Fixing the Nation's Harbor Security

By

Michael Fincher

In the early hours of March 26, 2024, the MV Dali, carrying over 4,000 containers, suffered a complete loss of power and struck a support pillar of the Francis Scott Key Bridge. This collapsed the bridge and blocked access to the Patapsco River and the 17 terminals in Baltimore Harbor. The incident caused disruptions for the 30,000 motorists who traverse the bridge each day, as well as the supply chain for the United States. It also exposed a vulnerability in the nation's security.

Clearing the harbor of the collapsed bridge and debris requires the removal of containers from the Dali so that it can be towed away, as well as the removal of wreckage, section by section. Meanwhile there are 11 large ships stuck in the port until the main channel opens. With the primary channel only 50 feet deep, the wreckage blocks all large vessels from entering the Port of Baltimore. On April 28 the first container ship since the wreck passed through a temporary channel.

A deeper channel was opened May 10, and the permanent channel is expected to reopen by June. The Navy is relying on contractors to bring cranes in to remove the salvage.

Since the incident, many naval and shipping experts have chimed in on social media about the state of our Navy and Army Corps of Engineers. There is a concern about the military's lack of capacity to conduct salvage operations without contractors.

As good ports are determined by geography, there are only so many options for the US Navy. Naval bases are in enclosed bays, such as Puget Sound, San Diego, and San Francisco. Nearly all of them are located behind a bridge that crosses the mouth of their respective bays.

There are five major naval bases behind narrow passageways, and three that are easily obstructed by an unassuming containership. One can find all of these using google maps in minutes. It does not take long to find where the home ports are for American warships or what their deployment cycles look like. The US even has fleet trackers that are posted on social media. Using this information alone, one can estimate how many ships are in port at any given time, and their state of readiness. There is no need for satellite surveillance.

According to the International Chamber of Shipping, there are 1.8 million seafarers worldwide. Most come from China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Russia. Two of those nations are adversaries. The largest ocean carrier, Mediterranean Shipping Company, has more than 700 ships and a long history with Balkan drug cartels. The largest cocaine seizure in US history took place on one of their vessels, as did many other massive drug busts.

This begs the question: is it really impossible for a small number of Chinese-flagged container ships to obstruct the entrance to critical ports, trapping most of the US Navy in port and isolating approximately one-fourth of the Navy from reinforcement and resupply? Such an event would be the modern analogy to the Battle of Gravelines or Red Cliffs, with the Pacific becoming a vacuum for an up-and-coming naval power—China.

America's allies throughout the Pacific would suffer. It is impossible to maintain logistical supply lines in the Pacific without the Navy. A modern container ship can carry up to 400,000 tons of cargo. The Air Force's 52 C5 Galaxy cargo aircraft and 275 C17s carry a combined cargo of 25,975 tons. It is far more efficient and practical to resupply by sea.

The US Navy may have the best radar, the best anti-ship missiles, and the best crews, but the fleet only has so much food, fuel, and firepower. Unfortunately, US Navy logistics capabilities were completely gutted, including prepositioned stocks. On top of that, as seen with the USS *Boxer*'s recent breakdown, the Navy has limited dry-dock capabilities for repairs.

In light of the Dali disaster and the US Navy's present capabilities, it is time to reassess the security of American ports from asymmetric or even conventional attack. They are simply more susceptible to attack than at any time.

After the War of 1812, the Fortification Board was created to plan for coastal defenses. From then until World War II the Army Corps of Engineers occupied their time with coastal defense. This is no longer their focus—or any other federal agency's focus. This leaves the nation vulnerable to an unexpected attack.

The United States' position in the world is a result of American economic strength, a strong military, and a commitment to the freedom of navigation. Adversaries do not share these values and seek to change the status quo. Times have changed, and so have the means and methods of adversaries to harm the United States.

First, it was foreign port security after the USS *Cole* bombing. Then it was airline security after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Now, the nation must adapt its capabilities and defenses to secure ports and entryways—before an attack has a catastrophic effect. This will require investment in time and treasure, as well as a shift in strategic thinking. The payoff is preventing a larger Pearl Harbor. The time to act is now when costs are at their lowest.

Michael Fincher is a Fellow at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies. The views expressed in this article are the author's own.