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## Perspectives on The Northern Sea Route Project



One of the most important resources the Russia possesses is its territory. The Russian Federation's unique position, its huge length spanning east to west, and access to the Pacific and Arctic Oceans could allow Russia to create on its territory unique transport routes of global importance and become one of the most important centres of world trade.

Amongst the most promising modern transport projects, the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is noteworthy. This transport artery originates in the Pacific waters of the Russian Federation, goes along the entire northern coastline of Russia, and provides access to the territorial waters of northern European countries and the Atlantic Ocean.

In Soviet and modern times, the NSR has been used for the country's internal needs. Via this route, necessary supplies for inhabitants of the northern territory are delivered along with equipment for workers on industrial site there, who ship out extracted resources. However, in our time the NSR could have another, equally important application. It could become a new and important strategic shipping lane between Europe and Asia.

Against the background of the globalization, trade developing and economic integration of the regions of the world, it is all the more important to assume international transportation routes. Accordingly, governments are considering it more and more important to create and maintain them. So, for example, the Republic of Singapore, a member of

the Four Asian Tigers, largely owes its prosperity to its favourable location on the Strait of Malacca – the narrow strip of a sea route between Europe, Africa, and East Asia, through which travels up to a quarter of all sea freight on the planet. It's worth noting, that it's not just a matter of location (there are other countries with ports on the Strait of Malacca), but also that Singapore has never skimmed when it comes to building infrastructure, and as a result it has one of the four largest sea ports in the world.

The start of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 could be called the start of a new epoch in the history of world transport and economic integration. The goal of BRI is to unite in one system the main transport routes of Eurasia, Africa, and, in the end, the whole planet, both land and sea routes (as part of the subproject The Maritime Silk Road of the XXI Century).

Russia, long dreaming of economic integration of the states of Eurasia, has brought great enthusiasm to BRI. Even now, the Russian Federation is playing a meaningful role in BRI, thanks to its geographic location, and its developed railroad system. The Russian Trans-Siberian Railroad is particularly important for much connectivity between Europe and Asia; the longest railroad in the world it connects the Far East and the European part of Russia, and has branches going to central Asia. However, despite all of its importance, the TSR is not the only railway artery of Eurasian significance. Railway connection between eastern and western Eurasia is also possible through Central Asian countries. Therefore, the railways of Kazakhstan are an important part of BRI.

The genuinely unique route that Russia can offer its partners in BRI is the NSR. If necessary infrastructure for servicing a large flow of vessels is created across the whole length of the NSR, it could become one of the most important sea routes on the planet.

The NSR is significantly shorter than the traditional sea transport route from the eastern extremity of Eurasia to Europe, going through the Indian Ocean. To get to Scandinavian countries from China via the southern route, a vessel must travel more than 23 thousand km. When using the NSR, that distance falls to 14 thousand km.

Another benefit of the NSR is security. The southern route passes through several narrow places – for example, the above-mentioned Strait of Malacca, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and others. In the event of some military action, these sections could be blocked by small armed forces. Besides that, at Malacca, and more-so on the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, there is a tradition of high pirate activity, and in recent years there is also the significant issue of the terrorist threat level. As far as the NSR, it passes through the calm territorial waters of Russia, which can guarantee safety to all foreign vessels.

As for the NSR's shortcomings, you can include difficult environmental conditions. To pass through the seas of the Arctic Ocean, merchant vessels may require icebreakers to escort them, increasing the cost of transporting cargo. Besides that, the NSR goes along sparsely populated regions, and so far, it does not have enough ports of call for transshipment and ship repair, if necessary. Creating the necessary infrastructure to transform the NSR into a comfortable route for commercial freight, and not only for professional conquerors of the north, is one of Russia's most important challenges.

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed this idea in his March 1, 2018 message to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. According to V. Putin, the NSR should become a key to the development of the Russian arctic and Far East. It needs to be made into a global transport artery and increase freight traffic to 80 million tons per year by 2025.

The NSR should become an important part of the global transport system, the creation for which the PRC launched BRI project. Because the views of Russia and China on Eurasian integration are completely consistent, Russia decided to invite Chinese partners to work on improving the NSR.

A meeting was held in May 2017 between the heads of the MFA Russia and PRC, during which both sides pledged to begin joint work on the Ice Silk Road project. The first stage requires the restoration of a number of ports on the NSR and possibly the construction of several new ones. The project has already attracted more than a few Chinese investors, such as the Government Development Bank, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, The Silk Road Fund, and others, who have already contributed \$19 million to developing the NSR.

For Russia, the development of the NSR could possibly make a strong push in development of its northern regions and of their vast resources, and receive considerable transit profits. For China, there's the possibility to use the shortest sea route to Europe. Additionally for the PRC, successful work on the NSR could ensure energy security. The Chinese economy is strongly reliant on imports of hydrocarbons from Middle Eastern countries, which make sea

deliveries via the Strait of Malacca. As was mentioned above, in the event of escalation in a conflict between China and one of its adversaries such as the USA, the Strait of Malacca, or other parts of the southern sea route could be blocked. In such a case, the NSR could become an alternate delivery route for energy deliveries to China (in this case, the journey of tankers from the Middle East to China via the NSR would be of similar length to the journey they make now). Such a guarantee of security could even further strengthen China's position in the Pacific Rim and weaken the position of the USA and its allies. It's also worth noting that the NSR will generally contribute to the intensification of global trade. Such a short journey from the Pacific Rim to Europe will interest not only China, but also Japan, Korea, the USA, and other nations of the region. In this way, the transformation of the NSR into a lively transport artery could have enormous significance for Russia, China, the Eurasian continent, and the whole world.

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