

Forum: Arab League

Issue: The issue of maintaining sustainable world trade through the Suez Canal in the case of a conflict in the region

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Introduction

Suez Canal is the ‘artery at heart of global trade’, as described by MFAT (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade). It’s the shortest and most direct maritime route from Europe to Asia, connecting the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. The 193 kilometer man-made canal acts as a bridge between the two continents, Africa and Asia.

The former French consul to Cairo, Ferdinand de Lesseps, settled an agreement with the Ottoman governor of Egypt into building a canal across the Isthmus of Suez in 1854. On November 17, 1864, the Suez Canal was officially opened for trade, after taking around 10 years to build. Its primary purpose for its construction was to have a more direct route for shipping between Europe and Asia without circumnavigating the African continent.

The unique location of the Suez Canal has exceptional importance to the world as well as Egypt. With the evolution of maritime transport and overall world trade, the global dependence on the Suez Canal increased. One of the cheapest means of transportation is Maritime transport, with over 80% of the world trade volume being transported by sea. Moreover, maritime transport saves distance, time, and operating costs, thereby firming up its importance even more.

Since its completion, it has become the hotspot for the shipment of goods, accounting for an estimated 12% of global trade. Moreover, 30% of all international container traffic is estimated at \$1 trillion worth of goods per annum. Approximately 19,000 ships utilised the canal in 2020. According to the SCA (Suez Canal Authority), in the last 5 years, the Suez Canal's revenue increased from \$25.9 billion in 2010-2015 to \$27.2 billion in 2020.

The Suez Canal, vital for international trade and the stability of the global economy, has also become the center of conflict since it opened in 1869. With this much money, power, and importance to world trade involved, the Suez Canal, now controlled by the Suez Canal Authority, is prone to the future conflict that can affect millions of people and put an immense toll on the flow of trade and the global economy. The most apparent conflict was the Suez Crisis, which resulted in countless deaths and tarnished relationships with its member states. Besides conflict, the most recent incident occurred in March 2021 when a giant container ship, the Ever Given, blocked the Suez Canal. This incident exposed the weaknesses in this global trade system. World trade is so heavily reliant on such narrow channels as well as through time, container ships are larger in size and able to carry more cargo, the potential for these incidents is ever-present.

There have been many efforts made in order to control and maintain the flow of goods through the Suez canal and avoid any other conflicts like the Suez Crisis. At the present time, the Suez Canal is owned, operated, and maintained by the state-owned Suez Canal Authority (SCA). The Suez Canal Authority was set up in the 1950s by the Egyptian government, replacing the Suez Canal Company, which had British and French interests, resulting in the Suez Crisis. Another incident that has been previously stated was the blockage which revealed the weaknesses of the global shipping trade. As ships get more extensive in size and more complicated, their reliance on the narrow shipping route, Suez Canal, constructed 150 years ago, continues to look increasingly risky. If no immediate actions were to take place, more blockages and potential economic crises are

likely to occur in the coming years.

Definition of Key Terms

Suez Canal

Suez Canal is an artificial canal located in Egypt which connects the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea. It is also called the ‘artery at heart of global trade’, facilitating international trade, as described by MFAT (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade).

Suez Canal Company

The Suez Canal Company constructed the Suez Canal between 1859 and 1869. It was formed by Ferdinand de Lesseps in 1858, and it operated the canal for 87 years thereafter.

Suez Canal Authority

The Suez Canal Authority was formed by the Egyptian Government to replace the Suez Canal Company in the 1950s which resulted in the Suez Crisis.

Aswan High Dam

Aswan High Dam is the world’s largest embankment dam which took 10 years to construct, from 1960 to 1970. It was built on the Nile River.

Key Issues

Environmental Impact

Every year, around 60,000 ships carry an estimated 11 billion tonnes of cargo ranging from clothing to food and technology. Each of these ships runs on fossil fuels, specifically heavy fuel oil, the world’s cheapest and dirtiest liquid fossil fuel. Heavy fuel oil is highly concentrated sulphur, with global shipping accounting for at least 8% of

sulphur dioxide emissions. When Heavy Fuel Oil is mixed with water, it becomes extremely acidic, making the shipping industry primarily responsible for acid rain, air pollution as well as other cardiovascular, respiratory, and pulmonary diseases. Shipping companies were able to pollute the canal and its surrounding area freely for many decades without any consequences. Even though sulphur emissions have somewhat been improved in 2020 after decades of regulations on power plants, trade by sea is still one of the leading industries contributing to air pollution. Air pollution is still responsible for 250,000 deaths and 6.4 million childhood asthma cases every year. Meanwhile, shipping continuously emits 1 billion tons of greenhouse gases into the Earth's atmosphere each year, more than the total of the top 5 countries that emit the most greenhouse gases, further contributing to climate change.

