

## **Any Port in a Storm: The Geopolitical Importance of Retaining a credible Expeditionary Port Operating Capability**

By any chosen metric, ports remain vital for human development. Between 80-95% of global imports and exports flow through them, making up 75% of all goods moved by value. In Western societies the dependency is greater, with the UK and US receiving over 95% of their imports through their respective 120 and 360 commercial ports.<sup>1</sup> There are a myriad of reasons why ports are, and are likely to remain, globally influential. Whilst economic benefits<sup>2</sup> of the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution lie at the core of each port's significance, their existence has implications for national security, demonstrates and energises modernity, reinforces national agency, contributes to sustainable development and helps to underpin sovereignty with their inherent connectivity to blue territories. Whilst these factors can be reinforcing for development, they can also be contested, as they have the potential to propel international competitiveness, leading, in some cases, to rivalry and/or antagonism where Noorali et al believe that "in the current moment of geopolitical transition, ports have become a focus of geopolitical practices and representations."<sup>3</sup> In the realm of security and defence, ports possess an inherent latent dual value.<sup>4</sup> They have a dormant capacity where their commercial facilities can be quickly spun towards military use, allowing the efficient transfer of military capability between operational environments. Described by Lin as nodes within the process of the projection of power,<sup>5</sup> ports can facilitate the transfer of hard and soft

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<sup>1</sup> Statista, Maritime ports in the UK - statistics & facts, <https://www.statista.com/topics/5532/maritime-ports-in-the-uk/#topicOverview> and US Environmental Protection Agency, Ports Primer: 2.1 The Role of Ports | Community-Port Collaboration | US EPA, [https://19january2021snapshot.epa.gov/community-port-collaboration/ports-primer-21-role-ports\\_.html](https://19january2021snapshot.epa.gov/community-port-collaboration/ports-primer-21-role-ports_.html) [Accessed 8 June 2024] and Juliana Basulo-Ribeiro, Carina Pimentel and Leonor Teixeira, *What is known about smart ports around the world? A benchmark study*, *Procedia Computer Science* 232, 5<sup>th</sup> Int Conf on Industry 4.0 and Smart Manufacturing,

<sup>2</sup> Economic considerations include the import/export of trade, sustaining the offshore energy industry and the underpinning intermodal links to international destinations.

<sup>3</sup> H, Noorali, C, Flint and S, Abbas Ahmadi, *Port Power: Toward a New Geopolitical World Order*, *Journal of Transport Geography*, 105 (2022), p.1.

<sup>4</sup> B, Hamlyn, *China in Sub-Saharan Africa: Sanction Proof Supply Lines and Dual-Use Ports*, *Commentary*, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), dated 14 March 2014.

<sup>5</sup> W, Lin, *Transport Geography and Geopolitics: Visions, Rules and Militarism in China's BRI and beyond*, *The Journal of Transport*, Vol. 75 dated February 2019.

power at scale and pace. This transference, however, is predicated in large part by the availability of trained personnel who can rapidly deploy and operate ports ranging from bare base to well-founded. This article briefly examines selected case studies which highlight the influence of ports from a conflict perspective, assessing their evolutionary contingency characteristics and the enduring value of expeditionary port operating capabilities. Finally, a summation is presented which evidences the vital requirement for not only sustaining military expeditionary port operating capabilities, but the crucial need for the few nations that possess this niche capability to reinforce it through planned modernisation.

