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Interview: Hal Cooper

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# Build Eurasian Railroads To Fuel Economic Progress

*Dr. Hal Cooper, of Cooper Consulting Company, is a transportation expert from Seattle, Washington. He was interviewed on Dec. 12 by Marcia Merry Baker.*

**EIR:** You were in Russia Nov. 22 to Dec. 4, in Novosibirsk, for an important railroad conference at the Siberian State Transportation University. Tell us how it is, that there is such a specialty university—I think we have no such transportation college here in the United States. What was the purpose of the conference, who attended, and so forth?

**Cooper:** The Siberian State Transport University is one of the ten universities in Russia, which is devoted to the education of specialists for railways. It has an enrollment of about 9,000 students, a staff and faculty of about 800, and it's one of the main transportation universities in Russia; it specializes in railroads.

They were holding a conference in conjunction with their 70th anniversary celebrations, while I was there, during the period from Nov. 24 until Nov. 28, in Novosibirsk. There were approximately 400 people attending the conference. I was the only one from the United States. . . .

**EIR:** It seems that the theme of the Novosibirsk conference is very much the topic of continental and intercontinental rail integration. I understand that you and a Korean rail expert were the speakers on a panel on this.

**Cooper:** Yes. As part of the ceremonies for the conference, there were a number of people there from both North Korea and South Korea. And the fact that the Russian railway and the Novosibirsk university have been very instrumental in helping both North and South Korea work to reunify their rail systems, and to upgrade their rail systems, has been very much a part of this whole program.

There was a woman named Madame [Dr.] Choi Yeon-hye, who gave a paper on the North and South Korean railways, and the efforts to reunify them [see article, below]. And at the same time, I gave a paper on transportation corridors, and that served as one of the sessions for the conference.

**EIR:** Her paper is called, "For the Era of an Iron Silk Road." Could you summarize the key points?

**Cooper:** She reviewed the present status of operation of both the South Korean and North Korean railways. The South Korean railway is a relatively well-developed railway, with relatively high traffic, and it's in relatively good physical condition.

She also discussed the fact that they are now in the process of building a high-speed line between Seoul and Pusan, through South Korea. It is not completed yet, but it is under construction.

Then she went through, in extensive detail, what is the situation in the North Korean railway, in terms of its present traffic, its present physical condition, the commodities it hauls, and the efforts to link the North Korean railways, not only to South Korea, but to connect South Korea to China and Russia, by way of North Korea; because North Korea is essential for all the interconnections to take place.

The fact that these discussions are occurring, is an effort to really connect all these countries together and to link them much closer economically, which will be beneficial to all of the countries, in particular to North Korea. . . .

Much of the North Korean Railway is in a condition of near collapse. On some of the lines, there is no ballast. Most of it is single track. There are not that many sidings. However, there is relatively light traffic at the moment. So for the railway to be expanded, in terms of its ability to haul more cargo and passengers, it's going to have to be significantly upgraded, and then expanded.

She is establishing its present baseline, so that what needs to be improved can be defined, and then those efforts can be brought into being.

**EIR:** So in a way, this is part of the background for what we have seen since. This very week, since you've been back from the conference, the Russians have a big delegation in South Korea, and they have some experts up in North Korea, checking out all the lines.

