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Maritime Resiliency in the Red Sea: Lessons from the Persian Gulf and Strait of Malacca

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Introduction

From natural disasters to geopolitical conflicts, the world's critical infrastructures face constant threats. Yet, it is not the absence of disruptions that ensures stability, but a system's ability to absorb shocks, recover, and adapt—a quality known as resiliency.

In the context of macro-systems, like nation-states, resiliency is a vital trait that guarantees stability and continued functionality and serves as a key factor in preserving the state's existence.

In the maritime domain, resiliency refers to the capacity of supporting maritime infrastructure-- shipping lanes, ports, naval forces--to withstand and adapt to disruptions while maintaining operations. Maritime resilience is critical to the infrastructure supporting global trade, as approximately 90% of all trade relies on sea routes, making these networks essential lifelines for transporting oil, food, and manufactured goods. [1]

Disruptions within crucial maritime routes, whether from conflict, piracy, environmental challenges, or economic fluctuations, have far-reaching global consequences, leading to price surges, supply shortages, and heightened diplomatic tensions. Ensuring the continuity of global trade networks not only stabilizes economies but reinforces global security, underscoring the need for robust governance and resilient maritime infrastructure to uphold the maritime economy and broader global stability. [2] One such vital artery is the Red Sea, which allows access to the Suez Canal, and whose instability has increasingly drawn the international community's attention.

The Issue of the Red Sea

The Red Sea links the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal. This narrow waterway is a conduit for 12-15% of global trade, worth one trillion dollars per year. [3] Additionally, approximately 9% of the total seaborne-traded petroleum (including crude oil and refined petroleum products) passes through the Red Sea. [4] At the southern end of the Red Sea lies the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the most strategically significant shipping lanes globally. Approximately 6.2 million barrels of oil pass through the Bab el-Mandeb daily making it an essential route for the global energy market.

Instability driven primarily by state-backed forces and non-state actors. While state-backed forces are well-defined, non-state actors refer to independent organizations or militias that operate without official government support yet actively impact national and international affairs. This complex environment has often obscured the Red Sea's critical strategic importance. The key players contributing to maritime insecurity in the region are the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen and various Somali pirate groups, including the Ali Zwahila Group, Salebaan Clan, Afweyen

Group, and pirates linked to the Islamic extremist faction, al-Shabab. [5] The Houthis, entrenched in a civil war against Yemen's government, have extended their conflict into the maritime sphere by targeting vessels from 65 countries, including Greece, Panama, the Marshall Islands, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Qatar, as they traversed the Red Sea. [6][7] By employing missile strikes, naval mines, and drone boats, the Houthis have successfully disrupted shipping lanes and threatened international economic stabilityAdditionally, their connection with Iran grants them access to advanced weaponry and tactical support, fueling concerns about a proxy war unfolding at sea. [8]

Somali pirates have continued to target vessels in the region. While Somali piracy peaked in the early 2010s following international interventions, ongoing issues such as poverty, lawlessness, and the absence of a strong central government in Somalia keep piracy a persistent threat. During the height of their activity between 2005 and 2011, Somali-based pirates imposed an estimated $18 billion cost on the global economy. [9] Together, these actors pose a complex and ongoing challenge to ensuring maritime security in the Red Sea.

Meanwhile, the involvements of state actors, such as Iran backing the Houthis, and non-state actors, like pirates, have created a complex, multilayered security dilemma in the region. However, this is not the first time that maritime instability has been driven by state and non-state actors.

State-backed Disruption: The War of Oil Tankers in the Persian Gulf

A relevant historical comparison is the War of Oil Tankers, which occurred in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. In this conflict, Iran targeted oil tankers to disrupt Iraq's oil exports and assert control over the Gulf's shipping lanes. At the height of the confrontation between 1984 and 1987, 340 ships were attacked. [10] This form of asymmetric warfare—using mines, fast attack boats, and missile strikes—posed a significant threat to global oil supplies and raised alarm in capitals internationally.

