

Increasing US focus on intersection of merchant shipping and national security



The missile attacks in the Red Sea, where targets have included US flagged vessels, the resurgence of pirate attacks, have contributed to shipping being on the media stage in the States.

Barry Parker | Jun 18, 2024

Awareness of shipping, almost always in the news in response to negative events, surged following the end-March *Dali* collision in Baltimore, and the subsequent weeks long closure of the port to large ocean going vessels. All this comes several months after a coalition of multiple Navies countries joined forces, in late 2023, to protect commercial ships transiting the Red Sea in the “Operation Prosperity Guardian” initiative.

So, not surprisingly, around the time of National Maritime Day, in the States, celebrated 22 May each year, there is a renewed discussion underway about the role of the US merchant marine, which can be defined in multiple ways but the focus here is on deepsea vessels in US/foreign trades and its connections with national security.

Related: [Don't wait for NTSB Dali final report – check bridges and waterways now](#)

In early May 2024, a bi-partisan quartet of legislators (Two Republicans- Senator Marco Rubio and Representative Mike Waltz, along with two Democrats - Senator Mark Kelly and Representative John Garamendi), released their bipartisan [Congressional Guidance for a National Maritime Strategy](#), a report “that provides a comprehensive vision for planning guidance, strategic objectives, and actionable steps to revitalize our nation’s maritime sector. This document highlights the urgent need for comprehensive action to counter the People’s Republic of China’s coercive actions to limit freedom of navigation.”

The US Navy League, a powerful Washington, DC based advocacy organisation, through its in-house think-tank, the Center for Maritime Strategy, has hosted a series of conversations during its Sea Air Space 2024 event held in May, 2024. Of particular relevance was a session “[A Holistic Approach to Commercial Maritime National Security](#)” which covered the intersections of commercial shipping with broader national security concerns. Session participants included the highly regarded commentator John McCown, who has authored [a pair of well written essays](#), informed by his decades working as an executive in the container trades, which buttress the “free trade” oriented views presented in his discourses. The Navy League session also included another maritime veteran, Michael Roberts, previously a top executive with Crowley Maritime and now a Senior Fellow at the conservative-leaning Hudson Institute.

Related: [Renewed Red Sea attacks leave two vessels adrift, seafarer missing](#)

One query during the Question and Answer session following the main presentation came from Jim Watson, Rear Admiral (Retired) from the US Coast Guard. Watson, who asked about the interactions historically between navies and merchant fleets, noting that the US international merchant fleet has shrunk to a miniscule portion of world tonnage, is the lead author of a book on America's Maritime future. In it Watson and his co-authors present a "57-Point Action Plan to revolutionize the US maritime sector..."

With any such discussions there is a danger of commentators conflating the roles of the numerous maritime agencies around Washington, DC with the national security mission- implicitly lending support to the views expressed by multiple commentators that all the agencies dealing with maritime related issues might be joined together.

A recent article from the right-leaning think tank Heritage Foundation, titled "[America's Maritime Mess](#)", states: "At the same time, [the March 12th petition](#) [submitted to the U.S. Trade Representative by a group of labor organizations] against unfair Chinese trade practices in the maritime, logistics and shipbuilding sectors is an opportunity to strengthen US agencies like the Federal Maritime Commission and press America's case, while rallying international common cause."

The FMC has certainly beefed up enforcement mechanism through the Shipping Reform Act of 2022- with its predecessor legislation, driven by cargo interests, importantly- jointly sponsored by Congressman Garamendi and forced some much-needed uniformity on the practices of liner carriers when it comes to demurrage and detention. It's interesting now to see the FMC's potential nexus with the broader international political issues, and types of "protection", now entering the discussion.

Views on the always controversial Jones Act differ among the maritime security related commentators. The four legislators, in their document come out on the "Pro" side, saying: "Our National Maritime Strategy should start with three key

words: the Jones Act.” The Hudson Institute also supports the legislation, with Roberts [writing in a recent commentary](#) that: “Repealing the Jones Act Would Diminish American Security,” while the Heritage Foundation comes down hard on this century-old set of rules that requires US build and manning requirements for vessel serving intra-US trades.

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