
Interview: H.A. Cooper



Bring The Eurasian Land-Bridge To America

Transportation consultant Hal B.H. Cooper, Jr. is based in Seattle. He designed the schematic maps for priority world rail routes, published in the January 1997 EIR Special Report, "The Eurasian Land-Bridge: The 'New Silk Road' – Locomotive For Worldwide Economic Development." Among his current projects, Cooper is actively promoting a new "Alaska-Canada-Lower 48" Rail Corridor, connecting via the Bering Strait, with Eurasia. He was interviewed on Oct. 4 by Marcia Merry Baker.

EIR: Back in 1997, *EIR* published your maps (Figures 1 and 2), of what ought to be world priority rail routes, in the report on the proposal for the Eurasian Land-Bridge. Since then, a lot has happened. Now there is talk in Washington and other capital cities, that because of security, or because of projects long overdue, we should start moving on infrastructure. Let's begin with the Western Hemisphere. What can you say about the North American routes never built? What about the Alaska-Canada Highway, the "Al-Can"?

Cooper: Well, certainly, going back to early in the 20th Century, there were proposals to build that line, and in fact, the proposals involved building a tunnel under the Bering Strait, and connecting to the rest of the world. But with the onset of World War I, that was stopped. Some people say that that was one of the reasons that World War I happened, for the specific purpose of stopping that railway development.

But in more recent times — there had been some interest in World War II, but it was shelved because of the steel shortage. And now, there is renewed interest in building the railroad, in conjunction with a natural gas pipeline, electric power generation, and perhaps water transport, along the lines of the NAWAPA [North American Water and Power Alliance] project.

EIR: In other words, at the time of the Al-Can Highway — that was World War II — would that be the same route?

Cooper: Yes it would.

EIR: Is it through the Peace River Valley? Or how does it go?

Cooper: No. Actually, the way it goes, is that the rail line would generally parallel the existing Alaskan Highway. Starting from Fairbanks, it would come down through the valley parallel to the highway through Delta Junction and Tok Junction

to a place called Alcan, at the border, to a place called Beaver Creek, and down through Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory in Canada, over to Watson Lake. Then, coming around in the Liard River region, over to Fort Nelson, on the east side of the Rocky Mountains (because, as you know, they are not so high up that far north), and then through Edmonton, and then coming down into the United States, into North Dakota, through the Minot and Bismarck area, into the Twin Cities [Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota] area. And then to Chicago, where it would, of course, all connect to the entire rest of the American rail network.

And there would be a separate line going from a place called Teslin in the Yukon Territory, down through Dease Lake to Prince George, British Columbia, to Vancouver, to Seattle; and then, of course, connecting with the West Coast rail network as well. So, there would then be direct rail access from Alaska down to the Lower 48 states on the West Coast and in the Midwest.

EIR: How long would the route be from the Alaska border?

Cooper: The part that has to be built, that doesn't exist now, is about 1,300 miles. The total corridor between Fairbanks and Bismarck is approximately 2,700 miles. It's over 3,000 to go to Chicago.

