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BELARUSIAN NATIONAL INTERESTS CONCERNING THE NORTHERN SEA ROUTE

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Abstract. This article examines the national interests of the Republic of Belarus concerning the Northern Sea Route, encompassing both economic aspects related to trade with East and Southeast Asian countries and strategic aspects of accessing northern oceanic ports. It outlines the policies of major Arctic and sub-Arctic states (Russia, China, Canada, the USA, Japan, and Northern European countries) regarding the Northern Sea Route, supported by historical and economic context. The article also analyses assessments by Western and Russian-speaking experts, highlighting key approaches to studying the Northern Sea Route and the Arctic region. Finally, the author hypothesises how the Northern Sea Route could facilitate trade between Eastern Europe and East and Southeast Asia, underlining Belarus' potential role as a connecting state between these regions.

Keywords: Northern Sea Route; Arctic policies of Russia, China, Canada, the US, Japan; national interests of the Republic of Belarus in the Arctic; foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus; world sea routes; Chinese foreign policy; Russian foreign policy.

БЕЛОРУССКИЕ НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ИНТЕРЕСЫ НА СЕВЕРНОМ МОРСКОМ ПУТИ

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Аннотация. Рассматриваются национальные интересы Республики Беларусь на Северном морском пути, касающиеся как экономического аспекта (торговли между Республикой Беларусь и странами Восточной и Юго-Восточной Азии), так и стратегического аспекта (выхода Республики Беларусь к северным океаническим портам). Дается описание подходов основных арктических и субарктических государств (России, Китая, Канады, США, Японии, стран Северной Европы) к использованию Северного морского пути, которое сопровождается исторической и экономической справкой о возможностях Северного морского пути. Исследуются мнения западных и отечественных экспертов, выделяющих основные подходы к изучению Северного морского пути и Арктики. Выдвигается предположение, как с помощью Северного морского пути стимулировать торговые отношения между Восточной Европой и Восточной и Юго-Восточной Азией. Республике Беларусь в данном взаимодействии отводится роль государства-коннектора для этих двух регионов.

Ключевые слова: Северный морской путь; арктическая политика России, Китая, Канады, США, Японии; национальные интересы Республики Беларусь в Арктике; внешняя политика Республики Беларусь; мировые морские пути; внешняя политика Китая; внешняя политика России.

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Introduction

The Northern Sea Route (NSR) is an international maritime corridor running through the northern seas along Russia's coastline, representing the shortest route between European Russia and the Far East. Historically, it has served as Russia's established Arctic transportation link, traversing the Arctic Ocean's Barents, Kara, Laptev, East Siberian, and Chukchi seas, as well as part of the Pacific Ocean (Bering Sea). The NSR's length from the Kara Strait to Providence Bay is approximately 5600 km [1, p. 55].

The NSR facilitates domestic transportation of minerals extracted in Russia's Arctic zone and transit between East and West as an alternative to existing sea routes via the Suez Canal or the Cape of Good Hope.

A key advantage of the NSR for transit transportation is significant time savings. Compared to routes via the Suez Canal, the NSR offers substantial economies of time and fuel for shipments to 20 of the world's 24 largest seaports. For instance, the journey from Dalian (China) to Rotterdam (the Netherlands) via the NSR takes around 33 days, compared to 48 days via the Suez Canal [2].

This article focuses primarily on the geopolitical dimensions of the NSR from the perspective of Belarusian national interests. The research aims to characterise the current geopolitical environment surrounding the NSR and define Belarus' national interests therein.

Historical and economic references will be provided, although they do not constitute the primary focus of this research. Arctic doctrines of key nations such as Russia, China, the US, and Canada will be examined and analysed, along with the policies of Japan, South Korea, and Northern European nations. The topic of the Arctic Council is deliberately excluded to avoid overburdening the reader with the intricacies of this international soft-law organisation, within which each player pursues its interests uniquely. The Arctic Council's role warrants a separate article.

Although Belarus is not an Arctic nation and currently lacks an Arctic policy or doctrine, developments over the past two years (since 2022) indicate a record-high level of Belarusian interest in the NSR. Unprecedented close cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and

Russian Arctic regions, as well as numerous high-level government visits, have been observed. This has resulted in ambitious projects and plans announced by the Belarusian president and government in 2023 concerning the Arctic region, making it a topical issue for research.

