



GNSI DECISION BRIEF

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 Zuhayr 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 stability. Additionally, 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

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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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