

Western Strategy in the Red Sea and Deterrence Options

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Introduction:-

The armed Houthi group has recently announced an expansion of its operations targeting ships, reaching to the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. With each expansion announcement by the group, Western policy increasingly reflects failure in deterring the Houthi movement or destroying its ballistic missiles and drones.

Since mid-November, the Houthis have been attacking commercial vessels passing through the Red Sea. These assaults have disrupted global trade routes between Europe and Asia, leading to increasing shipping costs. Over the past few months, the United States and its allies have conducted a series of military actions to deter the Houthi group from launching ballistic missile and drone attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea.

However, these Western strikes have been ineffective and the naval build-up in the Red Sea has not intimidated the Houthis; instead, it has encouraged them to escalate their attacks. This indicates flaws in the strategy and planning of Western powers. As a result, the Houthis strategically exploit these attacks to escalate their demands, using them as a tool to force compliance even after the end of the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip. The key questions now are: What are the flaws in the Western strategy in the Red Sea? And what options do Western powers have after the failure of their previous strategy?

International Operations in the Red Sea

There are currently three international operations taking place in the Red Sea:

1. **Operation Prosperity Guardian:** This operation was announced by the United States in December of last year. Notably, NATO's involvement in this operation is limited, with only the United States and the United Kingdom taking major roles.

2. **Operation Poseidon Archer:** In addition to "Operation Prosperity Guardian", the United States and the United Kingdom launched a different operation on the 12th of January to target Houthi areas. Warplanes and destroyers from the Red Sea have been carrying out airstrikes on Houthi weapon depots. According to the group, these operations have resulted in killing of 40 Houthi fighters but have also failed.

3. **ASPIDES:** The European Union announced this operation, which began in February. Its primary objective was to protect ships from naval attacks. ASPIDES currently consists of four warships and air assets, with an initial duration of one year and a budget of 8 Million Euros. The operation is managed from a military base in Larissa, a city in central Greece.

Deterrence Strategy against Houthis

In the early days of United States and the United Kingdom military operations against the Houthis, the coalition claimed to follow a "calculated approach" to deterrence. The military strikes were not intended to defeat the Houthis but to demonstrate Western intent and capability to strike and retaliate. In short, the purpose was only to prevent further Houthi attacks (a policy of deterrence).

However, despite these efforts, Houthis have shown determination and ability to continue their attacks in the Red Sea. The rules of engagement, which were initially established, have become more fluid over time as Houthi operations expand in response to the escalation of US-UK coalition attacks. This raises the question: What was the nature of the "calculated approach" employed against the Houthis during the past period?

The US-UK strategy involved a combination of military action and diplomatic pressure, proceeding along two parallel tracks:

1. First: Military Action

The military strategy against the Houthis in the Red Sea was based on three main phases: deterrence, disruption, and destruction. The transition between these phases depended on the evolution of military operations and the Houthis' actions.

- Deterrence: During the deterrence phase, international military mobilization aimed to intimidate the Houthis in the Red Sea and force them to stop their attacks. This involved limited air attacks and increased maritime surveillance to prevent the flow of Iranian weapons to the group.

- Disruption: In this phase, strikes in Yemen were expanded to weaken the Houthis' capabilities. The American and British military attacks focused on a wide range of military equipment to make it difficult for the Houthis to launch future attacks.

- Destruction: If the Houthis continued their attacks, the Western coalition has the option of moving into targeting all elements of the Houthis' military capabilities, including leadership and military members.

The US-UK coalition believed that targeting the Iranian resupply network, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2216, could deplete the Houthis' stockpiles. This included intercepting ships supplying weapons to the Houthis and disrupting the information flow used to target commercial vessels. For instance, the U.S launched a cyber-attack on the Iranian ship "Behshad," which likely provided targeting information to the Houthis.

In this context, Western strategists think that this would not stop Houthi attacks "but they will struggle to continue their attacks without the military tools - expertise or manpower - to sustain their illegal attacks".

Second: Diplomatic Pressure

The British-American alliance secured a UN Security Council resolution on "protecting navigation" in the Red Sea. The White House also designated the Houthis as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" organization, proposing the cessation of maritime attacks as a condition for delisting. Financial sanctions were imposed on Houthi and Iranian supporter networks, with the UK participating in similar sanctions against Houthi leaders.

The United Kingdom sent diplomatic messages to Iran, urging it to use its influence to stop the maritime attacks. The United States engaged in talks with Iran, facilitated by Oman, to leverage Tehran's influence over the Houthis. However, Iran refused to cooperate.

The European Union and the United States are involved in efforts with the UN Secretary-General's envoy in Yemen to reach a peace agreement that would ensure the cessation of Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. But discussions did not address the Houthis' arsenal of advanced weapons which could potentially be used as a political lever in the future to force their opponents and the international community to implement the demands of the group and its Iranian backers.

