Baltimore bridge collapse – A perspective from outside [1]

By Raji Sivaraman & Dr. Te Wu

During the early morning hours of March 26th, 2024, a Singapore registered container ship, the m.v. DALI, (deadweight* of 116,800MT with a capacity of 9, 971 TEUs**), collides with one of the support structures of the Francis Scott Key Bridge spanning across the Patapsco River in Baltimore Harbor. Initial reports suggest that the ship lost propulsion and power, traveling at about 8 knots southeast with a light northeast wind blowing on to its port (left), with 8 or 9 tiers of containers on deck (mid ship). It appears that within a few minutes, the ship's crew, and the pilots on board, managed to drop the port anchor, which is a manual process, alert the relevant authorities on shore through a MAYDAY call while attempting to restore power and propulsion, in darkness on board ship and on shore. From a project management viewpoint, it appears that everyone on board and ashore on short notice knew what they had to do, putting their training into practice, to mitigate the situation. Sadly 6 lives were lost on the Key Bridge, but the situation could have been worse if there was more traffic on the bridge.

With the closure of the Port of Baltimore, ships are already being diverted to other ports in the eastern seaboard such as New York/New Jersey, Philadelphia PA, and Norfolk, VA. CSX and Seagirt terminal are working on ways to move import containers from other northeast ports into Baltimore for local pickup so as to reduce congestion at the other northeast ports. Stemming from this disruption are new projects that supply chain professionals will need to put together quickly.

The dislocations of import and export cargo stress tests the agility of onshore infrastructure such as trucking and warehousing. As distribution centers of the shippers in the Baltimore area are equipped and trained with their ERP systems, it is unlikely that shippers will make major change to the locations of these centers. What is likely to happen is for supply chain project managers to remodel their current transport network and assets quickly and connect to alternative ports to cater for this emergency. Agility is important as any delay will create congestion at the various interchange points.

Similarly, planning teams of the ships' operators and marine terminals would have formed task forces to cater for the influx of cargo at these terminals and possibly longer dwell time of the ships, possibly causing congestion offshore. Finally, manufacturers' and retailers' project teams are already looking into their risk management playbook to cater

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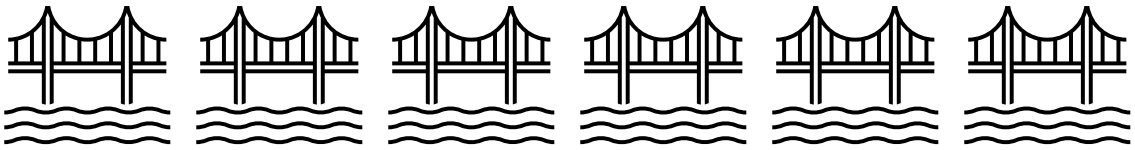
for contingencies by pulling in materials and assets from other parts of the country. As expected, what has been mustered is an industry-wide effort to mitigate the stress on the supply chain. Ironically, just coming out of the pandemic situation, our memories are still fresh as to what will be the anxiety when supply chains breakdown.

While the commercial sector is addressing the disruption, the government and the related agencies' project teams are feverishly working to safely open the ship channel to the Port of Baltimore. The co-ordination among the various stakeholders is probably an undertaking of a well-staffed PMO and EPMO. Each task, of opening an alternative channel, removing debris, hazmat mitigation or the human aspect of this exercise impacting the communities are all projects of their own consisting of unique expert resources. There are still many unknowns such as the environmental impact or the behavior of the area of operations to weather changes. These will be uncovered as the project progresses. Besides commercial reactions, communications remain crucial for all teams.

A point to note is that almost all US ports are either up-river or in an inlet or a bay with bridges that span across them, and daily ships traverse beneath these bridges. So, what can be done quickly to mitigate another collision while we work out long term solutions. From this incident we painfully learnt that there was not much time to raise the alarm to further reduce the loss of life. If it was during peak hours, then the catastrophe would have been unimaginable. Could a possible quick fix be to equip all bridges with emergency alert lights and loudspeakers that could transmit sirens? As all large ships going under these bridges and channels are usually under pilotage, could pilots through their VHF channels (or other cellular means) be able to activate the alarms and warnings directly to the people on the bridges? Could a tug escort for these large ships be useful until the ships clear all bridges enroute to port or the open sea?



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