENT SITUATION AND THE POTENTIAL OF THE ROUTE

Trabzon-Tabriz Commerce Transit Route acted as bridge role between Asia and Europe because of its historical and locational position. This route opens the door from Turkey to Middle Asia and Balkans. Also, Trabzon is excluded from the marine, road and railway international integrated transportation systems (Map 2).

The World Commerce axis has been created by Asian gravity such as BRICS and Shanghai Collaboration which is a political and an economical organization due to changes in a global economic balance. By increasing of international commercial logistic sectors, there are new opportunities offered by continuously developed economical dynamics (EKO. FORUM, 2014: 8-11). Trabzon harbor can be a big potential economical region for the East Black Sea if the roads and railways are merged into the Harbor and İstanbul-Poti (North line).

Because Trabzon is located next to North-South axis, at the intersection of the East-West route, it creates considerable advantage over other locations. As a result, the GAP (South Anatolia Project) region will have a connection with Trabzon and the important point is that this route can connect the Black Sea to the Middle

1 The countries that carried goods to Iran and the load amounts transported to Iran via Trabzon, the numbers and tonnages of the coming and going ships/sails, the kinds of goods and the reason of the decreasing of the trade volumes between 1888 and 1901 (TTSO, 2009:65-71)
East which may be very efficient for the economic development of countries. This issue was analyzed in the Black Sea Regional Development Projects (Map 3).

Map 2: The main routes used by Turkish Transporters Source: http://www.ubak.gov.tr/

4. EASTERN ANATOLIA PROJECT (EAP)

Eastern Anatolia Project was a big regional project supported by Ministry of Development between 1998 and 2000. The General Coordinator of the Project was Firat University. The other four universities Atatürk, İnönü, Kafkas and Yüzüncü Yıl contributed to the project.

In this project, transportations - airways, highways and railways- were studied deeply. Important strategic targets were defined (EAP, Strategic Plans p: 488). According to these strategic targets:

“The Region’s altitude, high mountain ranges that cut through the area and hinder access, and the small and dispersed urban and rural settlements, increase the outlay of transport infrastructure development. Moreover, the harsh climate makes it difficult to provide infrastructure services at desired standards all year round. Topographic conditions create great difficulty in terms of developing the railway network. This transport mode’s slant sensitivity is curtailing access, efficiency and the efficacy of railways in the region that in turn causes physical and economic difficulties for industrial, agricultural and dairy products to reaching outer markets” (EAP, Strategic Plans, p. 488).

“In its historical development, the regional transport infrastructure (especially highway and railway networks) reflects the topography, traditional settlement patterns, and political and economic structures. Despite ongoing changes within and adjacent to the Region (e.g. the increased need for transport with Armenia, Nahchivan and other former Eastern Block countries, the GAP Region, the expansion of new industrial, residential centers and corridors within the region) transport infrastructure has not been restructured accordingly. The transport networks and infrastructure that could have made effective use of opportunities arising from these changes have not been put into place. The lack of new transport structures that connect the emerging activity opportunities and new focal points with the Region and the new centers within the region are perceived as an important deficiency (Map 4 and Map 5)” (EAP, Strategic Plans, p.488).

Map 4: Current railways and lack of corridors of the railways in the direction of North to South (EAP, Strategic Plans, p. 492)
In the strategic plan of EAP, the improvement of the transit highway from Trabzon to Tabriz was studied and development strategic targets were determined. The roads in the Eastern Anatolia have improved since 2002. There are new connections between highways in the region (VAROL, 2013). In addition, the high speed railways have been constructed beginning from Istanbul to Ankara. These qualified railways will extend to the Eastern Anatolia in near future. These facilities will also help for the development of the Trabzon-Tabriz transit road.

Map 5: The quality of the roads in Eastern and Southern East Anatolia (Bölünmüş yollar = divided roads, 1. Sınıf yollar = 1st class roads, 2. Sınıf yollar= 2nd class roads, 3. Sınıf yollar = 3rd class roads, Geçit vermeyen yollar = primitive roads) (EAP, Strategic Plans, p.493).

5. CONCLUSION

1. Trabzon Harbor can be used as an important investment area because of its strategic location and being on the intersection of the roads directed from the West to East and from the North to South. If such an investment center is built in Trabzon Harbor, the transportation costs will be decreased, the transit road lies from Trabzon to Tabriz will put in action and this route will be in advantage over Poti Harbor.

2. Cost-Benefit analysis of investment planned should be done for Trabzon Harbor. The historical selection restricts nowadays selection although new parameters do not exist. For example: New York Harbor has been important than Philadelphia Harbor after Erie Canal opened (KRUGMAN, 1994). Erie Canal has connected 5 big lakes to Atlantic Ocean. In the same manner, after the Suez Canal was opened, the activity at Trabzon Harbor decreased. Therefore, this route should be connected to the main international transportation roads.

There were some political discussions on local media about the placement of the logistic central far from Trabzon city to another place. For example: http://www.kuzeyeekspress.com.tr/author_article_detail.php?id=12654, http://www.rizeninseti.net/2013/11/02/trabzon-rizedeki-lojistik-merkezi-hala-sindiremivord/
3. Commerce with Middle East countries has increased since 2008 because an economic crises have occurred in the western countries. Turkey has not been affected from these crises. The reason why the crisis affected Turkey less is that, Turkey has continued to trade with Middle East countries such as Iraq, Iran and Syria. If the railways connections studied in the Eastern Development Project (EAP) from North to South are able to construct, Turkey will improve its trades with Middle East countries.

4. The connection between Turkey and Middle Asia is built via Iran while Iran trades to Europe via Turkey. Therefore, Trabzon-Tabriz Transit route becomes very important because of Trabzon Harbor. If Iran has exact agreement with the 5+1 countries, Iran’s broken economic and political relationships with Europe and even with the US can be normalized in the future. Iran has D-8 economic collaboration and ICO (Islamic Conference Organization) membership like Turkey and border commerce exist. If the broken relationship that begun 35 years ago between Iran and the US will be normalized, even the economic embargo/blockage applied by European countries can be lifted. In this case, Trabzon-Tabriz transit route will be an alternative road.

5. A new railway connection agreement has been signed between related countries beginning from China Kashgar region, through Kyrgyzstan, over Tajikistan-Afghanistan to Iran, and from then to Gulf of Oman, and this railway will be connected to Cbhabar Harbor located to next to Pakistan. The feasibility studies have continued since 2010. If Trabzon-Tabriz transit route will put into action, and the railway project completed, Trabzon harbor will be an important place to reach Gulf of Oman.

In final conclusion, if Trabzon Harbor is integrated with the “smart transportation systems” such as road, marine and airway networks, Trabzon-Tabriz transit route will gain its historic economic power again. As a result, the Economies of Iran and even Black Sea region will benefit of this development.

6. REFERENCES


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