

The New Great Game

The Northern Sea Route and the new geopolitics of the Arctic

IN AUGUST 2026, INDIA ANNOUNCED plans for an Indian merchant vessel to undertake, in 2027, a voyage through the Northern Sea Route (NSR). The announcement, made at the Arctic-regions forum in Arkhangelsk, Russia, came amid recent similar transits by Chinese and South Korean ships.

These developments are not routine commercial initiatives. They reflect a broader recasting of maritime strategy necessitated by climate change, great-power competition, energy security, and the vulnerability of the traditional maritime chokepoints. The Arctic is rapidly emerging as a new arena of great-power competition (the new Great Game), driven by melting ice that is unlocking resources, the possibility of shorter shipping routes and strategic access.

Readers interested in the history of the opening of the NSR and the jockeying thereafter among world powers to secure their strategic interests in the Arctic, might like to read an earlier article by me, titled 'New Contestation' (FORCE, June 2024). The article traced the Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz's pioneering 16th-century voyages in search of the Northeast Passage (NSR) that first opened the region to European interest; his discovery of the Spitsbergen archipelago that sparked early sovereignty contests and resource exploitation (whaling, later coal). The article also outlined how the 1920 Spitsbergen Treaty awarded Norway sovereignty over the Spitsbergen, though Russia continues to retain a mining foothold for strategic monitoring of the Barents Sea and its Northern Fleet (Norway formally assumed sovereignty over Spitsbergen in 1925 and changed the name of the archipelago to Svalbard—the original Norse name).

The article also examined how climate-driven ice retreat has intensified the race for offshore hydrocarbons (Russia holds the bulk of estimated Arctic oil/ gas), disputed continental shelves (highlighted by Russia's flag-planting at a depth of 4,200 m below the North Pole on the Arctic seabed in 2007), and control of the NSR and Northwest Passage. Other actors—China (Polar Silk Road), the US, Canada (Northwest Passage sovereignty), Norway, Denmark/ Greenland, India, Singapore, and the EU—advance overlapping economic, scientific, and security claims via the Arctic Council and UNCLOS. The article cautioned that the rising militarisation of the Arctic, arising from the high stakes involved, could undermine cooperation and increase the risk of conflict—a risk which demands careful multilateral management. The announcement now, by India, of a planned NSR voyage provides the right backdrop to re-examine the motivations for the increasing interest in the Arctic and the NSR.

The Arctic's Strategic Importance

Interest in the Arctic is not new. Russia has been developing the NSR for decades. China published its Arctic Policy in 2018 and introduced the concept of a 'Polar Silk Road'. The US, Canada and the Nordic states have long regarded the Arctic as strategically important. What has changed is the speed with which theoretical possibilities are becoming operationally relevant. Three developments have converged to heighten the interest in the Arctic.

Receding Arctic Ice Cover: The retreat/ thinning of Arctic sea ice is lengthening the duration of the navigable season. This is not to say that the Arctic has become ice-free. It remains an exceptionally difficult maritime environment with variable ice conditions, extreme weather, limited ports, and inadequate rescue infrastructure. Nevertheless, the commercial window is becoming more attractive.

Unreliability of Traditional Maritime Routes: For decades, the global trading system assumed that the traditional maritime routes would remain open. That certainty has been shaken. Hormuz is the focus of an ongoing geopolitical confrontation. The Bab-el-Mandab has been disrupted by attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. The Black Sea has been rendered unsafe by the Russia-Ukraine war. The Panama Canal has experienced capacity constraints. And the Malacca strait remains a strategic chokepoint through which a very large proportion of east Asian energy and merchandise trade moves.

The lesson for global trading powers is not that any particular chokepoint will close permanently—it is that no modern economy can afford to depend excessively upon one maritime geography. The Arctic therefore acquires value as a hedge.

Changed Russian Geopolitical Position: Russia's disengagement from much of the western economic system since 2022 has accelerated its pivot towards Asia. The NSR provides Russia with a means of connecting its Arctic and far eastern resource base directly with China and other Asian markets. This is particularly important for hydrocarbons, LNG, metals, and minerals.