Flaws in Western Strategy

The Houthi attacks, including the sinking of the cargo ship "Rubimar" in late February and the disabling of the Barbados-flagged vessel "Real Confidence" in early March—resulting in the death of three crew members and injuries to others—demonstrate that no option has yet succeeded in de-escalating the Red Sea crisis. Additionally, the Houthis have unveiled new weapons, such as remotely controlled underwater unmanned vehicles, and have hinted at further surprises.

There are several factors that contribute to the flaws in the Western strategy to deter the Houthis: The reaction of the West and key Red Sea navigation stakeholders—including the major powers—seemed disjointed.

1. First: - Absent of key stakeholders

The United States securing a UN Security Council resolution to protect ships in the Red Sea did not legally justify attacks on Yemeni land. It can lead to increased disagreements among international powers on how to effectively address the Houthi challenge. China, which has most of its trade to Europe through the Red Sea, has remained neutral, although it has sent more naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden where it has a forward military base in Djibouti. Likewise, India has sent more warships to the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden, refusing to engage in a direct confrontation with Houthi attacks.

The rerouting of trade through alternative routes, such as the Cape of Good Hope, has further impacted the Red Sea's importance as a trade route. [An estimated 120\\$ billion](#) of Chinese imports and \$160 billion of Chinese exports flow through Bab al-Mandab every year. This is not a small amount of China's global trade. [Nearly 90% of goods linked to India](#) and the Western Hemisphere, both incoming and shipped from India, which used to pass through the Red Sea.

Regionally, United States and European policies over the past decade toward the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Egypt, and Sudan have made them lose any support for their operations in the Red Sea. The Houthis have been a constant threat to international navigation throughout their war against the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Saudi-led Arab coalition supporting it (2015-present).

Western powers including the United States and Britain have ignored calls from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states about the impact of Houthi attacks and the naval mines they have laid on commercial vessels and international navigation. During the war, the Houthis targeted commercial and military vessels belonging to Saudi Arabia and the UAE and attacked Saudi ports. On the contrary, Western powers pressured to stop a 2018 military operation by the government and its allies to expel the Houthis from Hodeida, the coastal governorate where they launched most of their attacks on navigation.

Announcing military operations in a geographical area without the presence of key stakeholders and the participation of regional countries whose national security is linked to the security of the important sea lane was an early political failure of the Western approach in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. This is why the United States and Britain were unable to use their military bases and assets in regional countries to participate in operations against the Houthis. The British Royal Air Force, for example, had to use its military base in Cyprus for attacks in Yemen instead of using its base in the Sultanate of Oman.

2. Second: - Disunity and Weakness

United States failed to include major European powers in its military operation against the Houthis, known as “Guardian of Prosperity,” announced in December. NATO lacked a strategy for protecting navigation from Houthi attacks, which may have been influenced by the Gaza war and the U.S.’s full support for Israel for its genocides against the Palestinians. This made European countries wary of being perceived as supporting these crimes. This fear may have been one of the main motives for the Europeans’ refusal to enter “Guardians of Prosperity.” It is clear that the matter goes beyond that, as the announcement of the operation seemed to be made without their full consent, causing tension between the U.S and Spain defense ministers, as the latter announced its non-participation along with other European countries.

On the other hand, the EU’s “ASPIDES” operation aimed to “restore and maintain freedom of navigation” in the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf as well as the mission’s “defensive mandate”. This means that it would not engage in attacks on the Yemeni mainland. The four-frigate mission was not representative of the weight of the NATO alliance, which is facing the dangers of Russia’s war in Ukraine. The frigates have been attacked in the Red Sea: a Danish frigate left because it failed to intercept a Houthi attack in March; in April, a French frigate left because it ran out of ammunition.

Third: - Miscalculation

The United States and Western powers thought that deploying warships to the Red Sea would be enough to frighten the Houthis and their Iranian backers. However, the West’s cautious approach to avoiding escalation in the region was interpreted by the Houthis as a sign of weakness.

The miscalculation by United States and the United Kingdom regarding the threat posed by the Houthis in the Red Sea—a crucial passageway for 12% of global trade—was compounded by underestimating the group’s capabilities, concealed stockpiles, Iranian supply networks, and the lack of intelligence on their munitions and capacities, [leading to short-sighted policies](#).

On January 13, the day after the start of Operation Poseidon Archer, “Lieutenant General Douglas Sims, Director of Operations for the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that the strikes had achieved their objectives of limiting the Houthis’ ability to carry out complex drone and missile attacks. In contrast, subsequent weeks have witnessed more robust and extensive Houthi operations.

