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Too Much of a Good Thing? Some Reflections on Increased Port Security and its Costs*

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> Security is like oxygen – you tend not to notice it until you begin to lose it, but once that occurs there is nothing else you will think about.[1]

INCREASED PORT SECURITY: COMFORTING OR CHOKING?

How things have changed since what was billed as the day of the most destructive attacks by a "foreign enemy" took place on American soil. Since 11 September 2001, now globally referred to as the 9/11 incident, maritime security has been viewed through the distorted lens of the notorious attacks on that fateful day that will live in infamy.

Despite security being a center-stage agenda today, it is impossible to make a convincing case that the world has become a more peaceful place since that event. It is also a matter of debate whether the maritime industry is any safer since then, despite the introduction of many security initiatives. Prior to that, the security of ports was almost an afterthought in the minds of most port stakeholders and security planners. Now, the situation has taken a reversal in a manner almost as dramatic and spectacular as the 9/11 attacks. Port stakeholders have been preoccupied with the issue of securing their perimeters ever since.

It does not seem too long ago when the mere mention of port security brought to mind images of little more than guards and gates. Those growing up around ports may perhaps recall the days of school visits to ports. Today, security at ports has been fortified to the extent that they have become almost inaccessible to such casual visits.

Since 9/11, ports have been swarmed by security consultants, eager to paddle the latest biometric equipment, explosive detection technologies, cutting-edge radio

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frequency identification (RFID) systems and an array of dazzling products and services aimed at providing "advanced" security to their perimeters. The phrase "taking advantage of a situation" should be used sparingly, but the surge of the security industry's interest in port security post-9/11 inadvertently presents a case study in opportunism. There is, unquestionably, some serious money to be made in port security these days.

That said, only the hard-headed fatalists in the maritime industry would view the intense focus on security with disdain. A terror strike on maritime interests would deliver a further psychological blow to a world already at the point of asphyxiating from security concerns. While many port financial controllers would frown at the costs of providing better security, few would deny its need all along the maritime supply chain. However, many of them are asking, "Are we the only ones footing the bill?'

The 9/11 attacks demonstrated in a gruesome way that public transportation can be used as medium for weapons that can inflict massive destruction. The combination of dare and the element of surprise have caught security officials off guard, inflicting death, destruction and a widespread sense of insecurity. Although the 9/11 attacks were aerial in nature, nobody would dare wager a bet against them being replicated using other modes of transport. As if feeding on the post-9/11 atmosphere of trepidation, the subsequent bombings on the Madrid commuter trains and London Underground and buses rattled nerves further.

The fear of the lurking danger, rightly or wrongly, is felt all the more in ports, which are the critical facilitators of global trade. As if waiting for their number to come up in a sickening terror-strike game of musical chairs involving transport modes, ports have been led to prepare and brace themselves for a nautical version of 9/11. This fear seems to be partly fueled by pseudo-analysts keen on brandishing Hollywood-like scenarios of potential terror attacks on maritime assets and interests. Their proclivity for doomsday predictions have not helped at all in promoting sober analyses of post-9/11 security threats to ports.

The recent *brouhaha* over the aborted proposal by Dubai Ports World (DPW) to take over the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Co. (P&O) on grounds of security concerns begs the question, are we missing the wood for the trees in discussing port security? Should politicians and policy-makers – who are more concerned with playing to the gallery of their constituents than developing a genuine understanding of port operations – be allowed to hijack the discourse on the subject?[2] Should not De Gaulle's caution that "politics is too important a subject to be left to politicians" apply to maritime security? Has the perception of threat concerning maritime security been distorted beyond alignment?

In the aftermath of the DPW–P&O fallout, it is all the more obvious that the discourse on port security based on political rhetoric[3] should be confronted with reality-based analysis on the subject, especially from the perspective of the stake-holders. The merry-go-round on port security, displayed in all its dizzyingly distorted glory during the DPW–P&O fiasco, demands a more rigorous debate on whether the perception of threat against ports warrants the hysteria surrounding the subject, and whether the slew of measures put in place to enhance port security is justified.