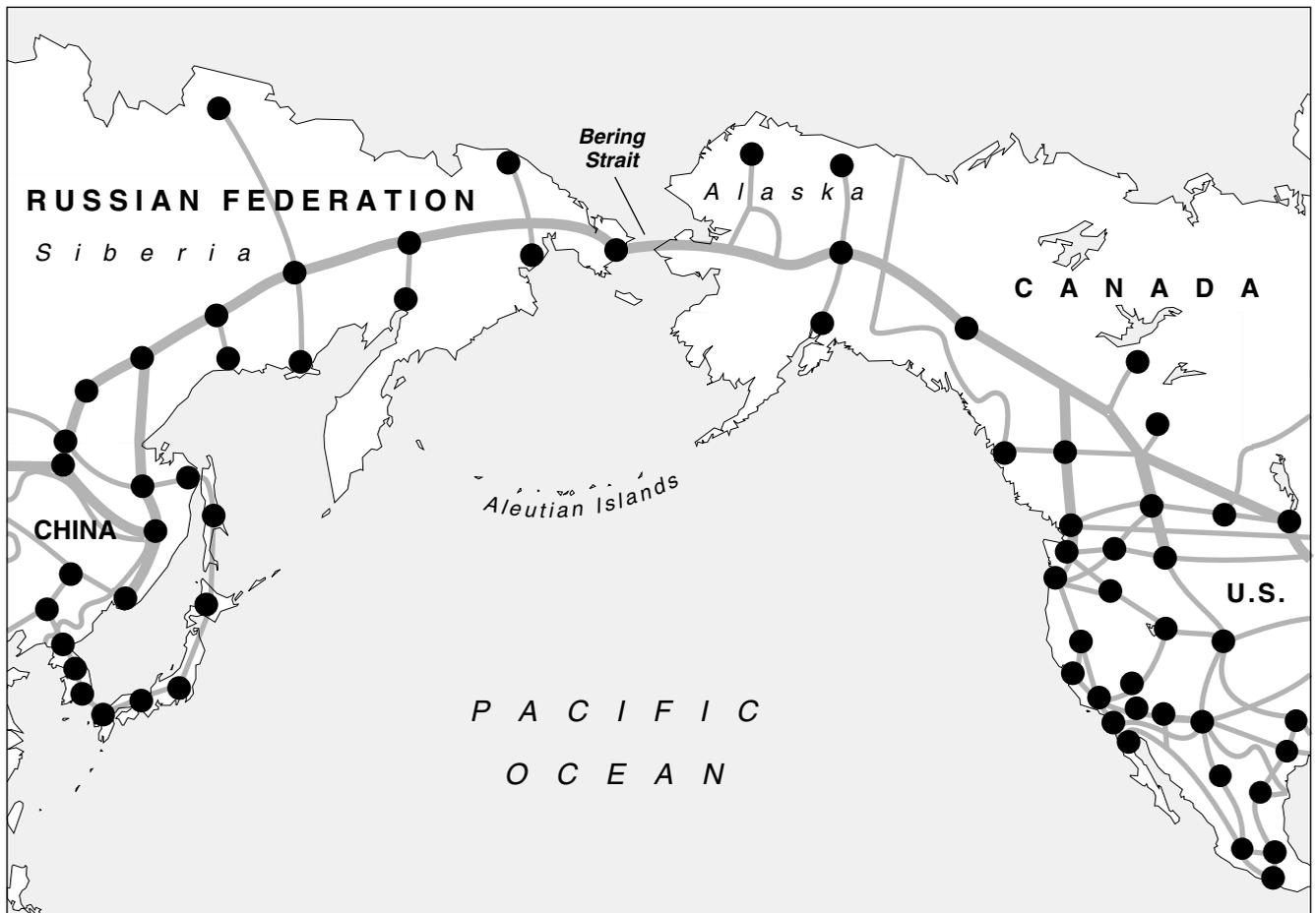
EIR: What about farther down in North America, down into Mexico and Central America?

Cooper: Well, there has been a proposal advanced by a group in North Dakota, called the Central North American Trade Development Corridor, which I discussed in one of my earlier papers on infrastructure development for Latin America. This would come from Minot, through Bismarck, North Dakota, down through Pierre, South Dakota, and ultimately end up in Abilene, Texas, and cross the border at Eagle Pass, Texas into Mexico, and then straight to Mexico City, on the main rail line from Saltillo. That would allow rail development down through Central America to South America, and connect into the rail systems in South America.

EIR: As of 1990, many of the rail lines in South America were still run by the governments. But since then, there has been there, as well as in North America, the so-called "mar-

FIGURE 1

Plan For A Tunnel Connection Under The Bering Strait Between Siberia And Alaska



Source: Redrawn from H.A. Cooper.

ket reform,” the privatization and deregulation sell-off of assets.

