

Russia and the Northern Sea Route: a Curriculum Guide

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Introduction: The receding ice cover in the Arctic Ocean will eventually provide the opportunity for greater international shipping traffic. Broadly speaking, there are three *potential* routes: the Northwest Passage through the Canadian archipelago, the Northern Sea Route along the northern coast of Russia, and a trans-polar passage directly over the region of the geographic North Pole. Of these three potential routes, the trans-polar passage is the least feasible because the entire polar icecap would have to completely melt in the summer for shipping to take place. However, the periphery of the polar icecap does melt in the summer. This leaves the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route as viable shipping routes in the immediate foreseeable future. Of these two options, the Northern Sea Passage over Russia is thought to be more easily accessible as there is less ice near the coasts during the summer months. The forum through which the Russian Federation consults with other countries of the region is known as the Arctic Council.

Goals of Lesson for Students: The goal of this lesson plan is to familiarize students with the basic geography and geopolitical significance of the Northern Sea Route. Students should come away from this lesson with a general knowledge of the region's economic and political importance for Russia and the world. Students should be able to identify the permanent member of the Arctic Council. Students should be introduced to the names of the islands, ports, rivers, and seas along the route. Furthermore, having read a selection of the articles listed below, students should be familiar with the basic geopolitics of the region.

Key Geographic Features: Below are tables of key geographic features for students to learn.

Members of Arctic Council	Official Observers of Arctic Council
Denmark (representing the Faroe Islands and Greenland)	People's Republic and China
Finland	France
Iceland	Germany
Norway	India
Sweden	Italy
Russia	The Netherlands
Canada	Poland
United States	Singapore
	South Korea
	Spain
	United Kingdom

Name of Seas Relevant to NSR	
1) Baltic Sea	8) Kara Sea
2) Greenland Sea	9) Laptev Sea
3) North Sea	10) East Siberian Sea
4) Norwegian Sea	11) Chukchi Sea
5) Barents Sea	12) Bering Sea
6) White Sea	13) Sea of Okhotsk
7) Pechora Sea	14) Sea of Japan

Major Islands along the NSR	
1) Jan Mayen Land (Nor.)	5) Severnaya Zemlya (Rus.)
2) Svalbard/ Spitsbergen (Nor.)	6) New Siberian Islands (Rus.)
3) Franz Josef Land (Rus.)	7) Wrangel Island (Rus.)
4) Novaya Zemlya (Rus.)	8) Sakhalin Island (Rus.)

Important Areas before the Arctic Ocean	
1) Fenno-Scandia	4) Baltic Sea
2) Scandinavian Peninsula	5) White Sea-Baltic Canal
3) Kola Peninsula	

Important Straits along the NSR	
1) Kara Strait/ Kara Gate	4) Dmitry Laptev Strait
2) Vilkitsky Strait	5) Bering Strait
3) Sannikov Strait	6) La Perouse Strait/ Soya Strait

Important Russian Ports along the NSR	
1) Murmansk	7) Tiksi
2) Arkhangelsk	8) Pevek
3) Naryan-Mar	9) Provideniya
4) Vorkuta	10) Anadyr
5) Nadym	11) Magadan
6) Dudinka	12) Vladivostok

Major Rivers along NSR	
1) Ob-Irtysh River	5) Indigirka
2) Yenisei River	6) Kolyma
3) Lena	7) Amur
4) Yana	

Design of Lesson Plan: The instructor should first use an atlas or an online map such as Google Maps to identify the geographic features listed above and read the news articles listed below prior to the in-class lesson. Suggested Activities 1, 2, and 3 will familiarize students with the Arctic Council membership and the geography of the region. Students should read the news articles below prior to the lesson so that a discussion may be held. Students will then profile a port city or sea listed above in the context of the issues discussed in the articles for the next class meeting.

Suggested Activity 1: Introduce and briefly discuss the member states and observers in the Arctic Council. Have students discuss what the motivations of the observer states are as well as the motivations of the member states in limiting full membership in the council.

Suggested Activity 2: Using a detailed map of the region (either a large physical map or a digital map using a projector), point out the major physical features of the Northern Sea Route, including the islands, ports, rivers, seas, and straights along the route.

Suggested Activity 3: Using a detailed map of the region (either a large physical map or a digital map using a projector), point out the major port cities found along the Northern Sea Route.

Discussion of Articles: Students should be prepared to discuss the articles in class on the day in which the lesson is held. After providing an overview of the content, the instructor should ask the following questions of the students: 1) How is this region important to Russia's economy? 2) How does the status of this region affect Russia's foreign relations? 3) What was the dispute between Russia and Norway? The significance of this dispute? 4) How does Russia and other Arctic states feel about the interest of "outsiders" in the Arctic region regarding shipping and natural resources? 5) How might Russia and other Arctic states adapt to the increased shipping traffic in the region?

