



The Red Sea Crisis 2023-2024: Regional Implications

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Figure 1: CENTCOM Intercepts Iranian Weapons Shipment Intended for Houthis /Centcom.mil/Photo/Gallery

Recently the Consortium's Military History Team podcasted about the situation in the Red Sea and its implications for the Indo-Pacific region. After the episode aired, several team members were asked to further expand their comments and perspectives. In

addition, Dr. Indu Saxena, Senior Fellow, provided her thoughts and compiled by Mr. Chris Kolakowski.

The Houthis and the Nature of the Threat

By Jose Antonio Custodio

“But once war is forced upon us, there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War's very object is victory, not prolonged indecision. In war there is no substitute for victory.”

These words uttered by General Douglas MacArthur in 1951 are seemingly lost in today's world of limited and inconclusive conflicts that belie their actual lethality and destruction. An example is the Korean and Vietnam Wars that due to the insistence by the United States then to limit the objectives of its military actions, it dragged the conflicts far longer than they should have with casualty rates approaching that of losses during the previous global wars. 2.5 million lost their lives in several years of fighting in Korea while an estimated 3.5 million were killed during the decades long Vietnam War. A peculiar feature of limited war is that one side and usually the more powerful one, restrains itself for whatever reason, while the weaker one commits totally to the war effort.

In a sense, limited war has the tendency to favor the side that adopts asymmetrical warfare as its strategy, because they approach it with the determination to win regardless of length of time and cost. Ironically, it is that side who has embraced what MacArthur emphasized six decades ago.

Meanwhile their stronger opponents languish in a bureaucratized approach to a war they already convinced themselves is unwinnable. More often than not, the insurgent commander does not seek to win battlefield victories as he just needs to ensure that his forces survive encounters because those are symbolic steps towards eventual victory. That is the common denominator between the North Vietnamese Army and the Taliban. The U.S. could boast of no battle lost, but the other side could also boast that their remnants survived all the battles they lost.

Which brings us to Houthis?

This terrorist organization has managed to survive all the ineffectual military attention employed against them by their immediate neighbors in the Arabian Peninsula. It is a testament to their survivability that despite having a banner that calls for the deaths of the U.S., Israel, and the Jews, and perhaps had there been more space on it, probably all their other enemies, that they were delisted as a terrorist organization in 2021 and stayed that way up until 2024 when they started attacking international shipping. It is evident that the U.S. led naval and air armada deployed against the Houthis will be content to degrade the ability of these terrorists to engage in mischief. Whenever statements by military spokesmen enumerate Houthi facilities eliminated and provide estimates of enemy capability reduced, one gets flashbacks of all those Vietnam War declarations of “light at the end of the tunnel” from MACV. Sometimes though, that light might be an oncoming train.

When all is said and done, the Houthis will be partially degraded. They will trumpet that they survived the attacks of the Great Satan. Iran will be pleased with its Houthi puppy and give it more treats of ballistic missiles and drones for them to create mischief another day.

Red Sea Impacts

By Captain Brendan Donnelly, USAF

Since the start of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip in October of 2023, in parallel the Houthis have also conducted their own battle in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The overall goal of the Houthis is to delay or cut off the humanitarian aid traversing the Red Sea on its way to Israel, and to execute this mission they have used anti-ship cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). These actions of course impact the conflict in Israel, but just 31 miles across the strait lays Eastern Africa, where the Houthis offensive directly impacts the neighboring countries. In particular Sudan, that has been called one of the largest humanitarian crises since conflict broke out in April of 2023 between the two military factions within.

The anti-ship cruise missiles and UAVs that are being engaged by a coalition of military vessels create a volatile shipping lane for any maritime traffic. Since 15% of global trade is conducted in the Red Sea, the impact will

be much larger than the Houthis desired effect against Israel.¹ These impacts include the delay of humanitarian aid, medicine and food that was destined for the Port of Sudan on the Red Sea. Instead of their usual route to the Port of Sudan through the Gulf of Aden, shipping vessels now take months to circle the Horn of Africa, through the Mediterranean and south to the port.² With this massive delay, the 48 million people in need of food, aid and medicine must wait while those around them that are injured may die from preventable illnesses or from hunger.³

As the Houthis continue their offensive and drive up the cost of global shipping through these areas, any country that need aid will suffer.⁴ In addition to those in need, with the strain on shipping this will place more pressure on the surrounding nations to assist such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kenya. In the near future we will very likely see that the continuous action in the Red Sea will ripple beyond the end of the conflict, and those that will be the most devastated are those in conflict areas in Africa and the Gaza Strip.