Cooper: Yes, that’s correct.

EIR: What effect has that had on the potential for upgrading and getting on with expansion?

Cooper: Well, in some cases, good, and in some cases, not so good, depending on who is doing it. In Mexico, of course, what has happened, is you have had a considerable investment in rail facilities. There have been three different companies involved in privatizations. Although the government has had to keep its participation in those projects.

In South America and Central America, there has been privatization of the Panama Canal Railroad, and I notice in Guatemala recently, there was a privatization. But there is a necessity of whoever is owning the railroads, to greatly expand the infrastructure, and this is really going to require

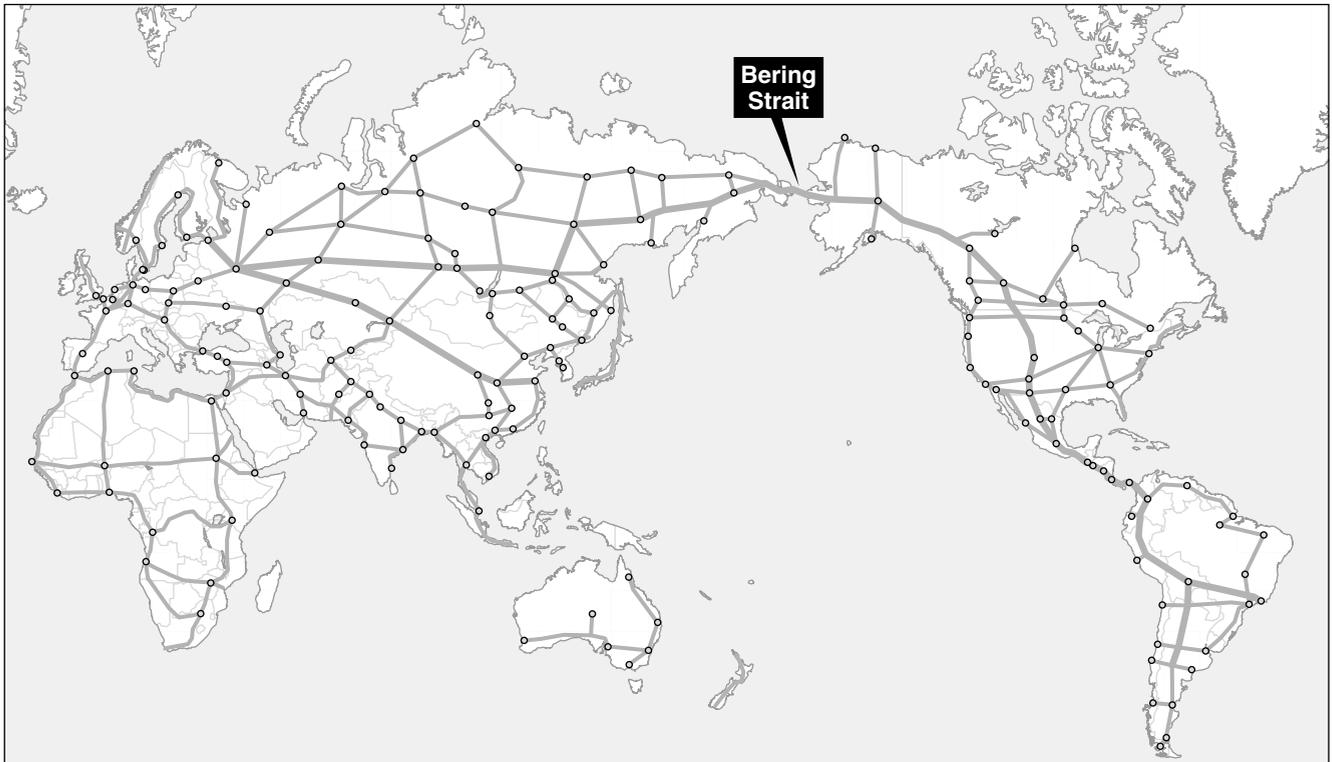
government participation on a major scale, not on a minor scale, as we’ve had.