While the scientific literature has examined this topic, publications addressing the same issues are not numerous. The established tradition of describing the Arctic as a collision of interests among the main Arctic players (Russia, Canada, the US, and China) still prevails over the approach of exploring how small nations can benefit from utilising the Arctic and the NSR.

Numerous journalistic publications in 2023 have focused on current developments on the NSR, with Western authors particularly concerned about the rapid increase in Russian-Chinese Arctic cooperation.

In post-Soviet countries, V. N. Konyshov, A. A. Sergunin [1], R. U. Amiraev¹ and M. A. Nikulin² have dedicated monographs and dissertations to this topic, primarily focusing on Arctic geopolitics in general and touching upon the NSR as part of their broader research.

Among European scientists, T. Martins from Portugal [2], A. Dávid, A. Galieriková, J. Tengler, and V. Stupalo from Slovakia [3] have produced relevant recent studies on current developments on the NSR. However, they focus more on documenting the growing Chinese-Russian cooperation on the NSR rather than providing a comprehensive political study of the region and the interests of the parties involved.

Specific research on the NSR has been conducted by V. Yu. Karandashova [4], A. P. Danilov [5], N. M. Antyushina [6], V. G. Egorov and N. V. Lopatkina [7], although these were published before 2022 and thus describe the subject from a different geopolitical standpoint. It is assumed that few attempts have been made to characterise the current geopolitical situation surrounding the NSR within the changing system of international relations.

With this in mind, the present article seems relevant and important for further in-depth research into the geopolitics surrounding the NSR and identifying Belarusian national interests therein.

The importance of the NSR for world trade

In 2022, the total cargo volume transported along the NSR was 34 mln tons. In 2023, this figure had already reached 36 mln tons, representing a 6 % increase in cargo turnover³.

Company "Rosatom", the main NSR operator, notes that these indicators are achieved due to the route's utilisation by Russian corporations such as "Novatek", which liquefied natural gas accounts for over half of the

¹Amiraev R. U. The Arctic in the world political processes of the 21st century: scenarios for the development of the region (political and legal analysis) : diss. abstr. ... doct. polit. science : 23.00.02. Bishkek : Jusur Balasagyn Kyrgyz Natl. Univ., 2012. 52 p. (in Russ.).

²Nikulin M. A. Arctic in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, the USA and the PRC in the context of regional security (1991–2021) : diss. abstr. ... PhD (history) : 07.00.15. M. : RUDN Univ., 2022. 26 p. (in Russ.).

³Cargo transportation along the Northern Sea Route in 2023 amounted to 36.254 million tons [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/939623> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

cargo traffic, as well as “Gazprom Neft”, “Lukoil”, and “Nornickel”, which rerouted cargo traffic from western to eastern directions in 2022 and 2023⁴.

Net cargo transit along the NSR in 2023 reached 2.1 mln tons. The main transit cargo was oil (1.5 mln tons), followed by iron ore concentrate (approximately 350 000 tons) and liquefied natural gas (approximately 250 000 tons)⁵.

In 2023, 80 voyages transited the NSR, compared to 47 in 2022 (an increase of nearly 50 %). Large ice-free class vessels, the bulk carriers “Gingo” and “Platos”, were escorted from the port of Murmansk to the Chinese ports of Qingdao and Dalian, respectively.

Russian Arctic strategy policies for the development of the NSR

The Russian authorities have ambitious plans for the NSR. In April 2022, president V. Putin held a council on the development of Russia’s Arctic zone, which became the starting point for implementing a new in-depth state policy.

Regarding the NSR, the following issues were discussed: creating modern port and rescue infrastructure, modernising Arctic ports and terminals, expanding the icebreaker and cargo fleet, establishing a single logistics operator for this route, implementing priority investment projects considering sanctions, adjusting and providing further support for flexible financing solutions for investment projects, and addressing ecology and the environment⁸.

Subsequently, in August 2022, the Russian government approved the Northern Sea Route development plan until 2035. This plan responds to the objectives set by V. Putin. It includes over 150 measures, ranging from constructing a transportation and logistics hub in the seaport “Korsakov” on Sakhalin to developing the Murmansk and Arkhangelsk transportation hubs and building new terminals for liquefied natural gas, oil, and coal. The total financing for the plan’s activities exceeds 200 mln US dollars⁹.