Over-reliance on the Suez Canal

The recent grounding of a huge container ship, known as the Ever Given, in the Suez Canal on March 23, 2021, brought to light the flaw in this global trade system. High winds at the time were seen to be at fault for the container ship blocking the narrow canal. While the canal is now unblocked, It truly showed the weakness in which raw materials, components, and finished goods are transported. These goods are being transported with the potential risk of severe implications for the global economy, both the long and short-term consequences. The unfortunate event has become a global phenomenon as it reminded the world of the interconnectedness that accompanies globalization and the over-reliance on each other to the worldwide supply chain. While globalisation grants many sectors (such as energy, business, and consumer sectors) tremendous advantages like the lowered prices of their goods, it comes with its own set of risks attached. Shipping companies had grown to over depend on suppliers, which was made evident when a link in the primary supply chain was altered. Countless reports on the incident stated that the blockage of the passage impeded the passage of 10 crude tankers with 13 million barrels of oil and the ships that rerouted had an additional 15 days to their journey. With over 400 container ships stalled beside the Ever Given, the prices of countless products have risen. One example is that oil prices have moved upwards as container ships carrying oil were

forced to come to a halt. After the Canal was unblocked, the cost of crude oil fell to its original price. But the accident has made companies and countries aware of the need to build flexibility to deal with unexpected global trade crises like the Ever Given blockage.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Egypt

The Suez Crisis was an international crisis that took place in the Middle East on July 26, 1956. This occurred when the Egyptian president at the time, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal. The vital waterway controlled two-thirds of the oil used by Europe. The Suez Canal Company owned the Canal, which had both French and British interests. After years of negotiation, the British withdrew their troops from the Suez Canal, passing it on to the hands of the Egyptian Government which was supported by the US and UN. Currently, the canal is controlled by the Suez Canal Authority, which is state-owned. The Suez Canal drastically contributes to the Egyptian Government's revenues, generating \$5.61 billion in revenue last year.

The most recent and disastrous blockage of the Suez Canal was on March 23, 2021. The Ever Given ship blocked both sides of the canal bringing maritime shipping to a complete stop. The gigantic container ship remained stuck for 6 days making more than 400 ships stranded. The Suez Canal Authority stated that the blockage cost the Egyptian government up to \$90 million loss in total revenue while hundreds of ships waited, with some even taking other routes to reach their destination. The blockage truly revealed the weakness of the global shipping trade.

France

The French diplomat. Ferdinand de Lesseps supervised the construction of the Suez Canal. Opened in 1869, after 10 years of construction, the man-made waterway separates most of Egypt from the Sinai Peninsula. The Sinai Peninsula consists of the

entire east bank of the Suez Canal. The majority of the internationally vital waterway's shareholders were the French and British, with their agreement not due to expire until 1968. France refused to finance the building of the Aswan High Dam which fostered tensions between both countries. From the former Egyptian president's view, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the revenue generated from the Canal would easily finance the building of the Aswan Dam. France was angered at Egypt for the fact that they aided Algerian rebels. France teamed up with Britain who wanted to maintain its control over the Suez Canal, launched a joint military attack to take back control over the canal. They were able to do this successfully through the military support of Israel. In just a few days, the Egyptian army was defeated despite Nasser commanding to sink around 40 ships to completely block the Canal. Regardless of their success, the world powers were unhappy, to say the least about France and Britain's actions over the Suez Canal. The Soviet Union threatened Paris and London with nuclear force. Even though the United States is allies with European powers, the USA criticized them for not being consulted before the attack took place. The Soviet Union and the United States did not approve their actions at all and applied enormous financial pressure on the United Kingdom and France with the support of the United Nations. They pressured the UK and France so much so that the Anglo-French force had to withdraw despite its military success in taking control over the Suez Canal.

