

Maritime Disruption in Yemen: The Making of a Hybrid Red Sea Order

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Abstract

Since late 2023, Houthi forces in Yemen have employed drones and missiles to disrupt commercial shipping in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, necessitating global rerouting and prompting multilateral naval responses. These events challenge the conventional view that the land domain is fragmented and prone to conflict, while the maritime domain is cooperative and regime-governed. To explain the developments in Yemen, this article applies regional security complex theory, arguing that the Red Sea is evolving into a hybrid security complex where land- and sea-based threats, actors, and logics are converging. The analysis of the Yemeni case demonstrates how the combination of cross-border rivalries and territorial control by insurgents can enable the projection of force into maritime spaces, undermining global shipping and security. In the absence of progress on land-based governance, maritime insecurity is likely to compel external stakeholders to oscillate between temporary trade-protection measures and longer-term political stabilization efforts. The analysis highlights the need for integrated, cross-domain approaches to regional security that address the interplay of nonstate actors, infrastructural vulnerabilities, and geopolitical competition shaping the emerging Red Sea order.

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In late 2023, the conflict in Yemen spilled decisively into the maritime domain. The Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite armed group that had won control over major portions of the country's north and west, including the capital of Sanaa, began targeting commercial vessels in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait with Iranian-supplied drones and missiles. These attacks, purportedly driven by solidarity with Palestine, disrupted global shipping, drove up insurance premiums, and prompted the United States and European countries to step up naval patrols. In late 2025, despite heavy retaliation by the Trump administration and by Israel, the Houthi strikes continued.

This sudden turn in the Yemen war underscores the erosion of the traditional distinction between terrestrial and maritime stability in the Red Sea, which has emerged as a strategic hub at the crossroads of African, Middle Eastern, and global power dynamics. Its geopolitical significance derives from linking the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean through two chokepoints: the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandeb. This vital maritime environment exists alongside persistent instability onshore, particularly in Yemen and along the African littoral, where fragile states, regional rivalries, and violent conflicts are the norm.

This article examines the evolving relationship between the two dimensions of security in the Red Sea: terrestrial conflict formation, characterized by mutual distrust and proxy interventions; and a maritime security regime historically sustained by shared interests in freedom of navigation and international trade. The Red Sea is now showing signs of a profound structural shift, with the boundaries between land-based and maritime security systems becoming increasingly blurred. In analyzing this transformation, the article builds on regional security complex theory (RSCT) to introduce the concept of a hybrid regional security complex. Unlike traditional area-based complexes, which compartmentalize terrestrial and maritime domains, the concept of hybridity reflects their growing interdependence. The Red Sea is no longer an area where the security logics of land and sea coexist separately. It is becoming an integrated arena where local conflicts are reshaping maritime order and sea-based militarization is influencing power struggles on land.

In Yemen, what began as a domestic insurgency has evolved into a regionalized proxy war across land and sea domains. This case exposes the limits of traditional approaches to regional security and underscores the need for frameworks that acknowledge the multidimensional nature of emerging threats. The article refines RSCT by extending its conceptual scope to encompass the interplay between maritime and terrestrial dynamics. In so doing, it provides insights for how policy makers can address regions where domestic orders are fragmented, great-power competition is rife, and transnational threats are increasing.

RSCT AND THE RED SEA

Historically, the Red Sea has been seen as a peripheral maritime zone serving the local economies of coastal communities. However, this changed with the opening of the geopolitically significant Suez Canal in 1869, which transformed the waterway into a vital corridor linking the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Throughout the 20th century, the canal shaped the Red Sea's global relevance and was a recurring flashpoint for conflict, most notably during the 1956 Suez Crisis and the 1967 Six-Day War between Arab states and Israel. After the Cold War, attention gradually shifted southward, particularly toward the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden, amid growing concerns over terrorism, piracy, and state fragility. The Arab Spring of the 2010s and the subsequent war in Yemen further exposed the area's fragility, particularly where African and Middle Eastern fault lines intersect.

To understand the evolving strategic importance of the Red Sea, we must move beyond narrow geographic determinism. A dual expansion is needed: spatially, by recognizing how infrastructure like the Suez Canal connects disparate zones into a single maritime continuum; and cognitively, by acknowledging that policy makers inside and outside increasingly treat the area as a unified strategic system. This reconceptualization positions it as a fully integrated geopolitical arena, not merely a corridor. While the core comprises Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, its strategic perimeter is broader. Israel and Jordan have access via the Gulf of Aqaba; Ethiopia, despite being landlocked, remains a major player due to its population size and military strength. Gulf monarchies such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have also increased their presence on both sides of the Red Sea through ports, military bases, and political alliances. This highlights the need for an analytical framework that can capture the interplay between land and maritime security dynamics.

RSCT, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, provides a solid foundation.¹ Regional security complexes are defined as sets of geographically proximate states whose national securities are interlinked.² The theory identifies patterns of amity and enmity that structure interactions, distinguishing between two opposite ideal types:

- *conflict formations*, characterized by deep-seated mistrust, cross-border insurgencies, and interstate rivalries
- *security regimes*, in which states establish cooperative mechanisms to manage shared threats.

