Record year in the Northeast passage does not change the character of the route

2025 was a record year for the transit traffic through the Northern Sea Route (NSR). According to Center for High North Logistics (CHNL), 103 transit voyages were recorded, the greatest amount in CHNL's records. However, the record reflects a modest growth: The number of transits did increase by around 6 percent from 2024, while the transported cargo volume increased by around 3 percent.

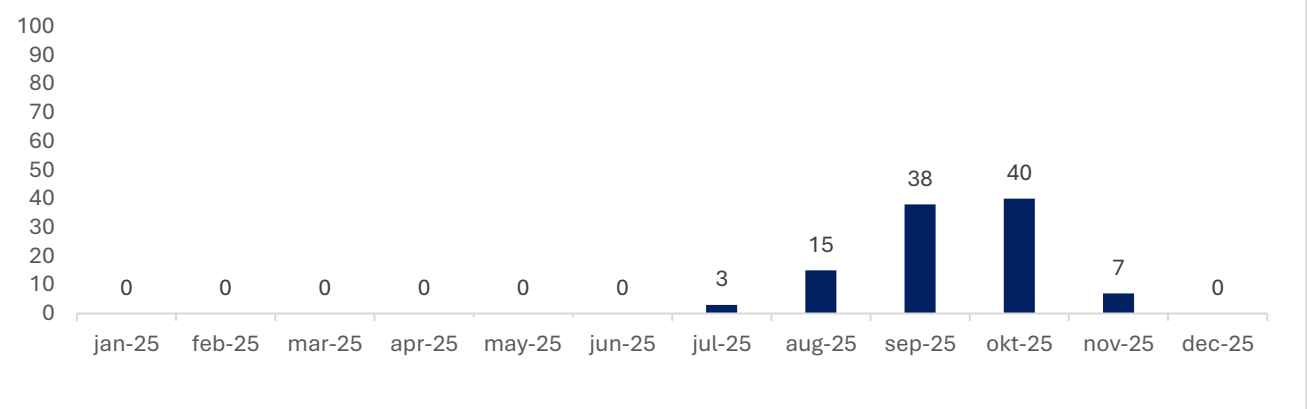
The activity remains modest compared to established global trade routes. According to Clarksons Research, monthly deep-sea cargo traffic around the Cape of Good Hope exceeded 2,000 passages in 2025. The entire year's record traffic along the NSR therefore is the equivalent to approximately one and a half days' worth of traffic around the Cape of Good Hope.

The traffic pattern also differentiates significantly from traditional trade routes. The transit season did span over a period of approximately four and a half months from the end of June to mid-November, and three out of four transits took place in September and Oktober. The NSR therefore continues to be used as a seasonal corridor rather than a year-round shipping route.

Moreover, the transit traffic is highly concentrated geographically. Only one vessel sailed via the NSR to a European port outside of Russia, while just two sailed to an Asian port outside of China. Instead, traffic was dominated by Russian Chinese commodity flows, including crude oil, petroleum products, coal and other bulk cargo. Some of the transits were also ballast voyages without cargo.

Despite the record year, the NSR remains far from being a viable alternative trade route between Europe and Asia. Traffic volumes are low, seasonal and primarily linked to Russia and China.

Monthly vessel transits via the Northern Sea Route 2025



Source: CHNL and Clarksons Research (data series: 12136381 and 12136403). The datasets are not directly comparable. CHNL records all registered transit voyages, while Clarksons records deep-sea cargo traffic.
Background: The NSR is the Russian-administered section of the Northeast Passage, which is the broader shipping route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans along the Arctic coasts of Europe and Russia. The NSR constitutes the central and most frequently used section of the passage and is often used to refer to the entire route, although the two terms are not identical. The route shortens the distance between Europe and Asia but requires Russian authorization and remains subject to ice conditions, a short navigation season and shallow straits and passages that limit its use by the largest vessel types.

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