Simultaneously, in June 2022, V. Putin signed a law granting the company “Rosatom” authority as the primary navigation operator on the NSR¹⁰.

Furthermore, in May 2023, the Russian government expanded the NSR development plan, introducing new activities: constructing icebreaker fleet vessels, ice-class cargo ships, rescue vessels, and their financial support by the

Company “Rosatom” also reported an increase in the number of permits issued for navigation in NSR waters, including those granted to foreign companies. In 2023, 1218 permits were issued, compared to 1163 in 2022 (again, an increase of nearly 50 %)⁶.

However, historically, cargo traffic flow along the NSR has been uneven. Since the 1930s, cargo it displayed steady growth from 130 000 tons to a record 6.5 mln tons in 1986. After the peak of the 1980s, cargo turnover stagnated, amounting to 1.8 mln tons in 1996 and 2006. Only after 2010 was there an upward trend, with cargo turnover exceeding the record of the 20th-century, reaching 7.4 mln tons in 2016⁷.

Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation. Thereby, Russia’s plans for the NSR are highly ambitious, and recent years’ cargo turnover statistics demonstrate their consistent realisation.

Moreover, due to global warming, the ice on the NSR will become thinner, and the regions where it thaws will remain ice-free for longer periods annually. Consequently, navigation along this route will become more accessible in the next 20–30 years. It is noted that pre-existing ice fields in the Bering, Chukchi, and East Siberian seas are disappearing, indicating profound changes in the Arctic’s accessibility for all vessel types. The melting of the Arctic Sea ice provides a key advantage for navigating the NSR, and analysts expect the NSR could be ice-free by 2050 [2].

However, developing the NSR has its nuances. For example, some researchers express doubts about its benefits for international commercial use due to the difficulty in assessing the route’s profitability.

Firstly, the gain in nautical miles compared to the Southern route may be lost due to travel time along the NSR. On the high seas between Southeast Asia and Europe, a container ship can reach speeds of 21–24 knots, whereas, on the NSR, speeds can drop to 14 knots due to drifting ice and unfavourable weather conditions. Using the NSR implies additional fuel and engineering costs for tankers and container ships [1, p. 56].

Secondly, according to M. Nikitina, the founder of the information and analytical portal “N.TransLab”,

⁴Cargo transportation along the Northern Sea Route in 2023...

⁵Transit along the Northern Sea Route in 2023 reached a record of 2.1 million tons [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/business/930429> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

⁶Cargo transportation along the Northern Sea Route in 2023 amounted to 36.254 million tons [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/939623> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

⁷Latitudes of high importance. Arctic shipping [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3254502> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

⁸Meeting on the development of the Arctic zone [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68188> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

⁹Mikhail Mishustin approved the plan for the development of the Northern Sea Route until 2035 [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://government.ru/news/46171/> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

¹⁰The government has expanded the plan for the development of the Northern Sea Route [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://government.ru/news/48389> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

the NSR's prospects are threatened by the deteriorated relations between Russia and foreign Arctic powers. Opportunities for attracting credit and third-party investments have decreased, as many public-private partnerships in the northern seas were designed for this financing format¹¹.

Thirdly, there are physical and geological limitations to positioning the NSR as a global transit gateway and competitor to the Suez Canal. The existence of two shallow straits – Sannikov and Laptev – with a through draught of 11–15 m allows unimpeded passage of container ships with a capacity of no more than 6000 TEU, while the Suez Canal can service vessels with a capacity exceeding 20 000 TEU¹².

It is also emphasised that the NSR requires “land-based support” to maximise the commercial benefits of using its separate, most in-demand sections. It is necessary to connect the NSR with the capabilities of the Eastern railway polygon and the Northern Latitudinal railway in the Russian Federation¹³.

According to Western researchers, it will take about two more decades for the NSR to be integrated into the main maritime trade routes. One of the biggest disadvantages noted is the lack of rescue opportunities in case of a dangerous situation. For the successful development of this route, effective solutions are necessary for the following issues: unification of the process of issuing permits for ship passage through this zone, introduction of uniform tariffs for transportation throughout the NSR, involvement of the world's largest shipping companies in developing routes along the NSR, and coordination of all ports through which the NSR passes from a single centre [3, p. 78].