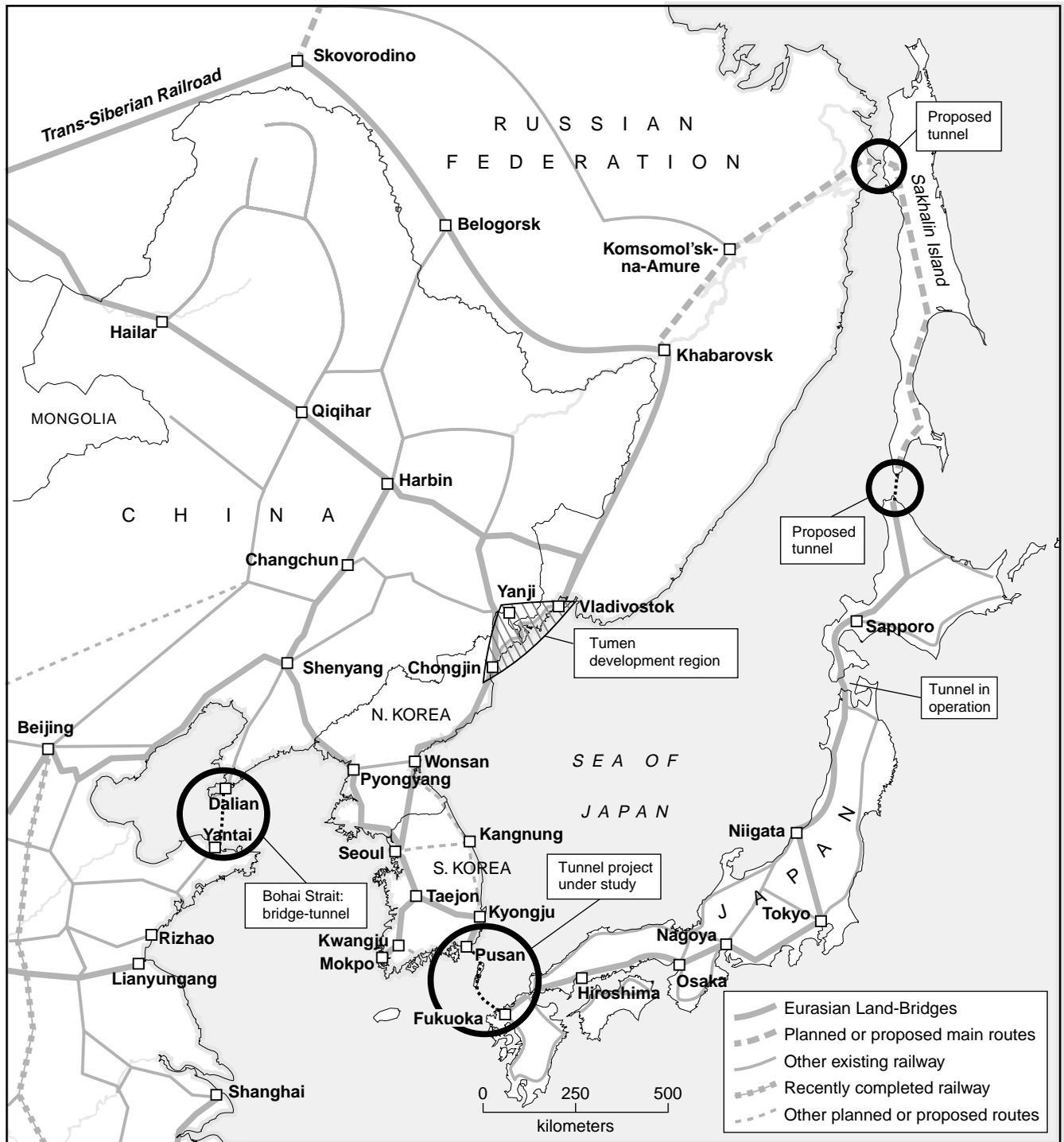
**Cooper:** Exactly.

**EIR:** So you see all this as a follow-on, to the conference of experts in which you took part?

**Cooper:** This is all a part of the same effort, to get these railways connected with each other, so commerce can move,

FIGURE 1

Far East Infrastructure Projects



and certainly so that the economic conditions in North Korea can be improved.

**EIR:** What about the routes, in your opinion and that of Dr.

Choi? Even though on the map, it appears to be the “long way ’round” to get to Europe, for example, from South Korea, by going northeast up into Russia, and then hooking west—isn’t that actually a limited way to look at it? It’s still very favorable

to link both through China—more geographically direct, and also through Russia, you say? Is that right?

**Cooper:** That is correct. Of course, there is one problem, and that is, that if you are going through the Russian system, you have a gauge change that you have to deal with. That's one of the issues that has to be addressed from a technical standpoint. They are working on how they can best deal with the question of changing railway gauges.

**EIR:** On the same panel, you talked about what we could we call the "North American integrated rail approach," which we have not had in past decades.

