China's Polar Silk Road

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Why in News?

Chinese shipping line Sea Legend has officially launched a regular commercial container service connecting Ningb o-Zhoushan in eastern China to Europe via the Arctic's Northern Sea Route (NSR).

Key Highlights of the Route

- **Distance and Time Efficiency -** Saves up to ***40% off transit times*** compared to traditional shipping routes via the Suez Canal.
- It reduces voyages from East Asia to Western Europe from around 40 days down to ***roughly 18–20 days.***
- **Bypassing Strategic Chokepoints -** Provides a maritime alternative that bypasses traditional chokepoints such as the
  - Red Sea,
  - The Suez Canal, and
  - The Strait of Malacca, mitigating China's strategic vulnerability known as the "Malacca Dilemma".
- **Polar Silk Road Initiative-** Serves as a primary operational deployment of China's 2018 **Polar Silk Road** policy framework, integrated within its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Metric / Parameter	Northern Sea Route (NSR)	Suez Canal Route	Cape of Good Hope Route
Transit Time (China to Europe)	~18 – 20 Days	~35 – 40 Days	~45 – 50 Days
Primary Chokepoints	Bering Strait	Strait of Malacca, Red Sea, Suez Canal	None (bypasses Suez)
Operational Window	Seasonal (Late July – Sept)	Year-round	Year-round
Max Vessel Capacity	Small–Medium (20k–50k DWT)	Mega Container Ships (>200k DWT)	Ultra Large Vessels
Geopolitical Control	High (Russian permits & icebreakers)	Egypt / Middle East security	Open Ocean

About the Northern Sea Route (NSR)

- **Geographic Span-** Runs entirely within Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) along its Arctic coastline, stretching from the Barents Sea near Murmansk to the Bering Strait near Alaska.
- **Governance Framework-** Administered under Russian federal law via the Northern Sea

Route Administration, which oversees navigation permissions, vessel ice-class compliance, and mandatory icebreaker escorts.

Reference

Down To Earth | China opens new Arctic trade route