



PRESS RELEASE

Will Arctic shipping routes really reshape the map of global trade?

Hong Kong S.A.R, April 20th, 2026 – As the conflict in the Middle East and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz are disrupting global trade, highlighting the vulnerability of major maritime corridors, Arctic routes are attracting growing interest as potential alternatives. In a new study, Coface shows that, over the next five years¹, their commercial potential will remain limited despite changes in navigation conditions due to climate change. Whilst they do not constitute a credible alternative for container transport, these routes may nevertheless offer significant benefits for certain commodity flows (including crude oil and gas), particularly US and Northern European exports to Asia.

Key figures:

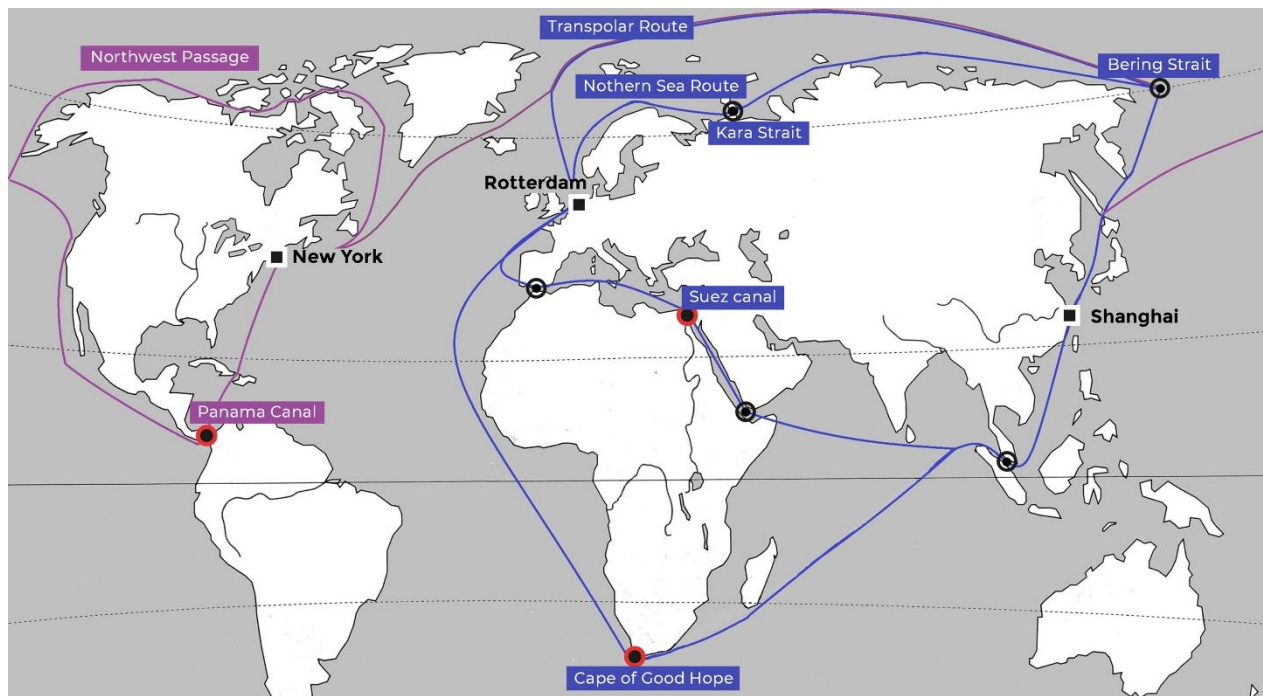
- **80%**: the share of maritime transport in global trade in goods
- **3.5%**: the share of trade between East Asia and Europe or North America that could use Arctic routes within five years

Shorter routes in a strained global maritime system

Maritime transport accounts for over **80% of global trade**, concentrated between three major regions – East Asia, Europe and North America – and structured around a limited number of strategic corridors. This concentration makes global trade particularly vulnerable to geopolitical shocks.

The disruptions observed in recent months in the Red Sea, combined with tensions around the Strait of Hormuz and changes in international trade policy – particularly US policy – highlight this vulnerability. In this context, Arctic routes appear to be a theoretical alternative, significantly reducing distances – by up to **40%** between East Asia and Northern Europe, and by around **20%** to the east coast of North America. Their increased navigability due to climate change raises the question of their economic viability.

¹ In order to provide a short-term outlook, we base our analysis on projected Arctic navigation conditions up to 2030, in line with main climate scenarios.



Real potential, but mainly focused on bulk transport

To assess the economic viability of these routes, Coface compared unit transport costs on Arctic routes and traditional corridors for two major routes – Asia–Northern Europe and Asia–North America – and for three main categories of vessels: tankers, bulk carriers and containerships.

