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COVID-19 Impact on Maritime Security

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The impacts of COVID-19 on one of the world's most important global commons, the maritime domain,¹ have so far not been highlighted in a comprehensive way. The scope of relevant articles and research that study the impacts thoroughly and in a global perspective remain limited. A reason could be the basis for research being fresh with many unknowns still surrounding the pandemic. Accordingly, COVID-19 impacts on the maritime domain is a subject deserving of heightened attention and prioritized research, for several reasons. Firstly, the maritime domain is highly significant to the international community and individual states. Everyone is "directly or indirectly, affected by maritime issues, whether it be by trade, exploration, nutrition, or even simple proximity. Continuous and unhampered flow of goods is the basis of all economy and is vital for the wealth and prosperity of humanity."² Secondly, the relevance of the maritime domain is evident, reinforced by reflecting on a terminology called the "70-80-90 rule." The rule states that 70 percent of the earth's surface is covered by water; 80 percent of the world's population lives in proximity to a coast; 90 percent of all international trade is transported by sea.³ Consequently, the maritime domain, being globally interconnected and the backbone of the world trade, will be affected by COVID-19 with potential strategic consequences. The questions of how it will be impacted and to what extent remain, and are the main questions addressed in this paper. It does so by analyzing the international buzzword, maritime security, to define the maritime domain. It further explores the idea of how COVID-19 impacts maritime security. Finally, the findings could hopefully inspire future research on the subject in a more extensive manner.

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- ¹ Maritime domain definition: The oceans, seas, bays, estuaries, islands, coastal areas, and the airspace above these, including the littorals. Joint Publication 3-32/(JP): Joint maritime Operations (June 2018). https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_32.pdf?ver=2019-03-14-144800-240, last accessed on 29 June 2020.
 - ² Centre of Excellence for operations in Confined and Shallow Waters (COECSW). Rationale. Retrieved 30 June 2020, from: <https://www.coecsw.org/our-coe/our-expertise/>, last accessed on 30 June 2020.
 - ³ Navy Live – The official blog of the US NAVY. America's navy: Crucial to national defense. Retrieved 1 July 2020 from: <https://navylive.dodlive.mil/2011/10/25/americas-navy-crucial-to-national-defense/>, last accessed on 01 July 2020.

1.2 Defining maritime security and thesis

Maritime Security is a popular term although there is no consensus on the exact definition. The buzzword concentrates on identifying the relations of maritime security to other notions that deal with the governance of maritime space through four concepts:⁴

- Sea power: concerns the role of military force and the maritime dimension of inter-state war and threats to national survival. Generally described as the “means” by which a nation extends its military power onto the seas.⁵
- Marine safety: concerns the regulation of shipping, port security, the safety of seafarers, Search and Rescue (SAR) provision, but also the protection of the marine environment.
- Human security: considers the living conditions of coastal communities dependent on the sea, their food security, and the risk of their marginalization in land focused governments.
- Blue economy: concerns the economic opportunities that are offered by the maritime, ranging from resource extraction to tourism.

The thesis is that COVID-19 will impact all four concepts of maritime security in a short-term perspective, and the concepts of blue economy and human security the most in a long-term perspective (>12 months).⁶ The analysis will be presented briefly and as an overview to stay within the scope of the paper.

2 Analysis

2.1 Impact on Sea power and marine safety

The main instrument for the projection of the first concept, sea power, has been maritime forces. COVID-19 has so far been a pandemic under peacetime. The role of maritime forces in peacetime is mainly seen in “protecting the core sea lines of communication in order to facilitate trade and economic prosperity by means of deterrence as well as surveillance and interdiction”.⁷ The second concept, marine safety, addresses the safety of ships and maritime installations with the primary purpose of protecting maritime professionals and the marine environment. The two concepts are naturally linked given that the “maritime industry, shipping companies and their employees are simultaneously poten-

⁴ Bueger 2015

⁵ Sea Power (Definition). Retrieved December 11, 2020, from Britannica.com website: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sea-power>, last accessed on 14 December 2020.

⁶ Note: historically, many western states and organizations (US or NATO) has separated high-end tasks of national defense (Seapower: strategic deterrence and naval warfare) from maritime security. However, from a European perspective, where most of the navies have limited resources and inter-governmental civil-military cooperation is normal conduct, the buzzword holds true. Bueger supports this view (Bueger 2015: 5).