The numerous measures undertaken by the Russian presidency and government indicate a clear intent to solidify Russia's position in the Arctic and significantly develop the NSR. The remaining barriers are not insurmountable, and a strong political will is already in place in Russia to address them, raising the probability of success in developing this critical transportation artery.

International status of the Arctic and the NSR

The international status of the Arctic and the NSR remains contentious. Russia asserts the NSR as its domestic transportation link, while the US, China, and Scandinavian countries advocate for its “internationalisation” to ensure unrestricted passage for all nations. Proponents of this view argue that arteries of global significance should not be under the sole control of a single country.

Consequently, two distinct positions have emerged among states regarding the Arctic. The first group comprises Russia and Canada, which enjoy direct Arctic access and possess the right to manage their 200-mile exclusive economic zones under the 1982 UN Convention on the law of the sea. The second group encompasses states with a growing interest in the Arctic but no direct access, such as the US, China, Japan, South Korea, and most Scandinavian countries (excluding Norway and Denmark).

Geopolitical interests in the development of Arctic shipping lanes have led to tensions even between traditional allies such as the US and Canada. The US challenges Canada's claim that the Northwest Passage, an alternative Arctic route through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, constitutes internal waters, advocating instead for its recognition as an international strait. This stance, supported by China, raises concerns for Canada.

Many scholars contend that the current US Arctic policy is largely rhetorical. Historically, the US has paid

limited attention to Arctic sea lanes, as evidenced by its non-ratification of the 1982 UN Convention on the law of the sea and its possession of only one Arctic icebreaker. These factors hinder the US' ability to safeguard its interests in Arctic mineral resources and to extend its exclusive economic zone. A known treaty between the US and Canada stipulates that while US ships must always be allowed passage through Canadian waters, the US must notify Canada and seek permission each time¹⁴.

The US advocates for the internationalisation of both the NSR and the Northwest Passage, though it does not plan to utilise these routes shortly. Canada, on the other hand, asserts sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, requiring all transit vessels to obtain Canadian authorisation. Despite this, Canada has been compelled to grant concessions to the US regarding ship passage. Additionally, the two countries are embroiled in a territorial dispute over the undefined border in the Beaufort Sea¹⁵.

Canada is keen to develop its own Arctic route. However, experts suggest that the Canadian Northwest Passage is less navigable than the NSR due to numerous islands which contribute to thicker ice formation. Currently, the Northwest Passage lacks significant transportation infrastructure and commercial shipping, making the NSR the only commercially viable Arctic route¹⁶.

In June 2017, China's National Development and Reform Commission and the State Oceanic Administration

¹¹Rosatom became the only shipping operator on the Northern Sea Route [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://neftegaz.ru/news/transport-and-storage/742062-rosatom-stal-edinstvennym-operatorom-sudokhodstva-na-severnom-morskom-puti/> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

¹²Northern Sea Route cools down under the influence of geopolitics and economy [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.dp.ru/a/2023/11/23/sevmorput-ostivaet-pod-vlijaniem> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Nikulin M. A. Arctic in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, the USA and the PRC... P. 16 (in Russ.).

¹⁵Ibid. P. 17.

¹⁶Ibid. P. 18.

issued a memorandum on prospects for maritime cooperation under the Belt and Road initiative, expressing intentions to establish a “blue corridor” across the Arctic Ocean to Europe, termed the Ice Silk Road.

China also pushes for broadening the definition of sub-Arctic states in international law. There is a growing discourse in China suggesting that the term “Arctic states” be replaced with interested party, a change that would significantly broaden China’s influence in Arctic affairs.

In 2018, China released a White paper outlining its Arctic strategy, positioning itself as a near-Arctic state and emphasising the global significance of the Arctic for humanity. The document asserts China’s role as a key player in Arctic political dialogue, reflecting Beijing’s dissatisfaction with its current level of involvement in the region [4, p. 27].

China also seeks to diversify its oil and gas supply routes to reduce its strategic dependence on the Strait of Malacca. Coined by Hu Jintao in 2003, the Malacca dilemma highlights China’s vulnerability to potential naval blockades due to its reliance on this critical passage, which is under indirect US influence [2].