There’s been a tendency for governments to get out of the business, rather than get in. And that’s probably the exact opposite of what we should be doing—and certainly from the capital investment standpoint. The difficulty with private financing of railroads, is the fact that typically, they are high-capital, relatively low-rate-of-return investments, as compared with some others. As a result, making profits is not necessarily very easy, certainly as compared with energy generation.

EIR: During the first week in October, there were hours of discussion on Capitol Hill about the urgency, for security and infrastructure reasons—because we don’t have any redundancy—to take on capitalizing projects. Can you tell us about the tremendous ripple effects there would be in building rail

FIGURE 2

Main Lines Of A Worldwide Rail Network, As Sketched By H.A. Cooper



projects?

Cooper: I'm going to do that, but first I'm going to answer the security concern, because it was on the news just 15 minutes ago, by Sen. Joseph Biden [D-Del.]: Amtrak wants \$3 billion for infrastructure upgrading. Of course, the airlines have already gotten a \$15 billion package—and Congress has been somewhat reluctant to do that. Interestingly enough, this entire investment of \$3 billion that Amtrak is proposing, is all for the Northeast corridor. There is nothing for the rest of the country. And this is why there's been so much bad feeling against Amtrak, because it's been looked at as an organization that takes care of Boston to New York to Washington, and nothing else. If we're going to have a national system, security included, we need to be thinking about the whole country, and not just a small part of it. And unfortunately, that's the philosophy of the Amtrak management. And frankly, it always has been, and it's been probably one of the biggest impediments to us developing a sufficient national rail system. The mentality needs to change.

Now let's get to the question of materials. The rebuilding of up to 70,000 miles of rail lines across this country, to double-track, or triple-track specification, is going to require, certainly, at least \$100 billion-plus investment, and perhaps significantly more than that. There's going to be the need for a large amount of steel, a large amount of concrete—of course,

reinforcing steel is used in concrete—a number of other metals.

EIR: What is the factor for something like steel per track-mile?

Cooper: For single track-line, it's around 1,500 tons per mile. That includes some sidings, but that's approximately what the number is. You probably have about 2,500 tons per mile for double-track railroad.

There is a need to electrify the railroads, so we don't need to import oil. And that means we can use our domestic energy resources, including nuclear and coal, in powering trains, and then we don't have to use oil.

This is the fallacy of the transportation system that we've developed in this country since World War II: We rely almost completely on airlines for our intercity passenger transportation, and we rely almost entirely on trucks for our intercity freight—certainly for the high-value commodities. That's something that we drastically need to change.

There's going to be a great need for completely rebuilding and reconstituting our entire basic industry infrastructure, including steel, aluminum, cement, and a large number of metal and other industries that have been allowed to languish, and, in many respects, to go down the drain—because of lack of demand, because there has been no force to implement

infrastructure programs. It is finally beginning to be recognized nationally, that it has to be done; and it has to be done for the whole country, and not just for a small part of the country, for railroads. That's certainly the fallacy of Amtrak.

I think that, also, we're going to need to have governments involved from the states. We need non-traditional private companies, that don't think like existing railroad companies. One of the biggest impediments we have, is the "decline and cut" mentality of railroad managements, which very much parallels so many other businesses in this country; which is why we've seen such economic decline, in my opinion.

EIR: "Decline and cut"?

Cooper: Yes. Or, "decrease and cut." In other words, to reduce: continuing reductions in cost, continuing reductions in service, continuing reductions in networks. That's been the policy of railroad managers in this country, since World War II. They've thrown away their base-rate business—it now goes by truck; that, they should have never done.

EIR: You've travelled all about the world, and back and forth to Alaska, on projects. Would you say something about the shifts you see, that could take place politically, for people to change their thinking and revive an orientation for the public good?