As of 2020, relations between Egypt and France are strong, consisting of shared cultural activities, tourism, trade, close political relationship, and more.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is an island nation located in northwestern Europe consisting of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The British Empire is considered to be one of the most influential and important empires in world history, it lasted a long time and it brought tremendous changes to many parts of the world. The Suez Canal Company, created by the French and British, owned and operated the Suez Canal for 87 years. The construction of the Suez Canal in 1869 allowed faster sea transport to India, only increasing Britain's lifelong interest to expand their influence to Eastern Mediterranean. It

allowed them quicker access to its colonies in Asia and Africa. To secure the Suez Canal, Britain maintained its control over all the finance and foreign affairs. They also played a prominent role in the Suez crisis, which took place on July 26, 1956. The root of the Suez Crisis was the refusal of the British to finance Egypt's construction of the Aswan High Dam, as they had previously promised because Egypt was growing to have stronger ties with communist Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. President Gamal Abdel Nasser responded by seizing control of the Suez Canal Company. Britain and its fellow allies, France and Israel secretly used military action, invading Egypt to recover control of the Suez Canal. Egypt coming out as the victor, emphasized Britain's declining status, confirming that they had become a 'second tier' world power. Along with its status being tarnished, it also resulted in an immense political fallout in Britain. This then led to an economic crisis, simultaneously further complicating the politics of the Middle East.

Israel

Israel needed the opening of the Suez Canal for its maritime transport. Its military intervention against Egypt was a response to the Fedayeen attacks suffered on its territory. Israeli armed forces initiated the Suez Crisis when they pushed into Egypt towards the Suez Canal. They would soon be joined by French and British forces, creating a serious Cold War problem in the Middle East. The reason for the joint Israeli-British-French attack was the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by the former president Nasser in 1956. The attack for all three parties was disapproved internationally. Under intense pressure and threats from the US in particular, all troops were rapidly withdrawn and replaced by UN troops. The crisis was both a win and loss for Israel as they did not have the freedom to use the canal, but on the other hand, it did regain shipping rights in the Straits of Tīrān.

Following around 10 years after the Suez Crisis, in 1967, a six-day war took place after Israeli forces occupied the Sinai peninsula. Egypt, unwilling Israelis to use the canal, immediately imposed a blockade, closing all shipping through the canal. It remained closed for 8 years, until in 1975 after lengthy peace talks with Israel.

Development of Issue/Timeline

Date	Event	Outcome
1854	Ferdinand de Lesseps secures an agreement with the Ottoman governor of Egypt to build a canal across the Isthmus of Suez.	Ferdinand de Lesseps was supported by a team of international engineers. Despite making a number of trips to London, he failed to receive the support of the British government.
15 December 1858	Suez Canal Company formed	The Suez Canal Company was formed by Ferdinand de Lesseps and was granted the right to control the canal's operation for 87 years after its completion.
25 April 1859	Construction of the Suez Canal	Digging of the canal was done by hand with tools like picks and shovels by forced laborers which led to many injuries and countless deaths. The digging was done by Egyptians, and in Nasser's nationalization speech, he estimated that 120,000 workers died during the 10-year construction of the Suez Canal.
1865	Cholera epidemic	Construction was slowed because of labor disputes and the cholera epidemic. The Suez Canal was completed 4 years behind schedule, in 1869.

November 17, 1869	Suez Canal opened to navigation	When it opened, the Suez Canal was only 7 meters deep, 22 meters wide at the bottom, and around 60 - 90 meters wide at the surface. With these dimensions, fewer than 500 ships navigated through the canal in its first full year of operation.
1875	Great Britain became the largest shareholder in the SCC	With £4million worth of shares that Britain bought in the Suez Canal from the Egyptians, it amounted to just under half of the total canal. This secured the water route to India and other Eastern Mediterranean countries.
1882	Britain invaded Egypt, beginning a long occupation of the country.	The main reason for Britain invading Egypt was to ensure the protection of the financial interests in the country, which culminated in a violent war.

1936	Anglo-Egyptian Treaty	In the wake of WW2, the Egyptian military had begun pressuring the British to end their military presence in the Suez Canal. The treaty made Egypt independent, with Britain still reserving its rights for the protection of the canal. Britain later withdrew all their troops.
October 29, 1956 – November 7, 1956	Suez Crisis	The root of the Suez Crisis was the refusal of Britain and France to finance Egypt's construction of the Aswan High Dam, as they had previously promised because Egypt was growing to have stronger ties with communist Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Former President Gamal Abdel Nasser responded by seizing control of the Suez Canal Company, which then resulted in Israel invading Egypt in late October. Then, British and French troops landed in early November, successfully seizing control over the canal zone. Under intense pressure from the United Nations and the United States, Britain and France withdrew all their troops in December, and Israeli forces left in March 1957. In the same month, Egypt regained its control over the

		canal and then reopened it to shipping.
June 5, 1967 – June 10, 1967	Six-day war	The Six-Day War was short but had many casualties on both sides. The War was fought between Israel against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. After years of diplomatic disagreements between Israel and its neighbors, Israel Defense Forces launched airstrikes, weakening the air forces of Egypt and its fellow Arab allies. Israel then conducted a successful ground offensive, taking control over the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. The war ended once the UN-brokered a ceasefire. This short war was able to significantly alter the map of the Middle East and increase tension amongst all countries.
1975	Suez Canal reopens	Egypt reopened the Suez Canal to international shipping, exactly eight years after it was closed by the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

