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[Summarized below are highlights from an article by Soon Jin Kim, journalist and scholar. Kim resided in Central America for 14 years (1961-74). He was the founding foreign editor of the Guatemalan daily, La Nacion, and taught at the University of El Salvador. His 1982 doctoral dissertation at the University of Maryland included discussion of isthmus canal options and the actors involved. His book, "EFE: Spain's World News Agency," was published by Greenwood Press in July 1989. The article was provided by Howard Frederick, Pasadena, Calif.] * The Panama Canal, completed in 1914, is 51 miles long. Its lock chambers 1,000 feet long and 110 feet wide, water depth of 41 feet cannot accommodate 500,000-ton capacity supertankers and US aircraft carriers and battleships. The world's largest tanker, the Japanese Seawise Giant, is 1,504 feet long with a beam of 226 feet, and a draught 81 feet deep. Next, deforestation in Panama is steadily reducing the canal's water supply. Each transit requires more than 50 million gallons of fresh water to lift and lower the ship in the locks. * In 1970, after studying 30 possible canal routes, the Atlantic-Pacific Inter-Oceanic Canal Study Commission, mandated by the US Congress, recommended that a sea-level canal be built in Panama. * A Nicaragua canal route, however, appears to be a superior option. The waterway's course would cut through a narrow strip of land between the Pacific and Lake Nicaragua (8,262 sq.km. surface area), and proceed to the San Juan River which flows from the lake to the Caribbean Sea. * The US is currently prevented from building a canal anywhere but Panama. The 1977 US-Panama canal treaty specifies that the US not "negotiate with third states for the right to construct an inter-oceanic canal on any other route in the Western Hemisphere" [Article XII, par. 1, (b)]. In addition, Washington agreed in 1971 to abrogate the 1914 Bryan-Chamorro Treaty under which the US had exclusive rights to build a canal in Nicaragua. * In 1982, the US-Panama Preparatory Committee on Panama Canal Alternatives Study invited the Japanese government to join the project. Japan accepted. The tri-partite Canal Alternatives Study Commission was established in 1985. The Commission recommended thereafter that "the current political and economic instability in Panama" made it all but impossible to continue the study. * Japan ranks as the biggest user of the Canal as a trade route. Although still formally committed to developing the Panama route, Tokyo has apparently decided to explore Nicaragua route alternatives. In early March this year, a seven-member Japanese business and technical team visited Nicaragua to conduct on-site inspections of canal route alternatives. Two months later, in August the team delivered its feasibility report to the Nicaraguan government. [The team included an ecology professor from Tokyo University, and architect Kozo Yamamoto, whose company, Yamamoto & Associates, Inc., has designed infrastructure projects in 25 countries.] * Nicaragua's 11-member National Canal Study Commission is headed by Finance Minister William Hupper. According to the author, while commission members have made no public statements, certain details have emerged. The Japanese team decided that the most cost-effective option would be to cut through 12 miles of land at the Rivas Strait on the Pacific end into Lake Nicaragua, and proceed into the San Juan River to the Caribbean. The San Juan River would require dredging and also straightening at certain points. The Japanese team reportedly discarded the most ambitious scheme to build a sea-level waterway by draining Lake Nicaragua because of its negative impact on the local ecology. Another discarded option was digging a canal parallel to Lake Nicaragua.
Another option would be to construct a sea-level canal within Lake Nicaragua while insulating it from lake waters via a giant concrete or plastic trough. This strategy would avoid destruction of the ecology around the lake. * Japan is reportedly the only country in the world with sufficient cash to undertake this 20 to 30-year project at a cost of some $50 billion. Next, according to the author, compared to most other contenders, Tokyo would cause the least suspicion in Washington in terms of "security threats." Japan may also be the best equipped for such a construction feat because of its hydro-engineering expertise. In 1985, Japan completed the world's longest (34 miles) underwater railroad tunnel in the Tsugaru Strait, connecting Honshu and Hokkaido Islands. Japan is also a world leader in seismology. (Historical note: In 1903, Theodore Roosevelt switched to the Panama option to avoid potential problems from volcanic and earthquake activity inherent in a Nicaragua route.) * Nicaragua's Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform has commissioned three- to five-year ecological studies to assist the Japanese commission in its planning. Specialists from Scandinavian countries are assisting in the ecology studies. An official representing Nicaragua's Directorate of Natural Resources (DIRENA) and the Nicaraguan ambassador to Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg are members of the National Canal Study Commission. * Nicaragua is likely approaching the project with great caution in order not to arouse US suspicions thus, its low profile on the canal enterprise. Nicaragua would retain 51% sovereign interest in the canal, and would operate the canal in such a way as "to favor the poor of the Third World." * Si-a-Paz (Yes-to-Peace, International System of Protected Areas for Peace) environmental conservation groups have expressed concern over possible damage canal construction would inflict on a biosphere reserve they plan to create on both sides of the San Juan River which serves as the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The binational Si-a-Paz program would conserve some 2,500 sq.km. of rain forest and wetlands and organize economic development in the areas surrounding the reserve. 

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