

# Out-of-gauge times

by Robert Blades, *Global Commercial Sales Manager, Peters & May*

**Overcoming complex logistical challenges has been part and parcel of managing the transportation of commercial cargo for decades. Experience, expertise, and the ability to pivot when managing the movement of heavy out-of-gauge cargo are even more critical in today's uncertain and turbulent geopolitical and economic environment.**

**W**hether handling standard freight or oversized, heavy, and out-of-gauge cargo, achieving a successful and seamless operation to efficiently move, load, and offload high-value assets in diverse global ports requires the right approach and systems.

Experienced decision-making capabilities and foresight are required every step of the way to mitigate risk and avoid hidden costs, from securing vessel space, scheduling and route planning, to considering options around the handling process, technical equipment, lifting methods, specialist workforce, port infrastructure, insurance, and more.

Transportation involving multi-purpose, heavy-lift, specialised cargo vessels for shipment of complex and challenging project cargo, such as pontoons, wind farm components and commercial vessels like tugboats or patrol boats, has always required additional specialist knowledge.

Today, amid fast-paced global events, triggered by geopolitical developments, this expertise is more critical than ever. Cargo owners and organisations are adjusting to the fact that marine transport options and operations are far less predictable than merely five years ago – with specific ramifications for the already complicated proposition of moving specialist project cargo by sea.

With a more uncertain and volatile global operating environment for shipping companies amid politicised trade conflicts, territorial disputes, and sanctions disrupting shipping routes and cargo flows, the safety of delivery depends on creating optionality, managing expectations, and having the ability to adapt to the unexpected.

## **Unpredictable geopolitics & global trade affecting MPVs**

The shifting geopolitical and economic landscape, alongside changes in market

dynamics, presents the marine transport sector with unique challenges – with multi-purpose vessels (MPVs) particularly affected. MPVs operate within the spot charter market, with the capabilities to handle considerably more complex cargo and heavier boats than container lines.

At Peters & May's Commercial Marine Transport division, we usually use heavy-lift geared ships with their own cranes, as well as gearless and semisubmersible vessels, and combidock ships when required. Cranes can reach as high as 2x 1,500 tonnes, with the heaviest boat we have lifted weighing 875,000 kilograms

With an increased demand for MPVs compared to 2019-20, there is already tight availability in some regions – a situation which has been exacerbated by the avoidance of the Suez Canal and vessels having to transit around the Cape of Good Hope (COGH), rather than utilise the more efficient Asia-to-Mediterranean or Northern Europe route through the Red Sea. The Russian war of aggression, the ongoing uncertainty about escalations in the Middle East, and the potential for Houthi attacks on ships will also continue to adversely affect available tonnage and market stability.

As a 25-day transit now takes 45 to 50 days due to transit via COGH, with substantial additional fuel and charter costs, there is less spot tonnage in the market than previously, with new supply/demand dynamics, which means that planning for MPVs has become more complex in certain regions. For example, in the currently in-demand Asian region, where large wind energy and oil & gas projects are consuming a lot of the tonnage in the market, finding space can be challenging. Rates are high and typically need a minimum of one to two months' lead time to secure space. Meanwhile, Europe and the US are in more of a decline, and we

are seeing plenty of opportunities from these regions, especially back to Asia.

The geopolitical issues and unpredictability of global trade routes now need to be considered along with the array of logistical and technical considerations when overseeing the transportation of high-value marine assets on MPVs – a challenge that can only be mastered by implementing lessons learned from decades of experience in managing successful shipments.

## **Mitigated risks + managed expectations = right to sail**

Agility, foresight, and precise coordination are essential when transporting project cargo. With specialist loadmasters and technical expertise in lifting and cradling equipment, alongside experience in identifying potential problems and avoiding hidden costs (such as delays, insurance hikes, and mis-cradled cargo), it is possible to mitigate risk and manage expectations.

Among our recent projects was the successful loading and shipment of the high-speed catamaran *Red Jet 4* from Southampton in the UK to South Korea on *AAL Kobe*. As an example of rapid rerouting because of rising geopolitical risks, the shipowner ruled out the vessel's planned passage through the Red Sea following deteriorating conditions, including renewed Houthi rebel attacks on commercial vessels. The team quickly adapted the voyage plan, securing permits, port arrangements, and vessel support to accommodate the new route back through the Suez Canal and around COGH, while considering weather variations, fuel resupply, crew scheduling, and increased transit risks over the longer distance.

The challenge for another project – the shipping of two new 22-metre-long tugboats from Vietnam to the French Port of Saint-Malo – centred around the bespoke



Photos: Peters &amp; May



architectural design of the vessels, which included specialised lifting lugs integrated directly into the structure. The Peters & May logistics team worked with *Fairmaster*, fitted with two 1,500-tonne cranes (combinable for 3,000t lifts). The lifting lugs allowed the vessels to be hoisted with precision, using a crane system that safely distributed the weight and reduced any potential risk to the tugs during the handling process.

For some projects, the challenge focuses on meeting a customer's budget and dates, which was the case for a standard shipment of two workboat patrol units that motored from the Baltic to Bremerhaven and were then shipped to the Persian Gulf. Peters & May supplied the shipping option from water to water, lashing, securing and

dunnage, in addition to surveyor report, cargo insurance, loadmaster attendance, technical support and much more – demonstrating our end-to-end service. This operation is also an example highlighting that we can offer out-of-gauge options on container lines when it is the right solution.

We regularly see how our expertise and experience when planning operations results in the avoidance of hidden costs, but the most prevalent issue in our experience is a discrepancy between the supplied

gross registered tonnage and displacement weight of the cargo. A world-class technical team can quickly spot any errors and inconsistencies, which, if unnoticed, could cause a logistical and financial disaster. Incorrect weight advice from a shipper could lead to selection of the wrong vessel type, leaving cranes unable to lift the cargo.

Another important reason for securing the support of a quality technical team is that, with an appetite for risk so low, insurance providers are ensuring project shipments are fully up to the latest safety requirements. In our own shipments, we are seeing a growing number of requirements for surveyor sign-offs, particularly marine warranty surveyors, who will review all technical documentation and report back to the insurers and give a 'right to sail' document.

### A century and a half of experience

For cargo owners focusing primarily on the safe delivery of their goods in time and on budget, there are several advantages in dealing with specialists. A consultative partner with experience in shipping heavy out-of-gauge cargo and an understanding of the geopolitical landscape can apply lessons from previous projects with huge knock-on benefits. By factoring in new market dynamics and identifying potential roadblocks, specialists can prevent delays and find solutions through clear communication.

With expertise, customers have optionality, which comes at a premium in today's climate; for instance, by combining cargo on a scheduled MPV to share and save costs or by ensuring any specialised cradles or other equipment is in place to prevent additional insurance premiums.

Demonstrating the level of knowledge in place at Peters & May, our loadmasters team has a total combined work experience of 150 years, with many having served in the British Army's Royal Logistics Corps. We just cannot underestimate these decades of hands-on experience in loading and offloading heavy machinery, oversized equipment, or complex and challenging cargo in multiple global ports.

In today's new 'normal' climate, the importance of forward planning and the support of specialist, experienced problem-solving experts to manage schedules, budgets, and navigate new rules and risks with confidence is more critical than ever before. ■



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