The NSR provides Russia, faced with the inaccessibility of Western markets, with an enormous maritime frontage connecting it directly with the world's principal growth markets. This explains why Russia regards the NSR not simply as a shipping route but as a national transport artery. Its 2035 development plan describes the route as a corridor of national and international importance.

Global Attention

The NSR runs for roughly 5,600 kilometres along Russia's Arctic coast between the Kara gate and the Bering strait. The immediate commercial case for the NSR is attractive. For cargo originating in east Asia and bound for northern Europe, the NSR can substantially shorten the travel time compared with the Suez route. A 2025 China-Europe trial via the NSR took approximately 20 days from Ningbo to Felixstowe, compared with roughly 40 days by the Suez route. China has, therefore, already moved from experimentation to scheduled seasonal services (most recently, in August-September 2026, another Chinese cargo ship, the 575-foot Dubai Tower, completed a three-week journey—that previously took the ship 36 days to complete via the Suez route—from Qingdao to Teesport in England carrying a cargo of TVs, batteries and other renewable energy equipment).

For Russia, the NSR is, simultaneously, a transport corridor, an economic-development project, a means of monetising the Arctic's resources, a mechanism for sustaining its far eastern and Arctic territories, a source of geopolitical leverage, and an instrument to demonstrate that Russia remains the predominant Arctic power. Russia's plans envisage enormous increases in NSR cargo volumes and the Russian government is, as a consequence, investing aggressively in icebreakers, new

ports, navigation systems, communications, and other essential infrastructure.

For China, the attraction is principally strategic diversification. China's economy is heavily dependent upon maritime trade and imported energy. The ability to move some cargo through a northern route reduces its exposure to southern maritime chokepoints. China therefore sees the NSR as one route in a portfolio of routes rather than as a replacement for the Malacca strait and Suez Canal.

For India, the motivation is somewhat different. India does not derive an obvious advantage by sailing directly from an Indian port to Europe through the Arctic. The strategic value for India lies instead in connecting the Chennai-Vladivostok/ eastern maritime corridor with the NSR, Russia's far eastern ports, and multimodal rail-sea links. The NSR could become an extension of India's connectivity with Russia rather than simply an alternative to Suez.

South Korea provides an especially useful comparison. Seoul is already planning a regular Korea-Europe Arctic shipping route by 2030 and conducted its first government-backed commercial trial in August 2026. The South Korean government explicitly links the Arctic route with the transformation of Busan into a global maritime hub and with strengthening the country's maritime-industrial base.

Thus, the Arctic is not suddenly becoming important because the world has discovered a shorter shipping route; it is becoming important because geography, climate change, strategic competition, supply-chain insecurity, energy security, and maritime chokepoints are converging in the same place.

Russia's Arctic Goals

Russia has clear strategic interests in the Arctic and in the development of the NSR since Russia's economic centre of gravity has shifted eastward.

Russia possesses enormous natural resources in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions—oil, natural gas, LNG, nickel, copper, palladium, and other minerals. The problem has always been transportation. Any resource is economically useful only if it can be extracted, transported and sold. The NSR solves part of this problem by linking Arctic production centres with ports and markets in Asia and Europe.

China and India are now critical markets for Russian energy. Arctic shipping makes it easier to move Russian hydrocarbons directly towards Asia. This is especially important for projects such as Yamal LNG and Vostok Oil, whose viability depends on reliable maritime transport. The NSR therefore becomes part of Russia's post-Western economic architecture.



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Russia does not merely want ships to pass through the Arctic. It wants to control the ecosystem surrounding arctic shipping activity—icebreakers, navigation, weather, ice information, ports, pilotage, rescue, communications, ship repair/ ship building, bunkering, shipping insurance, and transshipment. Russia has placed the operational management of the NSR under a state institution—Rosatom, that has enormous nuclear and industrial capabilities. Russia is not just selling access to a geographical shortcut; it is constructing a managed maritime ecosystem.

