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Faster out of the station: Asia surges ahead on rail

Abstract

It is interesting to see the progress made by Asian countries since 2001 in developing high-speed rail (HSR), while Australia is missing out.

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**Philip Laird**

It is interesting to see the progress made by Asian countries since 2001 in developing high-speed rail (HSR), while Australia is missing out.

In Australia, in 2001, the Howard government released the *East Coast High-Speed Train Scoping Study*. This followed two major investigations by the private sector into HSR options for Australia; the first being a Sydney-Canberra-Melbourne very fast train as proposed in 1984 by the CSIRO. The second was the Sydney-Canberra Speedrail proposal of the late 1990s, quoted at the time to cost \$4.8 billion to provide an 84-minute journey.

In April this year, the Gillard government released a report on HSR that settled on a route of some 1748 kilometres between Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, with a spur line to Canberra. The estimated cost, considered by some commentators to be high, was \$114 billion. The cost to provide a 64-minute Sydney-to-Canberra journey was \$23.5 billion.

This was followed in August by a report of the official High Speed Rail Advisory Group, with recommendations including the formation of a HSR authority. This was agreed to by the then Rudd government. The Abbott government is yet to issue a definitive statement on how it may progress HSR.

Meanwhile, the prospect of HSR in Australia, with trains capable of

travelling at speeds of 250km/h or more, has been much studied. However, while we delay and/or study, Asia has been building HSR.

In 2001, Japan was the only country in the Asia-Pacific region with HSR. Along with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China now have HSR in operation.

South Korea's HSR operations started in 2004 between Seoul and Busan on new track and now includes fairly fast trains operating on conventional track at speeds up to 200km/h. Their HSR network will be further extended by 2020.

Taiwan's HSR started operations in 2007 along a 345-kilometre route on its west coast. China, starting in 2008 with Beijing to Tianjin, has since continued a program to deliver an extensive HSR network. The aim is to have an HSR network extending for some 12,000 kilometres by 2020. This is part of a well-funded program that includes provision for more metros; an additional 1000 kilometres of subways and light rail is expected to be built by 2015.

Other Asian countries are also planning to gain HSR. This includes a HSR link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore by 2020. The new service, operating over about 330 kilometres of track, will aim for express trains to complete the journey in 90 minutes. Detailed planning, including intermediate station locations, is under way.

As noted by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak: "Now, more than ever, we are seeing a massive expansion of the rail network in Asia, including in Malaysia."

Vietnam and Thailand are also seriously considering HSR projects, each with a view to making a start on shorter corridors. In addition, it was announced last week that the Indian government has set up the High-Speed Rail

Corporation of India to progress their development of high-speed trains. India, along with considering trains capable of speeds of 350km/h, may also start by running trains between 160km/h and 200km/h on the existing network.

Japan, despite its sluggish economy, has continued to improve its Tokaido Shinkansen between Tokyo to Shin-Osaka that started operations in 1964 and extended its HSR network in both directions. This network now includes Shin-Aomori to Kagoshima-Chuo with a length of about 2117 kilometres. From Shin-Aomori, it is scheduled to reach Shin-Hakodate in Hokkaido by 2015.

In addition, a Hokuriku Shinkansen between Nagano and Kanazawa is scheduled for completion next year. If Taiwan, with its 23.3 million people, can have HSR extending for 345 kilometres, surely Australia's 23.25 million people can at least start to build a high-speed line over a similar length. A good place to start is linking Sydney to Canberra – some 270 kilometres. This could be done on an incremental basis, with initial stages to include the scope of Sydney-Canberra Speedrail taking 84 minutes. This would be at a fraction of the cost to provide for a 64-minute journey.

Meanwhile, we shall continue to rely on cars, planes, really slow trains and a growing number of buses to link Australia's largest city to its federal capital.

Philip Laird, an honorary principal fellow at the University of Wollongong, is a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport. He was recently in Taiwan to attend a conference that included special sessions on HSR in Asia.