It also acknowledges the role of overlay, whereby external powers and international organizations intervene either to stabilize a regional complex or to pursue their own agendas—without being fully embedded within it.³

Around the Red Sea, this dual structure is evident. The land-based dimension, particularly in the Horn of Africa and Yemen, exhibits features of a conflict formation, including weak institutions, border disputes, overlapping ethnic and sectarian ties, and interference among neighboring states. By contrast, the maritime dimension, especially after the anti-piracy campaigns of the 2000s, has exhibited elements of a nascent security regime supported by shared economic interests and multilateral naval coordination. However, this dichotomy is becoming unsustainable. The once-clear distinction between terrestrial instability and maritime cooperation is eroding under the weight of infrastructural integration, cross-border criminality, and the transnationalization of conflict.⁴ The Yemeni civil war is a striking example of this: Initially a domestic power struggle, it has evolved into a cross-border proxy conflict with direct spillovers into the maritime domain.

To address this new pattern, the article introduces the concept of a hybrid regional security complex. This broadens the scope of RSCT by acknowledging the functional interdependence between land- and sea-based security logics. For instance, territorial conflicts sparked by

¹ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

² Matteo Legrenzi and Fred H. Lawson, "Regional Security Complexes and Organizations," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*, ed. Alexandra Gheciu and William C. Wohlforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ Dennis Senam Amable, "Theorizing the Emergence of Security Regions: An Adaptation for the Regional Security Complex Theory," *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2022).

⁴ Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, "Beyond seablindness: A new agenda for maritime security studies," *International Affairs* 95, no. 5 (2019): 971–978.

insurgency or state collapse can jeopardize maritime stability. Similarly, militarization and strategic control over ports or shipping lanes can reshape territorial disputes and internal balances of power. This mutual reinforcement signals that land and sea no longer function as separate strategic arenas but rather as intertwined domains within a single geopolitical system. The same actors, state and nonstate, operate across both dimensions. External powers project influence through integrated strategies combining military presence, port access, and security assistance.

The UAE's involvement in southern Yemen, for example, illustrates how maritime and land-based ambitions converge, as control of strategic chokepoints at sea is linked to alliances with local militias on land. Similarly, Iran's support for the Houthis encompasses terrestrial advisory roles and maritime disruption through drone and missile capabilities targeting shipping routes. This is not simply a juxtaposition of logics but a structural entanglement. This concept of hybridity also helps us understand the evolving nature of threats. Piracy, once the dominant maritime concern, has either been replaced or is now complemented by the asymmetric tactics of armed groups with territorial bases. Also central to the shifting order are systemic vulnerabilities like the sabotage of undersea infrastructure, narcotrafficking, and the smuggling of weapons.⁵

Although RSCT has proven valuable in mapping regional security dynamics, it often assumes clear boundaries between domains and actors.⁶ This new approach aims to refine the standard theory in three ways. First, it challenges the sea-land binary that underpins much of the literature on regional security, treating the maritime and terrestrial domains as functionally interdependent. Second, it incorporates nonstate actors more centrally into the analysis, recognizing their capacity to influence both land-based conflicts and maritime threats. Third, it considers global-regional interactions as mutually constitutive rather than hierarchical, enabling feedback loops between local conflicts and global strategic competition.

Hybridity has implications for regional order. It renders purely maritime or terrestrial responses less effective, requiring integrated strategies that address the interlinkage of infrastructure, governance, and military posturing. It also changes external actors, who must now navigate an environment where land-based instability can disrupt global trade and where military deployments at sea can trigger political repercussions on land.

LAND-BASED CONFLICT FORMATION

The Red Sea is marked by entrenched patterns of conflict and mistrust, featuring arms buildups, tactical alliances, and proxy rivalries. While limited forms of cooperation exist, the dominant logic remains adversarial, often captured by the maxim “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”⁷ This competitive posture is particularly salient on land, where historical legacies, institutional fragility, and transborder contestation have created a structurally unstable environment.

Much of the instability can be attributed to colonial boundary making. European powers imposed territorial divisions that prioritized imperial interests over local balances, often disregarding ethnic, religious, and linguistic dynamics.⁸ Consequently, post-independence

⁵ Tim Edmunds, Scott Edwards, and Christian Bueger, *Maritime Security: The Unseen Infrastructure of Global Trade* (Cham: Springer, 2023).

⁶ Brendon J. Cannon and Federico Donelli, “Asymmetric Alliances and High Polarity: Evaluating Regional Security Complexes in the Middle East and Horn of Africa,” *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2020): 505–24.

⁷ Lionel Cliffe, Roy Love, and Kjetil Tronvoll, “Conflict and Peace in the Horn of Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy* 36, no. 120 (2009): 151–63.

⁸ Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

states emerged as fragmented. In contrast to other parts of Africa, where colonial borders were generally accepted, actors and groups in many Red Sea states, such as Yemen, Sudan, and Ethiopia, have pursued revisionist or irredentist agendas. Territorial claims have also been used by political elites to consolidate domestic power, exacerbating mistrust across borders.⁹ As territories were firmly established, competition for resources intensified, especially with regard to access to transboundary waters. Disputes over the Nile are a prime example. Despite institutional mechanisms like the Nile Basin Initiative, relationships between upstream and downstream nations, particularly Ethiopia and Egypt, remain tense.¹⁰

Insecurities are exacerbated by ethnic communities and clans that span state borders. Governments often exploit transnational kinship ties to interfere in neighboring states, particularly by supporting armed opposition groups.¹¹ In the Horn of Africa, we see this pattern of mutual interference among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, which have employed ethnic and insurgent proxies to influence cross-border power dynamics.¹² Such cross-border dynamics can contribute to the escalation of internal conflicts, transforming localized disputes into broader confrontations.

