

ILC2021 UPF Europe and the Middle East: Session II – Bering Strait Tunnel

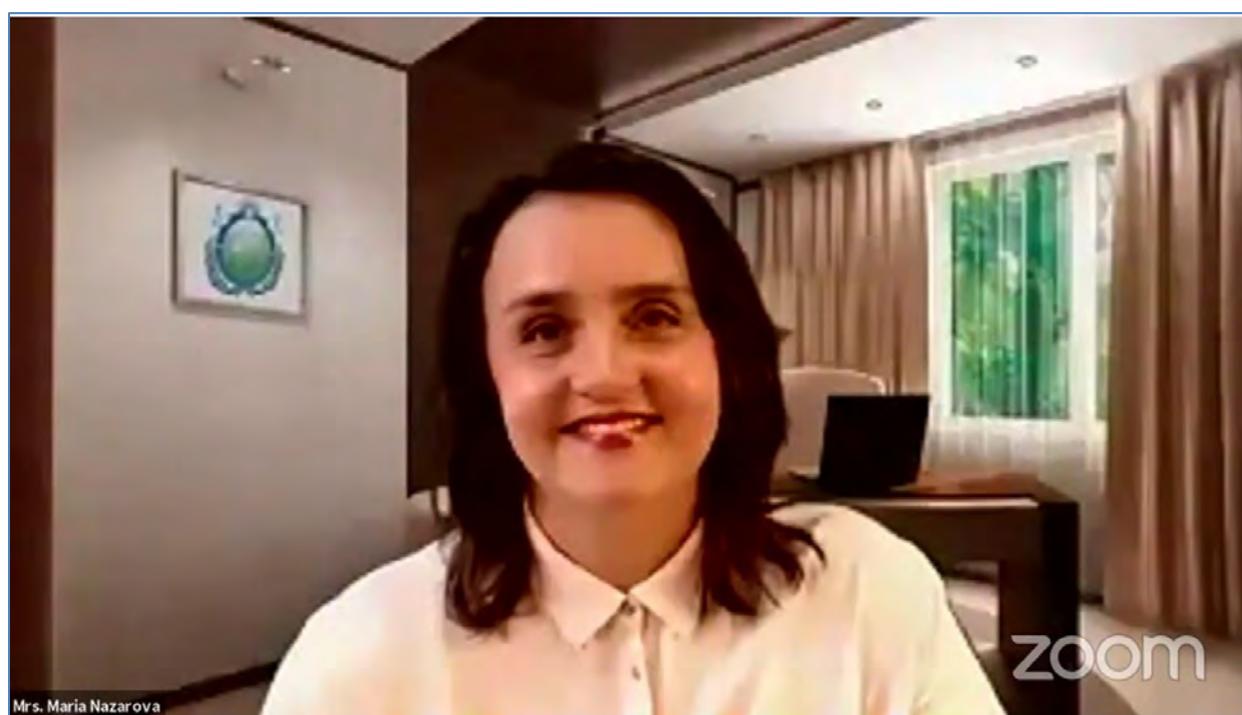
Yvo Bruffaerts
August 19, 2021



Europe and the Middle East -- The second session of the August 2021 International Leadership Conference examined the feasibility of a railway tunnel connecting Russia and Alaska.

From August 19 to 21, seven sessions of the ILC were held online under the title "Toward Peaceful Reunification of the Korean Peninsula: Prospects for Economic Development and Peace, and Ideologies, Worldviews, and International Relations."

The August 19 session titled "The Bering Strait Undersea Tunnel Project" brought together experts to discuss the building of a tunnel or bridge across the Bering Strait between the Chukotka region of Russia and the state of Alaska in the United States. The connection between Eurasia and North America would allow unprecedented opportunities for business and cultural integration. Since the 19th century, this bold engineering project has appeared increasingly in experts' minds, government research and the media, both in the United States and in Russia, raising interest among potential investors and beneficiaries worldwide. Believing that the Bering Strait link is an idea whose time has come, the panelists elaborated on ways to fulfill this ambitious endeavor.



