

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERNATIONAL NAVAL COALITIONS IN SECURING GLOBAL TRADE ROUTES: A CASE STUDY OF HOUTHJI DISRUPTIONS IN THE RED SEA

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Assessing the Effectiveness of International Naval Coalitions in Securing Global Trade Routes: A Case Study of Houthi Disruptions in the Red Sea



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Abstract

The evolving maritime security dynamics in the Red Sea, driven by Iranian-backed Houthi attacks have highlighted the vulnerability of global supply chains while exacerbating regional rivalries. To tackle this menace, various global and regional powers have formed coalitions like Operation Prosperity Guardian, and Combined Task Force-153 to ensure freedom of navigation and to counter asymmetric threats in the strategic waterways. This paper aims to analyse the geo-strategic and geo-economic ramifications of these attacks on global trade and evaluates the effectiveness of emerging multinational naval alliances in the region. It concludes that although the international naval coalitions have to some extent proved to be effective in addressing the issue, there is a necessity for enhanced real-time data collection, intelligence sharing, and strong coordination among the participant countries to ensure long-term maritime stability in the area.

Keywords: Red Sea, Maritime Security, International Naval Coalitions, Global Economic Security, Freedom of Navigation

Introduction

The prominent geopolitical theorist Nicholas John Spykman presented his theory of 'Rimland' against Halford Mackinder's land-based theory of 'Heartland' way back in the 1940s. Underscoring the significance of sea power in establishing global dominance, Spykman identified his Rimland with the coastal periphery areas of Eurasia, which include regions from Western Europe, West Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. In his theory, he argued that "the fundamental fact which is responsible for the conditions of this age of world politics is the development of ocean navigation...and...maritime mobility is the basis for a new type of geopolitical structure."ⁱ Although he made this statement as per the conditions of the early and mid-twentieth century but the increasing significance of maritime mobility in the 21st century has once again highlighted the complex scenario of political geography not only shaping global politics but also influencing global economic stability. Currently, almost 90% of global trade by volume is conducted via sea routes and Asian maritime arteries plays a pivotal role. According to the UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Asia accounted for 47.1% of total maritime trade in 2023, almost double than Europe (24%), triple than the Americas (16.9%), four times than the Oceania (7.3%) and almost twelve times that of the African continent (4.7%).ⁱⁱ

Of the most crucial maritime waterways located in the Northwestern Indian Ocean or West Asia, the Red Sea plays a crucial role. The sea provides the shortest route between Asia and Europe by connecting two key chokepoints, the Bab el-Mandeb in the south and the Suez Canal in the north. Almost "14% of global maritime trade, 30% of global containerized trade"ⁱⁱⁱ and 12% of global seaborne oil trade^{iv} pass through it. Hence, freedom of navigation in the area is very crucial for global economic growth and energy security. However, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have become a key geopolitical obstacle in the efficient flow of goods, resulting in altered shipping patterns, re-routing of vessels, and delays in global supply chains. From mid-November 2023 to September 2025, more than 100 commercial vessels have been targeted by the Houthis, creating a volatile and uncertain environment for international commerce.^v

This article explains the issue of maritime escalation in the Red Sea by Houthi militias and analyses the geoeconomic implications of these attacks on global trade. It further

examines the role of international naval coalitions formed to secure the maritime traffic from these attacks, along with their successes and limitations. Lastly, the article also highlights the Indian response to the crisis and its handling mechanisms.

Houthi Disruptions in the Red Sea: What and Why of the Issue

The Houthi attacks in the Red Sea are not an event in isolation; rather, they are inextricably linked to the geopolitical power dynamics in West Asia. The Houthis, who belong to the Zaydi sect of Shia Islam from northern Yemen, organized themselves in a movement in the 1980s in opposition to the increasing influence of non-Zaydi elements, such as Wahhabism, in Zaydi society.^{vi} The movement intensified in the 1990s with the rising strategic footprint of Saudi Arabia in the country^{vii} and came to the forefront in the 2000s when the Houthi leaders started organizing anti-government protests, leading to a subsequent governmental crackdown against them.^{viii} Since then, the militia group has been fighting against the internationally-recognised central government of Yemen for greater autonomy in their region and has captured almost all of the northwestern part of the country, including the capital Sana'a, in 2014.