Colonial legacies have also influenced the development of political systems after independence. With the notable exception of Ethiopia, most Red Sea states lack a long-standing tradition of statehood, and their political authority remains contested. Ethnic, sectarian, and tribal divisions continue to influence struggles over governance.¹³ In many cases, regimes rely on narrow patronage networks tied to ethnic or clan constituencies.¹⁴ This personalization of power turns the state apparatus into a zero-sum arena where gaining control often means excluding rivals from resources and legitimacy.¹⁵

The militaries of these states often fulfill both internal and external functions. Domestically, they act as tools for regime survival, while regionally they are deployed as deterrents or instruments for intervening in neighboring conflicts. This blurs the line between internal and interstate security dynamics. Political legitimacy is often associated with control of the coercive apparatus and the ability to manipulate area alliances. This reinforces the logic of mutual suspicion and encourages the formation of ad hoc coalitions, which are often aligned by identity or ideology, to counter perceived threats.

These trends are amplified by socioeconomics. Chronic poverty and inadequate service provision fuel competition over limited state resources. Although identity-based grievances often dominate political narratives, the persistence of instability is driven by structural inequalities and governance failures. Indeed, with the partial exception of the Gulf monarchies, most Red Sea states suffer from high levels of underdevelopment. According to the 2023 Multidimensional

⁹ Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

¹⁰ Fred H. Lawson, "Egypt versus Ethiopia: The Conflict over the Nile Metastasizes," *The International Spectator* 52, no. 4 (2017): 129–44.

¹¹ Federico Battered, "Some Considerations on State Building in Divided Societies and the Role of the 'International Community': Somaliland and Somalia Compared," *Northeast African Studies* 10, no. 3 (2003): 225–247.

¹² Christopher Clapham, "The Horn of Africa: Fragility and Conflict in a Complex Regional Environment," Conflict Research Programme Paper, London School of Economics, 2017.

¹³ Yonas Adaye Adeto, "Violent ethnic extremism in Ethiopia: Implications for the stability of the Horn of Africa," *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 20, no. 2 (2020): 10–36.

¹⁴ Redie Bereketeab, *Historical Sociology of State Formation in the Horn of Africa: Genesis, Trajectories, Processes, Routes and Consequences* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

¹⁵ Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll, *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life* (Stockholm: SIDA Studies, 2003).

Poverty Index, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia are among the world's poorest, with more than 80 percent of their populations lacking access to adequate healthcare, education, and housing.¹⁶

These conditions not only affect internal order but exacerbate the imbalances between the African and Arabian shores of the Red Sea. To the east, wealthy Gulf states use their financial resources to exert political and security influence across the region.¹⁷ They invest in infrastructure, fund local elites, and provide military support to favored groups, allowing them to influence conflicts in countries like Sudan and Yemen while securing port access and logistical hubs.

Although instability has been more prevalent in Africa, the Arabian Peninsula has also experienced its share of challenges. Yemen, in particular, has seen repeated conflict and foreign interference. Since the 1960s, it has suffered two major civil wars that drew in external actors, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia during the Cold War, and Iran and the UAE in the conflict that has raged since 2014.¹⁸ Indeed, the country is a prime example of how internal political divisions can become intertwined with interstate rivalries, transforming domestic civil wars into arenas for proxy battles.

These factors create a system in which the domestic, regional, and international dimensions of conflict are closely intertwined. Few conflicts remain confined to local areas, with even minor outbreaks of violence having the potential to reverberate.¹⁹ Stability risks are diffuse and transnational, arising from a web of state and nonstate actors. Informal networks, ethnic connections, and strategic alliances create a pattern of mutual insecurity that respects no boundaries.²⁰

Unlike West Africa and the Gulf, which have regimes for conflict management, the Red Sea stability framework lacks robust institutions and is characterized by alliance building and foreign sponsorship.²¹ Cooperation tends to be short-term, interest-based, and dependent on shifting power dynamics. Therefore, trust is scarce. External players have generally favored indirect intervention through nongovernmental local organizations, bilateral aid, or support for proxies. In the land-based domain, few have deployed substantial military forces, instead favoring political leverage, technical assistance, and diplomatic initiatives. This caution reflects the complexity of local politics and the reputational costs of involvement.²²

These land-based security configurations can best be described within RSCT as a conflict formation. It is shaped by overlapping patterns of state fragility, regional rivalry, and identity-driven politics. These are mutually reinforcing and tend to evolve rather than be resolved. Conflicts rarely follow a linear path but mutate, expand, and adapt to shifting balances of power. As new actors emerge or external alliances change, past disputes can be reignited and existing ones can escalate. Three main structural factors perpetuate this:

¹⁶ UNDP, "2023 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index: Unstacking global poverty," 2023, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-global-multidimensional-poverty-index-mpi>.

¹⁷ Aleksi Ylönen, *The Horn Engaging the Gulf* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

¹⁸ Bernd Kaussler and Keith A. Grant, *Proxy War in Yemen* (London: Routledge, 2023).

¹⁹ Ciriú Mwaúra, *Early Warning and Conflict Management in the Horn of Africa* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2002).

²⁰ Alexandra M. Dias, "The Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula: The Interplay between Domestic, Regional, and Global Dynamics in the Rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea," in *Routledge Handbook of the Horn of Africa* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 139–48.

²¹ Cedric de Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2018): 301–317.

²² Aleksi Ylönen, "External Relations and Local Agency in the Horn of Africa," *Current History* 122, no. 844 (2023): 185–90.

