Scotland-Northern Ireland bridge: how to make it a reality

The British government is reportedly looking at the possibility of building a bridge between Scotland and Northern Ireland. This has been described as a “once in a generation” opportunity for the UK. However, the project faces a number of challenges, including the cost and the complexity of constructing such a bridge.

Northern Sea Bridge

Scotland and Northern Ireland are separated by the Irish Sea, which is relatively short stretches of water, the longest being 4.5km. This makes it suitable for a fixed bridge, tunnel, or even a floating bridge or tunnel.

Costs and challenges

The proposed bridge routes between Torr and Mull of Kintyre (northern route, red) and Larne and Portpatrick (southern route, blue) are shown in the map below.

The designs of the floating bridge and tunnel described above would draw on expertise in construction of offshore structures.

Conventional cable-supported bridges, with their towers placed onshore structures.

Submerged tube tethered to the sea bed by cables could be used. A bridge above the sea bed would be more expensive. So the problem of linking Scotland and Northern Ireland presents an enormous engineering challenge for the British government.

Ian Firth, a British structural engineer, proposed a solution involving a floating bridge and tunnel. The bridge would be supported by large, submerged pontoons connected to the sea bed, while the tunnel would be supported by large, submerged pontoons connected to the sea bed, allowing no more than two ships passing each other in a given 100-second interval. A bridge above the sea bed would be more expensive.

The world’s longest sea bridge, the Beaufort’s Dyke, is a fixed bridge in the Irish Sea that opened in 1910. It is 20.5km long and 2.5m wide.

The proposed bridge would be longer, with a total length of 20km. The designs of the floating bridge and tunnel described above would draw on expertise in construction of offshore structures.

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