India's Strategic Options and the Red Sea Crisis

¹ Hope O'Dell, "From Oil to Ikea furniture: Red Sea Conflict and Panama Canal drought delay shipments and could increase emissions", *Blue marble*, (January 22, 2024), <https://globalaffairs.org/bluemarble/oil-ikea-furniture-red-sea-conflict-and-panama-canal-drought-delay-shipments-and-could>.

² Fred Harter, "Houthi attacks in Red Sea having a 'catastrophic' effect on aid to Sudan", *The Guardian*, (February 16, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/feb/16/houthi-attacks-in-red-sea-having-a-catastrophic-effect-on-aid-to-sudan>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Edith Lederer, "Russia and China clash with US and UK over attacks on Yemen Rebels for strikes on Red Sea ships", *AP News*, (February 14, 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/un-yemen-houthis-red-sea-us-russia-1caf7db8248f86efba31884d71a7fa69>.

By Dr. Indu Saxena

The Red Sea tensions have been a significant point of escalation since late October 2023, primarily triggered by the Yemeni Houthi rebels who retaliated against Israel's war in Gaza. It is noteworthy that India strongly [denounced](#) Hamas for their attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and unequivocally condemned it as an act of terrorism. However, India has reiterated its support for the protection of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire. It has called for the establishment of a humanitarian corridor in the conflict-ravaged region of Gaza.

In December 2023, the United States [launched](#) "Operation Prosperity Guardian," a multinational security initiative aimed at securing the waterways in the Red Sea, one of the world's busiest and most strategic shipping lanes. The operation, which involves a combined maritime task force, aims to counter piracy, smuggling, and other maritime threats that could undermine global trade and security. The coalition includes [more than 20 countries](#) such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel, Sri Lanka among others.

However, despite the widespread participation of many countries, India has chosen to refrain from joining the coalition forces. India's decision could be attributed to its traditionally non-aligned foreign policy, prioritizing maintaining strategic autonomy and avoiding entanglement in foreign conflicts. Additionally, India may have concerns about the coalition's alignment with the interests of certain regional powers. Nevertheless, India remains committed to

ensuring the safety and security of its maritime interests and maintaining good relations with all countries in the region.



Figure 2: INS Sumitra Carries out Anti-Piracy Operations //IMAGES/Indian/Navy

The Indian navy has been the first to respond to situations in the Indian Ocean, deploying a dozen navy ships to conduct [anti-piracy drills](#) in the Arabian Sea rescuing [Fishing Vessel Al Naeemi and her Crew \(19 Pakistani Nationals\) from 11 Somali Pirates](#). When it comes to India's strategic choices, the country has a strong relationship with Iran based on shared history, culture, and civilization. India also has close ties with Israel, collaborating on defense equipment and technology sharing. Furthermore, India-U.S. relations

have entered a new era, with a focus on advancing their relations in the Indo-Pacific construct.

In essence, India is determined to assert itself as a resident power in the Indian Ocean, a strategic maritime region that holds immense economic and geopolitical significance. To achieve this goal, India intends to continue pursuing a foreign policy that emphasizes the peaceful settlement of disputes and promotes cooperation and partnership with other countries.

It's worth highlighting that India's stance on international conflicts is underpinned by a commitment to upholding international law and safeguarding the principles of justice and peaceful resolution of disputes. In particular, India supports a [two-state solution](#) to the ongoing conflict in West Asia, a region that has long been marred by sectarian violence and political instability.

Overall, India's foreign policy reflects its aspirations to be a responsible and influential global actor, one that is committed to promoting peace, stability, and prosperity both within its borders and beyond.

