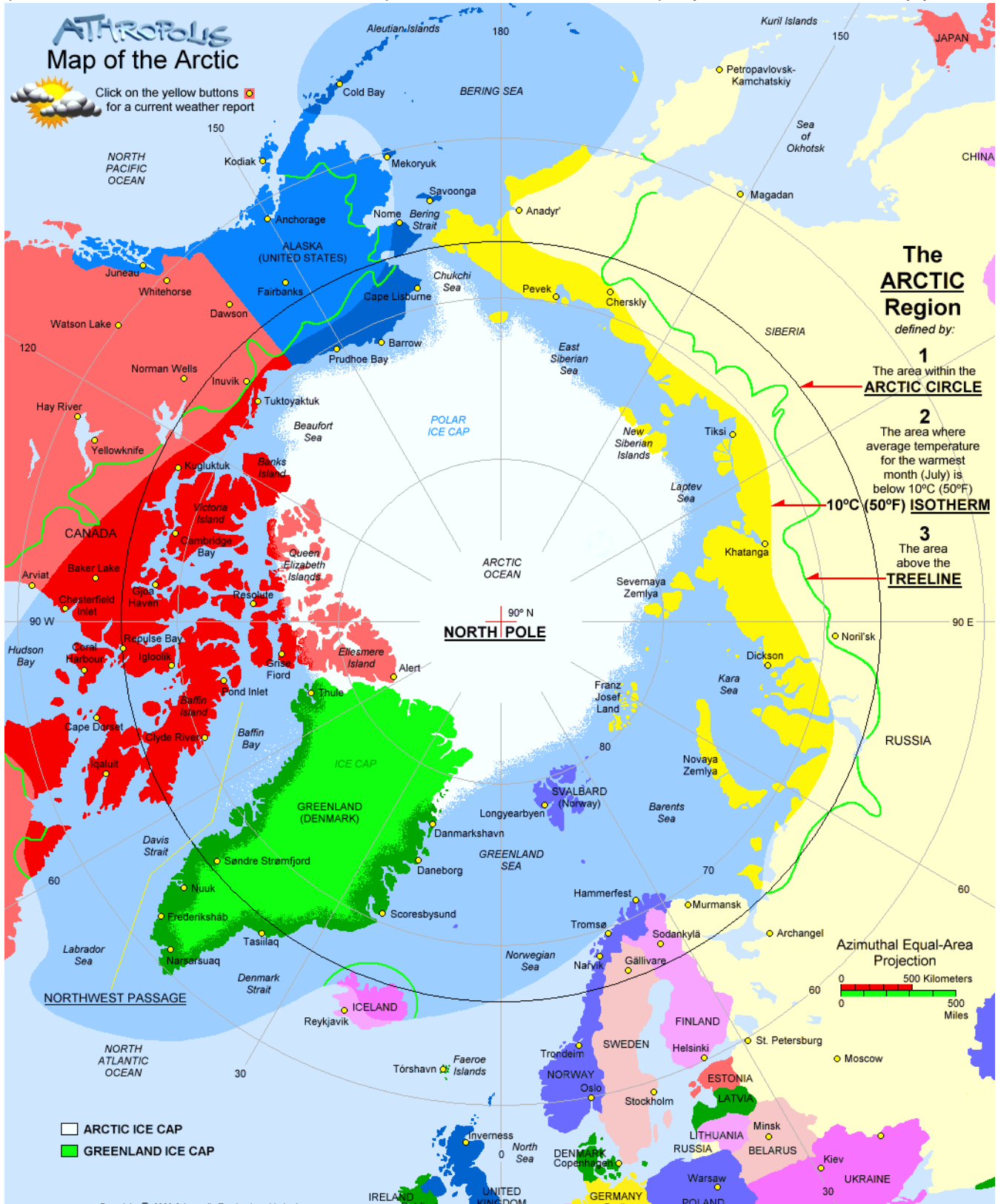


An Ill Wind

In 1940, the German armed merchant cruiser "Komet" was operating in the Barents Sea but, as her prey declined in numbers, the German High Command decided she would enjoy more success elsewhere and the decision was taken to move her to the Far East.

Undoubtedly, the passage from the Barents Sea to the Pacific would have been a hazardous one and so they decided that the ship would take the Northern Sea Route along the northern coast of Russia to Cape Dezhnev in the Bering Straits and, eventually, the Pacific Ocean. This was the era of the Russo-German pact and the Soviets agreed to provide two icebreakers to accompany the vessel throughout the entire passage to the Pacific. She was the first foreign flag vessel for some 20 years to be granted right of passage by the Russians - and almost certainly the last for another 50 years or more.

For centuries, mankind had sought a more economical route to the Orient from Northern Europe and the "North East Passage" via Russia, the Chukchi Sea and the Bering Strait was preferred to the "North West Passage" via the north of Canada and Alaska. England mounted several expeditions in mid 1500 but none was successful and three ships and their crews were lost. The Dutch explorer, William Barentz, was equally unsuccessful some fifty years later



Finally, in 1879 the Swedish explorer Erik Nordenskiöld in the "Vega" did manage to complete the passage from west to east (despite being stranded in ice for one Arctic winter) but it was not until 1934 that the complete route was travelled in one season, without damage, by a Russian icebreaker. Thereafter, during WW2 the Russians used the route frequently for warships returning from the Pacific area and many tons of essential supplies reached ports in Siberia from ports in the United States.

Today, almost certainly as a result of "global warming" the Northern Sea Route is being used more and more and not just by Russian ships specially constructed to withstand the ravages imposed by ice navigation. Indeed, a few months ago - in mid October 2011 - the Norwegian seismic ship "Polarcus Alima" voyaged from the Norwegian port of Hammerfest to Port Taranaki in New Zealand to take up a lucrative charter. The transit of the ice-strewn passage, a distance of some 3000 miles from her home port to the Bering Straits was completed in some nine days. The ship is ice-strengthened and in accordance with the regulations laid down by the Russians in 1990 (Regulations for Navigation on the Seaways of the Northern Sea Route) she holds an ICE-1A class certificate. Had she taken the more normal route via the PANAMA CANAL the passage to New Zealand would have taken an additional eight days and if she had used the SUEZ CANAL an additional thirteen days. As the Arctic ice recedes more and more merchantmen are taking advantage of this fuel-saving (and pirate free) route and a recent report in a UK newspaper suggested that " a medium sized bulk carrier can save some 18 days and 580 tons of bunker fuel on a journey between northern Norway and China - a voyage that would normally take upwards of 40 days".

Currently the "window" for using the route is about four months during the Northern summer (or seven months if accompanied by a Russian atomic-powered icebreaker) but as the temperatures of the air and sea increase there is optimism in some circles that the route could be used for a longer period. Regular summer passages could save huge sums in fuel bills (estimates have ranged from \$180,000 to \$300,000) as well as the huge premiums paid as a result of the pirate threat AND Suez Canal dues.

It is doubtful if this news - welcome as it may be to the shipping industry - will be universally welcomed and many will be concerned to read that this year has seen a "record" melting of the ice but when we read that the passage cuts nearly 4000 miles off the Suez route from West to East with a saving of 1000 tonnes of bunker fuel -AND NEARLY 3000 TONNES OF CO2 on a passage from Murmansk to northern China it is just possible that some will think

"It is an ill wind"

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