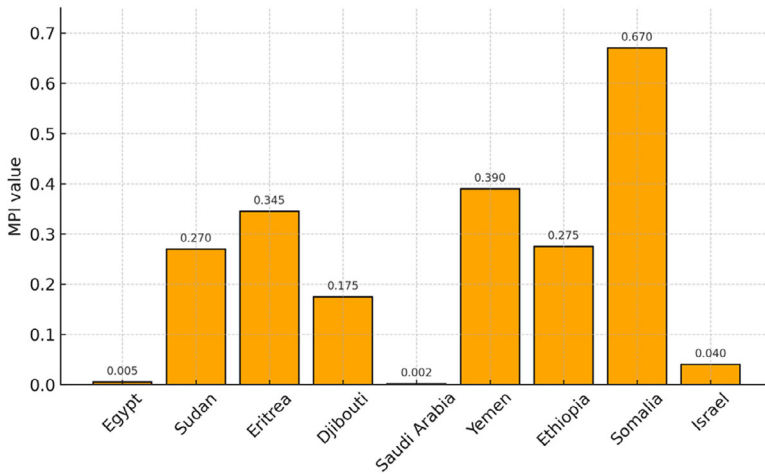


FIGURE 1 Multidimensional Poverty Index values for Red Sea states

Source: UNDP, “2024 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index: Poverty amid conflict,” October 17, 2024, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2024-global-multidimensional-poverty-index-mpi#/indicies/MPI>.

- ethnic and political fragmentation within states, which limits institutional legitimacy and exacerbates exclusion
- regional interference and rivalry, whereby states exploit domestic tensions in neighboring countries for strategic gain
- socioeconomic underdevelopment, which fuels popular discontent and reduces the state’s capacity to absorb shocks.²³

With a few exceptions, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel, countries bordering the Red Sea or located close to it, such as Ethiopia, tend to have high levels of economic vulnerability and institutional fragility (see Figure 1).

These dynamics are exacerbated by a shared logic of regime survival. Political elites prioritize control rather than stability, often relying on coercion to suppress dissent. Opposition groups often respond with violence or external alliances to challenge incumbents. This security dilemma fuels arms races, increases polarization, and increases the likelihood of cross-border escalation. The implications for regional order are profound. The land-based arena of the Red Sea is not merely a backdrop for crisis; it is a driver of instability across domains. The intersection of domestic weakness and regional rivalry creates a cyclical pattern of conflict. States undermine one another to ensure their own survival, weakening the regional system as a whole.

This unstable terrestrial configuration is having an increasingly negative impact on maritime stability. The logics of land and sea are converging. Armed groups with territorial bases, such as the Houthis, are now capable of projecting force into maritime domains. Infrastructure projects designed to increase connectivity, such as ports and roads, become vectors of competition rather than integration.²⁴ Therefore, the Red Sea should be considered a hybrid regional security complex.

²³ Redie Bereketeab, *The Horn of Africa: Intra-State and Inter-State Conflicts and Security* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

²⁴ Biruk Terrefe and Harry Verhoeven, “The Road (Not) Taken: The Contingencies of Infrastructure and Sovereignty in the Horn of Africa,” *Political Geography* 110 (April 2024).

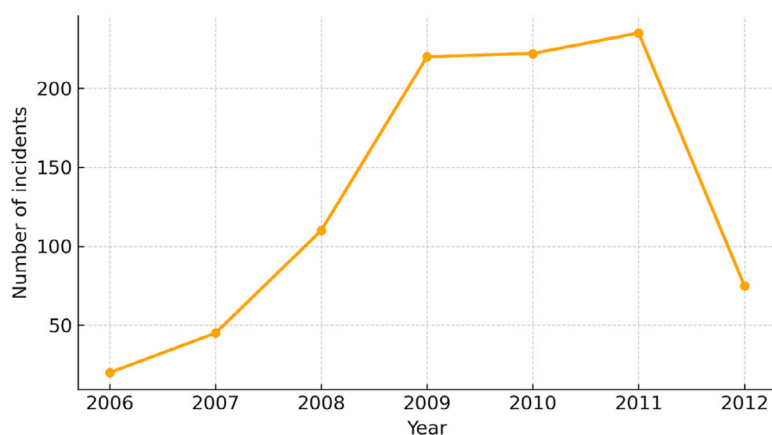


FIGURE 2 The evolution of piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden and the wider Red Sea

Source: Commercial Crime Services, “Maritime Piracy,” n.d., <https://icc-ccs.org>.

THE MARITIME SECURITY REGIME

Unlike the Hobbesian environment of fragmentation and mutual interference on land, the Red Sea has exhibited more Lockean traits at sea, functioning under a logic shaped more by shared interests. Despite political rivalries among littoral and external powers, stability has generally been maintained through cooperation to safeguard trade flows and freedom of navigation.²⁵ The uninterrupted movement of goods, energy, and data is essential not only for regional economies but also for the broader global trading system. This logic has underpinned ad hoc forms of coordination between states that are otherwise competitors, especially in response to transnational threats like piracy and terrorism.