However, strategically the most important Russian goal in the arctic is the strengthening of its sovereignty claims. Russia regards the NSR as a national transportation artery and asserts extensive regulatory authority over shipping in it. Foreign vessels require permits and must comply with Russian rules. Russian law also provides for icebreaker and ice-pilotage arrangements. This legal position is however controversial. Russia's authority is not equivalent to unrestricted sovereignty over the entire Arctic Ocean. UNCLOS recognises coastal-state rights, particularly under Article 234 (ice-covered areas), which permits coastal states to adopt and enforce non-discriminatory pollution-prevention regulations in qualifying ice-covered areas of their EEZs. At the same time, international law does not simply grant Russia an unlimited right to treat the entire NSR as internal waters.

This distinction matters enormously. The NSR passes through different maritime zones, including areas where international navigation rights can become relevant. The legal status of particular straits and routes is therefore more complicated than Russia's political description of the NSR as a 'national transport artery' might suggest.

This makes Chia-Yun Po's analysis in the April 2026 edition of The Diplomat especially important. Chia-Yun Po argues that Russia may actually benefit geopolitically from the expectation that the NSR is becoming an open international trade route while retaining substantial control over access to it. Russia's greatest strategic interest may not lie in converting the NSR into an Arctic Suez Canal; it lies in the NSR becoming a commercially attractive route over which Russia retains considerable regulatory leverage.

This explains Moscow's interest in India and China. If China, India and eventually South Korea become regular users of the NSR, the route acquires international legitimacy and commercial significance. Russia can then present itself not as an isolated sanctioned power but as the indispensable geographical bridge between Asia and Europe. There is also an important diplomatic effect. The more Chinese and Indian companies, ships, ports, and financial institutions become invested in Arctic logistics, the greater their stake in continued Russian control and operation of the system. Russia aims to obtain geopolitical value from being the gatekeeper of an increasingly desirable route without having to transform it into an entirely open international corridor.

The Arctic is, simultaneously, Russia's northern economic frontier and a military bastion and the development of the NSR supports Russia's broader Arctic security strategy. The northern fleet and Russia's nuclear submarine forces give the Arctic enormous importance in Russian nuclear strategy. Russia therefore sees Arctic economic development and Arctic military security as mutually reinforcing. A populated, industrialised, connected Arctic is easier to defend than an empty Arctic.

China's Salience for Russia

China has three attributes Russia desperately needs—capital, cargo, and geopolitical weight. China can provide demand for Russian LNG, oil, and minerals. It can supply cargo moving through the NSR. Chinese shipping companies can generate actual commercial traffic rather than simply diplomatic declarations. The relationship is therefore complementary.

The 2025 China-Europe Arctic container voyage was consequently strategically significant even though its absolute cargo volume was tiny compared with global shipping. It demonstrated that the route could actually work. In 2026, China went further by launching a regular seasonal China-Europe Arctic service during the summer navigation window. That is a qualitative change from experimentation.

China and the NSR

China's strategic calculation is often described as the 'Malacca dilemma.' A substantial proportion of China's energy imports must pass through maritime chokepoints. Beijing therefore has a powerful incentive to diversify its maritime trade transit routes. The Arctic offers China four advantages.

Shorter Transit Route: For northern Chinese ports, the NSR can dramatically shortened voyages to Northern Europe. The route is, therefore, potentially competitive with the Suez for certain cargo categories.

Avoiding Southern Chokepoints: A China-Europe Arctic route avoids—the Malacca strait, the Indian Ocean, Bab el-Mandeb, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal. This is strategically invaluable.

Energy security: Russia's Arctic contains enormous energy resources. China can therefore more easily access Russian Arctic resources. This is a powerful strategic equation.

Strategic Access to a New Geopolitical Domain: China does not want the Arctic to become an exclusively Russian-American-European strategic theatre. Beijing became an Arctic Council observer in 2013 and has since consistently presented itself as a stakeholder in Arctic affairs (India and South Korea are also Arctic Council observers). China's participation gives it political visibility and legitimacy while its commercial relationship with Russia gives it practical access.

South Korean Interests

South Korea is one of the world's great shipbuilding and maritime-trade powers. South Korea's Arctic policy aims to demonstrate that the NSR cannot be allowed to only be a Russia-China geopolitical project.

