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# Explained | India and the Northern Sea Route

PREMIUM

What is the significance of the Arctic region for India's interests? Why is India involved in Murmansk's Cargo Traffic? How long has India been engaged with the Arctic region? What is the NSR? How does Russia ensure the navigability of the NSR? How does the Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor impact NSR?

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**The story so far:** Murmansk, popularly called the capital of the Arctic region and the beginning point of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), is witnessing the rising trend of Indian



2,000 km northwest of Moscow. India has been showing greater interest regarding the NSR for a variety of reasons.

## Why is the Arctic region significant to India ?

The vulnerability of the Arctic region, which is above the Arctic Circle and includes the Arctic Ocean with the North Pole at its centre, to unprecedented changes in the climate may have an impact on India in terms of economic security, water security and sustainability.

The region also constitutes the largest unexplored prospective area for hydrocarbons remaining on the earth. Shyam Saran, former Foreign Secretary, in an article in *'The Hindu'* published in February 2012, states that "it is estimated that the region may hold over 40 percent of the current global reserves of oil and gas. There may also be significant reserves of coal, zinc and silver." However, the government's Arctic Policy of 2022 mentions that the country's approach to economic development of the region is guided by UN Sustainable Development Goals.

## How old is India's engagement with the Arctic?

India's engagement with the Arctic can be traced to the signing of the Svalbard Treaty in February 1920 in Paris and India is undertaking several scientific studies and research in the Arctic region. This encompasses atmospheric, biological, marine, hydrological and glaciological studies. Apart from setting up a research station, Himadri, at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, in 2008, the country launched its inaugural multi-sensor moored observatory and northernmost atmospheric laboratory in 2014 and 2016 respectively. Till last year, thirteen expeditions to the Arctic were successfully conducted. In May 2013, India became an observer-state of the Arctic Council along with five others including China.

## What is NSR?

The Northern Sea Route (NSR), the shortest shipping route for freight transportation between Europe and countries of the Asia-Pacific region, straddles four seas of the Arctic Ocean. Running to 5,600 km, the Route begins at the boundary between the Barents and the Kara seas (Kara Strait) and ends in the Bering Strait (Provideniya Bay).



used shipping lanes via Suez or Panama. The 2021 blockage of the Suez Canal, which forms part of the widely-used maritime route involving Europe and Asia, has led to greater attention on the NSR.

## How is Russia making the NSR navigable ?

As the seas of the Arctic Ocean remain icebound during most of the year, the icebreaking assistance is organised to ensure safe navigation along the NSR. Russia is the only country in the world with a nuclear-powered icebreaker fleet, according to Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation, the NSR infrastructure operator. In December 1959, the world's first nuclear icebreaker, "Lenin," was put into operation, unveiling the new chapter in the NSR development. It was decommissioned 30 years later.

Today, FSUE Atomflot, a subsidiary of Rosatom, acts as the fleet operator of nuclear-powered icebreakers. The fleet comprises seven nuclear-powered icebreakers, apart from one nuclear container ship. Three more are expected to be commissioned between 2024 and 2027.

## What are the driving factors for India to participate in the NSR development ?

Primarily, the growth in cargo traffic along the NSR is on the constant rise and during 2018-2022, the growth rate was around 73%. Last year, the volume of cargo traffic was 34.117 million tonnes. With India increasingly importing crude oil and coal from Russia in recent years, Rosatom says that "the record supplies of energy resources for the Indian economy are possible due to such a reliable and safe transport artery as the NSR."

Secondly, the NSR, as a transit route, assumes importance, given India's geographical position and the major share of its trade associated with sea transportation.

Thirdly, the Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor (CVMC) project, an outcome of signing of the memorandum of intent between the two countries in September 2019, is being examined as one linking with another organise international container transit through the NSR. The 10,500 km-long CVMC, passing through the Sea of Japan, the South





Union Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal, who was quoted as saying in *The Hindu Businessline* in June 2023. A study commissioned by Chennai Port Trust reveals that coking coal [used by steel companies], crude oil, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) and fertilisers are some of the cargo that can be imported from Russia to India through CVMC.

Fourthly, experts are discussing the possibility of China and Russia gaining collective influence over the NSR.

## What lies forward?

The NSR development plan until 2035, as approved by the Russian government last year, sets the cargo traffic target as 80 million tonnes and 150 million tonnes for 2024 and 2030. The plan approval took place amid economic sanctions imposed by the West against Russia.

In March 2023, a Russian delegation held meetings with the Indian business community in New Delhi and Mumbai on the NSR development, according to media reports. The delegation had promised to provide the availability of key components for the year-round operation of the route. Rosatom seeks the participation of Indian companies in projects related to the NSR.

As for the CVMC project, a workshop, featuring stakeholders from the two countries, is expected to be held in the second half of October, says a senior official in the Government of India.

*(The writer was in Murmansk recently on the invitation of Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation)*