

Security of the Red Sea Arena and Strait of Bab Al Mandab

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Key Takeaways

- An integral part of global trade routes, the Red Sea and Strait of Bab Al Mandab are of increasing regional and global importance. Security concerns along the coasts and growing investment interest in the Horn of Africa underscore the need for freedom of navigation and free flow of commerce.
- Shifting regional dynamics and the American security withdrawal from the Middle East have led Gulf states to take on more national and regional security responsibilities leading to a diversification of security partners as well as investment in domestic maritime capabilities.
- Great power dynamics are also at play within these strategic waters; both Washington and Beijing have some degree of military presence in the Horn while Chinese investments in the sub-Saharan region continue to grow.

The maritime security in the Bab Al Mandab Strait and Red Sea are of increasing international and regional concern. The Bab Al Mandab chokepoint, located between the conflict-dense Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and the Red Sea arena, have become both a theater for regional rivalries to play out and a launchpad for piracy, human trafficking, and terrorism. American, Saudi, and Emirati vessels within the strait have been attacked or threatened with rising frequency over the past few years, and Houthi attacks in 2018 led to a temporary halt on oil shipments from Saudi Aramco. Littoral states like Somalia have been used as a haven for pirates as well as terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and its Somalia-based offshoot, Al Shabaab.



A temporary halt to Saudi oil shipments through the Bab Al-Mandeb strait has heightened security concerns. (Arab News)

The potential for development across numerous sectors within the Horn, due to its key location at the gateway of the African continent, be they construction, infrastructure, or real estate, has also contributed to the region's rising geo-strategic significance. Of particular importance to the Gulf players is sub-Saharan Africa's food production capabilities. The impacts of the pandemic on supply chain disruptions highlighted the GCC's overdependence on food imports, pushing food security high on their lists of policy priorities. In addition to investments in the aforementioned sectors, cooperation in logistics, agriculture, and agri-tech is also on the rise, which will support trade flows between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn, emphasizing the need to secure its waters. Saudi Arabia's mega-project, Neom, and recently established Red Sea Development Company, among other initiatives along its Red Sea coast, put the area at the heart of much of the kingdom's development and investment plans.



Neom Project



Red Sea Project

Global trade is also strongly tied to the stability of the Strait of Bab Al Mandab and the Red Sea with more than 10% of seaborne cargo transiting its waters, including the majority of Asian trade with Europe. Approximately USD 700 billion of trade annually crosses the strait on its way to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean. 1.5 million barrels of crude oil also move daily through the strategic waterways with nearly 10% of Saudi Arabia's total crude exported to Europe through this route. Additionally, the bulk of Europe's crude from the broader Middle East comes through the Red Sea.



Saudi Arabia, UAE win membership in IMO Council for 2022-2023

These, alongside broader concerns related to regional instability, have led the Gulf states to place the Horn under the umbrella of their regional security purview. The diminishing US security involvement in the Middle East and the conflict in Yemen too are playing no small part in amplifying the need for Gulf states to implement new foreign policy strategies that are more independent and pragmatic and that seek to improve regional stability.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey have been particularly involved in conflict resolution within the Horn. Shifting regional dynamics across the GCC and the Saudi-Iranian conflict have been fueling the race for influence within the sub-Saharan, be that economic or military. Driven by their respective foreign policies and national interests, vested parties have been vying for leverage through establishment of military bases, investment in logistics and ports, or through economic or political support.

Gulf states have been taking on more regional and individual security responsibilities and there has been a push to increase involvement in multilateral maritime coalitions and to establish some degree of regional cooperation. Saudi Arabia launched the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden on January 6th, 2020. However, despite the acknowledged need for cooperation and coalition building, competition for leverage and influence in the arena remains high. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE were elected to the International Maritime Organization in 2021, emphasizing the strong regional engagement with maritime security. Kuwait has also been enhancing its participation in regional maritime safekeeping, taking a turn leading the Combined Maritime Force Mission after Saudi Arabia concluded its rotation in early 2021 – continuing the break from the task force's traditionally Western leadership.

Gulf spending on naval assets has also been on the rise; aware of the power of deterrence, there is a mounting desire to enhance domestic capabilities through training and acquisition of hardware. Riyadh, Doha, and Abu Dhabi have all been expanding their naval capabilities through investing in corvettes, frigates, and submarines and conducting naval training exercises. The GCC is collaborating with a broader range of security partners through naval training drills, signing of agreements, or purchasing of equipment, thus internationalizing their security alliances as Washington looks to decrease its security involvement in the region.

US interest in the Horn of Africa, however, has yet to wane as China's investments in the sub-Saharan continue to grow. Likely seeking to strengthen American presence at the strategic chokepoint, the US Navy 5th Fleet based in Bahrain has added the Red Sea, Bab Al Mandab, and the Gulf of Aden to its mandate. A new task force, Task Force 59, has also been launched in support of the fleet containing airborne, sailing, and underwater drones. At the same time, the largest American base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti also remains active – underscoring the ever-growing importance of Red Sea security on a global level and the US' desire to remain on its shores. This is likely of serious interest to American leadership considering China's first overseas naval base and largest semi-permanent military base outside of Asia is located in Djibouti (established in 2017). While the 2,000 troops of the People's Liberation Army do not present a meaningful military threat, their presence has enhanced Beijing's foothold in the arena. China's policy of noninterference however, still holds, and is part and parcel of its strategy to strengthen its ties with Red Sea players. Chinese engagement in the Horn is primarily driven by economic ambitions seen in the signing of numerous partnerships with Djibouti and Ethiopia, where the majority of China's focus lies. Aligning itself with both governments' development goals, Beijing has been able to increase its leverage and exposure to the region, as well as forward its Maritime Silk Road, an essential component of the Belt and Road Initiative.

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