South Korea's economy is heavily concentrated around shipbuilding, container shipping, automobiles, electronics, petrochemicals, and energy imports. Seoul therefore has a strong commercial incentive to understand the Arctic route before its competitors do. South Korea's first commercial Arctic voyage in August 2026 (with the PanStar Acro) was designed to test commercial viability and ultimately support the establishment of a regular Korea-Europe Arctic service by 2030.

India's energy relationship with Russia has become enormously important. Beyond oil and gas, Russia offers lng, coking coal, nickel, palladium, copper, rare minerals, fertiliser inputs, etc. Arc tic development therefore gives India a potential additional source of strategic materials

The Korean government is simultaneously planning Arctic navigation systems, additional icebreaking capability, polar-specialist training, Arctic fuel infrastructure, port development and logistics networks. What is significant is that South Korea is not abandoning conventional routes. It is buying optionality—precisely the strategic logic India should pursue.

India's Arctic Interests

India's case is arguably more strategically interesting. India should not view the NSR primarily as a substitute for the Suez. For most India-Europe trade, the Suez remains more logical. India's strategic interest is instead built around other propositions:

Strengthening the India-Russia Maritime Relationship: India and Russia have already agreed to cooperate in developing shipping through the NSR and have contemplated a joint working body under the India-Russia Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Cooperation. India and Russia have both welcomed progress in multifaceted NSR cooperation and reaffirmed interest in Arctic and Russian Far East development. The proposed 2027 voyage is therefore not a standalone initiative—it is the operational expression of a policy already agreed between the two governments.

Linking the NSR to the Chennai-Vladivostok Corridor: This is possibly the most important issue from India's standpoint. India has been developing the eastern maritime corridor between Chennai and Vladivostok. Once cargo reaches Vladivostok, it is at the eastern entrance of Russia's Arctic transport system. This produces a multimodal India-Russia-Asia-Europe network. It does not necessarily make economic sense for every commodity, but it creates an additional strategic route.

Access to Russian Arctic Resources: India's energy relationship with Russia has become enormously important. Beyond oil and gas, Russia offers LNG, coking coal, nickel, palladium, copper, rare minerals, fertiliser inputs, etc. Arctic development therefore gives India a potential additional source of strategic materials.

Shipbuilding and Polar Technology: The planned 2027 passage should be understood, at least partly, as a capability demonstration. India does not yet possess the same depth of commercial polar shipping capability as Russia, Finland, Canada, or the other Arctic-capable shipbuilding nations. Operating a merchant vessel

in the NSR would allow India to acquire practical knowledge on ice-class ships, polar navigation, ice forecasting, crew training, emergency response, Arctic logistics, cold-weather propulsion, etc. The ultimate prize will therefore not be the passage by the first Indian cargo ship; it is the acquisition of Indian polar shipping competence.

Strategic Autonomy: Historically, India has chosen not to be overly dependent upon any single strategic relationship. The same principle could also be applied to maritime trade. Since India cannot control a crisis from arising in Hormuz, Suez, or Malacca, it can acquire real value for itself by developing alternative options.

The NSR will provide network resilience. A resilient trading system does not require an alternative route to entirely replace the existing one (route independence need not be the goal). With multiple routes available, the failure of one will not lead to systemic collapse.

India-Russia Arctic Partnership

Russia would not want to become economically subordinate to China. If China becomes the customer, financier, and principal shipping partner in the Russian Arctic, Moscow's bargaining power diminishes. India gives Russia an alternative Asian pole.

India is politically more autonomous. India maintains close relations with Russia while simultaneously maintaining extensive relationships with the US, Europe, Japan, Australia and other partners. Russian policymakers can therefore present Indian participation as evidence that Arctic cooperation is not simply a Sino-Russian bloc project.

India is a huge energy market. Russian Arctic LNG, oil and mineral resources potentially have a natural market in India. Also, India is a significant maritime power and its participation gives the NSR greater legitimacy as an international commercial route.

NSR: A Magic Bullet?

India's strategists should, however, not get carried away by the hype around the possibilities of the NSR, present it as a magic bullet, and overstate the NSR's value to India's maritime trade. The route presents some formidable challenges.