However, the major complexity in the issue is the involvement of Iran. Iran has been a major supplier of military equipment, technological know-how, and financial assistance to Houthis as they form a key part of the Iranian 'Axis of Resistance,' alongside Hezbollah and Hamas in the region. Houthi leaders strongly identify themselves with the anti-Western and anti-Israeli goals of the 'Axis' and resonate with the Iranian Islamic Revolution ideas of reshaping the regional order.^{ix} Furthermore, the Houthis wish to take advantage of the fact that the majority of Yemenis share their antisemitic views in order to not only solidify their position inside Yemeni society but also gain some leverage at the regional negotiating table over the future of Yemen.^x So, by default, the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel by Hamas and subsequent Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip have acted as a catalyst for the Houthis' maritime escalation in the Red Sea. They wanted to project themselves as responsible actors of the region by "showing solidarity with Gaza."^{xi}

From November 2023, Houthis started targeting commercial and shipping vessels using anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), suicide drone boats, seabed mines, land-based improvised explosive devices (IEDs), water-

borne IEDs, and other sophisticated weapons. In the earlier phase, only vessels related to Israel, the United States, and other Western powers were targeted, but subsequently, the pattern related to the nationality of ownership and operation of vessels became blurred, and Houthis began striking ships randomly (see Table 1.1), resulting in the militarisation of the sea lanes.

Date	Vessel Name	Vessel Type	Flag and Ownership	Type of Attack	Impact
19-11-2023	Galaxy Leader	Vehicle Carrier	Bahamas-flagged & British-owned	Hijack	Vessel and crew hijacked
25-11-2023	CMA CGM Symi	Container Ship	Malta-flagged & Israeli-owned	Drone	Minor damage
13-12-2023	Ardmore Encounter	Oil & Chemical Tanker	Marshall Island-flagged & owned	UAV & Skiffs	No injuries or damage
31-12-2023	Maersk Hangzhou	Container Ship	Singapore - flagged & Danish-owned	Missile & speedboats	Hit, ship Seaworthy, no injuries
24-01-2024	Maersk Detroit & Maersk Chesapeake	Container Ship	USA-flagged & owned	Missile	No impact on vessel; no injuries or damage
18-02-2024	Rubymar	General Cargo Ship	Belize-flagged & British-owned	Missile	Crew evacuated; vessel sunk

					two weeks after attack
6-03-2024	True Confidence	Bulk Carrier	Barbados-flagged & Liberia-owned	Missile	Three crew killed; several other seriously injured; vessel abandoned
8-06-2024	Norderney	General cargo ship with container capacity	Antigua & Barbuda-flagged and German-owned	Missile	Minor damage to the vessel; no injuries reported
2-08-2024	Blue Lagoon	Crude oil tanker	Panama-flagged	Missile	Crew members were safe; vessel reported minor damage
17-11-2024	Anadolu S	Bulk Carrier	Panama-flagged & Turkey-owned	Missile	Vessel and crew reported safe
6-07-2025	Magic Seas	Bulk Carrier	Liberian-flagged & Greek-owned	Missiles, Small arms, RPG	Crew evacuated; vessel abandoned
7-07-2025	Eternity C	Bulk Carrier	Liberian-flagged &	Drones, Small arms, RPG	three crew dead, two injured,

			Greek-owned		vessel severely damaged
31-08-2025	Scarlet Ray	Chemical & oil tanker	Liberian-flagged & Israeli-owned	Missile	Crew & vessel safe
23-09-2025	Minervagracht	General Cargo	Dutch-flagged & Dutch-owned	Missile	Crew & vessel safe

Table 1.1: Overview of Some Houthi Attacks on Commercial Ships **Source:** created by the author from Llyod's List data.^{xii}

