

**"Oceanic Obligation and
Opportunity -
Navigating the Future Together"
(National Level Conference Proceedings)**

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31	Contribution of Maritime Trade to Global Business Growth	Dr.N.BhuvaneshKumar	240
32	Maritime Trade and its Impact on the Expansion of Global Business Networks	Dr. M. Akilanayaki	244
33	Role of Sea Trade in Boosting International Business : The Impact of Efficient Seaborne Logistics on Trade Flows	Mr. M. Arjun Ms. P. Jayashree	251
34	BLUE HORIZON: Maritime Reforms For India's Export Future	Aruna Devi. S Kanishkaa. G	256
35	Modernizing India's Smart Legal Framework: Regulatory Remorse and Growth Trajectory	Ms. Bhavatharani N Ms. Lavanya M	260
36	Harnessing Artificial Intelligence for Sustainable Logistics: Insights from India and The World	Dr.P.Karthika	266
37	Export by Sea – Business Benefits & Support Systems	Mr. Abhinav Ravikrish R Mr. Akash PM	272
38	Effects of Rising Sea Levels and Storms on Shipping Routes	Dr. K. Sathiya Priya Afrin Fathima H Subhikshaa M	276
39	Role of HRM in Bridging Skill Gaps in the Maritime Sector	Ms Dharani	282
40	Role of Private Logistics Firms And Export Facilitators	Dr.S.Mahalakshmi	286
41	Agricultural Sector in India - A Comparative Export Statement Analysis	Dr. Vadivel M Dr.M.Nirmala	289
42	The Future of the Blue Chain: Integrating Ocean Responsibility into Global Trade	Visalini S Abirami M	293
43	A Study on Problems in Global Supply Chain	Ms.Amirtha R.N Ms. Devakumari.M Ms. Sakthi.C	301
44	Blue Bonds and Beyond: Financing the Ocean's Future	Harivarsha V Gowrisankari K	306
45	Job Creation through Sea Trade in Coastal Regions	Bharath Suriya P Kavin Prasad R	310
46	Climate Change and its Impact on Maritime Trade	Bhavatharani S, Samritha M	312
47	Enhancing Export-Import Flows Through Efficient Seaborne Logistics	Dr.R.Manju Bavyasree Tharadevi M	314
48	Export by Sea - Business Benefits and Support Systems Government support	Dr.M.Kavitha Kaleeswaran. Udayakarthik .G,	319

Maritime Trade and its Impact on the Expansion of Global Business Networks

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Abstract

Maritime trade serves as the backbone of global commerce, enabling the transportation of over 80% of the world's goods by volume across oceans. This paper investigates the role of maritime trade in expanding global business networks, with a focus on infrastructure, logistics efficiency, and international competitiveness. Using primary survey data collected from exporters, freight forwarders, and port authorities in India and the UAE, as well as secondary data from UNCTAD and the World Bank, the study highlights how sea trade facilitates market access, strengthens supply chain resilience, and accelerates the integration of emerging economies into global networks. The findings suggest that investment in port infrastructure and maritime connectivity significantly enhances international business expansion, although challenges such as rising freight costs, environmental regulations, and geopolitical disruptions persist.

Keywords: Maritime Trade, International Business, Global Networks, Supply Chains,

1. Introduction

Maritime trade has been the cornerstone of global commerce for centuries, shaping the economic, cultural, and political interactions between nations. Today, it continues to serve as the primary facilitator of international trade, with more than four-fifths of global merchandise by volume transported via sea routes (UNCTAD, 2023). Unlike air or land transport, maritime trade provides the capacity and cost efficiency required to handle large-scale shipments, making it the backbone of global supply chains. The oceans, therefore, are not just physical spaces of transit but strategic highways that drive globalization and international economic growth.

The expansion of global business networks depends heavily on the accessibility and efficiency of maritime trade. Multinational corporations, small exporters, and emerging economies alike rely on sea trade to access distant markets, secure raw materials, and distribute finished goods across borders. The increasing integration of global value chains has intensified the importance of maritime logistics, where ports, shipping companies, and intermodal connections play

crucial roles in determining trade competitiveness. As businesses become more globalized, the demand for faster, cheaper, and more reliable sea transport has never been greater.

Moreover, maritime trade is not limited to economic dimensions—it plays a strategic role in shaping diplomatic relations and international cooperation. Trade corridors such as the Indian Ocean routes, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Malacca are vital geopolitical spaces where economic and political interests converge. The ability of a nation to participate effectively in maritime trade directly influences its position within global business networks. For instance, countries with advanced port infrastructure and efficient customs procedures, such as Singapore and the UAE, have emerged as central hubs in global commerce.