Fourth: - Incomplete Strategy

Despite Western strategists’ efforts on a military operation in the Red Sea, they failed to connect it to any Yemeni political process that could protect the results achieved militarily. The Houthis are expected to continue launching naval attacks in the near future. [According to US intelligence](#), which notes that the Houthis are “domestically producing a lot of weaponry while also continuing to receive support from Iran.”

Options for Protecting International Navigation

The first months of operations in the Red Sea reveal that the Western strategy has failed. The solutions proposed by the US-British alliance towards the Houthis indicate their entry into a state of war- without an intelligence base or support from allies in the region or the world. This suggests that the current deterrence approach is far from achieving its goal of protecting navigation and weakening the Houthis' capabilities. The only solution seems to be ending the war in Gaza.

But will the Houthis stop their maritime attacks if the Israeli aggression ceases, especially after realizing the impact of their actions in gaining local and international momentum and presenting themselves as a force to be reckoned with? The history of the Houthis tells us otherwise. Even if Houthis temporarily cease attacks, they are likely to find new justifications to resume threatening navigation to achieve internal gains.

The current Western deterrence options against the Houthis seem very inadequate. They range from meeting some of their demands to adopting a “destruction” strategy with significant escalation against the armed group.

1. First: - Meeting Houthi Demands

The United States and the European Union are engaged in negotiations with the Houthis, mediated by Oman in Muscat. It is unknown what the Houthis are demanding to stop their maritime operations. It is possible that the Houthis, seeking to leverage the influence gained from their attacks, will impose new conditions to cease their attacks. The Houthis might offer to end their attacks in the Red Sea in exchange for a complete and unconditional Saudi military withdrawal from supporting the internationally recognized government and granting the group legitimacy to govern the country. It appears the Americans are offering this to the Houthis, pushing for an UN-brokered peace agreement that meets their conditions by stopping Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthis might also [have external demands](#), such as asking the US and its allies to lift all sanctions on Iran, reflecting Tehran's insistence that the sanctions constitute an “economic war” against the Iranian people.

It is notable that this option highlights what Western strategists fail to see. It is the potential threat posed by the Houthis in the Red Sea and their continued display of this threat in the future, whether in the Red Sea or against Saudi Arabia and other regional countries. As long as they retain their strategic arsenal, the group will use attacks as a political weapon internally, as they have done previously by targeting Saudi Arabia and the UAE to pressure the Yemeni government. Meanwhile, the Houthi group lacks popularity in Yemen, including in the areas they control, where their governance has failed amid accumulated issues of corruption and mismanagement.

2. Second: - Major Military Operation

Some American and British military strategists insist that the only way to end the Red Sea crisis is a “destruction” operation, aiming to destroy the armed group's arsenal to force them into submission. They argue that the West—specifically the United States—must defend the principle of protecting navigation, which cannot be threatened by an armed group. Besides defending this principle, they want to send messages to Russia in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, and to China in the South China Sea.

However, a major military operation could lead to an internal war in Yemen involving ground forces. Launching air strikes and causing significant destruction to the Houthi group or targeting its leaders could provoke the Houthis into attacking Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It could also push Iran into a battle to defend the Houthis, something both Tehran and Washington are trying to avoid preventing further escalation in a fragile region. Additionally, this option reinforces Russian and Iranian propaganda that the West is rushing to colonize and occupy countries that refuse to submit to its policies.

Therefore, this option has less support among Western strategists and decision-makers.

3. Third: - Military Operations and Supporting the Yemeni Government

This option calls for balancing costs and risks, making them acceptable by escalating attacks on Houthi targets, including their leaders and weapon depots, while simultaneously supporting Yemeni forces opposing the Houthis to regain control over areas held by the armed group. This would push the Houthis to change their course in threatening maritime navigation.

However, following this option could provoke both the Houthis and Iranians, expand the civil war in Yemen, and increase the humanitarian crisis that has plagued the country after ten years of war. Moreover, as regional players distance themselves from such a coalition, there is a risk of drawing United States forces into Yemen. This could also internationalize the Yemeni conflict, involving other major powers like Russia and possibly China.

Solutions Related to the Yemenis:-

In light of the current circumstances, it is difficult to find middle-ground solutions to the Red Sea crisis and deterring Houthi attacks is challenging. Western strategic thinking has consistently overlooked the future of the Houthi arsenal, a trend that has persisted since the onset of the Saudi-led Arab coalition's operations to support the internationally recognized government in 2015. With the Houthis controlling the capital, Sanaa, and receiving continuous support from Iran, they will remain a threat to international navigation and a key player in any future political negotiations or power-sharing arrangements.

The possible solution to the Houthi dilemma remains related to the Yemenis themselves and their ability to confront the group. The future course of the Houthi movement, its ability to maintain cohesion, protect its military capabilities, and uphold its political influence in the areas under its control are usually linked to complex local and regional factors.



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