

Russia Launches Nuclear Icebreaker as It Eyes Arctic Future

By [Reuters](#)

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Peter Kovalev / TASS

Russia launched a nuclear-powered icebreaker on Saturday, part of an ambitious program to renew and expand its fleet of the vessels in order to improve its ability to tap the Arctic's commercial potential.

The ship, dubbed the Ural and which was floated out from a dockyard in St. Petersburg, is one of a trio that when completed will be the largest and most powerful icebreakers in the world.

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Russia is building new infrastructure and overhauling its ports as, amid warmer climate cycles, it readies for more traffic via what it calls the Northern Sea Route (NSR) which it envisages being navigable year-round.

The Ural is due to be handed over to Russia's state-owned nuclear energy corporation Rosatom in 2022 after the two other icebreakers in the same series, Arktika (Arctic) and Sibir (Siberia), enter service.

"The Ural together with its sisters are central to our strategic project of opening the NSR to all-year activity," Alexey Likhachev, Rosatom's chief executive, was quoted saying.

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President Vladimir Putin said in April Russia was stepping up construction of icebreakers with the aim of significantly boosting freight traffic along its Arctic coast.

The drive is part of a push to strengthen Moscow's hand in the High North as it vies for dominance with traditional rivals Canada, the United States and Norway, as well as newcomer China.

By 2035, Putin said Russia's Arctic fleet would operate at least 13 heavy-duty icebreakers, nine of which would be powered by nuclear reactors.

The Arctic holds oil and gas reserves equivalent to 412 billion barrels of oil, about 22 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and gas, the U.S. Geological Survey estimates.

Moscow hopes the route which runs from Murmansk to the Bering Strait near Alaska could take off as it cuts sea transport times from Asia to Europe.

Designed to be crewed by 75 people, the Ural will be able to slice through ice up to around 3 meters thick.

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