The ability of a nation to project an expeditionary force is dependent on its capacity to transfer land and air power across the maritime environment. For those nations that can cohere land and air power across a strandline into the littoral, the sea can be a magic carpet<sup>6</sup>. There is a long and expansive operational lineage which evidences the persistent necessity of possessing credible expeditionary port operating capabilities. In an effort to sustain the first truly modern mechanised military force in history, the development and deployment of the Mulberry harbours in WW2 introduced a step change in the ingenuity and scale of delivery of expeditionary port operating solutions. Designed to support the Allied Expeditionary Force in securing an initial operational lodgment in North-West Europe, the single surviving artificial port, designed to operate for no longer than 90 days, contributed to sustaining Allied forces for over seven months. The ability to rapidly fabricate technological solutions to enable the delivery of UK combat power through ports was again witnessed in the Iraq war in 2003. Two Kuwaiti ports were operated by 17 Port and Maritime Regiment (17 P&M Regt) RLC, supplemented by a concurrent, albeit temporary, across-the-beach operation. Akin to the design philosophy of Mulberry, a bespoke technological solution placed at one of the ports enabled extended hours of port working across a broad tidal range and ensured the timely offload of British materiel. Even in landlocked Afghanistan, from

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<sup>6</sup> An idea taken from Peter Padfield's book on sailing; *The Sea is a Magic Carpet*, Published by P. Davies, London, 1959.

2001, the expanded coalition campaign was heavily influenced by ports. On the southern ground lines of communication the entry point was the port at Karachi in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, with throughflow dependent on the land border crossings at Torkham and Chaman, 1843Km (1145 miles) and over 737 Km (457 miles) away from the port respectively. Again, at selected times, 17 P&M Regt provided specialist teams to advise, oversee and assure the timely offload of UK materiel and throughflow of the reverse supply chain. In the north, the various ground lines of communication along the Northern Distribution Network were also ultimately dependent on ports, Riga being one of the adopted nodes.

If hard power is to be delivered at a desired point and time, even an overview of selected military operations reveals a necessity for undertaking a range of expeditionary port functions. Whilst applying hard power through the utilisation of ports is clearly important, there is a longer strategic infrastructure consideration that underpins a nation's ability to influence and/or access ports through the skillful application of a specific form of soft power.<sup>7</sup> China's transformative transport corridor Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),<sup>8</sup> offers a substantive case study of a deliberate and comprehensive strategic soft power policy which offers dual capability options. So large is the range and scale of this particular latent duality, Schindler et al<sup>9</sup> believe that it has the potential to challenge the international order.

An integral part of the BRI is the development of ports and the access opportunities they offer along designated sea corridors and the immediate hinterlands. Through Sino-foreign cooperation, Li et al believe that 101 ports have been built as part of the wider BRI policy.<sup>10</sup> Flint et al believe that this extensive infrastructure initiative operating at the local,

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<sup>7</sup> Not exhaustive but soft power includes; economic, diplomatic and cultural initiatives.

<sup>8</sup> Initially introduced by Xi as the 'One Belt One Road' initiative in 2013. The 'Belt' refers to the development of land corridors (road and rail) and the 'Road' the complementary sea lines of communication.

<sup>9</sup> S, J, Schindler., J, Dicarlo., and D. Paudel. *One Belt One Road Initiative of China: Implication for Future of Global Development*, Modern Economy 9 (04): pp.623-638, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> H. Li., M, Niu., and Z, Jia, *Dataset Development Overseas Port Project of China (1979-2019)*, Journal of Global Change, Data and Discovery 3, pp.234-0243, 3 March 2019.

regional and global levels will simultaneously develop maritime trade and provide wider access to Eurasia, eventually linking approximately 60 countries in Asia, Europe and Africa.<sup>11</sup> As Noorali et al explains, BRI “ports are the means and the ends in China’s potential to change the geopolitical landscape,”<sup>12</sup> in effect, underpinning Xi Jinping’s strategic development codex whose delivery potentially offers a restructuring of international trade and investment. Modelski summarises the importance of port stimuli where “the more dominant a country in the economics of port construction and operation, the greater that influence [beyond its territory]”.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese financed fused ‘road’ aspects not only deliver substantial peacetime benefits through commercial competitor advantage, their unfettered access, especially in times of heightened tensions, could offer a distinct strategic advantage. Admiral Harris, Chief of US Command in the Pacific, has gone so far as describing the BRI as a manoeuvre to encircle (and thereby deny) key global shipping hubs to US (read Western) global influence.<sup>14</sup> Evidence for this thesis may be found in China’s ‘String of Pearls’ initiative which, with the building of a network of naval bases across South Asia and the Pacific, also threatens to extend into the Indian Ocean with links to Africa and the Middle East. The development of the commercially dislocated port of Gwadar in Pakistan is an oft quoted example of a specific infrastructure project which potentially shifts the regional power dial. If Flint et al is correct, and Russia is also considered as a partner with China in developing a broader BRI,<sup>15</sup> then the availability of well-founded ports to Western nations in times of increased tension, potentially starts to dwindle.