A turning point came in the late 2000s with the surge in Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden and surrounding areas. Between 2006 and 2012, the number of attacks peaked, largely due to the collapse of the Somali state and the resulting power vacuum along the coast (see Figure 2).²⁶ In response, multiple international actors became involved in maritime security operations. In 2008, the UN Security Council authorized foreign naval interventions under Resolution 1950, resulting in the deployment of three multinational missions: the US-led Combined Task Force 151, the European Union’s Operation Atalanta, and NATO’s Operation Ocean Shield.²⁷ These were supplemented by area-wide initiatives, most notably the 2009 Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC), which was adopted under the auspices of the International Maritime Organization. It promoted interstate cooperation, information sharing, and capacity building, leading to the creation of information-sharing centers in Mombasa, Sanaa, and Dar es Salaam. A 2017 revision expanded the DCoC framework to address a wider range of crimes, including smuggling, trafficking,

²⁵ Theo Notteboom, Hercules Haralambides, and Kevin Cullinane, “The Red Sea Crisis: Ramifications for Vessel Operations, Shipping Networks, and Maritime Supply Chains,” *Maritime Economics & Logistics* 26, no. 1 (2024): 1–20.

²⁶ Bibi Van Ginkel and Frans-Paul van der Putten, eds., *The International Response to Somali Piracy* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

²⁷ James Kraska, “Coalition Strategy and the Pirates of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea,” *Comparative Strategy* 28, no. 3 (2009): 197–216.

and illegal fishing.²⁸ These combined efforts yielded tangible results: By the mid-2010s, piracy incidents had dropped sharply, and the corridor had regained relative stability.

For more than a decade, the Red Sea operated under a maritime security regime based on shared practices, limited institutionalization, and overlapping naval deployments. It thus became an example of stability in a high-risk zone.²⁹ However, this proved fragile. The conditions that enabled cooperation, such as shared threats, external sponsorship, and a degree of separation from terrestrial conflicts, are no longer guaranteed. Structural vulnerabilities persist, with weak coastal governance, illicit trade networks, and the growing influence of nonstate actors.

One of the most pressing concerns is the diversification of threats. Although piracy has declined, new forms of instability have emerged. These include illegal fishing, toxic waste dumping, arms trafficking, and the smuggling of drugs and people. These activities are often facilitated by armed networks with land-based strongholds. Groups such as al-Shabab, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and ISIS's Puntland branch have exploited sea routes to transport weapons or personnel, though they have not systematically targeted commercial shipping.³⁰

The most significant shift has come from the increasing maritimization of armed conflict. In the Red Sea, this has been most evident since late 2023, when the Houthis began targeting commercial vessels in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait in response to the Gaza war. Using Iranian-supplied drone and missile technology, the group has attacked international shipping, specifically vessels affiliated with US or Israeli entities.³¹ This clearly breached the security regime, demonstrating how land-based armed groups can exert influence over maritime areas and blurring the distinction between terrestrial instability and maritime order. As Bueger and Edmunds note, maritime regimes are not sustained by naval capacity alone; they also rely on shared perceptions of threat, restraint, and a collective interest in stability.³² The Houthi actions, enabled by Yemen's institutional collapse and regional rivalries, directly undermine these foundations and demonstrate the permeability of the sea-land divide.

The consequences were immediate and severe. Global shipping companies rerouted vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, dramatically increasing transit times and insurance costs. Western powers deployed more naval forces, reactivated dormant patrol frameworks, and formed ad hoc coalitions.³³ Compounding this were emerging risks associated with the undersea infrastructure. More than a dozen fiber-optic submarine cables pass through the Bab al-Mandeb, carrying more than 90 percent of internet and financial data between Europe and Asia. These lines are largely unprotected and vulnerable to sabotage.³⁴ While nonstate actors lack the capability to target them

²⁸ International Maritime Organization, "Djibouti Code of Conduct" (2009, revised 2017), <https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/security/pages/dcoc.aspx>.

²⁹ Tim Edmunds and Christian Bueger, *Understanding Maritime Security* (Oxford: Oxford Academy, 2024).

³⁰ Emilio Rodriguez-Diaz, J.I. Alcaide, R. Garcia-Llave, "Challenges and Security Risks in the Red Sea: Impact of Houthi Attacks on Maritime Traffic," *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering* 12, no. 11 (2024): 1900.

³¹ Eleonora Ardemagni, "The Houthis, Yemen, the Middle East: Four Things the US Shouldn't Underestimate About the Red Sea Crisis," ISPI Commentary, January 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-houthis-yemen-the-middle-east-four-things-the-us-shouldnt-underestimate-about-the-red-sea-crisis-160321>.

³² Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, "The European Union's Quest to Become a Global Maritime-Security Provider," *Naval War College Review* 76, no. 2 (2023): 1–20.

³³ Leonardo J.M. Mazzucco, "The EU Moves to Counter Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea," Gulf International Forum, September 2024, <https://gulrif.org/the-eu-moves-to-counter-houthi-attacks-in-the-red-sea>.

³⁴ Talha Latief Tantray, "Red Sea undersea cable disruptions: internet vulnerabilities and emerging geopolitical risks in a strategic maritime corridor," *The Round Table* (September 2025): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2025.2565225>; Bren-

directly, state-sponsored operations involving Russian or Iranian vessels could potentially disrupt these flows. This adds another layer of strategic sensitivity to a maritime space already under pressure.

The growing militarization of Djibouti is a prime example of how maritime stability concerns intersect with great-power competition. Located at the entrance to the Bab al-Mandeb, the country is now home to military bases belonging to the United States, France, China, and Japan, among other states. While this facilitates coordination on piracy and logistics, it also reflects broader rivalries. China's first overseas military base opened in Djibouti in 2017 just a few kilometers from the American Camp Lemonnier, symbolizing a shift from cooperation to competition.³⁵ As this intensifies, the Red Sea is exhibiting a layered security dynamic: Cooperative mechanisms continue to exist, but new rivalries and contested interventions are superimposed upon them. Maritime governance frameworks coexist uneasily with coercive strategies, and regional actors operate in the shadow of extra-regional power projection.