To mitigate this vulnerability, China and Russia have collaborated in the Arctic, with the Chinese shipping company “COSCO” participating in approximately 30 % of voyages along the NSR. Over the next decade, China aims to route 5–15 % of its container shipments via this corridor.

At the 3rd Belt and Road forum in Beijing in October 2023, Russian president V. Putin invited other nations to invest in the development of the NSR. He announced that ice-class cargo ships would navigate the NSR year-round starting the following year, a development likely to heighten China’s interest in this route [2].

Japan and South Korea also show economic interest in the NSR. Japan, which began receiving liquefied

natural gas deliveries from Norway via the NSR in 2012, possesses the world’s largest merchant marine fleet and advocates for the Arctic to be recognised as a common heritage of mankind. Japan estimates that up to 40 % of its exports to Europe could be transported via this route [3, p. 77–78].

South Korea’s interest in the NSR is generally similar to Japan’s interest. A global leader in shipbuilding, it has technologies through companies like “Samsung heavy industries” to construct merchant ships with icebreaking capabilities and aims to expand its fleet for navigating the northern seas [5, p. 54].

Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden also show substantial interest in the NSR. Norway, actively engaged in Arctic mining, seeks to develop Russian Arctic deposits, leveraging its technological and financial capabilities that Russia has historically lacked. For example, the Norwegian oil company “Statoil” actively collaborates with Russia and has been granted concessions for developing complex fields in the Russian Arctic. Norway, despite sharing cultural, historical, and geopolitical ties, competes with Denmark, Sweden, and Finland for influence in the Arctic [1, p. 84].

In terms of Arctic development forecasting, researchers acknowledge that international law in this domain is evolving to reflect the actual state of affairs. Hence, it is only a matter of time before the interests of the stakeholders gain international recognition.

Analysts predict that the future of the Arctic will be determined by those states equipped with the necessary resources for its development. Possessing cutting-edge scientific advancements and technologies for navigation and extraction in extreme weather conditions will be crucial in establishing dominance in the Arctic [1, p. 144].

The Republic of Belarus and Belarusian national interests in the NSR

Primarily, Belarusian national interests involve utilising the logistical opportunities of the route and securing strategically important access to ocean ports in the northern seas under the control of a friendly state, ensuring unhindered and non-discriminatory access.

The Belarusian presence in the Arctic region is facilitated through the Union State. Within this framework, fund the “Arctic-SG” has been established to provide financial and technological support for the modernisation and technological renewal of Union State enterprises operating in the Arctic. These enterprises engage in natural resource extraction, transport infrastructure development, and preservation of the Arctic ecosystem¹⁷.

Interregional cooperation has seen active development of business relations between the Murmansk region of Russia and the Republic of Belarus. The annual trade turnover between them exceeds 100 mln US dollars. Over a hundred large-tonnage BelAZ trucks are employed at mining enterprises in the Murmansk region, and more than a hundred MAZ buses facilitate passenger transportation in the polar region. Apatite concentrate from the Murmansk region is also supplied to Belarusian chemical plants¹⁸. There is significant potential for cooperation in industrial sectors, transportation, construction, agriculture, healthcare, and tourism¹⁹.

¹⁷Concept of the fund [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://arcticasg.ru/o-fonde/obshhaya-informatsiya/> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

¹⁸President of the Republic of Belarus: meeting with the governor of Murmansk region of Russia Andrei Chibis [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-gubernatorom-murmanskoy-oblasti-rossii-andreem-chibisom> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

¹⁹Let’s involve Belarus in the Arctic projects [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://xn----7sbhwjb3brd.xn--p1ai/news/city/murman-sk/vpryagaem-belarus-v-proekty-arktiki> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

The strategic importance of the Arctic region for Belarus is underscored by frequent official visits between Belarus and the northern regions of Russia in 2022 and 2023. For instance, in September 2022, the governor of the Murmansk region visited Belarus where President A. Lukashenko discussed logistics and the reorientation of certain Belarusian export cargoes, primarily potash fertilisers, to the port of Murmansk²⁰.

The President of the Republic Belarus has expressed optimism about utilising the Arctic Ocean, specifically the NSR, to enhance cargo supply to Asia. He remarked: “I remain confident that the Arctic Ocean (Northern Sea Route) will become a key player in rapidly supplying cargo to Asia. Through successful collaboration, we can seriously accelerate development in this direction”²¹ (hereinafter translated by us. – A. F.)

