

Digging deep

Could the world's longest undersea tunnel linking Japan and South Korea be built by the 'Moonies'?

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World peace isn't a pie-in-the-sky dream for Hirofumi Sato. He knows what would get results: an undersea tunnel connecting Japan and South Korea. "Cross-border infrastructure can end the possibility of war," says Sato from his Tokyo office, where fantastic blueprints of an elaborate highway adorn the walls. "It can bring eternal peace. Borders and walls between nations would become meaningless."

This is the spiel that Sato uses at meetings with members of parliament in Japan. As the director-general of the International Highway Foundation (IHF), Sato has spent

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years trying to persuade his government that a tunnel stretching from Karatsu, on Japan's southwestern island of Kyushu, to Busan, on the southeastern tip of the Korean peninsula, is a worthwhile investment.

At 250km, it would be the world's longest undersea tunnel: four times the length of Japan's Seikan Tunnel (a rail tunnel connecting Honshu and Hokkaido islands) and five times longer than the Channel Tunnel. The IHF estimates that construction would take at least 15 years and cost roughly ¥10trn (€86bn) but that doesn't factor in the possible delays and many technical difficulties of digging in the soft seabed of the Korea

Strait. That is, if the project ever reaches that point: the IHF has been lobbying politicians for more than three decades and progress has been glacial.

But if Sato feels frustrated he doesn't show it. The IHF, he explains, answers to a higher calling: the pronouncements of the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church (now known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification). It was Moon who, in 1981, called for a global highway network and a tunnel linking Japan to the Korean peninsula. He envisioned a family in Tokyo being able to pile into a car and drive all the way to London. Five months later the IHF was formed.

Today the FFWPU bankrolls the IHF's projects. The original plans for a road have evolved into a railway modelled on the Eurotunnel or with Japan-style Shinkansen and since the IHF was created it has spent ¥12bn (€103m) on route and tunnel blueprints, seabed assessments and property purchases on Japan's islands of Kyushu, Tsushima and Iki.

While it's hard to see how the IHF can win broad support for its idealistic mission, it's perhaps even harder to imagine two nations that feud as often as Japan and South Korea agreeing to such a high-profile link-up. Yet both sides have considered the idea. In 2009 Lee Myung-bak, South Korea's president at the time, ordered a feasibility study. Then a Japanese government panel put the tunnel on a list of relationship-building projects that Tokyo should pursue with Seoul. Last year Busan's mayor reportedly set aside KRW200m (€165,000) to re-examine the project.

As the IHF presses Tokyo and Seoul for support it continues to pour money into construction. "An economist would pull out if the calculations didn't add up," says Sato. "A politician would drop the plan if there was opposition. We can take the long view. There has to be someone who is willing to dream." — (M)