With respect to regional security complex theory, while the regime remains partially functional, it is increasingly embedded in a broader overlay process driven by global competition.³⁶ Developments on land now immediately affect the maritime regime. The Houthis' maritime reach is enabled by their territorial control and the broader dynamics of regional conflict. Similarly, state-backed militias or port authorities in southern Yemen or along the Sudanese coast can determine which vessels are permitted access and impose informal levies. This growing interdependence illustrates the emergence of the Red Sea as a hybrid security complex, in which maritime and land-based dynamics are mutually constitutive rather than distinct or sequential.

This situation also challenges traditional assumptions. The erosion of the functional boundaries between sea and land has made the maritime regime vulnerable to the same patterns of conflict formation that define the terrestrial dimension. Naval power and legal regimes alone are insufficient to guarantee stability. What is required instead is an integrated understanding of security across domains, accounting for the intersection of nonstate actors, collapsing states, and great-power rivalries both at sea and on shore. The maritime domain of the Red Sea, once considered relatively insulated from land-based instability, is now part of a hybrid security environment.

YEMEN: THE COLLAPSE OF THE MARITIME SECURITY REGIME

The Yemeni civil war illustrates the dynamics of a hybrid regional security complex. The initial stages fit RSCT's definition of a conflict formation: a cross-border war driven by deep mutual threat perceptions, weak states, and external interference. But it has escalated into a crisis with direct maritime implications.

The conflict began in 2014 when the Houthi forces, drawing on long-standing grievances, seized Sanaa and gradually expanded their territorial control. The collapse of the state was not sudden

don J. Cannon, "Undersea Cable Security in the Indo-Pacific: Enhancing the Quad's Collaborative Approach," *Marine Policy* 171 (January 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106415>.

³⁵ Benjamin Barton, *The Doraleh Disputes: Infrastructure Politics in the Global South* (Springer Nature, 2022); Federico Donelli, "The Red Sea Competition Arena: Anatomy of Chinese Strategic Engagement with Djibouti," *Afriche e Orienti* 25, no. 1 (2023): 43–59.

³⁶ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*.

but the result of decades of failed governance, elite fragmentation, and regional inequalities.³⁷ In line with the expectations of RSCT, the conflict quickly spread beyond Yemen's borders, triggering regional realignments. In 2015, Saudi Arabia intervened, framing the Houthi movement as an Iranian proxy.³⁸ Although formally aligned with Riyadh, the UAE gradually acted according to its distinct interests in southern Yemen, backing separatist groups and investing in ports and coastal infrastructure.³⁹ In turn, Iran provided the Houthis with strategic and material support, transforming the conflict into a proxy war embedded in broader Gulf rivalries.⁴⁰

The convergence of internal state collapse and regional power competition created an environment in which local dynamics were inextricably linked to wider geopolitical considerations. However, unlike most conflict formations, the war in Yemen has also destabilized the maritime domain, which had until recently been governed by cooperative practices. This maritimization of the conflict became particularly evident after the Houthis consolidated their control of the northern Red Sea coastline, including the strategically important areas near the Bab al-Mandeb.

From 2016 onward, the group began experimenting with maritime tactics, such as deploying explosive-laden boats and naval mines, as well as reconnaissance drones. Initially aimed at the Saudi-led coalition, these attacks gradually extended to international shipping.⁴¹ This escalated following the Hamas-Israel conflict in October 2023. The Houthis framed the campaign as a response to Israeli actions in Gaza and launched repeated attacks on commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea. They targeted those perceived as being linked to Israeli, American, or Western interests, using drones and missiles, hijackings, and coordinated threats to navigation from their coastal strongholds in western Yemen.⁴²

Between October 2023 and July 2024, international monitoring agencies recorded more than 70 attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. Consequently, companies like Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd, and MSC rerouted dozens of boats via the Cape of Good Hope. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, container volumes through the Suez Canal fell by nearly 40 percent in early 2024 compared with the previous year.⁴³ Rerouting added an average of 10 to 14 days of transit between Asia and Europe, increasing shipping costs by more than 300 percent. Insurance premiums for vessels passing through the Red Sea spiked to between 0.5 percent and 1 percent of cargo value, compared to less than 0.1 percent prior to the crisis (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).⁴⁴

³⁷ Helen Lackner, *Yemen: Poverty and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2022); April Longley Alley, "Yemen's Multiple Crises," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (2010).

³⁸ May Darwich, "Escalation in Failed Military Interventions: Saudi and Emirati Quagmires in Yemen," *Global Policy* 11, no. 1 (2020): 103–12.

³⁹ Selim Öztürk, "The Saudi-UAE Divide over the Yemen Quagmire," *Middle East Policy* 30, no. 4 (2023): 72–80.

⁴⁰ Tom Walsh, "Securitisation Imperatives and the Exaggeration of Iranian Involvement with the Houthi Movement by International Actors," *Global Policy* 14, no. 2 (2023): 385–95.

⁴¹ Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi, "Houthi Shipping Attacks: Patterns and Expectations for 2025," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2024.

⁴² Wolf-Christian Paes et al., *Navigating Troubled Waters: The Houthis' Campaign in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden* (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024), 1–46.