The moderator of the session, **Maria Nazarova**, the president of UPF-Russia, discussed these implications with the panel of speakers, reflecting on the vision of the UPF co-founders, Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon and Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, of an International Peace Highway uniting all continents.



Louis Cerny, an international railroad consultant and former executive director at the American Railway Engineering Association, described his involvement in the planning of the Bering Strait railway tunnel, which he considers the most significant collaboration between Russians and Americans since their combined victory over Germany in 1945. This time, instead of a military victory, it would be a victory of peace and collaboration which would benefit not only two countries but two continents, and consequently the future of the world.

Mr. Cerny admitted that when he initially heard the idea of a Bering Strait Tunnel, he was skeptical. Shipping across the Pacific Ocean is widely accepted and convenient. However, he had failed to realize that on conventional maps, the distances between coasts in the north are far more exaggerated than around the equator. When looking at the Bering Strait from a correct scale, the value of having a passage in the north became obvious.

Furthermore, a railroad between North America and East Asia would have several advantages over shipping, which would greatly justify the costs of such a project. Shipping from Chicago to Beijing, for example, requires two land-to-water transfers, which are expensive and time-consuming. A train, however, would need to make only one considerably shorter and faster trip. Electric trains, powered by renewable energy, are also better for the environment and would be less disruptive to marine life and the coasts than shipping.



A Bering Strait tunnel would be feasible as well as beneficial, Mr. Cerny argued. Passenger trains could travel at the same speed as freight trains. And trains hauling highway vehicles could be thought of as a segment of Reverend Moon's vision of a "Peace Road," encouraging collaboration between North America and Northeast Asia. Mr. Cerny said he believes the Bering Strait Tunnel, predicted to be completed in 2045, to be one of the greatest civil engineering projects in history.

Dr. Victor Razbegin from Russia, the co-founder of the Intercontinental Railway, said that when he first heard about the Bering Strait Tunnel project in 1992, he also was very doubtful. However, he now sees it as one of the most astounding engineering projects in the world to date. He explained that the population is greatly increasing, and there is great coastal density of populations across the world. Combined with the ecological effects of climate change, this will lead to industrial, social, and infrastructural development being limited.

While Mr. Cerny spoke about ocean transport, Dr. Razbegin spoke about road transport. Even though road density is high, long-haul journeys are much less efficient and cost-effective, making rail services a much better option for trade. Until now, rail services haven't played a big role in intercontinental trade. But in fact, the Bering Strait Tunnel length would be far shorter than the main railways in Canada, Alaska, and Russia. Additionally, there are two islands between Russia and Alaska on which parts of the tunnel can be built.

When this project is realized, he said, all railroads will work as a unit system around the globe, with seven channels across oceans and continents. But the Bering Strait project would be more than just a railroad, he said. In the works are also a power transmission line, fiber optic cable, oil and gas pipelines, and even a highway. Although the total cost is estimated at around \$90 billion, he concluded that over time, money would be saved, with an estimated payback period of 20 to 25 years, which also would create a base for sustainable socio-economic development between the two countries.



From Canada, **Dr. Peter Stockdale**, a policy analyst specializing in environment, indigenous and intergovernmental affairs, focused on the shifts that have taken place culturally and scientifically since Reverend Moon's proposal of a Bering Strait Tunnel in 1981.

Of course, climate change has had diverse effects on the strait. Dr. Stockdale said that it is currently more ice-free, and permafrost (frozen soil along the coasts) is melting at an alarming rate due to rising temperatures, increasing the likelihood of the tracks flooding. Moreover, if the project is not launched soon, the funding will be diverted to other problems created by global warming.

Dr. Stockdale mentioned the need to reduce carbon emissions. As shipping relies heavily on fossil fuels, electric trains are a promising alternative. Lastly, he explained that since 1981 the national governments of the United States, Russia, Canada and China are much more supportive and in favor of a tunnel, willing to put money into the project, thus strengthening relations between the countries. In Canada, indigenous populations, who have been integral to maintaining biodiversity, have been invited to be involved in policy-making.

Dr. Stockdale expressed his support for enterprises that don't rely on carbon, oil, and gas extraction, and avoid environmental disturbance as much as possible. This includes avoiding deforestation and maintaining healthy habitats. Here again, indigenous people can offer great wisdom, he said.

