Russia’s Northern Sea Route – Much to Do

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With contributions from Claes Lykke Ragner**

Introduction

It has been 24 years since an initiative to open the Northern Sea Route (NSR) was first indicated in Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s speech in 1987.1 Access to foreign vessels was to be permitted for use as a shortcut between the northern Atlantic and Pacific and for export of natural resources. Formal opening occurred on 1 July 1991, shortly before the U.S.S.R. dissolved, yet few non-Russian vessels navigate north of Siberia. Russian traffic has generally included transport of hard minerals, oil and gas in the west, tourism to the pole, summer sealift in the center and east, and exploration/science in the central exclusive economic zone.2 Since 2009, the NSR has seen a modest but increasing foreign usage, made possible principally by lighter ice-conditions. In 2009, the German vessels Beluga Fraternity and Beluga Foresight transited from South Korea to Holland, delivering heavy plant modules to the Russian Arctic. In September 2010, the Danish MV Nordic Barents became the first foreign vessel to transit not entering a Russian port carrying iron ore from Norway to China, while a month earlier the Russian Baltica, the first large tanker, transited from Murmansk to China with gas condensate. Statements by Russian icebreaker operators indicate that several transits were planned for

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During the summer of 2011, one of the warmest on record, the tanker *Vladimir Tikhonov*, with an icebreaker leading, crossed the Arctic Ocean in six and a half days carrying natural gas condensate. Reportedly during 2011 18 ships made the now mostly ice-free crossing, including a scenic cruise conducted by the Australian operator, Aurora Expeditions, departing from Murmansk and arriving in Anadyr on the Bering Sea.

Indications are that most ice-free water in the changing Arctic will occur first north of Russia and, of course, ice-cover directly influences marine shipping activities. It is anticipated that for the Arctic Ocean there will be an overall trend of reduced ice-cover with periodic regional increases and decreases. Changes in navigational conditions associated with ice-cover cycles will be observed. For example, the northward shift of vessel traffic has not occurred everywhere; in the late 1990s the boundary of multi-year ice in the eastern sector of the NSR shifted southward by 300 kilometers. During the 2001–2005 navigation season, shipping in August/September became more favorable north of Franz Josef Land, Severnaya Zemlya, and the New Siberian Islands, however, increased iceberg occurrence raised the risk for shipping. The possibility of very difficult ice conditions remain in the Dmitry Laptev, Sannikov, and De Long straits, and an increase in ice-cover may occur in the Barents and Kara seas in the period 2020–2030. Changes in ice-cover and fast-ice degradation have also negatively affected the coasts, particularly through increased erosion, and coastal infrastructure. These negative effects are expected to be most significant on the Chukchi Peninsula, upper Indigirka and Kolyma coasts, southeastern Yakutia, West Siberian Plain, Kara Sea coast, Novaya Zemlya, and an area north of European Russia.

These patterns must be considered in mid-term and long-term planning of marine activities, particularly ship design, icebreaker services, and infrastructure. Maintenance of the icebreaker fleet (see further below) is imperative due to the cyclic ice conditions.

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