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Countering Houthi Attacks: The Indian Navy's Strategic Role

By Saloni Salil

SYNOPSIS

At a time of increased tensions in the Middle East as the Hamas-Israel war in Gaza continues, this commentary delves into the escalating threats posed by Houthi attacks on shipping in the southern part of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden/Arabian Sea. The Indian Navy's role as a net security provider in safeguarding vital sea lanes and critical choke points, as well as in preserving regional stability, becomes indispensable.

COMMENTARY

The Houthis, an Iran-backed rebel group, who “declare themselves to be part of the [Iranian-led axis of resistance](#) against Israel, the US and the wider West”, has been instrumental in creating havoc in the Red Sea, disrupting global trade and threatening maritime security in the region.

On 19 November 2023, Houthi commandos landed a helicopter on the [Galaxy Leader cargo vessel](#) as it passed through the southern section of the Red Sea. The vessel was redirected towards Hodeidah port in Yemen and the crew seized.

As the crisis deepened, the number of Houthi attacks escalated to more than 30 ship attacks, approximately 13 of them by missiles or drones. The latest of these attacks was on 12 February 2024, when an American cargo vessel was struck causing it minor damage.

These incidents have had a double impact where, on one hand, they have led to significant disruptions in global trade, threatening global supply chains and logistics, increasing overall prices of energy, food and other commodities, and, on the other hand, causing heavy militarisation of the Red Sea.

Concerns are now growing over Houthi threats to international internet traffic and financial data transmissions, with Yemeni telecom providers warning of the terrorist group's plans to disrupt Red Sea submarine cables. On 4 February 2024, [Yemen's General Telecommunications Company](#), which is linked to the UN-recognised government, released a statement "condemning the Houthis' threats to target international marine cables [where] approximately 17% of the world's internet traffic is carried along fibre pipes in the Red Sea".

Thus, maritime security in the Red Sea is of grave importance and the absence of it comes with enormous consequences not only for the littoral states but globally. According to [freight analytics](#) firm Vortexa, the Suez Canal transported almost nine million barrels of oil per day in the first half of 2023. S&P reported that approximately 15 per cent of products imported into Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa arrived by sea from Asia and the Gulf. This figure includes 21.5 per cent of refined oil and more than 13 per cent of crude oil, making the Red Sea critical for global trade.

The Red Sea serves as a key maritime route connecting Europe to the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific region. It also hosts the Suez Canal, one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. Any disruption to traffic in the Red Sea, such as conflicts or blockades, can have significant implications for global trade which are now being felt.

International Response to the Houthi Attacks

The international response to the current geopolitical environment in the Red Sea has been mixed. In December 2023, the United States declared Operation Prosperity Guardian, a multinational maritime coalition aimed at upholding freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Over 20 nations, including the United Kingdom and Singapore, are participating, with Bahrain being the sole participant from the Middle East. The UK has deployed three ships to the area. The European Union is set to initiate a distinct maritime mission.

On 10 January 2024, while adopting resolution 2722, the United Nations Security Council condemned the Houthi attacks, demanded that they cease their attacks, recognised the right to freedom of navigation, and highlighted the arms embargo on the Houthis. China and Russia abstained, arguing that the US response risked exacerbating the Israel-Hamas conflict, which should instead be resolved by a ceasefire. Representatives from the UK and the US supported the measure.

On 11 January 2024, as reported in a research briefing by the UK House of Commons Library, [the US and UK launched air and naval strikes](#) on Houthi sites in Yemen, with further strikes on 22 January. Since 11 January, the US has also launched eight separate strikes against the Houthis.

Indian Navy's Contribution to Regional Stability

For India, being a resident power in the Indian Ocean Region, ensuring unhindered trade via the Gulf of Aden is crucial. The Indian Navy has responded quite vigorously and effectively to a succession of pirate attacks, demonstrating an increase in the frequency of hostage rescues undertaken in comparison to previous years.

Although India did not join the US-led task force in the Red Sea, which focused on attacks by the Houthis, it has [deployed](#) at least a dozen warships east of the Red Sea, its largest-ever deployment in the region, to deal with pirates and has investigated more than 250 vessels.

In December 2023, the [Indian Navy](#) deployed at least four warships, which were armed with BrahMos land attack missiles and surface-to-air missiles, anti-submarine warfare-capable helicopters, Sea Guardian drones, and P8I aircraft for surveillance.

In January 2024, the Indian Navy's INS Sumitra rescued 19 Pakistani crew members from a ship that was attacked by pirates off the east coast of Somalia. The same warship also responded to a hijacked Iranian vessel off Somalia, rescuing its 17 crew members. Additionally, the INS Visakhapatnam conducted a boarding operation on the Marshall Island-flagged Marlin Luanda, offering assistance to the 22 Indian and one Bangladeshi crew member on the tanker.

Given the recent attacks on merchant vessels, the Indian Navy has significantly increased its [surveillance apparatus](#) in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden by deploying frontline destroyers and frigates. [Aerial surveillance](#) by long-range maritime patrol aircraft and remotely piloted aircraft has been enhanced to provide a complete maritime domain awareness.

In its role as a regional security provider, the Indian Navy is progressively demonstrating its capacity not only to safeguard its interests but also to instil confidence in neighbouring stakeholders by expressing its capability and readiness to assume regional responsibilities. With its strategic deployments, diplomatic standing, and commitment to regional security, the Indian Navy will continue to play a crucial role in the Indian Ocean Region.

Conclusion

The ongoing hostilities between Israel and Hamas, and between the Houthis and international shipping in the Red Sea, could escalate beyond the region. If this should happen, the repercussions and implications for maritime security in the region and the global economy would be far-reaching. This underscores the need for sustained international attention and collaborative efforts to address the multifaceted challenges at hand. In this, the Indian Navy has an important role to play safeguarding vital sea lanes and critical chokepoints and contributing to regional stability.

Ms Saloni Salil is an independent geopolitics and security analyst with more than 11 years of experience focusing on global security risk and intelligence, naval affairs, maritime security, South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific region, including the delivery of risk assessments and policy frameworks across a spectrum of risk matters, international business, and geopolitical issues.
