

THE STORMY RED SEA, THE COMPLEXITIES OF GLOBAL EVENTS

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A U.S. missile destroyer | Photo Credit: AFP

At the end of October, after the audacious terror attack by Hamas against Israel, which has upended a renewed sense of regional stability, the Yemen-based and Iran-aligned Houthi militia announced that it would join the war to support the people of Gaza. This brought the critical waterways of the Red Sea, which connects the Suez Canal, into the middle of the conflict. The Suez by itself carries nearly 15% of all global trade between the West and the East.

In mid-November, the Houthis released a video of armed men in a helicopter raiding a cargo vessel that reportedly had Israeli links, which was travelling through the Red Sea towards India. While the Strait of Hormuz on the other side of the region, bordering Iran, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Qatar, is seen as a major geopolitical chokepoint, the Red Sea is increasingly being seen as an alternative. Saudi Arabia's new futuristic city of Neom, a pet project of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman which represents the rapidly changing face of the kingdom, is based off the coast of the Red Sea from where vast amounts of oil are also shipped.

Since the incident in November, the number of commercial vessels facing Houthi aggression has only increased, and cases are being reported on a near daily basis. The United States has been at the forefront of deploying military capacity towards the Red Sea to counter the threats in the form of drones, missiles that now include longer-range ones, and direct operations by the group's military cadre. The U.S. has now called upon partners to deploy a multinational task force around the narrow Bab al-Mandab Strait between Yemen, Djibouti (which hosts the military bases of the U.S., China, Japan, Italy, and France), and Eritrea. The Houthis have showcased an eclectic mix of military capability, including torpedoes and missiles with up to 1,000 km range capability. As of 2022, the Houthis are known to have acquired eight different types of missiles into their arsenal compared to just three previously, which had less than 50 km range and were acquired in the 1990s.

To further highlight the region's infamous geopolitical complexities, Riyadh has in fact called for "restraint" by Washington DC in taking any military action directly against the Houthis. With the Saudis having launched a war against the Houthis in Yemen in 2015, one that technically is still under way, the kingdom is now holding talks with the group's leadership on the back of the Saudi-Iran détente brokered by China earlier this year. According to recent data published by

Arab Barometer, a quantitative research institute on the Middle East (West Asia), Beijing's balanced stance on the ongoing Gaza crisis has found a positive response among Arabs on the back of the near-complete support given to the Israeli military campaign by the U.S. President, Joe Biden.

Beyond the regional crisis points, depletion of security in the Red Sea will have a global impact, specifically for Asian economies such as India, Japan, South Korea, and China, drawing in their interests as well. In the Persian Gulf for example, India has operationalised military capacities under Operation Sankalp since 2019, where the Indian Navy began escorting India-flagged ships, specifically oil tankers. Japan has worked its diplomatic channels directly with Tehran while South Korea has also experienced tensions with Iran over its ships travelling through the region.

A U.S. call for partners to mobilise is not irrational. Previously, the global community did rally to address the issue of piracy off coastal eastern Africa, specifically around the waters of Somalia. In 2012, India joined China, Japan, and South Korea for coordinated joint patrols in the Gulf of Aden. All states took point by rotation in leading these patrols. This was of course at a time when global geopolitics looked very different. While Beijing's position in such multilateral engagements is near improbable today, New Delhi, Tokyo and Seoul continue to have common security concerns as net importers of oil and gas from the region, which automatically places them as stakeholders in West Asian security both strategically and kinetically.

Through the current churn in the global geopolitical order, there is one major trend that states must factor into their calculus: that non-state militant actors are strengthening in agency, both politically and militarily, and often as part of state-promoted designs to secure short-term gains for long-term strategic victories. These are the fundamentals at play in an area such as the Red Sea which, in capitals such as New Delhi, do not enjoy the luxury of space in security debates. However, in an increasingly interconnected world colliding with an increasingly challenged stability of the western-led international security order, a more progressive, nimble, and practical development and deployment of power will have to be accepted to address challenges beyond the comforts of self-defined areas of interests.

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