

THE ARCTIC BASIN – A NEW SHIPPING LANE

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The central parts of the Arctic Basin (the waters on and around the North Pole) may be nearly ice-free during the warmest months of the year in 10 to 20 years. This provides new possibilities for transport routes by water. However, increased traffic will increase the risk of long-term damage to the environment. As of today, the international regulatory framework to meet this challenge is not in place. Neither is the necessary capacity for rescue operations.

A partly ice-free Arctic Basin will have consequences for marine flora and fauna, as well as for human activities, including commercial interests. The Arctic Basin has up to now been hard to access due to its ice cover. But within a couple of decades we can expect the Arctic Basin to be an international shipping lane of great importance. Ships which now have to pass through the Suez Canal or take even larger detours on their way between Asia and Europe will be able to sail across the North Pole, shortening their journeys by as much as 14 days.

A new offshore highway

As we speak, the German ship *Beluga Fraternity* is the first non-Russian ship to pass through the North-East Passage (partly along the Russian coastline) on its way from South Korea to western Europe. This milestone in international shipping and provides an idea of the possibilities that lie ahead in an ice-free Arctic Basin. A shipping lane straight across the Arctic Basin, through the Bering Strait (between Alaska and easternmost Russia) and the Fram Strait (between Svalbard and Iceland), is of even greater interest because it is shorter and saves even more time, in addition to the fact the ships will sail in international waters all the way.

No polar nations are yet ready to fully handle such a new shipping lane between the continents – Norway included. The likelihood that the Arctic Basin will be navigable for ships parts of the year during the coming 10 to 20 years is so great that we must start finding solutions to the challenges of increased traffic now. These challenges are many and complicated. Safety, search and rescue are vital issues, as well as mitigating damages to the environment due to accidents. These issues are of crucial importance to all the five nations that border the Arctic Basin. Today fishing boats, research vessels, tourist boats, cruise ships and coal freighters to and from the Svea coal mine in Svalbard make up the main part of shipping around the archipelago of Svalbard. More oil and gas installations may be constructed in the Barents Sea and in north-west Russia during the years to come, and this business activity will lead to increased navigation. In addition, less ice in these waters will attract more cruise-liners and lead to more scientific cruises and fishing. Traffic will be further increased as container ships and freighters make use of the new intercontinental shipping lanes across the Arctic Ocean.

A patchwork of regulations

Lacking the necessary degree of international coordination, current regulations for navigation in the Arctic Basin are like a patchwork quilt. The Arctic nations have different requirements for vessels sailing in these waters. The nautical charts for the

region are inadequate. Other facilities such as electronic navigation signals and satellite monitoring must be strengthened for safety reasons. The UN organization for improving maritime safety and preventing pollution from ships, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) plays a key part in the work to coordinate and establish requirements for safety and the environment. The Arctic Council is also an important forum for these issues. Norway must use both these channels actively in our work to increase safety for navigation in the north. These ambitions are incorporated in the new White Paper on Svalbard from the Norwegian Parliament, and also in the Government's extended focus on the High North. Achievements in these fields demand a long-term national political intention and strong and flexible international cooperation in a process that will take years to conclude. This is therefore already an urgent matter.

Time is money

Time is money. This also goes for international shipping, which is why the Arctic Basin is such a relevant shipping lane between Asia and the large European harbours. Big shipping companies, as the German Beluga, are already doing their calculations. Since it cannot be expected that the waters on and around the North Pole will be completely free of ice – only that ice will be reduced enough to make it possible to sail through – several shipping companies are ice-strengthening their vessels. The savings lie in the shorter sailing time, but ice-strengthening a ship that can pass through the Arctic Basin only a few months of the year is costly. Though the new transport routes will be shorter, there will be some ice-covered areas which the ships must steer clear of. To manage this, the vessels must slow down, and the skippers need accurate satellite maps every hour to keep track of the ice conditions ahead. Insuring a ship and a cargo through the Arctic is another expense that must be taken into account. Shipping companies also look at a larger picture, weighing the costs and advantages of transport in the Arctic Ocean against shipping in the south, where the dangers include warfare and pirates.