⁴³ Ahmed Elshazly, "Suez Canal and Red Sea Disruption," presentation at Multi-year Expert Meeting on Transport, Trade Logistics and Trade Facilitation, 11th Session, Maritime Transport in Times of Polycrisis, Geneva, October 2024, https://unctad.org/system/files/non-official-document/cimem7-2024-ppt05ahmedelshazly_en.pdf.

⁴⁴ Freightos, "The Impact of the Red Sea Crisis on Global Shipping and Trade," October 30, 2024, <https://www.freightos.com/freight-blog/market-update/red-sea-crisis-impact>.

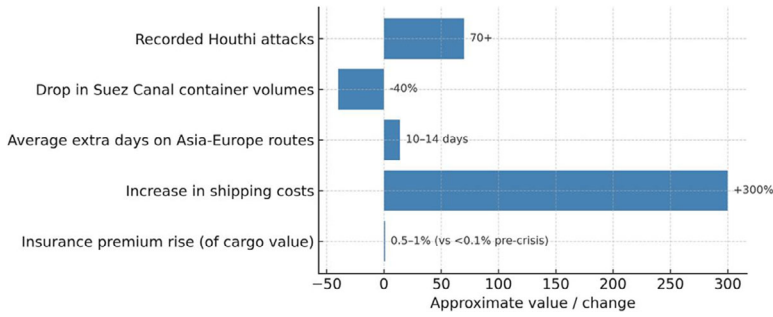


FIGURE 3 Key indicators of Houthi maritime disruption, October 2023–July 2024

Source: ACLED, “Interactive map: Red Sea attacks,” n.d., <https://acleddata.com/platform/interactive-map-red-sea-attacks>.

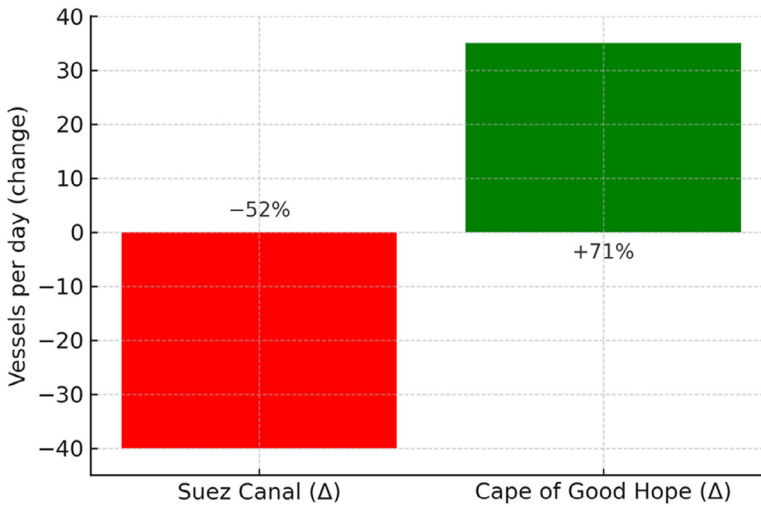


FIGURE 4 Change in vessels per day, December 2023–June 2024

Source: IMF PortWatch, “Trade Disruptions in the Red Sea,” n.d., <https://portwatch.imf.org/pages/573013af3b6545deae50ed1cbaf9444>.

As a nonstate actor embedded in a failing state and supported by a regional power, the Houthis have upended the maritime security regime. Their actions challenge the idea that waterways can be isolated from land-based conflicts and reveal the interconnectedness of domains that are traditionally considered distinct. In response to the disruptions to shipping and the spikes in cost, Washington and European states increased naval deployments in the area, reactivating patrol missions and establishing coordination mechanisms under Operation Prosperity Guardian.

The Houthis’ ability to carry out such attacks stems from their hybrid warfare strategy, which combines guerrilla tactics with advanced missile and drone technologies, reportedly supplied or codeveloped with Iranian assistance, and control over coastal territories.⁴⁵ Their maritime reach is an extension of their consolidation of power on land, demonstrating the impact of territorial

⁴⁵ Max Mutschler et al., “The Impact of Precision Strike Technology on the Warfare of Non-State Armed Groups: Case Studies on Daesh and the Houthis,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 35, no. 7 (2024): 1123–50; Marco Tamborini, “Sustainability of AI and robotics: Towards a unified framework for intelligence biosystems,” *AI and Ethics* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-025-00830-5>.

dynamics on maritime instability. The escalation has prompted questions about the resilience of maritime governance in the Red Sea. Although multilateral operations were relatively successful in reducing Somali piracy between 2008 and 2015, they were never intended to address ideologically motivated nonstate actors with ballistic capabilities.⁴⁶

The threat landscape thus includes actors who can challenge the maritime order from land-based sanctuaries by targeting commercial flows as part of a political and strategic confrontation, rather than for criminal gain. In this sense, Yemen highlights a limitation of RSCT: the assumption that security logics are spatially bounded, with maritime regimes and land-based conflict formations coexisting. The Yemeni case shows that, in situations of state failure and regional proxy competition, these domains converge to form a hybrid security complex. The presence of the Houthis simultaneously destabilizes Yemeni governance, regional alignments, and global trade flows.

The case also illustrates how external actors become involved simultaneously in both maritime and terrestrial theaters. While American and European naval patrols seek to deter Houthi maritime attacks, diplomats and intelligence services try to manage the political process. Iran, for its part, continues to strike a balance between plausible deniability and strategic entrenchment.⁴⁷ Thus, RSCT's concept of overlay occurs across both domains, often in parallel. Further, the Houthi actions demonstrate the fragility of regional deterrence architectures. Despite the presence of external naval powers, a relatively inexpensive, asymmetric threat has disrupted one of the world's busiest maritime routes. This calls into question the assumption that external naval deployments alone can ensure maritime stability in the absence of a political settlement on land.