Seasonal Limitations: The NSR remains heavily dependent on ice conditions. The commercial window is broadly the summer-to-early-autumn period, although Russia is working towards increasingly extended and eventually year-round navigation.

Ice-Class Ships: Ordinary merchant vessels cannot just enter the Arctic. Ships need appropriate ice strengthening and polar certification. Ice-class construction increases capital cost, reduces flexibility and can impose higher operating costs.

Icebreaker Dependence: Russia's nuclear-powered icebreakers are an extraordinary strategic asset. But they are also expensive. The economics of the NSR depend partly on the cost of icebreaker escort and associated services.

Insurance: Arctic shipping is a much greater insurance challenge. Risks include collision with ice, machinery failure, salvage difficulties, environmental damage, limited rescue capability, etc.

Search and Rescue: An accident in the Red Sea is one thing, but an accident hundreds of kilometres from an Arctic port is a risk of an entirely different dimension.

Infrastructure: The NSR does not yet possess the required network of logistics facilities found along the Suez or the other established trade routes. The absence of Arctic transshipment hubs, limited port capacity, and poor intermodal connectivity are major constraints.

Environmental Risk: An oil spill in the Arctic is vastly more difficult to clean up than one in a temperate maritime environment. This imposes enormous regulatory and insurance costs.

Other Arctic States

Russia is not alone in building Arctic capabilities. In fact, one reason the Arctic is becoming strategically competitive is that nearly every major Arctic state is increasing its investment.

The US increasingly regards the Arctic as a theatre of strategic competition. The US Coast Guard has historically suffered from insufficient icebreaking capacity. The US is now attempting to expand its Arctic-capable fleet. The US is investing in Arctic security via infrastructure development in Alaska, maritime domain awareness, scientific mapping, military surveillance, and Arctic communications.

Canada faces a somewhat different challenge. Its principal concern is the Northwest Passage (NWP). Canada considers the NWP part of its Arctic sovereignty, while international shipping interests view the passage through the lens of international navigation. The Canadian Coast Guard's new strategy explicitly connects Arctic shipping, sovereignty, infrastructure, emergency response and year-round presence.

Finland and Sweden are not Arctic Ocean coastal states in the same sense as Russia, Canada or the US, but both possess exceptional polar shipbuilding and icebreaking expertise. Finland and Sweden are cooperating to renew their icebreaker fleets and regard icebreaking as critical infrastructure for maintaining year-round maritime connectivity. Their expertise is becoming geopolitically valuable.

Denmark's Arctic importance derives largely from Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The strategic value of Greenland has increased dramatically because of its geographic position, access to the North Atlantic, proximity to North America, missile-warning infrastructure, and critical minerals. The Greenland question has, as a result, been fore-fronted in American and European strategic considerations (as evidenced, most recently, in the US' announcement in end September 2026 that it had struck an 'infinite' deal with Denmark to give the US control over Greenland's security and bar foreign adversaries from setting up bases there).

Norway occupies one of the most strategically sensitive positions in the Arctic. Its geography places it between Russia's Northern Fleet and the North Atlantic. The recent growth of Nato's Arctic activity has made Norway's role in the Arctic even more important.

End Note

India has no option but to be interested in the NSR because the strategic value of the Arctic is no longer hypothetical. The drafters of Indian strategic-policy should view the planned 2027 voyage as a capability-acquisition and route-validation exercise, not as a claim that the NSR can replace the Suez or Hormuz. The voyage will help determine if the Arctic can become commercially useful, technologically manageable, and strategically valuable.

The NSR's strategic value comes from the fact that it is an additional option. It is the same logic that explains Russia's interest in India, China, and South Korea. Moscow is not looking for these countries to form an alliance with Russia. It only needs them to become economically invested in the Arctic system that it is constructing.

For India, the opportunity, therefore, is not to choose between the Arctic and the Indian Ocean. It is to connect the two. The real objective is not substitution, but redundancy. In an era in which established maritime routes can be disrupted by war, sanctions, terrorism, accidents, climate events, or great-power confrontation, redundancy itself is a form of national power. ||