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September 4, 2009, 12:48 pm

Commercial Arctic Passage Nearing Goal

By [Andrew C. Revkin](#)



Beluga Group As the Beluga Fraternity entered Arctic waters, the crew kept track of ice floes.

More than halfway through a [rare trans-Arctic commercial voyage](#), two German heavy-lift ships carrying power-plant components from South Korea to a Siberian port were scheduled today to pass the [northernmost point](#) on their route, the [Vilkitsky Strait](#). The ships have been encountering small icebergs and rafts of sea ice since they passed through the Bering Strait last weekend, company officials say. But they are being escorted by the Russian nuclear-powered icebreaker [50 Years Since Victory](#) to limit risk and also have Russian pilots aboard. Excerpts from the Sept. 3 log entries of the two German vessels, the Beluga Fraternity and Beluga Foresight, are appended below. The ships could reach [Novyi Port](#), where the equipment would be unloaded, by Sunday or Monday. They would then continue west toward home.

Some fresh background placing this voyage in context has come from [Lawson W. Brigham](#), a retired captain of one of [America's aging polar icebreakers](#) and lead author of an important report on Arctic shipping trends and issues, the [Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment](#). Dr. Brigham said the Beluga shipments are probably the vanguard of what will be decades of exploratory efforts to normalize such

trade. But he doubts that big container shipping companies, which require predictability, will be eying such routes any time soon, given both the climatic and bureaucratic obstacles. Dr. Brigham said that to a large extent, it is Russian bureaucracy more than sea ice or icebergs that is impeding international use of the Arctic route along its coast, which has in theory been [open to such transit since 1987](#).

He added that, for the record, the Beluga shipments do not constitute the first commercial transit of non-Russian vessels through the fabled Northern Sea Route (also called the Northeast Passage).



Beluga Group The bow of the Beluga Fraternity is seen in this image from the convoy carrying power-plant components from South Korea to a Siberian port. The two German vessels are being led by a nuclear-powered Russian icebreaker.

Here's what he said about earlier non-Russian use of the route (N.S.R. is the abbreviation for the route):

In the summer of 1997, for example, the Finnish-flag tanker Uikku sailed the length of the N.S.R. beginning in Murmansk 3 September, 1997, and discharged fuel along a number of Russian Arctic ports. It arrived in Pevek on 12 September to discharge fuel and then sailed through the Bering Strait on 15 September. After picking up more fuel in the Pacific the ship sailed back along the N.S.R. discharging fuel at several ports and reaching Murmansk on 14 October. It was also reported by the Russian N.S.R. authorities that year that a Latvian-flag tanker also completed a full transit of the N.S.R. in 1997.

Here are his views on prospects for more small shipments like those of the Beluga fleet and large-scale use of the Arctic by the world's great container and tanker fleets:

I would say that these 2009 N.S.R. voyages do indicate that the smaller shipping companies are looking at these routes with increasing interest. I suspect the larger container ship & tanker companies understand the complexities of Arctic navigation and the many challenges to the just-in-time (seamless, integrated) systems that they run. They will have many others, over decades, test the waters to see how viable the northern routes are. With the extraordinary way the Arctic sea ice is melting/ retreating, a very plausible trans-Arctic

route remains, in my mind, right across the central Arctic Ocean, at least during a summer “window of opportunity.”

Finally, here’s an excerpt from a report on the progress of the two ships sent Thursday by [Niels Stolberg](#), the president and chief executive of the Beluga Group:

Currently the weather situation is favorable, despite sporadic snowfalls, fog and lower temperatures than a week ago. Near the northwest side of Ayon Island the masters had to watch out for ice fields and small ice blocks on Monday as well as on Wednesday morning during the first miles through the Sannikov Strait. “We proceed with utmost precaution through this area”, Captain Aleksander Antonov assured from the bridge of MV “Beluga Fraternity”. The ice concentration of the small floes was about 10 to 30 percent and the mini-icebergs jutting out of the water by about one meter provided for a situation which was mastered by the modern multipurpose heavy lift project carriers being built with ice class E3 and the experience of the captains. To assure for further safe passage and fulfil the obligations by Russian government, ice pilots from the ice breaker crew are now joining the bridges of MV “Beluga Fraternity” and MV “Beluga Foresight” to guide the vessels through the most demanding Vilkizki Strait. This most northerly point of the entire Northeast-Passage will be reached within this Friday, 4th of September: according to the analysis of the meteorologists thick ice blocks are to be expected in the southern area of the Vilkizki Strait as well as compact ice fields at the western exit and the entrance to the Kara Sea. In all likelihood, thereafter the journey should be free of ice all the way into the bay of River Ob.

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


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