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Analytical Article

Globalizing Regional Security and Ineffective Deterrence in the Red Sea

The Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip subsequent to the October 7 attacks brought to light a significant obstacle to maritime security in the Middle East, particularly in the Red Sea, where the Houthis' attacks disrupt maritime navigation.

This brings into question the efficacy of United States initiatives to protect shipping lanes in the region, considering that they have been the most effective in comparison to other regional security arrangements.

Ineffective Deterrence

The United States has consistently participated significantly and actively in maritime security arrangements owing to its military presence in the Middle East. Several joint maritime task forces were created to safeguard navigation in the Arabian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the connecting maritime regions, specifically from Iranian and Houthi attacks. Nevertheless, the efficacy of the United States' current role is being questioned due to several factors, most notably:

- **US Pressures on Regional Actors**

The Arab countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, aimed to actively engage in maritime security arrangements in the Red Sea region and safeguard it against Houthi threats. Nevertheless, the United States did not back these endeavors.

Contrarily, it declined to offer intelligence support to Arab initiatives aimed at freeing Yemen's Al Hudaydah from Houthi control in the middle of 2018 or even to supply the required equipment for participating in mine clearance operations. The United States provided justifications, stating that Al Hudaydah port is the only entry point for humanitarian aid.

In February 2021, the Biden administration, upon taking office, delisted the Houthis from the US list of designated terrorist organizations, citing allegations of preventing any hindrance to the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The US administration at the time acknowledged being cognizant of the group's malevolent activities and hostility, yet resolved to only sanction a few of its leaders. Despite the Houthis' escalating regional threats, the US stance remained unchanged.

Given this context, it is difficult for Arab countries to align with the United States in its military operations against the Houthis in Yemen. This is particularly true considering the Houthis' assertion that they are utilizing their military operations to halt Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip. The United States government also lacks a coherent regional strategy to counter the Houthi threat. It should be noted that the recent actions taken by the United States against the Houthis in Yemen were mainly driven by their support for Israel in its conflict with Gaza. Overall, Washington's plans to uphold maritime security in the region following the conclusion of Israel's war on the Gaza Strip remain uncertain, given the inadequacies of previous US endeavors in the post-October 7 war.

- **Inadequate US Arrangements to Secure Maritime Navigation**

US efforts to ensure navigation security in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea region are manifestly deficient, as demonstrated by the American Navy's inability to prevent Iran from seizing civilian vessels in the Arabian Gulf under bogus pretexts and Washington's contentment with recording these occurrences. This compromised the efficacy of Joint Task Force 153, whose objective is to ensure the safety of navigation in the Arabian Gulf waters.

Hence, the United States needs to change its strategy. Washington excessively depends on drone ships for monitoring potential ship hijackings. However, in September 2022, Iran successfully hijacked two American drone ships and removed cameras from them. Eventually, Iran returned the drones to the United States, albeit without the cameras, following a confrontation with American destroyers. Notably, Iran is employing reverse engineering to replicate American camera models, thereby bolstering its surveillance and espionage capabilities. Consequently, American endeavors not only face shortcomings but also inadvertently aid in enhancing Iran's technological prowess.

- **Lack of Effective Regional Frameworks**

One approach to address the difficulties related to maritime security in the Middle East was the establishment of the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in January 2020. Despite the Council's goal of ensuring safe maritime navigation, it did not create any unified forces to address threats to maritime security. This was the case even when the Houthis carried out a series of attacks to jeopardize navigation in the Red Sea, let alone the flow of Iranian weapons to Yemen's Houthis, which violated the international embargo on supplying weapons to Yemen. As a result, in April 2022, the United States, in collaboration with regional and international countries, formed Joint Task Force 153, which currently comprises approximately 39 countries. This indicates that the Council has been unable to address threats to navigation, a situation that is likely to persist despite the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

- **US Attacks against the Houthis**

In December 2023, the United States Naval Forces Central Command

(NAVCENT) launched Operation Prosperity Guardian, a coalition of 22 countries. Between October 17, 2023, and February 14, 2024, the Houthis launched over forty attacks on commercial ships. In retaliation, on January 11, 2024, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries conducted coordinated strikes on 60 Houthi targets across 16 locations in Yemen.

Despite US and British attacks on the Houthis, navigation in the Red Sea remains unsafe. Major maritime transport companies see that security in the Red Sea region is declining rather than improving. Instead, it is not implausible that the Houthis would use the card of maritime navigation to further their political objectives in conflicts other than the Arab-Israeli conflict, such as the internal Yemeni conflict, or to advance Iranian interests.

- **Washington's Strategy to Avoid Escalation with Iran**

Although American policy seeks to escalate tensions with Iranian militias in the region, it avoids a direct confrontation with Tehran, as evidenced by Washington's decision not to attack the Iranian spy ship MV Behshad in the Red Sea. Despite Washington's suspicions that the MV

Behshad was gathering intelligence on cargo ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, it opted to simply conduct electronic attacks on the vessel to prevent it from sharing information with the Houthis. This indicates that Washington presently avoids initiating a new front against Iran given its preoccupation with the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. This may serve as a motivation for Iran to persist in its efforts to pose a threat to navigation in the region. Consequently, it is imperative to implement effective measures to counteract this threat in the future.

Globalizing Regional Security

Concerned major powers are attentive to any threats to maritime security. Notably, the United States spearheaded the aforementioned maritime security initiatives. In addition, looking back at past instances of dealing with maritime security threats in the region, we find that they were of a global nature. Hence, the optimal formula entails the amalgamation of regional endeavors with international ones.

Nevertheless, in light of the United States' predilection towards Israel

within the context of its conflict against Gaza, the Houthis have capitalized on this predicament to demonstrate their capacity to jeopardize maritime security. If Washington fails to prevent them from posing a threat to maritime security, it is probable that the Houthis will attempt to leverage their newfound influence to pursue political objectives in other areas. This is especially true considering that they –with Iran’s assistance– obtained ballistic and wing missiles capable of endangering navigation. While Western military vessels are equipped with sophisticated air and missile defense systems capable of intercepting Houthi drones and missiles, their effectiveness is constrained by the quantity of interceptor missiles they can transport and the additional difficulty of restocking depleted stocks.

Even with Western defences in place, the Houthis persisted in their attacks on ships, and the variety of their tactics posed a danger to navigational safety. Against this, European countries initiated the ASPIDES mission on February 19, deploying 3 European warships and airborne early warning systems to the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and nearby waters in order to assist American endeavors in ensuring safe navigation.

Conversely, however, China and Russia do not endorse the ongoing American efforts aimed at ensuring maritime security. This discrepancy can be attributed not only to their differing interpretations of the Houthi threats and their connection to the ongoing war in Gaza but also to the fact that Washington’s inability to mitigate the Houthi threats raises doubts about the efficacy of the US’s role in ensuring safe navigation. This paves the way for Moscow and Beijing to ramp up their influence in the Middle East while simultaneously promoting their diplomatic approach, which promotes dialogue and diplomacy.

In conclusion, the recent Houthi threats to navigation in the Red Sea have demonstrated both their capacity to jeopardize maritime security and the inability of the United States to halt these threats. Considering Washington’s historical disapproval of Arab endeavors to restrict Houthi threats, it is anticipated that Arab countries will refrain from engaging in American initiatives unless Washington applies pressure on Israel to cease its assaults on the Gaza Strip or adopts a more comprehensive approach to addressing security challenges arising from Yemen, which are projected to persist even after the cessation of the Gaza conflict.