The takeaway from the BRI is that whilst recent history confirms that nations should retain an expeditionary port operating capability, its credibility is only as plausible in relation

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<sup>11</sup> C. Flint and H, Noorali, *The relationality of geopolitical codes: the example of the Belt and Road Initiative*, *Asian Geographer*, 41:1, 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/10225706.2023.2227618, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> H, Noorali et al, p.26.

<sup>13</sup> G, Modelski, *Long Cycles in World Politics*, London, Macmillan Press, 1987 and Robert E. Harkavy, *Strategic Basing and the Great Powers 1200-2000*, New York, Routledge, 2007 cited in H, Noorali., C, Flint and S, Abbas Ahmadi, *Port Power: Toward a New Geopolitical World Order*, *Journal of Transport Geography*, 105 (2022), p.2.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in W, Lin, *Transport Geography and Geopolitics: Visions, Rules and Militarism in China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Beyond*, *Journal of Transport Geography* 81, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> C, Flint and H, Noorali, p. 7, 2023.

to port availability and access at the target end. Whilst it is unlikely that Britain, or its allies, will ever be in a position to *'take ports with them,'*<sup>16</sup> again, perhaps, bearing in mind the potential paucity of specific regional port availability, we should not rule out the necessity to do so – consider Gaza.

Located in the ever-turbulent Levant region, Gaza sits on a geopolitical fault line. When political and religious tensions erupt, they invariably have global implications and understandably attract international attention. Historically sustained by land corridors, the daily humanitarian requirement for the people of Gaza was estimated around 500 truckloads (circa 7500 tons (6800 tonnes)).<sup>17</sup> Since the Hamas attack in October 2023, supply to Gaza's circa 2.3 million people<sup>18</sup> has fallen far short of the estimated daily demands. Whilst supply by land fluctuates, current estimates indicated that an upper daily delivery of circa 3000 tons (2721 tonnes)<sup>19</sup> pass into Gaza, with many days falling short of this. Whilst a high profile and well-intentioned international airdrop operation has supplemented these land deliveries, the overall daily tonnage remains low against the demand profile. Gaza, with a 40Km coastline, offers the long-term potential to allow the development of a well-founded port. This is not as fanciful as it first seems. Both the 1993 Oslo Accords and 1999 Sharm-El-Sheikh Memorandum explored the option of building one. Even a Palestinian Sea Ports Authority was established to organise and manage the construction of the facility. Political frictions, including an overly expensive option to develop an artificial island for a port and airport, resulted in the project's cancellation. Whilst recognised as offering no immediate

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<sup>16</sup> An often-used phrase which was purported to be used by Captain John Hughes-Hallett when the Mulberry concept was first being formulated.

<sup>17</sup> National Public Radio (NPR) USA, [How much humanitarian aid is getting into Gaza? The answer can be hard to know : NPR](https://www.npr.org/2024/02/21/1232605200/humanitarian-aid-gaza-israel), <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/21/1232605200/humanitarian-aid-gaza-israel> [Accessed 11 June 2024].

<sup>18</sup> OCHA Snapshot 1-30 April 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-access-snapshot-gaza-strip-1-30-april-2024> [Accessed 11 June 2024].