Military Reflections

By 1st Lieutenant Grant T. Willis, USAF

On October 7th, 2023, Hamas launched a massive terrorist attack into Israel, killing over 1,200 Israeli civilians and security forces, sparking a new war and crisis in the Middle East. The conflict has spread beyond the borders of Gaza and Israel into a regional struggle between the United States and its

allies and Iran and its proxies. One area or front of this regional war is in the Red Sea between the coalition of international maritime partners, led by the United States under the name Operation Prosperity Guardian, and the Iranian-backed Houthi Rebels in Yemen. As the Israeli Defense Forces battle their way through Gaza and look with caution to their borders with Syria and Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen have launched a campaign of attacks by drones, missiles, and other systems to impede global shipping through the strategic Bab-el-Mandeb Straits that connect the Red Sea and Suez Canal (including the southern Israeli port of Eilat) to the Indian Ocean.

The United States Navy has stepped into the challenge of escorting whatever global shipping remains brave enough to sail through these now threatened waters alongside their allies and partners including the Royal Navy. As this campaign is ongoing, there are many reflections and lessons the United States and its Military can learn from this campaign to build our combat experience against anti-ship cruise/ballistic missile, unmanned aerial vehicle, and unmanned surface vessel attacks in the maritime domain. As the U.S. prepares to deter and if necessary, fight the People's Republic of China's (PRC) People's Liberation Army (PLA) over the fragile peace that exists in Western Pacific and Taiwan, the Americans can learn valuable lessons in an active combat environment that may forgive mistakes that may not be as easily forgiven in a great power conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

The current Middle East crisis has provided the Americans with a perspective not often experienced by our own Armed Forces at a larger scale.

Defending against attacks by more precise weapon systems from state and non-state actors alike will prove a challenge to any force not accustomed to fighting them, especially one which is used to a technological advantage and used to fighting enemy units incapable of mounting significant fire support assets. The Iranian-backed string of organizations across the Middle East possesses one-way attack UAVs, unmanned surface vessels (which have been used by the Ukrainians to great effect, sinking many ships of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in the concurrent Russo-Ukraine War). Learning to fight these types of more accurate and prolific systems in a lower intensity environment like the Red Sea prior to a Western-Pacific campaign will be a welcomed exercise to those in the U.S. Military who can trail weapons and tactics, hone skills, and in some recent cases, make American military history. For example, AV8B Harrier II pilot Capt. Earl Ehrhart of Marine Fighter Squadron VMFA-211 onboard *USS Bataan*, has become the first Marine "Ace" since Maj John F. Bolt during the Korean War by shooting down seven Houthi drones, protecting civilian shipping and naval vessels within the Allied Task Force over the Red Sea. The skills learned by VMFA-211, as well as those of the Task Force will be vital in preparation to deter and if need be, defeat a communist attempt to grab the free island of Taiwan. It must also be noted that if the Americans and our Allies are taking notes of the performance of our forces in this present crisis, our enemies will also be carefully studying our practices with great interest.

Photo # USMC A348322 Maj. John F. Bolt with F-86, 1953



(Climbing into a U.S. Air Force F-86 Sabre jet fighter. Photo is dated 13 July 1953, two days after Major Bolt shot down his fifth and sixth MiG-15s to

become the only U.S. Marine Corps air Ace of the Korean War. He achieved the aerial victories while flying with the 5th Air Force as an exchange pilot. The original caption states: Major Bolt, who shot down six Japanese planes during World War II, has flown 89 jet fighter-bomber missions with the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, which has been assigned only close support and interdiction missions in Korea. He has flown 37 Saberjet sweeps with the 5th Air Force, which is carrying the air war to the MiGs. Photographed by TSgt. Tom Donaldson. U.S. Marine Corps Photograph.

<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhnc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nara-series/usmc-series/USMC-100000/USMC-A348322.html>

2.)



(A view of ballistic missiles during a military parade held by the Houthis to mark the anniversary of their takeover in Sanaa, Yemen September 21, 2023. REUTERS/Khaled Abdullah, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemen-houthis-flex-military-muscle-parade-riyadh-seeks-ceasefire-2023-09-21>)

3.)



(Capt Earl Ehrhart standing in front of one of the USS Bataan's Harrier jets, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68227200>)

4.)



(Guided-missile destroyer USS Gravely (DDG-107) launches Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles in response to increased Iranian-backed Houthi malign behavior in the Red Sea Jan. 12, 2024. US Navy Photo, <https://news.usni.org/2024/02/05/usni-news-timeline-conflict-in-the-red-sea>)

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