**Cooper:** I was really reviewing the present status of the development of railroad transportation corridors in North America, in my presentation, yes.

**EIR:** The long-hoped-for one that you have fought for, is the Alaska-Canada-U.S.A. line, connecting to the Bering Strait.

**Cooper:** The Bering Strait Tunnel project. I was asked to focus my presentation, not on what I had written my paper about—except in review—but on, how does all this relate to the Bering Strait and what can be done? Because at that university, they have already established a taskforce of people to study the Bering Strait Tunnel, and the ability to generate traffic for economic development in the corridors leading to the Bering Strait Tunnel from the existing railway lines now.

**EIR:** What is involved technically in such a tunnel? It's fascinating. Would it be a tunnel under the Earth; or a kind of sealed box on the seabed?

**Cooper:** You have very long connecting routes to build from both existing railroads, and that's as much of a cost factor as a technical factor.

**EIR:** You mean to get up to the Strait?

**Cooper:** Yes, to get there. There have been suggestions of both a bridge and a tunnel. A bridge is probably less expensive, but it exposes you to the problems of the weather.

The tunnel is more expensive, but you are going to have much less problem, obviously, with weather concerns. There are people who believe in both. My personal opinion is that we should have a tunnel there. We can build bridges farther south, where we don't have as severe weather problems, and we wouldn't have as much safety or operational problems from the Bering Sea region. This is where most of the storms originate that come to North America.

Evidently, this is relatively solid material, so that digging a tunnel is not an extremely difficult task at that point, on a relative basis. It would probably be very much comparable to the tunnel we already have at the English Channel between France and England.

**EIR:** So, in other words, people at the Siberian State Transport University were not daunted by any technical issues of the engineering involved.

**Cooper:** We really didn't discuss that issue. Our concern was, if you are going to build it, why are you going to build it? What is the justification? And what is the traffic potential? That's the issue that we discussed.

**EIR:** What did the Russian contingents say?

**Cooper:** They felt that there are really two commodities that are going to make that tunnel be very viable. First of all, is the transport of oil from Russia to the United States. And second, is the transport of intermodal containers from the central part of Asia, to the central part of North America.

**EIR:** From your point of view—the only American there—what assessment did you convey to the Russians about the prospects for getting this North American corridor that would go up to the Bering Strait connection?

**Cooper:** It was, and is, my opinion, that the governments of the United States and Russia need to work together. I think that the issue of the transport of oil seems to be the strategic interest that ties all of this together, because we had a very extensive discussion among the participants of the session, about—if we are going to transport oil from Russia to the United States, where are we going to transport it from? Where will it go to? Where will the oil be refined? And then, where does that fit into the market in the United States? And then, what are all the problems involved with the transport routes and infrastructure?

Our conclusion was, because so much of Russia's oil is in northerly locations, where it's a long ways from an ocean, we would be better off, shipping it by rail through the Bering Strait, than trying to use pipelines and seaports, and run into all these problems with other countries, when in fact, that isn't even necessary.

**EIR:** So you are talking about good, old-fashioned tanker-cars?

**Cooper:** Exactly.

**EIR:** In other words, this really takes it outside the box of the limited discussion of whether to have an Alaskan northern slope gas pipeline?

**Cooper:** Actually, building a natural gas pipeline might serve as an impetus to get the American part of this project moving, which is my belief, because some of the states in the upper Midwest would like to buy natural gas from Alaska, so as to assure a stable supply at a stable price.

**EIR:** This brings us to the gist of what your prepared paper was talking about; that is, integrated transport corridors, that have utilities combined. Did you report on that?

**Cooper:** Oh, yes. And the Russian people feel that in these areas which are remote, which right now have no development, you have, you know, nothing that you need to un-build, if you are developing a transportation corridor. So that concept works very well.

In fact, as you are probably aware, I did a feasibility study several years ago for one of these rail lines in northeastern Russia, which would actually involve a 500-mile-long transportation corridor, integrating this concept.

**EIR:** So in the paper that you submitted, you summarized how you would see the upgrading of the rail system of North America in that light?

