

Tanker makes solo voyage through melting Arctic Sea

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A Russian liquefied natural gas tanker completed its maiden voyage through the waters of the Arctic Sea last week without the use of an icebreaker, ushering in a new step in the exploitation of the dramatically warming polar region.

The specially constructed 300-meter tanker *Christophe de Margerie* became the first tanker to complete the Northern Sea Route voyage unassisted. The ship sailed from Norway to South Korea in just 19 days, 30 percent faster than the usual route through the Suez Canal. The Northern Sea Route tracks the northern coast of Siberia, which may provide an efficient alternative for trade between northern Europe and east Asia as climatic conditions change.

And those conditions are changing rapidly. The Arctic is warming twice as fast as the global average. As a result, both the extent and volume of sea ice is decreasing. The area of the Arctic Sea covered by ice in September has fallen by half compared to the average of recent decades. Likewise the average thickness of what remains has declined by 1.8 meters.

Scientists expect these observed trends to continue and even accelerate. Some scenarios envision largely ice-free polar seas during summertime as soon as the 2030s. While ice will continue to lock up the waterways during winter, the length of shipping seasons will grow. By the end of the century most of the Arctic may be open water half the year or longer.

The retreating ice is not only expected to open up shipping lanes, but also unlock more areas for oil and gas drilling. The Arctic holds perhaps an eighth of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and up to a third of its gas reserves.

The voyage completed last week coincides with the development of the massive South-Tambeyskoye natural gasfield in northern Siberia. The field holds an

estimated 926 billion cubic meters of untapped gas. Russian natural gas giant Novatek and major Chinese and French firms have formed a joint venture to extract, liquefy and transport up to 16.5 million tons of the liquefied gas each year.

The *Christophe de Margerie* is the first of 15 tankers planned to haul the massive payloads to markets in Europe and Asia. The new fleet will have reinforced hulls capable of cutting through two meters of ice. With the decreasing thickness of the sea ice, the ships are expected to operate nearly year-round on portions of the Arctic Sea.

The prospects for Arctic oil and gas development and open sailing are not limited to the Northern Sea Route and Russia. The Northwest Passage through the Canadian archipelago has seen a significant growth this decade in commercial and tourist activity, including a 1,600-passenger luxury cruise ship this summer making its second excursion along the Passage.

The warming temperatures and declining sea ice have brought with them intensified conflict over claims of sovereignty and expansion of military activity. The United States, Canada, Denmark, Norway and Russia all claim significant tracts of the Arctic, much of which is disputed. The US insists the shipping lanes are international passages, and a December 2016 Department of Defense Arctic strategy report highlighted the necessity to conduct "Freedom of Navigation operations to challenge excessive maritime claims when and where necessary."

The US Air Force's Alaska Command in May led the most recent joint military exercise with 6,000 personnel, 200 aircraft and several ships to simulate combat in the Arctic. Russia recently reorganized its Arctic Command and renovated Cold War-era Arctic bases.

Yet even as competition in the Arctic heats up, the variability of the weather has kept the risk high and reliability low. While container ships, oil tankers and cruise ships are now all active in the Arctic, the traffic relative to southern routes remains minute. Ice blockages during summer months are common. Ice flows and melting vary significantly from year to year and month to month. Shipping companies with regular schedules and tight deadlines are in no rush to reroute vessels north, a situation that analysts predict will persist for some time.

Compounding the extreme weather risk is a lack of infrastructure, which could prove catastrophic when disasters strike. Much of the Arctic is still poorly charted, with distances of hundreds of kilometers between ports, putting ships many days away from help if they encounter difficulty. Groundings or collisions could result in ships sinking or spilling its cargo. The danger is far from theoretical. In December of 2015, a Russian tanker carrying 200,000 gallons of oil ran aground in the North Pacific. The most well-known oil spill in the northern latitudes, the Exxon Valdez spill of 11 million gallons, is still impacting the Alaskan environment more than a quarter century later.



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