Geo-economic Ramifications of the Red Sea Maritime Disruptions

The increasing disruptions and hostilities in the Red Sea have compounded navigational challenges, upending regional stability and global economic security. The following sub-points explain the geo-economic consequences of these attacks: -

Increased Shipping Costs and Transit Times: Due to an increase in attacks in the Red Sea, ships are being rerouted via the Cape of Good Hope, which lengthens their travel times by 10 to 14 days. According to one analysis, the "operational costs for affected vessels" have increased by almost 18% since November 2023,^{xiii} which has reduced the effectiveness of international maritime trade flow. Longer travel delays have also raised the risk for businesses using just-in-time manufacturing such as electronics and automotive parts, and the perishable goods sector. For instance, prominent automobile giants like Tesla and Volvo had to temporarily halt their largest production units in Europe due to shortage of components in January 2024.^{xiv} Moreover, the UNCTAD's 2025 Review of Maritime Transport report highlights that tonnage through the Suez Canal was still 70% lower in May 2025 as compared to the 2023 levels, as the shipping industry has still not rebounded their confidence in the Red Sea transit routes (see figure 1.1).^{xv}

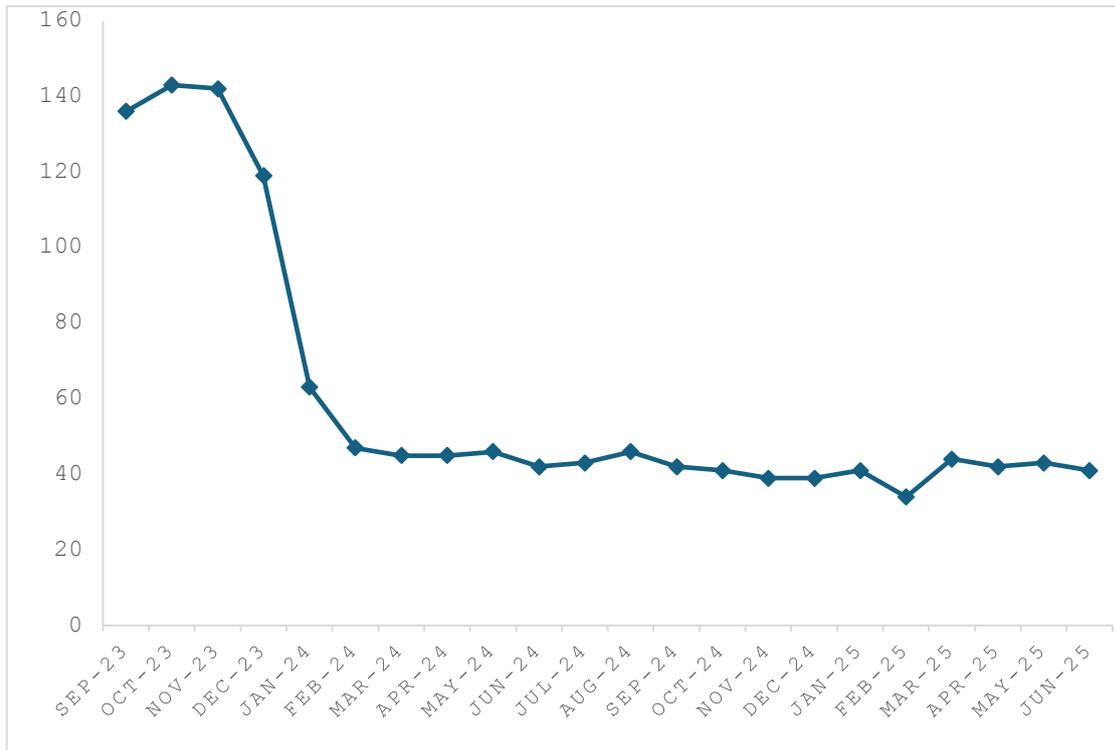


Figure 1.1: Monthly Ship Transits through the Suez Canal (millions of gross tons; September 2023 – June 2025) **Source:** UN Trade and Development^{xvi}

