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Mediterranean ports: models, functions and outlook

Nicolò Savarese

The Motorways of the Sea project was conceived in 1999 as part of the TEN-T Programme (Trans European Network-Transport) as one of the thirty priority projects proposed by the Van Miert Group.

Subsequently, the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), destined to profoundly modify the concept of relations between the EU and neighbouring countries, was starting to take shape.

Following the enlargement of the EU to 25 member states, in November 2005, the High Level Group chaired by Loyola de Palacio produced a document entitled Networks for Peace and Development. Extension of the major trans-European transport axes to the neighbouring countries and regions. This document established Motorways of the Sea as one of the five fundamental nubs of the new EU infrastructural and transportation programme.

The global economy

The emphasis on Motorways of the Sea is based on the new scenario imposed on international trade by the vigorous economic growth of China and India and the significant implications that this has on the Mediterranean port system.

In fact, high tonnage ships serve the intercontinental routes along the Suez-Gibraltar axis and as it is no longer convenient to fragment voyages with multiple calls, a new type of port specialised in transshipment functions has evolved. Loading and unloading operations take place directly between the container transport ships and smaller ships (feeders) that are exclusively in

charge of delivering freight to/from the origin/destination ports. Thus, with the objective of optimising the distribution of feeder lines, transshipment ports tend to be situated at the centre of the Mediterranean. This, in turn, determines a clear advantage in terms of the location of southern Italian ports.

Short Sea Shipping and intermodality

The definition of Short Sea Shipping (SSS) includes various different types of short and medium-range traffic with origin-destination ports within the Mediterranean and Black Seas. The pre-eminent success factor of SSS (a concept to which Motorways of the Sea is related) lies in the development of intermodality as a solution to the imbalance in the present modal split of freight transport. The most worrying element, in fact, is not so much the preponderance of road freight as the trend developed over the decade between 1990 and 2000. While the modal share of road transport increased by nearly 40% and rail transport decreased by 10%, it is important to emphasise that SSS underwent, over the same period, an increase equal to that of road freight. Undoubtedly, a significant redistribution of the modal split is highly desirable from many points of view (transportation costs, traffic congestion, environmental pollution, etc.). Nonetheless, the problem of intermodal redistribution does not seem to depend so much on the absolute total investment in infrastructures as much as on the relative competitiveness among the various transportation options. It is not just about reducing maritime transport tariffs to make them more convenient than road transport, but rather about facing all the issues that are related to the door-to-door

chain and acting on the behavioural psychology of small private transportation firms.

The new model of Mediterranean port systems

Complementary ports, which we may identify as 'port clusters', are readily identifiable; for each of the ten identified clusters, the transshipment ports are highlighted.

On the basis of this geographical distribution, a new model for the entire Mediterranean port system can be delineated. The model implies a new axis, or Meridian Corridor, that unites the southern regions of Spain, Italy and Greece with Cyprus and the Middle East.

This, then, clearly highlights the strategic position of southern Italy where the majority of the principal transshipment ports are concentrated (Gioia Tauro, Taranto, Cagliari). The importance of this port system is not limited to the maritime transportation sector, but extends to many other economic sectors determining a vast and significant territorial impact.

Transportation and intermodal functions

A perfect state of intermodality is attained when all possible transportation modes are, *coeteris paribus*, interchangeable. This, of course, depends on the efficiency of the intermodal exchange nodes. Ports intercept the majority of all modal, scalar and typological varieties of freight transport functions. Moreover, the complexity of the logistical functions at play, the presence of external economies, and the proximity to large urban areas, tend to favour the localization of interports in correspondence with, or at least in close connection to, existing ports. The integration of ports into the primary transport

network (TEN) and the close interdependence between ports and interports are the first significant territorial implications of the new port system model.

Hard functions: production and commerce

At present, ports tend to expand and even move to extrurban areas. In this way, besides the availability of large spaces in which to stock and move goods, it is possible to develop various intermediate operations between the production and final distribution of the goods such as: conservation (if the freight contains perishable items), packaging, packing, assembly and processing. These operations can reap great advantages through a customs-free incentive that has brought to the development of many 'free port areas' in the world. Thus, the relation between a port and the productive activities of an area is fundamental. When these activities are concentrated in highly specialized areas (agricultural, industrial and tourist districts), the existence of ports, and especially free ports, can become a valid incentive for their development and prosperity.

Furthermore, whatever the reasons lying behind the warehousing of goods are, this leads to the creation of commercial activities. The ports that served as gateways to great market areas in the past turned into 'emporium' centres. A classic example is Trieste, which in the 17th and 18th centuries became the principal gateway to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Today, in Europe, only the transshipment ports, directly connected to the eastern markets, can aspire to a renewed function as 'emporia' as long as the adequate material, administrative and economic conditions are satisfied.

Soft functions: business and tourism

Ports are highly sophisticated mechanisms not only on account of their logistical functions, but also in terms of the commercial and financial aspects that they present. This is clearly mirrored in the fact that most WTCs (World Trade Centres) and offshore areas worldwide were developed in close connection with port authorities.

Therefore, the restructuring of old harbours often entails the inclusion of new activities.

It is also important to acknowledge the vitality that ports have injected in the development of new technologies in logistics and in Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS), that allow not only the scheduling of port operations, but also provide operators with all the necessary information to optimise the use of transport networks.

The other functions involved in the restructuring and renewal of harbours and urban waterfronts, concern nautical tourism and leisure activities. Tourist ports in the vicinity of major urban centres can provide superior complementary services to minor tourist ports. Furthermore, tourist functions and induced complementary services are perfectly integrated with business functions increasing their overall environmental quality.

Strategic territorial platforms and the renewed centrality of the Mezzogiorno

One of the most significant contributions provided by MIITT/Dicoter to the definition of the national strategy for the 2007-2013 Structural Funds is the concept of 'strategic territorial platforms'. In fact, infrastructural investments have relevant implications on both economic and productive levels. Therefore, the concept of 'strategic

territorial platforms' includes at least three main elements: transport infrastructures; District production areas; Urban interchange systems.

In particular, ports represent a formidable engine for development not only in terms of transport, but also for highly qualified service functions.

With regard to Southern Italy, the most significant competitive factor lies in its direct connection to the TEN network via Corridors I, V and VIII. This may indeed be decisive if strengthened by two further types of action:

- the completion and expansion of Corridor I, which together with the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic corridors, which are interdependent via efficient transversal axes, constitutes a powerful infrastructural connection between the centre of Europe and that of Mediterranean;
- the reconfiguration of Corridor VIII that due to its enlargement up to Corridor I and beyond, including eastern Sicily and Malta could become of the most important segments in the Meridian Corridor.