In February 2023, during a press tour with journalists from the Russian Far East, the Belarusian leader reiterated the country’s interest in using the NSR for exports to Asian nations and in constructing a Belarusian terminal in Murmansk²².

In May 2023, a Belarusian delegation led by Prime minister R. Golovchenko visited Murmansk, where discussions focused on building a terminal in the Polar region for transshipping Belarusian potash fertilisers²³. This project is particularly advantageous for Belarus as it ensures unrestricted access to two oceans, thereby avoiding the sanctions-related shipping constraints experienced in the Baltic Sea²⁴.

By September 2023, Belarus and the Magadan region had agreed to utilise the NSR for bilateral trade. Following discussions with the governor of Magadan region, the Belarusian ambassador to Russia, D. Krutoy, confirmed plans to export goods to Magadan and import products from this Russian region via the NSR²⁵.

As of January 2024, Belarus harbours ambitious plans for both the NSR and the construction of its terminal in Murmansk. The upcoming year is expected to see significant developments in this project, enhancing Belarusian exports from Murmansk to Vladivostok and building logistical expertise for managing exports across the northern seas.

One key goal is to regularise Belarusian exports via the NSR to Southeast Asian countries such as China,

Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam, and to position the Republic of Belarus as a pivotal connector in East-West transit flows through the NSR.

From a geopolitical perspective, several nuances must be considered in planning Belarus’ engagement with the NSR. These include potential competition with the terrestrial infrastructure of China’s Belt and road initiative, differing perspectives between China and Russia on the Arctic’s international status, and Western sanctions that currently impede trade with the far arc countries and global commerce more broadly.

In light of these considerations, what further steps for Belarus could be recommended?

Firstly, the collaborative Belarusian-Russian development of transit chains from Minsk to Murmansk, from Murmansk to Vladivostok, and from Minsk to East and Southeast Asian countries is crucial. Given Russia’s pivotal role in the NSR, it is essential to fully exploit the potential of bilateral agreements and the Union State framework to secure non-discriminatory access to Russian northern ports.

Secondly, intensifying interregional cooperation with Russian regions along the NSR, including the Murmansk region, Arkhangelsk region, Far Eastern federal district, and Magadan region, is vital. Enhancing trade with these entities will facilitate the establishment of logistics and develop mutually beneficial transit schemes involving the Republic of Belarus.

Thirdly, the structure of recent Belarusian exports to Southeast Asia suggests a focus on transiting Belarusian potash fertilisers through the NSR to China. Consequently, engaging Chinese partners in discussions on this matter is advisable.

It is also hypothesised that using the NSR as a transit corridor between East and West could benefit Central-Eastern European (CEE) states that are either landlocked or distant from major European ports. For example, consider trade between CEE countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and key East and Southeast Asian nations such as China, South Korea, and Japan. These countries are selected based on their significant trade volumes with the CEE region.

For more precise economic estimations in future research, an expanded analysis could include all countries

²⁰Meeting with the governor of Murmansk region of Russia Andrei Chibis...

²¹Ibid.

²²Lukashenko: we want to build a port in Murmansk and use the Northern Sea Route [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-my-hotim-postroit-port-v-murmanske-i-ispolzovat-severnyj-morskoj-put-550649-2023> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

²³Prime minister of the Republic of Belarus Roman Golovchenko paid a working visit to Murmansk [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://murman.tv/news-n-11896--premer-ministr-respubliki-belarus-roman-golovchenko-posetil-murmansk-s-rabochim-vizitom> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

²⁴Golovchenko discussed options for the construction of a port in Murmansk with the governor of the region [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/golovchenko-obsudil-varianty-stroitelstva-porta-v-murmanske-s-gubernatorom-oblasti-568549-2023/> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

²⁵Belarus and Magadan region agree on the use of the Northern Sea Route in mutual trade [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.sb.by/articles/belarus-i-magadanskaya-oblast-dogovarivayutsya-ob-ispolzovanii-severnogo-morskogo-puti-vo-vzaimnoy-t.html> (date of access: 23.01.2024) (in Russ.).

within the CEE and Southeast and East Asia regions. This would encompass Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Baltic and Balkan states, Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, etc. Data from 2021 are used here due to the unavailability of certain comparative indicators for 2022 and 2023.