Global Supply Chain Strain and Inflationary Pressures: The supply chain delays and freight rate volatility have increased inflationary pressures on the global economy. Insurance companies have more than doubled war risk premiums, often reaching more than 1% of a ship’s value, adding up to US\$1 million per voyage and ultimately passing the burden on consumers.^{xvii} Besides, the re-routing of vessels has added another layer of complexity in the global trade landscape due to port congestion. Major transshipment hubs on mainland East-West trade, like Shanghai, Singapore, Jebel Ali and Port Kelang, have dealt with increased average anchor time. As per the UNCTAD, between “December 2023 and March 2024, average port waiting times climbed 23% to 6.4 hours in developed countries and 7% to 10.9 hours in developing countries.”^{xviii} The data from the Global Supply Chain Stress Index (GSCSI) also supports the additional increase of stress on the global economy (see Figure 1.2). Since early 2024, the Index has been on the higher side, with 1.54 million Twenty-foot Equivalent Units

(TEU)¹ in January 2024 to 1.95 million TEUs in January 2025, indicating the negative side of the Red Sea crisis on the container and logistics industry.

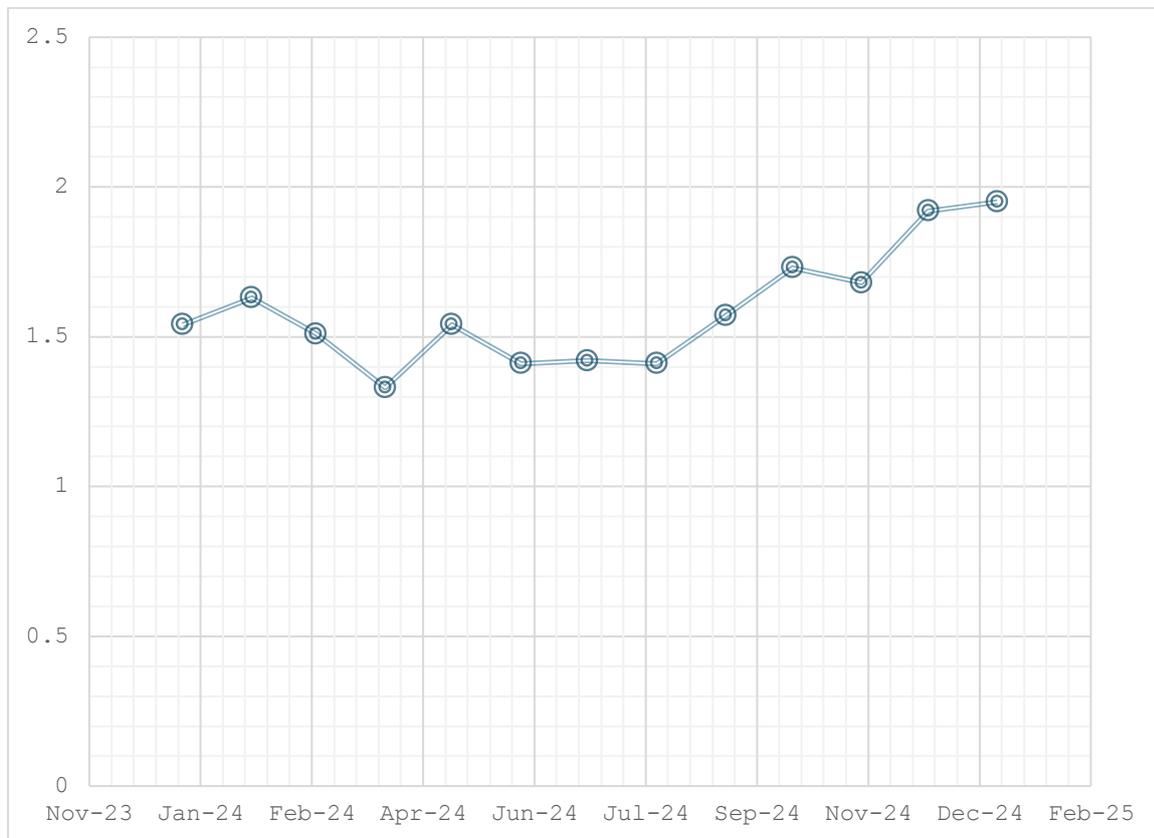


Figure 1.2: Global Supply Chain Stress Index (GSCSI) (in millions of TEUs) **Source:** World Bank.^{xix}