**Cooper:** Exactly.

**EIR:** Which key corridors did you highlight?

**Cooper:** Well, the corridor that's of focus, is from the Bering Strait down into northern British Columbia, into the U.S.-Canada border in North Dakota, and to a lesser extent, in the state of Washington, because that's the primary place of interest of getting cargo from the United States to the Bering Strait, by way of Alaska.

**EIR:** And to finish out the continental picture, the corridor that you speak of, running through the Dakotas, would continue southward down into Mexico?

**Cooper:** That is correct.

**EIR:** Otherwise, you see that in already highly settled regions, such as the Eastern United States, or urban areas on the West Coast, you see particular kinds of corridors there too? But with more specialized functions?

**Cooper:** They would probably be somewhat more limited, but there needs to be a corridor along the West Coast, generally parallel to Interstate 5, which, you know, I've already proposed, and made several presentations to the LaRouche organization about, in Los Angeles. And the Central Corridor—which I presented to the LaRouche organization in South Dakota. And then, also a corridor going over to Chicago and Minneapolis from the Dakotas, because of the fact that ties into the eastern, southern United States.

**EIR:** So, in other words, as this year ends, you are involved in almost as much, or more, international discussion—with the Russians and the Koreans—than has happened on Capitol Hill, because of the opposition here to do anything about Amtrak and so forth.

Can you say something about what ought to be done about our national passenger rail and the immediate emergency situation that we have?

**Cooper:** It's very obvious to me that the reason that we have so many financial problems with our airlines, is that we've tried to force a bi-modal passenger transportation system in this country, for intermodal service, which is airplanes and automobiles—basically to try to exclude railroads.

**EIR:** You mean, in the longer view—over the last 50 years?

**Cooper:** Over the last 50 years, exactly. This has been the basis of the transportation policy of the United States. And

this policy also integrates burning the maximum amount of oil that has to be imported, as we can possibly do. This is the basis of the policy, and this is what has to be, basically, thrown out the window. Because we're proving right now that when you try to use airplanes for markets for which they are really not suitable, it doesn't work!

**EIR:** You mean short-hop and so forth.

**Cooper:** Yes, exactly.

**EIR:** So you're saying, that since we have the overall crisis, it can be an opportunity to put things back on—

**Cooper:** Put things back onto where they should have been in the first place. We should never have gotten in this mess. We have a lot of airlines that probably never should be there. Not that I'm against Boeing, right here in Seattle! But, we use too many airplanes for our inter-city transportation in this country. I'm afraid Russia's beginning to go down that same path.

But anyway, I feel that we have to get the national system re-built, with a minimum of two trains in each direction in each of those lines, and we need to start expanding the lines. We have to recognize that we have an energy problem. And that isn't going to be solved by running more planes, and driving more cars.

**EIR:** You're saying, what we have now in the way of the major Amtrak and Via Canada and Mexican passenger lines, should have two trains on each of them.

**Cooper:** They *should have*, and most of them do not. That's what I'm trying to point out. To make this economically viable, you need at least two a day in each direction, and we don't have that.

**EIR:** So you will have a lot to do in the new year, to help change the thinking.

**Cooper:** Well, I hope so. As you said, I probably had more discussions about integration of rail systems between North America and Asia, than has occurred on Capitol Hill, and I believe it—that's the case!

**EIR:** Maybe you can bring pressure to bear from the outside.

**Cooper:** The difficulty that we have, is that most of the government people look at all this as fantasy-land. I mean, they are not looking at the strategic interest of the country.

And you know, the Russians were very concerned about, how do we get oil from Russia to the United States, and where does it need to get to? And their conclusion is, you are not going to bring most of this by ship or by plane.

**EIR:** So it is always back to, what is the right infrastructure?

**Cooper:** Right. . . .

**EIR:** Well, thank you for representing the traditional interests of the United States.

**Cooper:** Obviously, today, there is a concern over there about this war, and why are we spending so much effort on that, when we really don't need to.

