

The Times, Saturday August 20 2011

The train on Platform 6 is for Paris, Moscow and New York – through the Bering Strait

Nick Holdsworth Yakutsk

August 20 2011 12:01AM

It might still be too soon to book your ticket from King's Cross to Grand Central station in New York, but the prospect of such an epic rail journey has just moved a step closer.

The Kremlin gave its blessing this week to the greatest railway project of all time: a 65-mile (106km) tunnel linking Asia and North America under the Bering Strait and connecting railway lines that would allow a seamless train trip from Britain to the United States.

The £60 billion scheme would push the Trans-Siberian railway eastward while extending Alaska's tracks towards Siberia. East and West would meet directly at the international dateline under the Bering Strait islands of the Russian Big Diomedes and the US territory of Little Diomedes.

The Bering Strait tunnel, first mooted by Tsar Nicholas II in 1905, is no pipedream. This week it was endorsed by President Medvedev's top officials, including Aleksandr Levinthal, the deputy federal representative for the Russian Far East. Proponents of the network say that apart from the romance of taking a once-in-a-lifetime journey across the breathtaking wildernesses of Siberia and Alaska, it would be cheaper, faster and more secure than shipping goods around the world. It could carry about 3 per cent of the world's freight, earning £7 billion a year.

Engineers say there is no technical reason why the tunnel could not be built and investors would break even within 15 years of it opening.

Mr Levinthal was among several Kremlin officials, including Vladimir Nazarov, the deputy secretary of the Russian National Security Council, who flew to Yakutsk, 5,000 miles east of Moscow, to take part in a three-day conference on developing integrated infrastructure in northeast Russia.

Hosted by Yegor Borisov, the Governor of Yakutia (the Sakha Republic), the conference drew hundreds of delegates from Russia, the US, China and Britain to examine ways of boosting the economic potential of the resource-rich but sparsely populated region that stretches to the Arctic Circle.

A 500-mile rail spur to Yakutsk from the Trans-Siberian — built at a cost of £900 million and due for completion in 2013 — is part of a Kremlin strategy that will push rail links a further 2,360 miles to the northeastern tip of Siberia by 2030. It will connect the mineral-rich territory to key freight lines in Russia and China. That would make the construction of the tunnel, a 15-year project that would account for about a tenth of the joint investment in Russian, American and Canadian railway extensions envisaged, feasible. “We should see advanced development of road and rail infrastructure here [in the Russian Far East] and improvement in the investment climate in Russia as a key aim,” Mr Levinthal said.

Vladimir Putin, the Prime Minister, has made no secret of his intention to pursue Russia’s claim to the vast untapped fossil fuel and mineral wealth of the Arctic, improve trade with China and secure its borders in the Far East.

Building roads and railways, repopulating towns and cities ravaged by more than two decades of neglect, and bringing prosperity to a region that Europe could fit into three times over, has become a national priority. Against that background, the prospect of finding the political will — and cash — to bore a route twice the

length of the Channel Tunnel under the Bering Strait becomes much more realistic.

But Stephen Dalziel, the head of the Russo-British Chamber of Commerce, said it was unlikely that British companies would invest in the scheme until it was up and running. "It would be a great idea if it worked," he said. Igor Arzhanukhin, an engineer who is working on the spur line, said: "It is a brilliant idea. We are all really proud to be a part of it."