Revenue Losses for Transit States: The re-routing of vessels has resulted in revenue loss for Egypt as the centrality of the Suez Canal in global maritime trade declined. In 2024, the Egyptian government announced the total revenue loss of around US\$7 billion compared to 2023, and by March 2025, monthly losses due to disruptions reached around \$800 million.^{xx} The situation had compounded Egypt's economic crisis as the country's current account deficit had exceeded US\$20 billion by mid-2024.^{xxi} To reduce the financial stress, the Suez Canal Authority had to adopt conciliatory measures like a fee discount for shipping vessels, sometimes as high as 75% for crude oil tankers.^{xxii} However, on the positive side, the crisis forced Egyptians

¹ TEU stands for Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit, which is the standard measurement to determine cargo capacity for marine vessels. 1 TEU equals to one 20-foot container.

to diversify their revenues by expanding the manufacturing and services sectors, along with some structural reforms like the privatisation of state-owned companies and monetary flexibility.

International Naval Coalitions (INCs) and Red Sea Security

A major complexity of the Red Sea crisis stems from the fact that any direct military action by Washington and Tel Aviv against Houthis inside Yemen might trigger regional escalation. Besides, many Arab allies of the United States, primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are also against the idea of direct US intervention in Yemen, particularly due to the pro-Palestine stance of the Arab public. Moreover, it should also be kept in mind that the nature of the crisis also demands collective action, as no single nation can tackle the issue unilaterally. So, to ensure the freedom of navigation, the United States, along with the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, Spain, Australia, and Greece, launched 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' on December 18, 2023.^{xxiii} It was to be operationalized by the Combined Task Force (CTF)-153, which is a US Navy-led Red Sea-focused maritime security task force. Under 'Prosperity Guardian,' international naval forces pooled the resources, adopted a unified approach, and resolved to 'provide assurance to the maritime industry and deter illegal activity' by increasing patrolling in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.^{xxiv} But the increased intensity of attacks led to the direct strikes on Houthis' military facilities inside Yemen by the United States and the United Kingdom.^{xxv}

Following this incident, the European Union launched its own naval mission on February 19, 2024, named 'Operation ASPIDES,' as many European countries, except the Netherlands, perceived the move as escalatory in an already volatile region. By taking inspiration from the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2722, ASPIDES was mandated to "protect vessels against ongoing attacks, accompany vessels, reinforce maritime situational awareness, such as monitoring, assessing possible threats, and shaping information, in coordination with partners."^{xxvi} Although these coalitions have been successful in protecting shipping vessels and reducing navigational challenges, a deeper analysis brings to light the flip side of it, directing

towards the need to adopt a more coherent and wholesome approach while dealing with the Houthi militias and their evolving asymmetric tactics.