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## Korean Rail Expert

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# 'For the Era of The Iron Silk Road'

Dr. Choi Yeon-hye, professor in the Department of Transportation Management at the Korea National Railroad College in South Korea, spoke at the Nov. 25-29 conference at the Siberian State Transport University in Novosibirsk, on a panel with Dr. Hal Cooper. Dr. Choi contributed a paper, "For the Era of the Iron Silk Road: A Report on Inter-Korean Railway Link Projects and Perspectives for the TKR-TSR" (Trans-Korean Railway and Trans-Siberian Railway).

In the 30-page document, Dr. Choi starts with a chronology of the Korean National Railway, from 1899 to the present, and then reviews the status of the current North and South Korean rail systems. Finally she gives the latest update on the "Inter-Korean Railway Link Projects," and her perspective on "Alternatives for Continental Railway Link"—through both China and Russia.

Her paper provides charts and tables of the "Planned Inter-Korean Infrastructure Re-Link Projects," ranging from a mere 8 km of the Jangdan-Bongdong connection on the west coast Kyongui Line (opened in 1906, to connect Seoul with Pyongyang and Shinuiju), to a re-link of 127 km on the Kangnung-Demilitarized Zone segment of the east coast Donghae-Bukbu Line. She writes that with the reconnections, "the two Koreas are expecting positive impacts, first of all, in the economic field. Transportation costs between the two Koreas will

be reduced to about one-quarter of the current cost of sending goods by ships, namely to \$150-200 per TEU [20-foot equivalent unit] from the current \$700." And there will be time savings, too.

Choi wrote: "These merits will contribute to increasing inter-Korean economic cooperation. According to estimations from the Korean Ministry of Construction and Transportation, the volume of inter-Korean trade can be increased up to tenfold of this year."

In giving her view of the "Comparative Advantages for the Trans-Siberian Railway," Choi stressed that, in respect to future progress in North Korea, "Russia can plan an important role, because it is one of a few countries which still remain in a diplomatic relationship with North Korea. Furthermore, the two countries have been cultivating a close friendship traditionally. Hence, Russia is situated in a position to inspire North Korea for re-linking railway networks and also for keeping up smooth operations later on."

Dr. Choi drew out other comparative advantages of the Trans-Siberian link—not as opposed to the link-up with China, but rather, for certain inherent merits. She provided a chart (**Table 1**) comparing three land-routes from Korea to Germany, and the marine transport trip, in terms of length of time, distance, and estimated fare. She then summarized:

"First, in the case of the TSR, the number of transit countries is much less than the TCR [Trans-China Railroad]-TMGR [Trans-Mongolia Railroad]-TSR corridor. It is generally acknowledged that the customs formalities at the cross-border are always accompanied by some risks in terms of time.

"Second, TSR still offers available capacity, whereas the TCR suffers in some areas from partly serious bottleneck phenomena.

"Third, the transportation means more than transit. The connection to TSR indicates access to Siberia, which is known as the treasure house of various resources. Therefore, taking a chance to participate in the economic development process of this area represents another merit of TSR."

TABLE 1

### From Korea to Germany: Comparison of Three 'Iron Silk Road' Routes, and Marine Transport

Route	Length (km)	Time (Days)	Fares (\$)
1. Trans-Korea/Trans-Siberia Rail Seoul-Tumen River-Bostochini-Brest-Berlin	11,569	24-26	1,869-2,019
2. Trans-Korea/ Trans-China/Trans-Mongolia/Trans-Siberia Seoul-Shinuiju-Dandong-Beijing-Ulanbaator-Brest-Berlin	10,625	25-27	1,919-2,069
3. Pusan, Trans-Korea/Trans-Siberia Pusan-Bostochini-Brest Berlin	12,080	26-28	2,024-2,174
4. Marine Transportation*	21,749	33	2,101-2,501

\* Different marine routes from Pusan to Europe (Rotterdam). By sea, through the Suez Canal (27,000 km); through the Panama Canal (23,000 km); via Cape Town, South Africa, (27,000); or land-bridge across North America (20,000 km).

Source: Dr. Choi Yeon-hye, "For the Era of the Iron Silk Road: A Report on Inter-Korean Railway Link Projects and Perspectives for THR-TSR," November, 2002.