23–29 March 2021	Suez Canal blocked by Ever Given container ship	'Ever Given' ship gets stuck in the Suez Canal blocking both sides. This cost the economy around \$400 million an hour. The gigantic container ship blocked the canal for more than six days and put an immense toll on the flow of global trade. After the departure of the Ever Given, the Suez Canal Authority demanded the ship's owners pay a \$916 million fine.
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Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936

The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 was signed in London on August 26, 1936, which officially brought to an end 54 years of British occupation in Egypt. This was then ratified in December 1936. Regardless, the Egyptian dominance in the Suez Canal remained bounded by the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty. The treaty established a 20-year military alliance which permitted Great Britain to impose martial law and censorship in Egypt. This would only take place in the event of an international emergency, a stationing of up to 10,000 British troops and 400 Royal Air Force pilots in the Suez Canal Zone will be placed. All troops would then be withdrawn once the Egyptians were able to protect the area from coming attacks. Following the signing of the treaty, the Egyptian government assumed full administrative control over its military.

Under the terms of the treaty, the United Kingdom was obliged to withdraw all its troops from Egypt, specifically the Suez Canal. They were only allowed to place their troops back if it was necessary to protect the Suez Canal and its surrounding areas. The number of troops which would be placed is 10,000, taking into account the number of auxiliary personnel.

Possible Solutions

Crisis plan

The Suez Canal blockage which took place in March of 2021 shows yet another reason why companies should invest their time, money, data, and technology to create stable and dispersed shipping routes rather than focusing on the Suez Canal. This will help the effect of unexpected events, like the blockage, to have a smaller impact on world trade. The Ever Given, a container ship measuring just under 400 meters, blocked the Suez Canal on both sides, leaving hundreds of other vessels from using the canal, one of the busiest and valuable waterways in the world.

The blockage reminded corporate officials of the importance of creating a crisis plan or updating their current plan. The headlines and popularity of the blockage and its effect should be enough to make their plans a top priority whether they depend on the Suez Canal or not. These plans need to be mandatory for each shipping company that passes through the canal and if a blockage is present consequences such as fines will be involved. If crisis plans were not to be made, companies and just the overall global economy will be hit worse with the crisis. Furthermore, it will make it harder for them to address the situation and recover from it as they did have a warning from the blockage in March of 2021.

Expansion of the Suez Canal

A potential alternative to the creation of a new canal would be the expansion and amelioration of the current Suez Canal. The previously mentioned cargo ship named the Ever Given clogged the Suez Canal, where the width is only 205 meters. Thus, in order to solve this issue, there should be an expansion of the width of the canal, and the construction of more artificial “lakes” used as passing lanes to allow ships to turn around and not get stuck in the canal. Lakes such as the “Great Bitter Lake” act as a makeshift harbor and overall reduces the vulnerability of the Suez Canal. Therefore, investments in more development projects that aim to improve the current canal are encouraged. There are signs of optimism concerning the improvement of the Suez Canal, with the

Egyptian government approving a development project by the Suez Canal Authority, to expand the southern section of the canal, widening it by around 40 meters to the east. This project is targeting the area where Ever Given was stuck, showing promising progress towards improving this canal.

Development of a new canal

The blockage of the Suez Canal had cost Egypt millions and triggered new plans from the Egyptian government to develop a potential new canal. One of the main issues with the Suez canal is how heavily corporations rely on it. In order to prevent potential future economic damage from a canal blockage, an entirely new canal can be built in another area around the Sinai Peninsula, connecting both the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Having another canal in Egypt would not only reduce the vulnerability of the international trade system but also allow Egypt to sustain more ships with the addition of the new route. This would contribute to the economy in the long term since Egypt charges a fee for every cargo ship that uses its canals. United Nations officials have been planning the development of an additional canal along the Egypt-Israel border, following the crisis.

Implementation of stricter environmental regulations

Additional restrictions on cargo ships concerning their size, and stricter fines on environmental regulation violations would promote the reduction of fossil fuel usage. Having a limitation on cargo ship sizes would reduce the potential for blockages, and use fewer fossil fuels since cargo ship sizes keep increasing. Moreover, more environmental regulations encourage an amelioration of the quality of the cargo ships to prevent leakages and avoid fines.

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Appendix

I. Britannica, Suez Crisis

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Suez-Crisis>

II. Britannica, Suez Canal

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Suez-Canal>