Analysis of mutual trade reveals that China notably dominates imports into the CEE region. For instance, in the Czech Republic, China accounts for 12 % (20 bln US dollars) of total imports, in Poland this number is also 12 % (40 bln US dollars), in Hungary it is 6 % (7.5 bln US dollars), and in Slovakia it is 2.5 % (\$2.5 bln US dollars)²⁶.

Imports from Japan and South Korea include Poland (10 bln US dollars), the Czech Republic (6.2 bln US dollars), Hungary (5.75 bln US dollars), and Slovakia (3.9 bln US dollars)²⁷. The total imports from the Asian region exceed 95 bln US dollars.

Next, consider the exports from CEE countries to South-East and East Asia. Poland's exports to this region total approximately 8.5 bln US dollars, followed by the Czech Republic at 7.85 bln US dollars, Hungary at 5.8 bln US dollars, and Slovakia at 4 bln US dollars²⁸. Collectively, CEE countries export over 26 bln US dollars worth of goods to these Asian regions annually.

This trade flow, valued at 120 bln US dollars, is significant. It equates to half of the trade turnover between the US and South Korea and double that of

Russia's combined trade with Japan and South Korea²⁹.

Consequently, Eastern European states, many of which are landlocked or distant from major European ports, rely heavily on directing their trade through Dutch or Belgian ports and subsequently through the Suez Canal or around the Cape of Good Hope.

Trade between these regions is expected to increase over time, primarily due to the growth of the Chinese economy and the annual increase in Chinese exports. Notably, trade with China alone accounts for about 60 % of the total 120 bln US dollars trade turnover, highlighting China's interest in finding faster and more cost-effective routes to CEE countries.

Considering the development prospects of the NSR and the Republic of Belarus involvement in this project, coupled with its developed rail and road logistics, it is plausible that the Republic of Belarus could become a key connector linking Eastern Europe with the NSR.

To evaluate this hypothesis, it is essential first to compare the costs of transporting goods from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary to Rotterdam by land with the costs via the Republic of Belarus to Russian Arctic ports. The NSR could potentially halve delivery times, offering significant economic benefits. However, the choice of transit routes is also influenced by political factors. Thus, improving Belarusian-European relations is crucial for testing this hypothesis.

Conclusions

The increasing importance of the NSR in global trade cannot be overstated. Its potential to drastically reduce travel time and fuel costs between global seaports places it at the forefront of geopolitical interests. Russia has ambitious plans for its development, while other nations including China, the US, and European countries also show keen interest in its utilisation.

The cargo volume along the NSR has consistently increased, reaching unprecedented levels in recent years. Russian corporations are notably active on this route, primarily for transporting natural resources such as liquefied natural gas, oil, and iron ore. With the anticipated reduction in Arctic sea ice, the NSR is expected to become more navigable in the coming decades.

The international status of the NSR is contentious, with divergent perspectives from Russia, the US, China, and European nations. These countries have articulated their interests in the region, leading to geopolitical tensions and divergent views on the route's management and utilisation.

The Republic of Belarus is increasingly interested in using the NSR for its trade and logistics, aiming to de-

velop strategic access to Arctic Ocean ports. The country is actively seeking collaborations with Russian regions along the NSR and is keen on exporting goods to Asian markets via this route. Belarus' involvement aims to establish a long-term strategic presence in the NSR for trade and logistics enhancement.

The use of the NSR as a transit corridor between East and West could significantly benefit CEE states and East and Southeast Asian countries. The substantial annual trade turnover exceeding 120 bln US dollars underscores the need for faster and more cost-effective delivery methods. The development of the NSR, along with potential Belarusian participation, could position Belarus as a pivotal connector between Eastern Europe and the NSR. However, further research, including cost comparison analyses and consideration of political factors, is essential to substantiate this hypothesis. Overall, the future appears promising for bolstering trade links between Eastern Europe and Southeast and East Asia through the NSR. This development could potentially transform regional trade dynamics, enhancing economic efficiency and geopolitical cooperation.

²⁶CIA world facebook [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/> (date of access: 23.01.2024).

²⁷Observatory of economic complexity (OEC) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://oec.world> (date of access: 23.01.2024).

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Office of the United States trade representative: Japan, Korea & APEC [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/japan-korea-apec> (date of access: 23.01.2024).

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