Suggested Student Assignment: Students should be asked to profile one of the port cities mentioned above for the next class session. Profiles could be delivered either orally or in writing (1/2 page to full page). Ideally, any profile should include information on demographics, economics, political structures, and cultural aspects of a given city. Alternatively, students may profile one of the seas along the Northern Sea Route. Students should tie issues discussed in the news articles with these profiles. This information can be easily found on the Internet and will further familiarize students with this region.

Additionally, it is suggested that students locate photographs or video of the various port cities and seas covered in this lesson on the Internet for sharing in class. This activity, while not

demanding, helps students visualize the geographic features taught in this lesson. It is also a fun way for them to become more familiar with the region.

Assessment: The instructor naturally has latitude in determining the quality of students' work. However, students should be expected to demonstrate an understanding of the geopolitical situation in this region along with its basic human geography.

Suggested Materials:

Google Maps

Wikipedia

Other Internet Resources

Articles:

Blunden, Margaret, "Geopolitics and the Northern Sea Route", *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2012): 115-129. Accessed 1/14/14, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/International%20Affairs/2012/88_1/88_1_blunden.pdf.

Adomanis, Mark, "Russia and Norway's Increasing Cooperation in the Arctic", *Forbes*, May 5, 2012: Accessed 1/14/14, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/markadomanis/2012/05/05/russia-and-norways-increasing-cooperation-in-the-arctic/>.

Blank, Stephen, "China's Arctic Strategy", *The Diplomat*, June 20, 2013: Accessed 1/14/14, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/06/chinas-arctic-strategy/>.

Milne, Richard, "Arctic Shipping set for record as sea ice melts", *Financial Times*, July 21, 2013: Accessed 1/14/14, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c947b810-f06a-11e2-929c-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2qP4cqGOa>.

Clark, Pilita, "Environment: Frozen Frontiers", *Financial Times*, February 6, 2013, Accessed 1/14/14, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/a51a35e2-704c-11e2-ab31-00144feab49a.html#axzz2qP4cqGOa>.

O'Dwyer, Gerard, "Arctic Nations Set Cooperation Guidelines" [defensenews.com](http://www.defensenews.com), June 27, 2013: Accessed 1/14/14, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20130627/DEFREG01/306270013/Arctic-Nations-Set-Cooperation-Guidelines>.

Klotz, Frank, “Trouble at the Ends of the Earth”, *The National Interest*, October 8, 2012: Accessed 1/14/14, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/trouble-the-ends-the-earth-7561>.

Rozhnov, Konstantin. “Norway and Russia ‘open up for business’ in the Barents Sea”, BBC News Business, September 15, 2010: Accessed 1/14/14, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-11299024>.

Sverdlov, Leonid. “Russian Naval Officers and Geographic Exploration in Northern Russia (18th through 20th Centuries)”, in *Arctic Voice* 11, November 27, 1996: Accessed 1/14/14, <http://arcticcircle.uconn.edu/HistoryCulture/russianexplor.html>.

Ragner, Claes Lykke, “Den norra sjövägen” [The Northern Sea Route] in Hallberg, Torsten (ed), *Barents – ett gränsland i Norden*. Stockholm, Arena Norden, 2008, pp. 114-127. Accessed 1/14/14, <http://www.fni.no/doc%26pdf/clr-norden-nsr-en.pdf>.

How to Use the Readings:

Historical Background

A good historical account of Russia’s exploration and expansion along the northern coast is provided by Sverdlov’s (1996) article. This would be a good way of familiarizing yourself and the students with the history of this region. It would not be necessary for students to read this article, although they may in fact find it interesting.

It would benefit the instructor and students alike to understand to read the articles by Ragner (2008) and O’Dwyer (2013).

The Big Picture

Blunden’s (2012) article is the central element of this lesson plan. Students should read the article and pay close attention to what is written. It will familiarize everyone with the major political themes surrounding access to the NSR. The subsequent news articles will illustrate these themes. Read Clark’s (2013) for more information on the Arctic Council.

Russo-Norwegian Relations in the Arctic

Students and the instructor should read the Adomanis (2012) article and the Rozhnov (2010) article to understand the importance of Russo-Norwegian relations in the Arctic for the overall cooperation between the eight member states of the Arctic Council as well as for maritime navigation through this region.

Emerging Role of China

The article by Blank (2013) is essential reading on this topic as it presents the reaction of the eight member states of the Arctic Council (especially Russia) to China's growing interest in the region in terms of shipping and mineral exploration.

US and Russia

Students and the instructor may find it helpful to read Klotz (2012) and Milne (2013) in addition to the readings above.