

ENLARGEMENT OF THE PANAMA CANAL: A CHANCE FOR FRENCH PORTS ?

In 2014, the locks of the Panama Canal will gain in width and depth, which will double the canal's capacity. It will then accommodate more and larger ships. This enlargement will have significant impact on the maritime traffic and favour French ports in the Caribbean and on the Atlantic coast of the mainland. France still has to act to capture these flows that pass by its shores.

THE CHALLENGES OF AN UPGRADED OCEANIC ROUTE

Nearly 30% of world shipping today is provided by the post-Panamax vessels of monumental proportions. As the name implies, their dimensions exceed the carrying capacity of the canal. This channel of 80 km includes three sets of locks that allow crossing the 26 m of altitude of the isthmus. They are however limited by their size, defined by one of the largest American battleship of the early twentieth century: 300 m long, 33 m wide, 150 000 t displacement.

The work undertaken since 2007 intends to extend the width of the initial two lanes and open a third one dedicated to post-Panamax vessels (up to 49 m wide, 386 m long and 15 m draft, i.e. vessels of similar size to container ships of 12,000 "boxes").

This doubling of capacity will bring to the canal those vessels that couldn't use it so far and have been unloading their cargo on the West Coast of the United States or Latin America, when not doubling the Cape Horn.

Once the channel is renovated in 2014, cargo, especially containers, will shun rail or road transport to be transported by ship directly to the East Coast of the United States or their final destination.

The U.S.A. won't be the only country affected: expanding Brazil, Argentina but also the Atlantic ports of Europe will be well served. Indeed, the ships carrying consumer goods produced in Asia for Europe may prefer this route, which allows avoiding pirates in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean instability. Once the work is done, trade between Asia, the Americas, West Africa and Europe will increase thanks to the Asian growth and to the demand for energy and raw materials. All these mutations represent opportunities for Atlantic ports.

PORTS IN ORDER OF BATTLE

U.S. ports, North and South, will be the first winners of the canal expansion. But to take advantage of the opportunity offered to them, they must still be able to capture the flow of post-Panama. There is thus a "rush to modernization" of the ports in the area, which adapt their infrastructure to the increased traffic, particularly containers.

As a consequence of the new set of Panamanian locks, ports such as Virginia, Montreal, Savannah or Charleston deepen their access channels, develop and modernize



Autonomous port project in Guadeloupe (French Caribbean)



Canal of Panama

their docks, their roads or their railways. Caribbean ports are not far behind. Their domestic market being small, these ports will function primarily as hubs. Some have started the modernization: Kingston in Jamaica, Freeport in the Bahamas and Caucedo in the Dominican Republic are competing fiercely to attract large ships and the most active operators.

IS FRANCE LATE ?

France, in this area through its West Indies territories ("departments") and well positioned on the European coast, appears late. So far, no site has been launched, and it is unclear whether there will be one or two transshipment ports in the Caribbean or if France will use the services of a neighbouring hub.

Martinique and Guadeloupe are competing. The latter is handicapped by the high cost of the project (300 million euros, against 60 million for Martinique), due to the shallowness of the access channel in Pointe-à-Pitre. On the other hand, the social instability of the port of Fort-de-France, as illustrated by the strikes of recent years, speaks against Martinique. The choice has to be made soon. The state must also handle the preparation of ports on the mainland Atlantic coast, poorly connected by rail, road and canals.