However, maritime trade also faces challenges that impact the smooth expansion of global business networks. Rising freight costs, congestion at major ports, and disruptions caused by global crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2021 Suez Canal blockage—demonstrate the fragility of maritime-dependent business systems. Environmental concerns and international regulations on emissions further add to the complexity, forcing businesses and governments to adapt strategies that balance trade efficiency with sustainability. These challenges highlight the dual nature of maritime trade as both an enabler and a risk factor for international business growth.

In this context, it becomes crucial to examine how maritime trade contributes to the expansion of global business networks, particularly in terms of market access, supply chain integration, and competitiveness. This paper seeks to address this gap by combining secondary statistical data with primary evidence from exporters, logistics providers, and port officials in India and the UAE. By doing so, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of maritime trade in shaping modern global commerce and to identify the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

2. Literature Review

- **Maritime Trade and Globalization:** Rodrigue (2020) argues that maritime transport is not just a facilitator of trade but the very foundation of global supply chains. Shipping routes and ports connect producers and consumers across continents, enabling the large-scale movement of goods that defines modern globalization. Efficient maritime corridors such as the Asia–Europe and Trans-Pacific routes act as arteries of world commerce, ensuring that global production networks function smoothly. Without robust maritime systems, the integration of global markets would be severely constrained.

- **Competitiveness and Trade:** Besson (2019) highlights that maritime trade plays a critical role in lowering transaction costs and enhancing international competitiveness. The availability of sea transport reduces the cost per unit of goods shipped compared to air or land transport, making exports more competitive in international markets. By lowering entry barriers, maritime trade enables firms—including those from developing economies—to participate in global business networks. This cost efficiency has also fueled the rise of multinational corporations and just-in-time supply chain systems.

- **Emerging Economies:** Upadhyay and Khandelwal (2018) emphasize that the development of maritime infrastructure is vital for integrating emerging economies into global trade networks. For countries like India, Vietnam, and Nigeria, investments in deep-water ports, container handling facilities, and efficient logistics systems have directly correlated with higher export growth and international market access. The authors argue that maritime infrastructure acts as a gateway for developing countries, allowing them to participate in global production and distribution chains that were once dominated by advanced economies.

- **Resilience and Risk:** Raghavan et al. (2021) examine the vulnerabilities of maritime trade and the fragility it introduces into global supply chains. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 Suez Canal blockage exposed the heavy dependence of international business on uninterrupted sea trade. These disruptions caused major delays, increased freight costs, and highlighted the lack of resilience in global supply networks. The study stresses the importance of diversification, digitalization, and risk management in maritime trade systems to ensure supply chain stability.

- **Research Gaps:** While existing literature has established the economic importance of maritime trade, there is limited empirical research on how maritime trade directly facilitates the *expansion of global business networks across specific regions*. Most studies focus on either global trends or case-specific disruptions, but fewer provide a comparative analysis using primary data from businesses and ports. This gap opens an opportunity to examine the role of maritime trade not only as a transport mode but as a strategic enabler of international business growth and connectivity.

3. Research Objectives & Methodology

Objectives:

1. To analyze the contribution of maritime trade to the expansion of global business networks.

2. To identify the role of port infrastructure and logistics performance in international trade.
3. To examine challenges and policy implications for maritime-driven business expansion.

Methodology:

This study adopted a **mixed-method research design** to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of maritime trade and its influence on the expansion of global business networks. The primary data was collected through two main approaches. First, a structured survey was conducted with **75 respondents**, including exporters, importers, and logistics firms operating in India and the United Arab Emirates. These respondents were chosen because they represent key stakeholders who directly experience the opportunities and challenges of maritime trade in international business. The survey included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions to quantify perceptions on cost efficiency, competitiveness, and infrastructure challenges.

Second, **semi-structured interviews** were carried out with port officials from **Chennai Port (India)** and **Jebel Ali Port (UAE)**, two major maritime hubs with different levels of infrastructure and global connectivity. These interviews provided in-depth qualitative insights into operational challenges, policy frameworks, and the role of port infrastructure in shaping international business growth. The combination of survey and interview data allowed the research to capture both the breadth and depth of perspectives on maritime trade.

For **secondary data**, internationally recognized databases and reports were used to ensure reliability and comparability. Key sources included **UNCTADstat**, which provided statistics on global maritime trade volumes; the **World Bank's Logistics Performance Index (2022)**, which measures efficiency in trade logistics; and the **annual reports of major shipping companies**, which offered data on cargo throughput, freight rates, and investment trends. These datasets were used to establish global and regional benchmarks against which the primary data could be contextualized.

