



Shipments of nickel ore from the Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands, rich in mineral resources, has recently begun exporting nickel ore from at least two mines. Given the nation's developing status and limited regulatory oversight, we wish to highlight potential challenges related to these shipments.

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According to our correspondent in Australia, Thynne & Macartney, " Nickel Ore being exported from Solomon Islands may contain significant amounts of silt and clay making it particularly prone to liquefaction during shipment. Given the relatively new setup and remote location, there is a shortage of experienced marine surveyors in Solomon Islands, and testing of cargo by independent labs is logistically impractical. As such reliance has to be placed on assistance from experts. Below is an overview of the two mines exporting Nickel Ore from this region.

Kolosori Nickel mine

The Kolosori Nickel mine on Santa Isabel Island, Solomon Islands, commenced nickel ore shipments in December 2023. The mine operates an on-site lab to test cargo moisture content, ensuring it remains below the transportable moisture limit, as defined in section 4.3.3 of the IMSBC Code. However, there is no governmental authority to certify or regulate this lab. Due to the mine's remote location, obtaining third-party verification of test results is impractical.

Stockpiles at the Kolosori mine are covered with tarpaulins to protect them from weather, particularly heavy rainfall, which is common year-round but especially from November to March. Shipowners' surveyors are granted access to these stockpiles for sampling. Owners' surveyors conduct "can tests" on barge loads, and shippers have responded positively to surveyors' refusals to pass loads. This has resulted in shippers undertaking further cargo drying and permitting owners' surveyors and chief officers to observe additional lab analyses.

To date, there have been no reported cases of liquefaction after vessels departed carrying Kolosori nickel ore. However, given that the mine has only been shipping ore for slightly over a year, a long-term track record of safety is yet to be established.

Choiseul Island mine

The first nickel ore shipment from the Choiseul Island mine occurred in January 2025. The experience level of those operating the mine with nickel ore shipments is not known to us. During the loading of this initial shipment, issues with wet cargo were reported, and crew members' 'can tests' yielded marginal results. Shortly after departure, the vessel experienced liquefaction in two holds and was forced to divert to the nearest port for refuge.

Owners are advised to exercise extreme caution when loading nickel ore from this mine until a proven history of successful shipments is established."

Gard's experience

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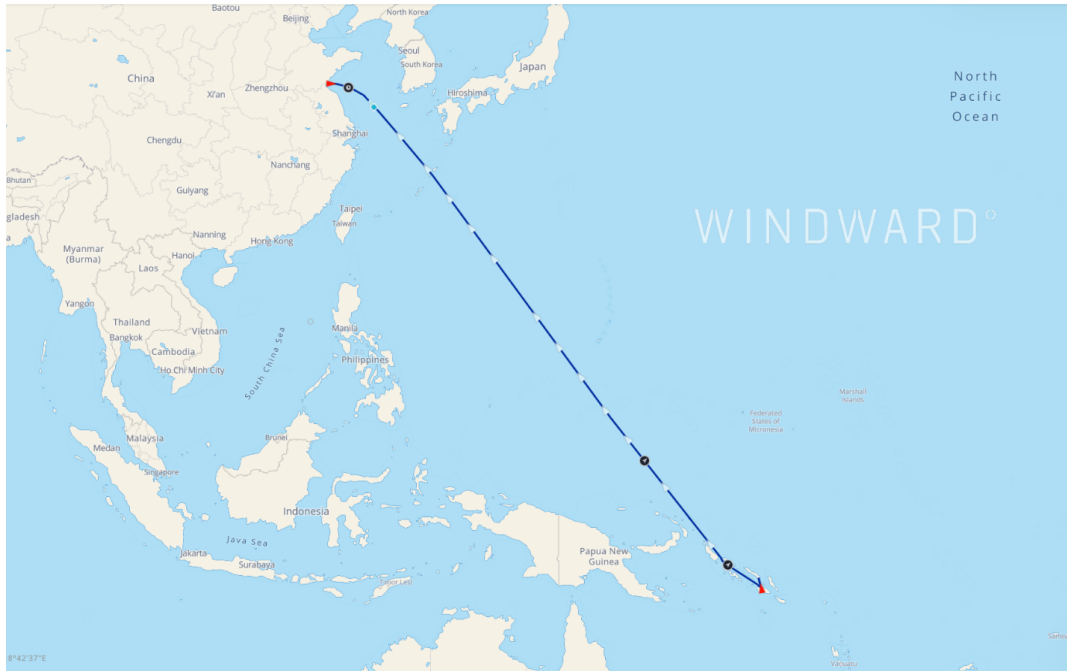
A Gard entered vessel was involved in one of the first shipments of Nickel Ore from the Kolosori mines. In that instance, our approach, as indicated in the diagram below, included the member's active participation, the appointment of a local correspondent and surveyor for site access, and the early engagement of an expert to provide remote assistance to both the vessel and the surveyor during the entire loading operation. The combined efforts ensured a safe and successful loading operation, highlighting the importance of strategic planning and expert oversight in navigating complex, first-time shipping endeavours.



Routeing related challenges: Distant ports of refuge

Vessels carrying this cargo are typically destined for ports in China or South Korea. The concern is that these extended voyages place vessels at a considerable distance from ports of refuge, significantly complicating emergency response in the event of cargo liquefaction. Below we have shown the route taken by one of the vessels, as an example.

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Conclusion

Given the nascent nature of Solomon Islands nickel ore shipments and the current lack of robust regulatory oversight, the risk of liquefaction, particularly as demonstrated at Choiseul Island remains a critical concern. Therefore, charterers, owners, and crew members must exercise extreme caution and implement rigorous oversight to ensure safe transportation.

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