<sup>19</sup> Confirming trucks and tonnage is challenging. Before the Hamas attack, it was estimated that circa 500 trucks (circa 7500 tons (6803 tonnes) a day, based on an average load of 15 tons (13.6 tonnes) per truck) were using the land crossing points. Using the same metrics, 190 trucks can deliver circa 2850 tons (2585 tonnes). The New Yorker estimate of up to 172 truckloads per day were entering by 29 April 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/how-much-aid-is-actually-reaching-gazans> [Accessed 11 June 2024].

equivalent solution to land corridors, an expeditionary port solution consisting of a floating connecting platform to a land pier has been fabricated in two months and has been intermittently operating from 17 May 2024. Although far from technically perfect, and vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather, with an initial daily operating capability of circa 150 trucks (circa 2250 tons (2041 tonnes))<sup>20</sup> of humanitarian aid, the temporary port offers a supplementary access point, with significant potential for further development. From a port operating perspective, the expeditionary solution has opened a broader debate on permanent port development and highlights the influence that port infrastructure can have in shaping discussions on agency and sovereignty. Separately, but in parallel, the relationship between sovereignty and ports is being played out in Ukraine.

Despite the presence of Russia's seemingly potent Black Sea fleet, Moscow has failed to curb Ukraine's seaborne trade through the port of Odessa. With reported losses of up to a third of Russia's deployed maritime strength<sup>21</sup> and Ukraine's seaborne trade now calculated in the millions of tons, the enduring advantages of possessing a well-founded port, even one under attack, are plain to see. Ukraine's Black Sea corridor has been sustained by credible air defence and the threat of offensive drone technology. Such is the reliability of Ukraine's wider port operating capability; trade has returned to prewar levels with over 200 ships transiting each month in January and February 2024. The Financial Times identified that these port operations are 'of strategic and economic importance,'<sup>22</sup> being important not only to Ukraine, but to NATO and global markets. Growing international confidence in Ukraine's port operating capability has resulted in global insurers (November 2023 and updated in March 2024) providing cover to commercial shipping transiting the Black Sea corridor. This development has allowed 44 million tons (40 million tonnes) of goods to transit in just over six months.<sup>23</sup> This latest development in port operating

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<sup>20</sup> Financial Times, *US-built pier for Gaza aid opens after alert famine is 'imminent,'* FT Weekend, 18/19 May 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Financial Times, 'Kyiv's low-tech drones deny Putin control of Black Sea; Re-opening of trade corridor has given Ukraine a much-needed exports boost,' FT International, 4/5 May 2024, p.8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

capability offers several lessons for nations who retain contingency plans for utilising ports. Perhaps the biggest lesson identified is that even with a technologically advanced naval threat, if defensive and offensive air and sea capabilities can be fielded, port operations can be resilient – reinforcing the argument that an expeditionary port capability should not only be retained on a military establishment but routinely trained in unison with air and sea defence assets.

Considering all of the case studies in unison, the lessons identified clearly illustrate that if a nation wishes to have global reach in order to compete commercially and militarily, then it has to possess a credible expeditionary maritime capability. This, in turn, means that comprehensive port operating proficiency needs to be baked into the order of battle. If we continue to believe that because humans live upon the land - all great things must happen there, then George's martial observation is prescient if "the tail of an army is long, and is at sea,"<sup>24</sup> - getting a land force across a strandline takes expertise in breadth and depth to deliver a desired endstate. To ensure that the UK remains one of the few credible nations with an expeditionary port operating capability, we need to continue to invest, protect and assure it. With a single regular port operating regiment, and with competition for access to international ports increasing, the UK perhaps needs to re-evaluate and assure itself that it can continue to use the sea as a magic carpet if it wants to be in *the fastest with the moistest* global club. Any aspirations that HMG has to retain a competitive global edge is vested in the maritime environment, cojoined with expeditionary port operating at As Noorali et al identified "Port power will be transformative in the definition of a new geopolitical world order."<sup>25</sup> If the UK wants that new order to mirror liberal democratic values and avoid offering an economic and military advantage to our competitors, then sustainment of the nation's port operating capability seems a no brainer.

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<sup>24</sup> R, George, 'Deep Sea and Foreign Going: Inside Shipping, the Invisible Industry that Brings You 90% of Everything,' Portobello Books Ltd, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Port Power, p.28.