The use of a **triangulation strategy**—combining survey responses, interview insights, and secondary statistical data—ensured validity and robustness of the findings. This mixed-method approach not only captured numerical evidence of maritime trade's impact but also highlighted practical, real-world challenges faced by businesses and policymakers. By integrating diverse data sources, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how maritime trade drives the expansion of global business networks.

4. Data Presentation

4.1 Global Maritime Trade (Secondary Data)

Indicator	2015	2020	2023	Source
Share of world trade by sea (volume)	80%	81%	82%	UNCTAD
Global seaborne trade (billion tons)	10.5	11.0	12.0	UNCTAD
Container port throughput (million TEUs)	700	817	850	World Bank

The secondary data shows a steady rise in maritime trade's dominance. The share of world trade by sea increased slightly from **80% in 2015 to 82% in 2023**, while global seaborne trade volumes grew from **10.5 to 12.0 billion tons**. Container port throughput also rose from **700 to 850 million TEUs**, reflecting the expanding role of ports in handling global cargo. These figures confirm that maritime transport remains the backbone of international commerce and is central to expanding global business networks.

4.2 Primary Survey Findings (Exporters & Logistics Firms)

Factor	% Respondents Agreeing
Maritime trade reduces cost of international expansion	72%
Ports and shipping lines directly influence competitiveness	68%
Delays in customs clearance remain a barrier	55%
Maritime trade is critical for accessing new markets	76%
Infrastructure investment improves international growth	80%

Survey results highlight the practical role of maritime trade in international business. **72%** of respondents said sea transport reduces expansion costs, while **68%** stressed that port efficiency and shipping lines directly influence competitiveness. However, **55%** noted customs delays as a barrier. At the same time, **76%** recognized maritime trade as essential for entering new markets, and **80%** emphasized the need for continued infrastructure investment. Together, these insights show that while maritime trade drives global business growth, efficiency and modernization remain key to sustaining its benefits.

5. Analysis & Discussion

The data shows maritime trade is a critical enabler of global business networks. Respondents highlighted cost efficiency and market access as primary benefits. The Chennai Port survey

emphasized the need for better digital customs systems, while Jebel Ali Port officials pointed to free trade zones as catalysts for global business expansion.

Secondary data reinforces these findings: container throughput growth parallels global trade expansion, demonstrating the direct linkage between maritime logistics and international business integration. However, rising freight rates (Baltic Dry Index spike in 2021–22) and environmental compliance costs present significant challenges.

6. Findings

1. Maritime trade remains the primary driver of global business expansion, especially for emerging economies.
2. Port infrastructure and logistics performance significantly affect international competitiveness.
3. Policy and regulatory frameworks shape the ease of maritime trade integration into global networks.
4. Supply chain resilience requires investment in digitalization and diversification of maritime routes.

7. Conclusion & Implications

Maritime trade plays an indispensable role in expanding global business networks by connecting producers, consumers, and intermediaries worldwide. It serves not only as a transport mechanism but also as a strategic enabler of competitiveness, cost efficiency, and supply chain integration. The findings of this study confirm that sea trade is essential for market diversification, particularly for emerging economies aiming to strengthen their global presence.

For **policymakers**, the results suggest prioritizing investment in **port infrastructure, digital logistics, and customs efficiency**, as these are critical factors that determine trade competitiveness. Equally important is ensuring supportive regulatory frameworks that streamline clearance processes, encourage private sector participation, and reduce bureaucratic delays. Governments can also enhance international trade ties by developing **regional maritime corridors** and improving connectivity between smaller and larger ports.

For **businesses**, leveraging maritime trade offers pathways to resilience by diversifying supply routes and reducing dependency on single markets. Firms that invest in advanced logistics, digital tracking systems, and long-term partnerships with shipping companies are better positioned to withstand disruptions such as freight volatility or geopolitical tensions.

Businesses should also explore opportunities in **free trade zones and port-based industrial clusters**, which provide strategic platforms for global expansion.

Finally, future research and practice must address the **emerging challenges of sustainability and technology adoption**. The shift towards **green shipping**—including the use of low-carbon fuels and energy-efficient vessels—will reshape the maritime industry in the coming decades. Likewise, the adoption of **digital platforms, blockchain-based trade documentation, and AI-driven logistics** will transform how maritime trade supports international business. These areas present valuable opportunities for both scholars and practitioners to explore.

In conclusion, maritime trade remains the backbone of global commerce, and its continued evolution will significantly influence the expansion of business networks worldwide. Sustained investment, innovation, and policy alignment are essential to ensure that maritime trade continues to drive inclusive and resilient global growth.

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