Cooper: This next week, there's going to be a conference on the Alaska-Canada rail corridor, between Fairbanks and the Lower-48 states, that will be sponsored under the aegis of the Alaska Legislature, and several of the businesses in the Fairbanks area.

But what we really need to be thinking about is that we have to—in terms of Alaska, there has been somewhat of a political battle up there between the people who want economic development—and which, of course, is focussed, at least initially, on oil and gas development—as compared to those people who are associated with the environmental community, who don't want there to be any economic development at all. Up until very recently, the people involved with the environmental outlook, have been very much predominant; and of course, that completely needs to change, because we see the environmentalist movement, going from a very positive force to a very negative force in the recent past. And I think especially in view of the situation that occurred down in the Klamath River Basin in southern Oregon this past Summer, with water.

There's certainly a mentality that needs to change. The fact that this effort is being made in Alaska is a very good indicator that it is beginning to change.

EIR: On waterborne transportation, the fact is that only six major U.S. ports have high security, and you have a whole system that's underfunded. Financing has been cut to replace dams on inland channels, such as the tributaries of the Ohio—the Monongahela. Do you want to say something on this?

Cooper: I certainly think so. We've been fighting this battle

out here in the Pacific Northwest, where, as you are probably aware, our Seattle City Council passed a resolution to take out the dams on the Snake River. There's been this mentality of, let's protect the salmon, and let's forget about the economies in these rural areas. What we've had is nothing less than rural-cleansing. Of course, the idea about removing dams is just a small part of that. I think we need to go completely in the other direction. We need to get on with the building program, rather than the "taking out" program.

EIR: Recently in Vienna was the World Rail Congress. Among many giving reports there, was Vyacheslav Petrenko, Deputy General Director of the Russian Ministry of Rail Transport, who spoke about—given Russia's location, they are looking for building up their own system to handle volume between Asia and Europe, especially north-south connections to India. Do you want to comment about these kinds of shifts taking place?

Cooper: Russia has always been a country that's relied on its railroad system. Based on my having been in that country five times, and having kept up with what's going on, my assessment is that that's a decision that's basic to their economic survival. In fact, in my opinion, it's one of the reasons that country stayed together during the last ten years—was the fact that it has a good railroad system run by good people.

Russia, of course, is pushing for connections to India, by way of Iran and Azerbaijan. They are also planning to greatly expand infrastructure to and with China, and also into Korea. There have been proposals to rebuild the railroad on Sakhalin Island, connected at both the north end, at the Tatar Strait, and the south end, at La Perouse Strait, with the Japanese system.

There are some gauge change issues that have to be dealt with. A Spanish company, Talgo, which manufactures rail cars that are used in the Pacific Northwest, has a system that can be used for interchanging the gauges of the cars without having to change the wheels. That certainly helps. But I think it would help, at some point in the future, if we all were on the same gauge. Then it would be very suitable. But Russia has an extensive system already that operates on its own gauge. That's certainly some problem that can be worked around.

Russia is really pushing to develop more extensive rail. It was announced at the end of last year from Moscow, that they have done a feasibility study of building the connecting rail to the Bering Strait. Their indication is that that project is economically feasible. It would have a lot of benefits in improving freight transport from the interior of Asia to the interior of the United States.

EIR: The Bering Strait tunnel. What are the engineering issues, for the layman?

Cooper: Well, the Bering Strait is 53 miles wide. The deepest water is about 180 feet deep. There are two islands, Big Diomedes and Little Diomedes, out in the channel, which make it easier to build. The longest underwater crossing is 22 miles.

Actually, it has better soil conditions than the English Channel, where they have already built a rail tunnel. With the English Channel Tunnel being completed, that indicates that the project to build a tunnel under the Bering Strait is certainly a feasible one. It could be readily built.