Therefore, the implications extend beyond Yemen. The crisis has highlighted the strategic vulnerability of chokepoints and the fact that global trade relies on stable coastal environments. It also underscores the necessity of analytical frameworks that transcend domain-specific thinking. Maritime security cannot be separated from land-based conflicts, particularly in regions where state authority is contested and armed groups operate across domains. Yemen is not just a failed state or a battleground for regional hegemony; it is a place where the logics of conflict formation and regime stability converge. Addressing the crisis therefore requires more than ceasefires or naval patrols. Cross-domain strategies that integrate governance, maritime infrastructure protection, and conflict resolution within a coordinated framework are required.

TOWARD A HYBRID SECURITY COMPLEX

The Red Sea is undergoing a structural transformation. The traditional duality of conflict formation on land and security regimes at sea is giving way to a hybrid regional security complex, with the two logics increasingly interdependent.⁴⁸

This has direct policy implications. Different categories of actors are faced with difficult choices about how to respond:

⁴⁶ Denys Reva and Timothy Walker, "Is Somali piracy finally under control?" Institute for Security Studies, April 21, 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-somali-piracy-finally-under-control>.

⁴⁷ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's *Annus Horribilis* in 2024: Beaten, but Not Defeated," *Middle East Policy* 32, no. 2 (2025): 3–17.

⁴⁸ Federico Donelli, *Power Competition in the Red Sea: Testing the Post-Liberal International Order* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025).

- Neighboring powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Ethiopia, prioritize the continuity of commerce, but they remain divided by rivalries.
- Commercial actors, such as global shipping firms, insurers, and energy companies, focus narrowly on protecting trade flows and reducing costs, often pushing for immediate fixes.
- Global military powers view the Red Sea in the context of broader strategic competition, using naval deployments to secure influence as well as stability.

Across these actors, three types of responses can be identified:

1. sustainable governance: investment in conflict resolution and coastal state capacity, aimed at addressing root causes on land
2. alliance strategies: backing particular factions to contain conflict and secure chokepoints, even if governance remains fragile
3. transactional arrangements: short-term deals or payoffs to local actors that allow shipping to continue without addressing deeper instability.

Sustainable governance is the most effective route to stabilization. In the short term, however, fragmented alliances and transactional deals are more probable, as they require fewer resources and provide immediate relief from commercial pressures. The discrepancy between what is necessary and what is probable underscores the challenge of translating theoretical insights into policy action.

Geographically, the once-separate domains of terrestrial and maritime security have merged. Port cities like Hudaydah and Mokha are no longer just logistical hubs but dual-use zones for civilian trade and military operations. The Bab al-Mandeb Strait is not just a chokepoint for container ships; it is also a strategically important area influenced by actors whose power base lies inland. The same is true of other regional nodes. Djibouti's maritime infrastructure is shaped by cross-border rivalries, while Eritrea's coast is part of its conflictual relationship with Ethiopia and the UAE. Infrastructure projects on land and at sea, designed to integrate the region, are now also vectors of competition and vulnerability.

Practically, the tools and practices of war and governance transcend their respective domains. Land-based insurgents adopt maritime tactics, while navies become involved in regime security and power projection. Hybrid threats, from drone attacks to the sabotage of undersea cables via cyber attacks, highlight the extent to which state and nonstate actors operate across traditional boundaries. Naval presence alone is no longer enough to ensure stability if the surrounding coastal area is under the control of hostile or fractured political forces.

The hybridization of the security complex is evident in the strategies employed by both local and external players. State actors such as the UAE or Iran pursue integrated policies. Emirati control over ports in southern Yemen is directly tied to alliances with separatist factions inland, while Tehran's support for the Houthis enables it to exert influence over both domains. External powers, including the United States, France, and China, now view the Red Sea as part of broader geostrategic competition involving local proxies, economic corridors, and ideologies, as well as a naval arena.

These dynamics are also shaped by overlay, a core RSCT concept. In the Red Sea, outside powers are not only intervening to suppress instability, they are also engaging in strategic positioning in relation to one another. Djibouti is a prime example of this, given the proximity of Chinese and US military facilities. However, overlay does not insulate the region; it magnifies its strategic

regime stability has become blurred. Drawing on regional security complex theory, the article has demonstrated that the region's spatial, functional, and actor-based boundaries have become increasingly porous. The case of Yemen shows how insurgent territorial control, cross-border rivalries, and asymmetric tactics can destabilize state governance, regional alliances, and global trade simultaneously. The hybridization of security logics challenges the assumption that the maritime and terrestrial domains can be managed separately.

This case refines the RSCT model by extending it beyond domain-specific logics and by demonstrating how nonstate actors, infrastructure, and great-power interests converge in cross-domain configurations. And it highlights the limitations of isolated policy tools: Naval patrols alone cannot ensure freedom of navigation without political stabilization on land, and peace processes cannot succeed if they overlook maritime vulnerabilities. The implications are clear. Policy makers must adopt integrated, cross-domain strategies combining short-term crisis management with long-term governance initiatives. Without such an approach, the Red Sea will continue to be a region where local insurgencies have global consequences and fragmented responses fail to resolve structural interdependencies.

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