During the question-and-answer session, a few questions focused on the environmental impact and the geological considerations of the tunnel's construction. The first was: "Some believe that the permafrost in Alaska and Russia is melting too quickly and that building a passage across the strait is no longer possible. Is the construction of a tunnel worth the high cost and high risk in this case? Is it even feasible?"

Mr. Cerny answered that permafrost is an issue we have been dealing with for years. There are ways to overcome and handle it as conditions change over time, as we have seen with the railway to Tibet. The main factor to consider is that there is a lot of rock beneath the permafrost which will not be affected, making it possible to construct year-round without too many difficulties.

Dr. Razbegin agreed that permafrost is not the biggest issue for the construction, and all countries involved have a lot of experience and can adjust well to construction in such conditions.

The second question, addressed to Dr. Stockdale, was: "How do we avoid environmental damage when building railways and roads?" He answered that any railway or road will impact the nature around it, especially for migratory species. We need to avoid disturbance as much as possible, either by going underground or elevating above ground. It is only in trying that we will be able to find more sensitive alternatives.

Mr. Cerny added that it is important to look at the overall environmental impact. One of the aims of the project is to replace shipping, which is much less sensitive to surrounding environments and results in much more emissions. Therefore, even though there will be some inevitable disturbances to the environment, it is overall a beneficial project for the environment, and we must work hard to create it as sustainably as possible.

The next question was whether there would be any geological difficulties in building the tunnel, considering it would be located close to ridged terrain. Dr. Razbegin did not see any issue with the Bering Strait, as the location is, in fact, suitable for construction. There are no big seismic shifts or cracks in the terrain, and the sea depth is almost completely consistent across the entire length of the proposed tunnel. He was optimistic that it would be a successful and highly beneficial project.

Other questions focused more on political and economic areas: "Considering the tense political and economic relations between Russia, China and the United States, what are the real possibilities of synergy across projects in America, Asia and Europe?" Dr. Razbegin's response was that political tension is, of course, one of the most troubling issues when it comes to international cooperation. However, the prospects of global cooperation are appealing to all sides. The only way to achieve the "One Belt Project" is to unite North America and Eurasia via the Bering Strait. Therefore, there is incentive on all sides to cooperate. Expertise across all countries is welcome for such a project.

The next question was: "How will cross-border railway systems be managed? At what stage is this discussion between countries?" Mr. Cerny replied that this is an issue for the future. Currently, the focus is on construction. Management would be handled later, as it has been handled between many countries already. Ultimately the value of having such a passage means that countries would be willing to reach an agreement.

Another question for Dr. Razbegin was: "It was recently announced that a railway bridge between China and Russia was completed. Is it possible that this is a step toward China's connection to the Bering Strait crossing?" He replied that he believes this could be possible. There are several routes that could connect this transcontinental railway with China, so the Chinese may play a leading role in developing some.

Mr. Cerny was then asked: "if the rail gauges in different countries are all different sizes, will this have an adverse impact on the costs of the project?" His response was that there are several ways to tackle this issue. Trains that change gauge size, even while in motion, already exist. The second solution would be having a dual-gauge track. This has both political and financial implications, but he believes that it is solvable, especially as technology develops.

The final question, to Dr. Stockdale, was about cooperation with indigenous peoples in Canada, following the appointment of an Inuit governor-general, in relation to the Bering Strait project. He replied that sub-national leaders would play a bigger role in this project than they have done in the past.

Concerning the Inuit governor-general in Canada, he said that she is attuned to the economic aspects of national and Inuit development, and therefore Dr. Stockdale believes she can help to facilitate the project well.

Mrs. Nazarova concluded the session by saying that the completion of this tunnel would mark a shift in history, not only for relations between Russia and the United States but also in peace around the world.

She closed with words from the UPF co-founder Reverend Moon: "The great Silk Road was not only a commercial path for people who sold silk and bought spices. This road served as a means for conducting dialogue between peoples who lived in East and West, and contributed to bringing Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity closer to each other. All these cultures mixed and gave birth to a new one. The International Highway Project will play the same role in the 21st century."