The crisis in the Persian Gulf was eventually addressed through the intervention of a multinational coalition, primarily led by the United States. The coalition launched Operation Earnest Will, which provided naval escorts to safeguard oil tankers. In addition to defensive measures, the coalition took offensive actions, such as the launch of Operation Praying Mantis in 1988, during which U.S. forces attacked the Iranian frigates *Sabalan* and *Sahand* and struck Revolutionary Guard bases in the Sirri and Sassan oil fields. [11] This combination of military force and diplomatic pressure helped de-escalate the conflict, allowing the Persian Gulf to return to a state of relative stability.

Non-State-backed Disruption: Strait of Malacca

Another relevant example is the Strait of Malacca, which experienced a sharp rise in piracy by non-state actors in the early 2000s. Pirates operating in the strait posed a serious threat to commercial shipping, as the waterway is one of the world's busiest maritime corridors. Similar to the Red Sea, the Strait of Malacca plays a critical role in the transportation of oil and goods including coal, liquefied natural gas (LNG), textiles between East Asia and the Middle East, making it a key artery for international trade.[12]

In response to the piracy threat, regional powers such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia collaborated with international partners, including United States and India, to establish joint patrols and enhance regional security. A multinational coalition of naval forces was deployed to protect vessels and deter pirate attacks. While the coalition achieved some success, notably reducing piracy in the Strait of Malacca, which between 1993 and 2013 accounted for 41% of global pirate attacks, challenges still remain.[13] As of 2023, 55 out of 84 piracy incidents in Asia (roughly 65%) still occurred in this region.[14] However, the severity of these incidents, in terms of violence and the significance of targeted cargo, has notably decreased.

An argument can be made that the multinational coalition in the Persian Gulf achieved a higher level of success than the efforts in the Strait of Malacca. While the U.S.'s active presence in the Persian Gulf likely contributed to this difference, the nature of the actors involved also plays a role. Unlike the Persian Gulf, where state-backed actors like Iran were involved, the piracy in the Strait of Malacca is carried out by non-state actors, making it more difficult to exert pressure and enforce de-escalation.

Strategic Hindsight

The Red Sea's current instability shares similarities with the Persian Gulf during the War of Oil Tankers and the Strait of Malacca's piracy crisis. In both cases, the attacks on oil tankers and the broader concerns over maritime security were significant enough to prompt international intervention. In the Red Sea today, attacks on oil tankers by the Houthis and other actors have raised alarm bells within the international community, leading to calls for increased naval patrols and protective measures. Since November 2023, the Red Sea has seen over 90 attacks on merchant vessels, mainly by groups like the Houthis.[15] In response, multinational coalitions, such as Operation Prosperity Guardian (launched in December 2023), have increased naval patrols to counter these threats. While detailed data on the patrols' effectiveness is limited, reports indicate they have helped deter some attacks and provided crucial escorts for at-risk vessels. However, incidents like the October 28, 2024 Houthis' attack on Motaro Ship in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait highlight that,[16] despite their impact, the patrols have not fully eliminated the threats

However, the Red Sea situation also differs in two important ways. First, one key difference is the multilayered nature of the threat. While the War of Oil Tankers in the Persian Gulf was largely driven by a single state actor (Iran), and piracy in the Strait of Malacca was carried out by non-state actors (pirates), the Red Sea faces both types of threats simultaneously. This creates a more complex security environment, as solutions that work for one party may not be effective others.

Second, the internal instability of the surrounding nations—Somalia and Yemen—compounds the problem. Unlike the Persian Gulf and Strait of Malacca, where neighboring states had the capacity to enforce agreements and stabilize the situation once a deal was reached, Somalia and Yemen remain mired in conflict and lawlessness. This makes it difficult for any lasting solution to be implemented, as no central authority can enforce it.