⁷ Maritime forces definition: Forces that operate on, under, or above the sea to gain or exploit command of the sea, sea control, or sea denial and/or to project power from the sea (Source: JP 3-32, see footnote 1).

tial targets as well as potential perpetrators.”⁸ The analysis continues with emphasizing the peacetime aspect of both concepts, to identify which threats are emerging or can emerge in the future.

2.1.1 Piracy & Maritime Crime

It is argued that the piracy⁹ in the west- and north of Africa, as well as parts of Latin America, has and can continue to increase due to COVID-19 through three main points:¹⁰

1. New pirate opportunities: As governments attempt to mitigate the pandemic, they will almost certainly shift their public safety efforts away from sea piracy and toward more immediate concerns on land.
2. Easier targets: Less revenue due to less trade leaves shipping companies with reduced budgets to spend on armed guards or other methods of protecting ships/ports against pirates.
3. Harder for crews to protect their ships: Most merchant vessels are lean manned, meaning crews already being stretched thin. The situation gets worse if crew members get sick or are prevented from showing up before debarkation due to travel-restrictions.

Evidence supporting the argument is the notion that piracy increased 24% during the three first months of 2020 over the same period in 2019. Moreover, two preconditions for piracy have been reinforced due to COVID-19. Firstly, the conditions in the troubled regions are somewhat the same: weak governments embroiled in political violence, widespread economic hardship, and easy access to weapons. Secondly, the economic hardship in the first precondition leads to the poor and jobless citizens seeking (illegal) opportunities offshore.¹¹ Further, there is another aspect that can motivate legal activity in stable areas to turn illegal. Supply chains may be forced to conduct increased transshipment of fish at sea, as several main-ports are either closed, downsized or access-restricted.¹² It is argued that “such practices are harder to regulate and more likely to be associated with illicit fishing and human rights violations”.¹³ On the other hand, if COVID-19 has led the basis for increased piracy and illegal activity in some areas as argued, how has it affected nation’s ability to employ sea power or support marine safety to counter these threats?

COVID-19 could firstly exacerbate the offshore law enforcement gap, as maritime forces “look inward to manage domestic crises rather than police the

⁸ Bueger 2015: 3–4

⁹ Piracy: practice of a pirate (a person who robs or commits illegal violence at sea or on the shores of the sea, or a ship used by such persons) to conduct any plunderer, predator, etc.: robbery or illegal violence at sea. www.dictionary.com, last accessed on 14 December 2020.

¹⁰ Prins 2020.

¹¹ Prins 2020

¹² Transshipment definition: the practice of transferring catch from one vessel to another at sea.

¹³ Lehr/Aamweber/Loft 2020.

seas”.¹⁴ Further, maritime forces are also subject to COVID-19 as the merchant fleet. There have been seen several cases of such vessels being quarantined at sea or at port unavailable to support national or international commitments.¹⁵ As an example the U.S. Navy has already canceled this year’s Obangame Express joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Guinea, the world’s most piracy-prone region (112 attacks in 2017).¹⁶ There is therefore evidence that COVID-19 has impacted maritime forces in the short term.

2.1.2 Emerging geopolitical threats and trends

It is argued that that COVID-19 will result in the recontextualization of the operational threat profile, using Iran and China as an example:

Complex geopolitical narratives, such as those seen with Iran in the Persian Gulf, which was a key driver of maritime instability in 2019, have likely reduced considerably for the coming months. However, Iran is currently grappling with issues resulting from ongoing economic isolation, global oversupply of oil and the struggle to contain COVID-19.¹⁷

Faced with potential economic collapse, intensified by COVID-19, Iran may feel compelled to act. The US sanctioning of Chinese shipping companies transporting Iranian oil may even trigger and increase localized and significant incidents. Another aspect of oversupply of oil caused by COVID-19, is the global cargoes changing their sailing patterns, moving activity levels to other parts of the world. A recent trend was to bypass the Suez Canal and the Panama Canal due to low oil prices, as shipowners preferred to take a longer route south of Africa that was cheaper (both Canals later lowered their prices). During COVID-19 this route saved an average of US\$235,000 per voyage.¹⁸ Struggling economies, the oversupply of oil and rerouting had, and still has two safety aspects. Firstly, illegal actors in unstable areas will gain more opportunities by exploiting the increased amount of traffic. Secondly, the previously mentioned complex geopolitical narratives, can bring new challenges to otherwise stable areas. As an example, the US sanctions against Iran, and Chinese shipping companies, may affect China’s ability to withhold oil and gas. China is committed to strengthen its strategic partnership and secure the import of energy from Iran the next 25 years.¹⁹ If the US decides to enforce its embargo on Iran by increasing its presence in the Persian Gulf, China can respond to protect its strategic interest. This could be achieved by increasing their own maritime presence in the region or in another part the world, which is of strategic importance to the US, to apply

¹⁴ Lehr/Aamweber/Loft 2020.