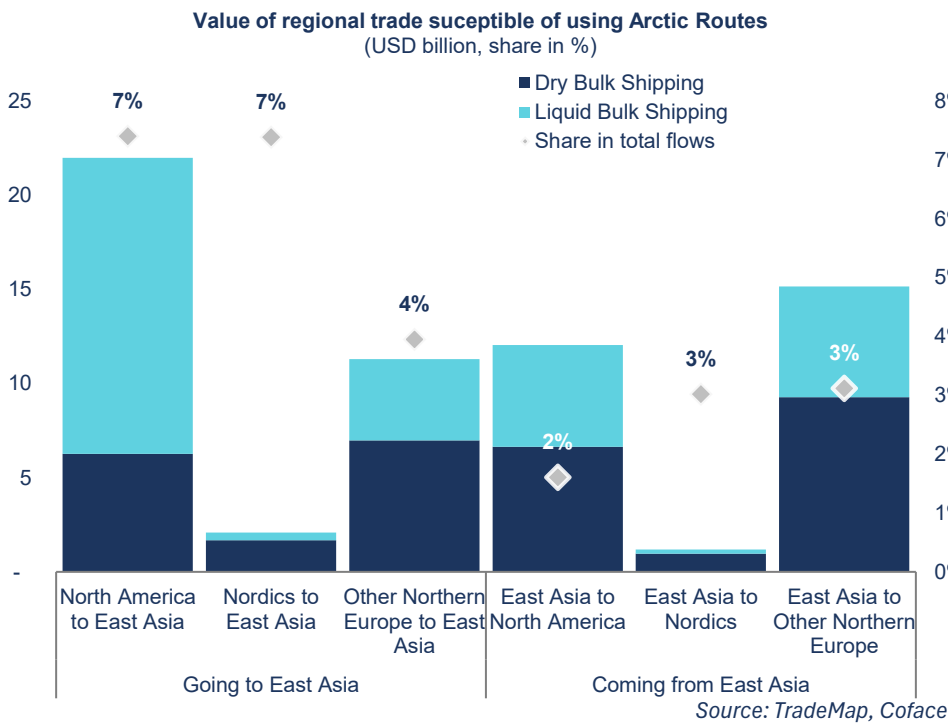
The results show that, over a **five-year horizon, Arctic routes will remain primarily dedicated to the transport of raw materials**. Cost savings are particularly significant for liquid bulk (crude oil, diesel, methanol or LNG), with reductions of up to 45% to 50% in some cases. Dry bulk (cereals, ores, construction materials) may also become competitive, but mainly when ships can operate without icebreaker escort.

Conversely, containerized transport remains uncompetitive, despite the shorter distances. Operational constraints, the limited size of vessels and the specific costs of Arctic navigation prevent it, at this stage, from competing with the economies of scale of traditional routes.

A limited overall impact on trade despite some sectoral winners

In total, **only 3.5% of trade** between East Asia, Northern Europe and North America is likely to actually use Arctic routes. Their overall impact on the global trade map would therefore remain limited in the short term.

Certain sectors could nevertheless benefit. This is particularly the case for industries linked to **cereals, energy, metals** and **timber**.



How should this be interpreted?
7% of the value of goods exported from North America to East Asia could be transported via Arctic routes. This amounts to \$22 billion: \$6 billion in dry bulk and \$16 billion in liquid bulk.

Bulk exporters based on the US North-East coast or in Northern Europe could thus improve their competitiveness in Asian markets thanks to lower transport costs and reduced transit times. Conversely, certain competitors in South America (Brazil with iron ore, Chile with copper) or Africa (the Democratic Republic of the Congo with certain minerals) could see their relative transport competitiveness decline.

Beyond producers, **certain countries heavily reliant on traditional routes could also be left vulnerable**. Egypt and Panama, where revenue from their canals accounts for a significant share of GDP, are particularly exposed. Some major port hubs for Asia-Europe trade, such as Singapore or, to a lesser extent, Jebel Ali, could also see their strategic role called into question if part of the trade flows were to shift northwards. The risk for these port hubs is, however, a longer-term one, as Arctic shipping is not expected to open up to container trade by 2030.



A trade route that is still of secondary importance, but a major geopolitical issue

Whilst Arctic routes offer a distance advantage, their development nevertheless faces significant constraints. Navigation windows remain seasonal, ice conditions remain variable and unpredictable, and the use of icebreakers is often essential.

The Arctic has thus primarily become an arena of **growing strategic rivalry**. The Northern Sea Route remains largely controlled by Russia, whilst China is gradually strengthening its presence and polar capabilities. The United States, too, is seeking to increase its influence in the region. Against this backdrop, the development of Arctic routes is not merely a matter of weighing up logistics costs, but also involves issues of sovereignty, control of critical infrastructure, access to resources and the reshaping of the balance of power.

In the short term, the value of these routes therefore appears to be less commercial than political. Until container transport there becomes economically viable on a large scale, they are unlikely to **radically disrupt the major balances of global trade**.

“The Arctic maritimes routes are attracting attention because they shorten distances. However, the commercial interest – over the next few years – remains very limited and is concentrated mainly around raw materials,” notes **Eve Barré, sector economist at Coface**.

Read the full report [here](#)



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