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Armed Naval Multilateralism in the Red Sea

By Alan Chong

SYNOPSIS

Operation Prosperity Guardian was established in mid-December 2023 as a coordinated naval patrol operation to counter Houthi rebel attacks on shipping in the Bab-el-Mandeb strait in the Red Sea. This is a welcome instance of armed naval multilateralism.

COMMENTARY

On 18 December 2023, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin announced the launch of Operation Prosperity Guardian. One might quibble about the label, but it was apt in many respects. This naval policing operation involving an initial 13 countries in varying capacities was aimed at protecting the shipping lanes that run from the Suez Canal through the Red Sea, passing through a narrow strait named Bab-el-Mandeb close to the Yemeni coast, before proceeding to the high seas.

Trouble started as early as late November 2023 when Houthi rebels fighting an insurgency in Yemen [seized](#) British and Japanese owned merchant vessels. By early December, the Houthis had launched drones and missiles at merchant ships of different flags, including three Israeli commercial vessels. Things escalated from there.

As of the first week of January 2024, the Houthis have proven their resilience by launching repeated attacks on third and fourth party shipping including a [Singapore-registered](#) Maersk container ship bound for Egypt's Port Suez. A Houthi spokesperson claimed that the Singapore-flagged vessel was attacked after it failed to heed warnings from its personnel.

Officially, through their social media announcements on Al-Jazeera satellite television, the Houthis made it clear that their action was in support of the people of Gaza and

aimed at constraining Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip and its denial of food, medicine and other aid to the displaced population.

For the rest of the world's economy, this was not simply an inadvertent act to widen the Israel-Hamas war that began on 7 October 2023, but a violent attempt to hold the global economy hostage to a purported united front comprising the Iranian-supplied Houthis, Hamas and Iran itself.

Faced with this scenario of calculated escalation by the Houthis, we are witnessing what is in effect the equivalent of the creation of a posse of pro-multilateralist states: an armed naval multilateralism to secure the sea lanes of communication and trade between the Red Sea and the rest of the transoceanic sea routes.

Miscreants of an Interconnected Global Economy

By linking the prosperity of the world's seaborne commerce to the fortunes of the Israel-Hamas war, the Houthis and their supporters have embarked on a campaign to sabotage maritime commerce. Their message is clear: stop or curb Israel's military campaign in Gaza or risk retaliation against the world's seaborne trade.

The [statistics](#) bear out the scale and seriousness of this threat. Twelve per cent of the world's trade passes through the Suez Canal and transits the Red Sea passing through Bab-el-Mandeb onto the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and vice versa towards the Mediterranean, North Africa and Europe. Forty per cent of Asia-Europe trade is conducted via this seaborne route.

Analysts have also estimated that one million barrels of oil transit this route daily, along with 30 per cent of global container volume under non-threatening circumstances. Additionally, the Houthis' actions of randomly damaging, or seizing, Israel-bound and Israeli-associated cargo ships, generate a disproportionate effect in the diversion of world trade.

By mid-December 2023, major [shipping companies](#) such as MSC, Maersk, COSCO, CMA CGM Group and Hapag-Lloyd, among others, were already announcing improvised fallback shipping routes that round the Cape of Good Hope for both Europe and Asia bound ships. This diversion adds weeks to the delivery of goods and mineral resources transported by sea. Even BP Oil temporarily suspended its tankers from transiting Bab-el-Mandeb.

The Responsibilities of Leadership

The United States has announced Operation Prosperity Guardian as a coordinated naval patrol to fend off pirate actions by the Houthis at Bab-el-Mandeb. In this endeavour, the US Navy enjoys varying degrees of overt support by twelve other concerned states to date: the United Kingdom, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, Singapore and Sri Lanka. These represent a good sample of major trading economies and seafaring states.

It has been reported that an [additional ten states](#) have privately signalled strong

support for the US-led effort while preferring to remain anonymous so as not to be seen taking sides for or against Israel and Hamas.

The importance of US leadership in this armed naval multilateralism is crucial. The United States will be bearing the brunt of responsibilities and serving as the public leader of a multilateral effort to defend the right of all economies to undertake seaborne commerce through the Red Sea without interference.

This is the laudable cost of supporting multilateralism during a time of war and at a crucial juncture where the world's economies have yet to recover fully from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policing the Seas

Policing the world's oceans, seas and straits in the name of multilateralism has many beneficent historical precedents. Alfred Thayer Mahan had famously memorialised the maritime prowess of the British Empire over its rivals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in this regard.

In the age of high imperialism, Britain articulated and enforced an open access trading order through its constant naval presence all over the globe, albeit for self-serving purposes. In this respect, Britain stood for trade with both neutrals and rivals and profited from it while privileging those economies that traded under its naval umbrella, the benefit of obtaining goods and resources they could not produce themselves.

All maritime powers that predated Britain and the United States had also practised the naval strategy of convoying their commercial vessels and interdicting hostile craft in regional waterways and on the high seas. Operation Prosperity Guardian – so named with the global economy in mind – follows in these footsteps.

The [hardware deployed](#) by the three biggest naval powers of the coalition (the US, UK and France) with bases in the vicinity of Bab-el-Mandeb include advanced frigates and stealth destroyers capable of electronic surveillance and pre-emptive strikes against small speedboats, drones and missile launches by the Houthis. This is what armed naval multilateralism looks like today. It is also what is needed to tamp down the negative side-effects of the Israel-Hamas war on the global economy.

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