¹⁵ Martinez 2020.

¹⁶ Lehr/Aamweber/Loft 2020

¹⁷ Dryad Global 2020.

¹⁸ Kennedy 2016.

¹⁹ Saleh/Yazdanshenas 2020.

counter-pressure. This exemplifies how COVID-19 could serve as a catalyst for confrontation affecting the already complex geopolitical narrative, especially in the maritime domain.

Another aspect of this issue is how COVID-19 has affected defense budgets, for example in Indonesia. Even if defense budgets are allocated outside the realm of maritime security, they play a significant part. Reallocation of defense budgets to support struggling domestic economies will decrease maritime capability and ability to conduct joint exercises and operations. Some countries, like China, have taken advantage of these conditions and intensified aggressive operations in the South China sea region to assert its own claims, knowing its neighbors have decreased maritime ability to respond.²⁰

Another trend, increased migration, is a visible outcome of the pandemic. This is especially evident in Europe. The spread of COVID-19, coupled with ongoing conflicts are responsible for mass-migration out of northern Africa, notably from countries like Libya. The government's inability to sufficiently enforce quarantines and lockdown infected regions enhances the migrant's aspirations to leave the increasingly risky area towards a safer Europe. This puts dual pressures on maritime forces in the Mediterranean.²¹ They would have to assist migrant vessels in distress and simultaneously account for migrants who may carry COVID-19 being a health concern to the vessel crew.

In summary, it is evident that COVID-19 has had an impact on sea power and marine safety from a short-term perspective. Because there has not been clear evidence of increases in piracy over the long-term, we can assume that short-term increases of activity may stabilize and return to normal levels. At the same time, we cannot rule out that an unexpected economic collapse could lead to desperate people turning to piracy or other illegal activity. Further, geopolitical narratives and great power competition can lead to increased pressure on maritime forces. The maritime forces ability to employ sea power and marine safety to act on the issues above is dependent on two aspects. As maritime forces adapt and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, their availability increases. The lack of evidence of recent cases of quarantine from media reports or public statements supports this argument. To the contrary, their employability is dependent on their respective defense budgets. Therefore, the greater long-term impact to maritime forces may come from reductions in budget priority in favor of public health measures.

2.2 Impacts on Blue Economy

2.2.1 The seafood sectors

Fish is the world's most widely traded food commodity. COVID-19 related market closures have caused a crisis for fishers. For instance, fishers in the United Kingdom, who export 70% of their catch, were especially affected. Further,

²⁰ Darmawan 2020.

²¹ Dryad Global 2020.

countries like the United States who process most of their seafood in China are now looking to re-shore processing operations to avoid trade disruptions caused by the pandemic and future crises. Looking past short-term impacts, to predict the long-term impacts one should divide the seafood industry into categories based on the duration of fishing trips within the sector.²²

- Vessels that return to shore each day to near-shore/artisanal industrial fisheries may benefit from reduced competition with industrial fleets limited by concerns about offshore epidemics.²³ However, in lesser developed countries, where fisheries are a vital source of food and employment, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing due to reduced oversight by maritime forces is a major problem impacting both their economy and human security.²⁴
- For vessels that are at sea for months to years at a time and either trans-ship or return to port, port closures would be devastating. However, as this mitigates demand for longline-derived catch, it may decrease risk and increase delivery predictability during potential future pandemics.

2.2.2 Tourism and Cruise Industries

Ocean tourism has naturally suffered due to reduction in travel. Small island states, where ocean tourism substantially accounts for GDP, are especially vulnerable. Closely tied, the cruise industry alone in the USA lost US \$750 million in the first three months of the outbreak. Some major cruise lines lost up to 60% of their stock value.²⁵ In the long-term perspective, even if the cruise-economy rebounds, there is no guarantee that the same will happen to the demand. Dreadful stories of passengers being isolated for weeks inside their cabins after an outbreak will surely have a deterrent effect on potential customers if the industry does not employ effective countermeasures.²⁶ A positive aspect, however, is that the oceans were less polluted during COVID-19 due to fewer (cruise) ships at sea.²⁷ The obvious result could motivate governments to support the cruise industry if they represent future ambitions for low-emission ships.

2.2.3 Container-shipping

Estimated 17 million TEU²⁸ would be taken out of service in 2020. For the main terminals/ports in the world, this would amount to 80 million TEU. The total

²² Lehr/Aamweber/Loft 2020.