EIR: Turning to some problems in the current rail system: Besides not completing many routes, what about the fact that the lack of maintenance and underdeveloped infrastructure, such as continuation of grade-level crossings — where the rail and highway are on same level — causes problems? Higher rates of accidents, and so on?

Cooper: Certainly the fact that we have not properly invested in our rail system, and in the highway systems that interface with the railroads — specifically the grade crossings, and grade separations — has helped create the safety problems we've had. Some people have said that deregulation may have put too many cost pressures on railroads, and they haven't made the investments. I know there was a concern over CSX and the Northeast Corridor runs several years ago on that issue.

What we're going to need to do, is build a large number of grade separations, which is going to require lots of steel and concrete, and keep lots of people employed; along with the fact, we need to double-track and triple-track the railroads, and electrify them.

I think the conference in Alaska next week is going to be very important, in terms of what has to happen in the redevelopment of our North American rail system. The fact that there is now a bill in Congress for \$71 billion to upgrade freight and passenger railroads, is certainly a good start. But there has to be a real push from the Federal government to do that.

I also think that we need to have some organization, other than the present management of Amtrak, running things. We need to take a completely growth-oriented national focus, rather than a strictly Northeast Corridor status-quo focus. I think that there's going to be lots and lots of additional investment.

I also think, that we are probably seeing a period now, where we are not ever going to see airline travel as dominant as it has been in the past. And we also are going to need to find some way of getting trucks put on trains.

Ultimately, we are going to need a magnetic levitation system network across this country, in conjunction with the railroads, as a replacement for at least some of the airlines service that we have in this country today. Because it doesn't have to use oil, and we can use energy resources, including nuclear and coal, that we already have in this country.

EIR: If you are phasing in these routes, what is the principle governing this?

Cooper: I think the smartest thing that can be done with magnetic levitation, is to build on these projects that were already proposed in the recent solicitation by the Federal Rail-

road Administration, where they were proposing projects that would go from downtowns to airports. There's one in the Washington, D.C. area — Washington to Baltimore — one in Pittsburgh, that I understand were recommended for funding; but those need to go ahead, as well as other ones, in Southern California, and in Atlanta, and so forth — that would be very good.

In some respects, these are going to replace the need for expanding airports; that's becoming increasingly difficult to do. Of course, here in Seattle, they're going ahead with expanding their airport, with the very likely possibility that there's not going to be the traffic there in the future. We need to be thinking in different ways than we have in the past.

EIR: So you say, just get along with the job. Get some experience, and then build the other lines.

Cooper: Exactly. Because then it will just build on itself. I see it, for long-distance travel across the country, as complementing, as a replacement for at least some of the airlines service we have today.

EIR: So it would be an inter-mix, at the beginning, of upgraded, pre-existing rail, and then, the introduction of maglev.

Cooper: Exactly. I don't see maglev replacing the present rail. I see it complementing it.

Russia Will Build Rail Link To Sakhalin Island

by Rachel Douglas

The Russian government's weekly meeting of Oct. 4 was devoted to key economic projects in the far western and eastern reaches of the Russian Federation: the development of Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg) on the Baltic Sea; and the construction of the rail bridge from the Eurasian continent to Sakhalin Island in the Pacific Ocean. At a press conference after the cabinet session, Minister of Economic Development and Trade German Gref, and Railways Minister Nikolai Aksyonenko announced Russia's commitment to push ahead with the connection to Sakhalin, which is an eastwards extension of Eurasia's first land-bridge, the Trans-Siberian Railroad (TSR).

Gref called these projects "geostrategic and geopolitical in their implications." He reported that a feasibility study, undertaken earlier this year, had determined that a Mainland-Sakhalin rail bridge is preferable to a tunnel. Gref placed much emphasis on negotiating the participation of Japan in further development of Sakhalin infrastructure, asserting that the \$3-4 billion, 5.8 kilometer-long Mainland-Sakhalin bridge project will break even, only if Sakhalin is subse-