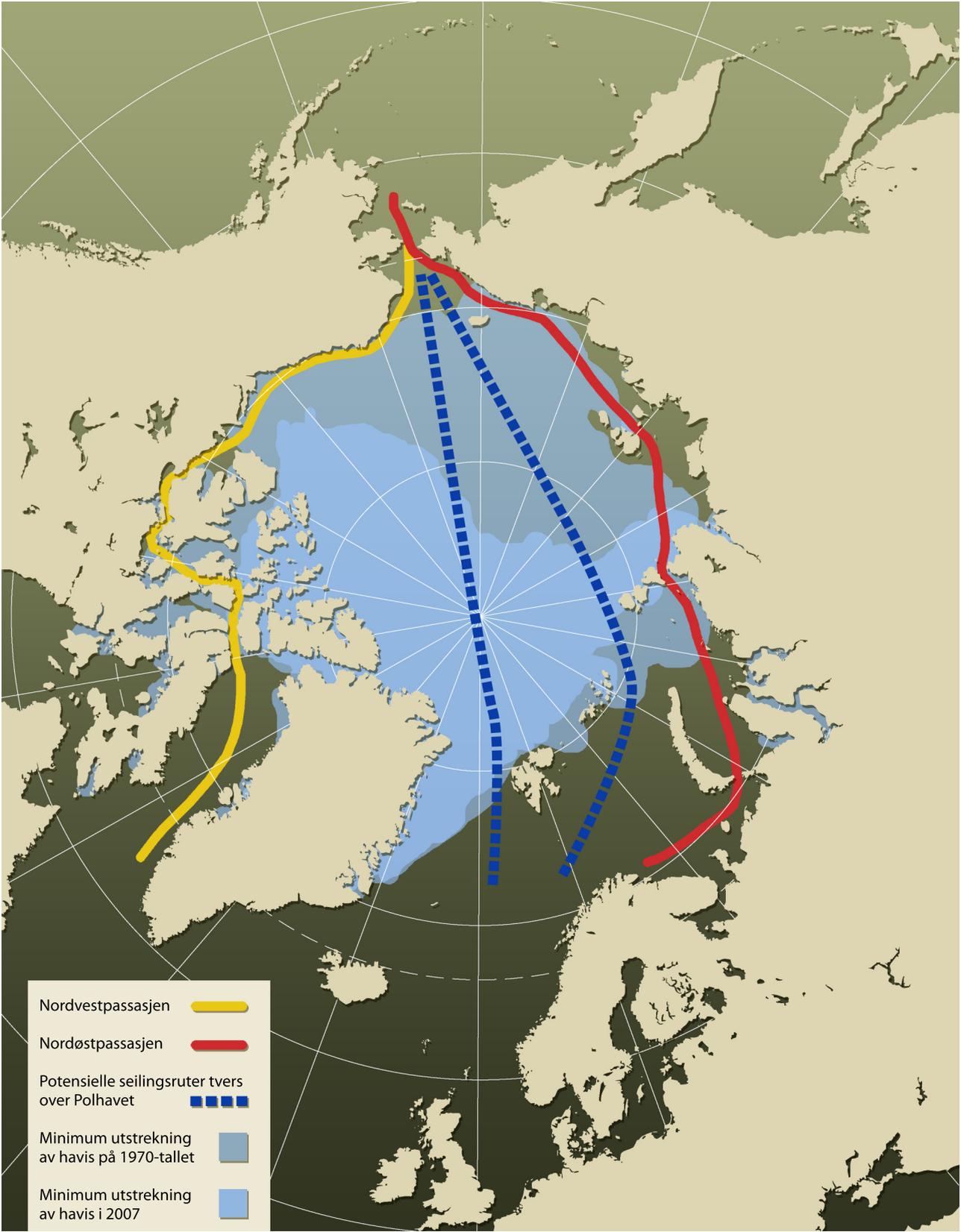
Oil in the ice – the great fear

The main threat to the marine environment in the Arctic is oil pollution. Today there is no efficient way to remove oil which has been emptied into the ice. The most probable solution is to burn it, which will have other negative impacts on the environment. Spills of heavy oil in the Arctic Basin will be a disaster for the environment. Arctic nature is vulnerable and its wounds heal slowly. The time spent to get to an oil spill to deal with it takes longer the further away from a harbour it happens. At present the response time for an oil spill at the eastern coast of Svalbard is one to two days at the least. Should the incident happen closer to the North Pole it is easy to imagine the consequences. A spill of heavy bunker fuel does extensive damage and has a long-term impact even in open waters in the Arctic.

Another aspect is discharge which will come from increased traffic of ships. Scientific results imply that long-range transport of black carbon may speed up the melting of the sea-ice in the Arctic. The dark particles which cover the ice makes it reflect less energy from the sun, so it melts at a faster rate. On the other hand, ships will use less fuel – and hence discharge less – when they choose the shorter route across the Arctic Basin rather than doing the southern detour.

Svalbard as a base for search and rescue

The Svalbard archipelago (with Spitsbergen as the main island) is the Arctic Basin's northernmost outpost of civilization. Due to its strategic geographical position it is easy to imagine the archipelago as a future base for monitoring, safety, search and rescue and oil pollution services. The resources which today exist in Svalbard are far from adequate when it comes to handling large accidents in the Arctic. With shipping across the North Pole, there is a need for wide-ranging helicopters and a far better oil pollution service, including better equipment and vessels that can reach far in a short amount of time. As a polar nation, Norway has a duty to pursue the development of the highest standards to prevent conflicts, accidents and environmental disasters from happening in the Arctic Basin. This must happen fast: while time-consuming processes and regulations are gradually falling into place, the ice is melting in Arctic waters.



Nordvestpassasjen



Nordøstpassasjen



Potensielle seilingsruter tvers over Polhavet



Minimum utstrekning av havis på 1970-tallet



Minimum utstrekning av havis i 2007