²³ Artisanal definition: made in a traditional way by someone who is skilled with their hands.

²⁴ Bueger 2015.

²⁵ Marineinsight: Coronavirus impact on shipping, 23 March 2020. YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4etQMYX9cY>, last accessed on 30 June 2020.

²⁶ Pesut 2020.

²⁷ Cohan 2020.

²⁸ TEU definition: Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit which can be used to measure a ship's cargo carrying capacity. The dimensions of one TEU are equal to that of a standard 20' shipping container. 20 feet long, 8 feet tall.

estimated damage to this sector due to COVID-19 is US \$ 17 Billion.²⁹ However as ports are slowly opening, the long-term forecast is optimistic.

COVID-19 has clearly impacted the blue economy in a substantial way, with long-term impacts and need for efficient measures before it can recover. A long-term consequence of COVID-19 will be the reevaluation of the shape and sustainability of world trade and globalization:

A lot of protectionist arguments are going to be made against outsourcing. It will have a very profound impact on how global supply chains are organized. It is going to be a political topic in coming years.³⁰

2.3 Impact on Human Security

COVID-19 impact on human security can be explained by dividing the crewmembers by those who stay at sea for weeks or months at time and those who return to port every day. The first group face the most risks based on recent credible reports of fishermen in isolation experiencing human rights violations.:

Conditions of forced labor being beaten, placed in physical confinement, marooned on islands, and in rare instances killed, there is a significant risk that vulnerable migrant workers who show Covid-19 symptoms could face solitary confinement or be left at sea.³¹

Such crewmembers will be yet more vulnerable if maritime forces ability to oversee their vessels diminishes due to COVID-19. Also, even in the absence of other labor issues, cases of infection may cause the vessel to be turned away at ports. This would leave sick crewmembers without access to medical care, food, or water while stranded at sea. Another example is cruise ships with hundreds of crewmembers having been quarantined off the coast of port states after passengers tested positive for the virus. Even after disembarkation of passengers they have been ordered to anchorage or remote berths, confined on board, and denied medical assistance or repatriation. Further, even on vessels that experienced none of the above issues, reports indicate that vessel management companies have made it harder for their existing crews to leave their ships due to concerns of the new crew being infected.³² Another risk group consists of crewmembers from vessels that return to shore each day and, therefore, do not run a risk of developing a contained offshore outbreak. They rely on tightly linked shore-side networks where social distancing may be impractical and outbreaks

²⁹ Marineinsight 2020.

³⁰ Bowler 2020

³¹ Lehr/Aamweber/Loft 2020.

³² International Labor Organization 2020: 1-4.

highly disruptive. Moreover, many artisanal communities are poorly served by health infrastructure and at high risk from a global pandemic.³³

Based on the challenges on human security, the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS)³⁴ (represents more than 80% of the world merchant fleet) recently issued a guidance, in cooperation with the World Health Organization, intended to protect the health of seafarers. Some weeks beforehand the International Labor Organization (ILO) also issued a brief stating that they in cooperation with governments, shipowners and ICS would regulate the industry in such a way that human rights, health, safety, and income protection is safeguarded.³⁵ Government-led-stimulus would be one of the key drivers of the initiative. The short-term impact of COVID-19 on human security is therefore evident. The mitigations initiated through the influential bodies of ICS and ILO give a positive long-term view. However, there is no guarantee that the mitigations will reach all migrant workers or the artisanal communities. That is an issue that must be addressed on shore, through social economic measures beyond blue economy.

3 Conclusion

The protection of the maritime environment is of essential importance for mankind. COVID-19 has affected all four concepts of maritime security from a short-term perspective. Governments and organizations would have to calculate effects of potential defense budget reductions on sea power and marine safety into their overall strategy. The spillovers from complex geopolitical narrative reinforces this notion. From a long term-perspective the blue economy has taken considerable hits and will have to deal with the effects long after the arrivals of the first vaccines. The primary victim seems to be human security, absorbing the impact of effects originating mostly from the other areas. In addition to the mitigation measures, further coordination across jurisdictions to provide health services to seafarers and ensure they do not end up in vulnerable circumstances are necessary. As one author put it, we must make sure our efforts and mitigations apply “both during the COVID-19 crisis and afterwards.”³⁶ In conclusion, the impacts of COVID-19 on maritime security are not going away anytime soon.

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³³ Lehr/Aamweber/Loft 2020.

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³⁶ Leith et al. 2020.

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