

Transportation by Rachel Douglas

A Bering Strait rail link

A rail link between the Eurasian and American continents would be no more difficult to build than the Franco-English Channel Tunnel.

There is renewed discussion in Russia of the benefits of great infrastructure projects for economic development. Many economists and commentators scoffed at such projects in recent years, calling them cases of the "gigantism" disease that afflicted communist leaders. The Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), for example, the second trans-Siberian railroad, lost its status as "project of the century" and was termed a "road to nowhere."

Built in the 1970s and 1980s, the BAM, which had military significance and a role for shipping out Siberian raw materials for export, was unfortunately divorced from infrastructure improvements in the economy as a whole; while the huge BAM was built, most railroads in European Russia were still single-track lines.

But several years of bitter experience have now demonstrated to Russians that the "invisible hand" of the free market, in the version promoted by Harvard professor Jeffrey Sachs and other International Monetary Fund-linked advisers from the West, is that of a pickpocket. Talk has turned back to some big projects, which could only be carried out through the efforts of several governments, as well as private companies.

The Moscow daily *Izvestia* reported on one of them on July 17, under the headline: "A Unique Twenty-First Century Project: Tunnel under the Bering Strait."

According to author Boris Konovalov, the plan for a rail link between

Alaska and far northeastern Russia, developed at the turn of the century by an engineering team in Paris, has been revived by an international consortium called Transcontinental.

Several Russian engineering organizations and the Russian Academy of Sciences have joined its Russian section, headed by Academician P. Melnikov. "According to the preliminary opinion of the specialists," reported Konovalov, "laying this tunnel will be no more difficult than the creation of the underwater link between England and France," the English Channel tunnel which is now operational.

The Transcontinental scheme envisions two nine-meter-wide tunnels for rail lines, plus a six-meter-wide service tunnel in between them. The tunnels will be 100 kilometers long, reaching from Cape Uelen on the Russian side to the Seward Peninsula in Alaska.

On neither side, however, are these remote, nearly Arctic regions serviced by rail lines now. "Their construction makes the project unique in its grand scale," wrote Konovalov. With adequate international investment, he outlined, the Russian network could be built northwards from the BAM nexus at Tynda, and along the Lena River through Yakutsk. "The transportation artery solves the problem of year-round delivery of freight to the Sakha Republic [formerly Yakutia] and will sharply accelerate its development."

Konovalov estimated the cost of the project at \$50 billion, comparable

with the plan for American-European-Canadian-Japanese financing of Space Station Freedom at \$70 billion. "Thus, implementation of this project for a transcontinental railroad is fully within the capability of the international community."

Russia, he added, has "the technical experience in construction in roadless areas and permafrost."

Konovalov concluded with a discussion of the broader gains from such a rail link:

"The railroad will be of extraordinary significance not only for Russia, but also the United States and Canada. It will provide these countries direct rail communication with China, Mongolia, Korea, and later on, Japan and Indochina, as well as opening the way into Central and South Asia, the Near and Middle East. . . . Preliminary calculations show, I was told by President B. Gusev of the Russian Engineering Academy, that the delivery of freight by rail from the U.S. Pacific Coast, for example, to Bombay, would be 1.5 times cheaper than by sea. The greater part of humanity has an interest in the linking up Eurasia and America, and that provides the basis to believe that, despite all the difficulties, this grandiose project will come to be."

These proposals and plans are in line with *EIR's* comprehensive proposal last year for a Eurasian rail system which would connect to a number of "great projects," including Lyndon LaRouche's European "Productive Triangle" proposal. See *EIR's Feature*, July 17, 1992, p. 20, in which Jonathan Tennenbaum reviews the Productive Triangle proposals for the development of Eurasian rail lines in combination with incorporating the most up-to-date technological advances, and the updated map of these Eurasian projects in the issue dated Oct. 9, 1992, p. 36.