
Interview: Hal B.H. Cooper, Jr.

Connecting N. America And Eurasia by Rail

Hal Cooper, PhD, a Seattle-based transportation consultant, is a longtime advocate for an intercontinental railroad connection across the Bering Strait, and for development corridors—rail, utilities including electric transmission, natural gas, and water, and highways—on key routes in the Americas, and worldwide. He recently commissioned the painting reproduced here, done by J. Craig Thorpe, for presentation to Alaska Gov. Frank Murkowski (R). Cooper was interviewed on June 9 by Marcia Merry Baker.

EIR: The Bering Strait crossing, what is the physical geography involved? How long is the span to link up the continents?

Cooper: It's 53 miles, or 85 kilometers, across from Alaska to Russia, at the Bering Strait, at the minimum distance.

EIR: What might be a comparable strait? The Chesapeake Bay? China just began work on a 22-mile bridge across Hangzhou Bay, which will be the world's longest trans-oceanic bridge. Is there anything like the Bering Strait, or would this crossing be the first?

Cooper: The English Channel is very similar to it. And, of course, the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay would be another. But I think the English Channel is the analogy that's closest to the Bering Strait.

EIR: What about the physical setting there? Does it still compare with the English Channel and Channel Tunnel?

Cooper: In some respects, it's more difficult, because it's farther, but it isn't as deep. It's 180 feet, versus about 250. There are two islands out in the middle of the Bering Strait—Little Diomed, on the United States side, and Big Diomed Island, on the Russian side, that would make it considerably easier, because your longest underwater distance is about 23 miles. So it's actually less than the English Channel.

EIR: There are some spectacular new bridges in the world, for example, those reconnecting Scandinavia with Western Europe. In the approaches to the tunnel to the Bering Strait, are bridges involved?

Cooper: No. You would have a straight tunnel across. There have been some proposals for a bridge, and I'll get to that. But there would be a straight tunnel; there would be a straight

two- or three-bore tunnel. It would go through the islands. It would be under the water—probably 50 or 75 feet below the water line.

Your soil there is a granitic, and granite-chalk type, and it's actually relatively stable to dig. You are quite a ways north of the active geologic zones where the earthquakes are. So it's actually relatively stable there. In some respects, it would be easier to dig than the English Channel was, because there are not these rock fissures going down that caused so much problem there near the French coast for the English Channel Tunnel.

EIR: In other words, you are saying—whether two- or three-bore—it's an excavation matter. Some others have said that you could drop onto the seabed, a kind of sealed-box affair.

Cooper: You could do that. But the only concern that I would have is the flows of ice through there, and the possibility of dislocating it. That would be, to me, a concern. I would prefer to put it down in the rock, although you could put the tubes on the floor, provided that you dug near the shores, because of the ice. But you'd have to be very concerned about the flows of ice through there.

EIR: So this would be a first, this length of actual excavation. It would be the longest?

Cooper: To my knowledge, yes. It would be the longest in the world. But you know, it isn't that much longer from other things that already exist, that it would be a revolutionary breakthrough. Because actually, when you look at the single, particular sections of the tunnel, it's less than what the English Channel is now.

EIR: So it's in sections. It's tractable.

Cooper: It's very do-able.

EIR: These islands you mentioned: Are they just rock outcrops, or are they more significant?

Cooper: Well, there are about 200 native people who live on Little Diomed Island on the Alaskan side. As far as I know, there is only a weather station, and some Russian military people on the Russian side on Big Diomed Island.

EIR: The Diomedes are visible in the painting [Figure 1] you commissioned.

Cooper: Yes, they are very visible from the land. And we got that view from both my having flown over the area, and from photographs from the Internet, which were explicit about the Diomed Islands.

EIR: Now to some of the politics and the financing questions. You've been Mr. Shuttle Diplomacy, going between Russia—that would be Chukotka, and other places in Siberia—Alaska, Canada, and you are based in Seattle. What



Tunnel is shown from the Alaskan side, but most interest and preparation to date is by Russia. As Cooper explains, for transport of oil between the continents, the double-track electrified railroad would be half the cost of a pipeline; and this would also have been true for the route of the Alaska pipeline built in the 1970s.

about the feasibility politically?

Cooper: Well, it's very interesting to note that, to my knowledge, there's little if any effort going on on the U.S. side. I know there is a gentleman by the name of George Koumal, who in the past, has created this hemispheric Bering Strait tunnel and rail group. He's based in Tucson, Arizona. He's been working somewhat with the people up in Alaska, and he has got some degree of support up there. But, unfortunately, not enough.

But that has not led to any significant effort so far. Certainly not from the standpoint of financial support or benefits from the state of Alaska, or anyone else.

But on the Russian side, I know the Siberian State Transport University in Novosibirsk has established a taskforce, and they are actually looking at the economic development, and the traffic-generation potential of connecting the Russian rail system to the Bering Strait. Years ago, there was a feasibility study done by the Moscow Regional Transportation Institute by Dr. Viktor Razbegin, which shows that the Bering Strait Tunnel is very feasible.

EIR: Is this partly why, on the Russian side, you see an interest in tank cars—which you show in the painting? This is for petroleum?

Cooper: It would be for carrying oil. And, of course, in Russia, there is large amounts of oil transported by railroad.

It's interesting to point out that, in the conditions of the

Arctic, you could build the fanciest railroad—double-track, electric, fully resistant to any frost conditions, which, of course, you have plenty of there, and the cost would be about \$7.5 million a mile.

EIR: How does that compare with other modes?

Cooper: Well, I'm going to compare it to a pipeline. And you can carry any commodity in either direction on the railroad. Including all the oil you want.

Now, if you build a pipeline to that area, and we're extrapolating the cost of the Alaska pipeline, which was completed in 1979, at a cost of about \$10 million a mile. It would probably be about \$15 million a mile, at a minimum, now, for a pipeline very similar to what was built in Alaska.

EIR: Because of permafrost, and so on?

Cooper: It has to be built elevated; it has to be able to resist heat. You have to have foundations. And all sorts of things like that. And, the cost would be a minimum of \$15 million a mile, and you could ship one commodity in one direction. And in fact, believe it or not, the railroad would have a greater capacity to carry oil than the pipeline would.

EIR: That's a revelation.

Cooper: It just points out that, if you had gone back, and it was 1972 again, and we were looking at that Alaska pipeline, we would have never built the pipeline, knowing what we know today. Because the comparison was made when the rail was just marginally more expensive, coming down to North Dakota, with a cost of \$800 million for the pipeline, and the pipeline ended up costing \$10.8 billion! And on top of that, you have to add \$7.9 billion for the oil spill that happened in 1980.

EIR: So, what you are saying, is that the development corridor approach, which you have been promoting for decades, and which is in the LaRouche Eurasian Land-Bridge approach, is even cheaper at the outset?

Cooper: Oh, absolutely! The difficulty you have is that the oil companies want the transportation system under their own control. And they have no concern whatsoever about cost-effectiveness. Their attitude is, that it might be the difference between 3¢ a gallon and 5¢ a gallon, added onto the cost of gasoline.