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Putin touts Arctic Northeast passage

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MOSCOW — Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin pledged on Thursday to turn the Northeast passage into a key shipping route and modernise its Arctic infrastructure as Moscow seeks to stake out a claim over the energy-rich region.

"We see the future of the Northeast passage as that of an international transport artery capable of competing with traditional maritime routes when it comes to service fees, safety and quality," Putin told an international Arctic forum.

Russia, which for decades has used the passage for domestic connections, blazed the trail to China last year with a gas tanker that sailed from northwestern port of Murmansk.

Citing preliminary data, Putin said that the total volume of traffic through the Northeast passage this year could reach 700,000 tonnes.

"I do not doubt that this is just the beginning," he told the forum in the northern city of Arkhangelsk in televised remarks.

Russia, the powerful prime minister added, plans to modernise the Arctic infrastructure to give prospective clients more reasons to choose the Northern Passage over established southern thoroughfares.

"Our plans include modernising river, automobile, and rail routes and communications, and northern airfields and airports as well as the renovation of Polar aviation," Putin said.

"The states and private companies which will choose Arctic shipping will no doubt receive hefty economic advantages and dividends," he said.

Russia's ambitious plans are part of the Kremlin's bid to mark out its stake over the energy-rich Arctic as climate change is beginning to open up at least as polar ice recedes.

"It is transport -- the creation of new sea and air corridors -- that is capable of becoming one of breakthrough projects uniting Arctic states," Putin said.

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