Securing the Red Sea will require more than increased naval patrols and military presence. It will first require the stabilization of Somalia and Yemen, nations that are currently far from stable. In Yemen, this would mean either removing the Houthis from power or reaching a political settlement that brings them into the fold as a legitimate governing force. However, given the deep-seated enmity between the Houthis and the Yemeni government, as well as the broader geopolitical tensions involving Iran, such a settlement seems unlikely short term.

Similarly, stabilizing Somalia will require a concerted effort to strengthen the country's governing structures and address the root causes of piracy and militancy. Achieving stability in both Somalia and Yemen would likely necessitate ground operations, yet the international community has shown limited appetite for such an approach. In Yemen, where Houthi activity disrupts shipping routes, Iran's involvement is crucial, given its role as the Houthis' primary backer. However, Iran's active engagement in regional conflicts, particularly in Lebanon and Gaza, complicates any diplomatic outreach. Realistically, these factors suggest that fully securing Red Sea shipping routes from threats posed by both piracy and Houthi forces may remain an elusive goal in the near future.

Endgame

Although there has been no immediate response to the crisis in the Red Sea, the conflict's collateral damage continues to strain both the U.S. and global economies. The conflict has nearly tripled insurance costs, with the price to insure each container rising from $2,500 to $6,500.[17] As of early 2024, these rates have surged to between 0.7% and 2% of the vessel's value, depending on the specific route and risk assessment.[18] In addition, some shipping companies have opted to reroute their vessels to the Cape Route, which adds approximately two weeks to transit times and an extra $1 million to shipping costs.[19] The U.S. economy is also feeling the burden, as stabilizing operations in the Red Sea have already cost around $1 billion, a figure likely to increase.[20] Each time the U.S. Navy intercepts a Houthi missile, the cost of munitions alone ranges from $1 to $4 million, placing additional strain on American taxpayers.[21]

The Red Sea is expected to remain a region where instability is part of its reality, with international naval forces able to offer only limited containment amid growing regional threats. Recent developments add new layers of complexity: for example, Houthi attacks on ships perceived as supporting Israel's actions in Gaza have escalated, with reports suggesting that Russia is supplying the Houthis with targeting data to enhance their operations.[22] The Russian involvement has added another layer to an already complex and conflicted region, deepening the proxy dynamics and complicating the maritime security landscape. The destabilizing impact of Russian support for the Houthis intertwines with preexisting issues, such as the state collapse

in Yemen, Somalia's ongoing governance struggles, and the persistent influence of non-state actors like al-Shabab, all of which drive insecurity. These conditions collectively amplify maritime threats and undermine efforts to secure shipping lanes crucial to global trade. Without a comprehensive political strategy addressing these root causes—including foreign involvement, local governance failures, and non-state actor influence—the increased troop presence can only partially mitigate risks rather than resolve them. In this context, given the limited political will for a ground operation to fully stabilize the region, the most pragmatic course is to maintain the current naval patrols to safeguard key routes. At the same time, we must acknowledge that instability will remain part of the Red Sea's reality in the foreseeable future.

By embracing this partial reality, we can mitigate reactionary fluctuations in the insurance and energy markets, lessening psychologically driven pressures on global trade. This approach also enables shipping companies to make sustainable decisions, opting for the Cape Route for non-time-sensitive shipments and reserving the Red Sea's secure passages for essential cargo. Such a strategy allows the U.S. and its allies to allocate resources more effectively to protect these vital routes while adapting to the region's inherent volatility.

Decision Points

1. **Should major shipping companies be encouraged to adopt the Cape Route as a permanent option for non-time-sensitive shipping?**
2. **How might U.S. allies and other interested third parties, such as China and India with their friendly ties to Iran, engage Iran in negotiations to reduce Houthi attacks?**
3. **How could the United States effectively support local actors in Somalia to help them combat piracy through the proxies?**
4. **How can the United States leverage regional partnerships to develop a cooperative security framework that addresses both immediate threats in the Red Sea and the long-term stabilization of Yemen and Somalia?**

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