Effectiveness of the INCs in Securing the Trade Route: Successes and Limitations

Successes

- **Limited the Scale of Disruption:** The INC forces have thwarted many drones strikes and intercepted missiles using advanced missile defence systems and maritime surveillance, preventing numerous attacks from hitting the targets. As per the ACLED data, around 75% of drone attacks and 16% of missile attacks by the Houthis have been intercepted by the INCs,^{xxvii} which helped in protecting the Red Sea route from a complete blockade even at the peak of the crisis.
- **Enhanced Maritime Situational Awareness:** By integrating various modern defence technologies, such as surveillance drones, radars, satellites, and long-range maritime patrol aircraft from partner countries, INCs have enhanced the maritime situational awareness of the area. Early warning systems deployed by the CTF-153 detected missile launches more quickly, while real-time intelligence sharing helped shipping vessels and shipping companies receive threat updates. Naval forces also established liaison networks in host nations, which helped in seamless information exchange and enhanced coordination among them.^{xxviii}
- **Reinforced the norms of Freedom of Navigation:** The multinational naval initiative reaffirmed the phenomena of maritime commons and collective responsibility in securing global interests. Sustained naval presence and deeper interoperability among naval forces also reflected that unilateral coercive actions by the violent non-state actors (VNSAs) cannot erase the principles of freedom of navigation upheld under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Besides, naval patrolling has also indirectly

created a defensive shield and helped in deterring piracy incidents along the Somalian coast.^{xxix}

Limitations

- **Asymmetric Warf Tactics:** A major challenge presented by the Houthis to the naval forces is their use of asymmetric maritime warfare strategies. Houthis have primarily relied on drone technologies of different ranges, such as Rased (35 km), Hudhud-1 (15 km), Qasef-1 (150-200 km), Samad variants (500-1700 km), and Shahed-136 (2500 km),^{xxx} all of them provided by Iran, and sea mines to target shipping vessels in the Red Sea, as they are low-cost and flexible in nature and provide tactical advantage over enemies advanced military capabilities. Although INCs have been able to shoot down drones before reaching their target to a major extent, the countermeasures did not stop the militias from continuing their attacks. This state of affairs reflects that “military superiority does not necessarily translate into political or battlefield victory against a decentralised and ideologically cohesive opponent.”^{xxxi}
- **Difference of Opinions among Stakeholders:** Strategic hesitancy and constricting alliance policies by the relevant stakeholders is another major issue in tackling the Houthi crisis. Countries of the Persian Gulf region, like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have been hesitant about directly attacking the Houthis’ military facilities inside Yemen. Besides, extra regional-players like India and some of the INC members, too, have displayed reluctance in publicly supporting the operation. The launch of the EU’s ‘Operation ASPIDES’ and India’s ‘Operation Sankalp’ brought into light the diplomatic faultlines of the naval coalitions.
- **Uncertainty about the Future Escalation:** As the reason behind the escalation of the Red Sea crisis itself indicates, the problem does not have any linear cause; rather, it is completely enmeshed in the West Asian geopolitical dynamics. There is every possibility of escalation by the Houthis in the maritime route, either to exert pressure on Saudi Arabia and Western powers to stop interfering in Yemen or to support its ‘Axis of Resistance’ allies and strengthen

their strategic presence in the region. Therefore, entirely depending on military solutions to tackle a complex geopolitical skirmish will not yield any positive outcome. The threats will persist because naval forces do not have any capacity or reach to resolve the internal conflicts of Yemen, Israel, Iran and other regional players.

India and the Red Sea Crisis

The intensified Red Sea crisis and supply chain disruptions directly impacted the geoeconomic and geostrategic interests of New Delhi. In geoeconomic terms, the rerouting of commercial vessels via the Cape of Good Hope increased the container freight rates to an unprecedented level. For instance, data highlights that the price of 40-foot container traffic from the Jawaharlal Nehru Port to Rotterdam increased from US\$650 to US\$3750 between January 2023 and January 2024. Similarly, the inbound shipment rates from Rotterdam to West India increased from US\$1050 to a whopping US\$3750 during the same period,^{xxxii} severely impacting the country's current account deficit (CAD). Some of the primary industries that were impacted by the rising shipping costs were the perishable goods industry, pharmaceuticals, textiles, steel, and automobiles.^{xxxiii}

At the geostrategic level, the crisis tested India's non-aligned position in the region as many incidents put it in a central role to deter the evolving maritime threats. For example, on 23 December 2023, a Liberian-flagged and Netherlands-operated tanker carrying 21 Indian crew, MV Chem Pluto, was attacked by Houthi rebels using a one-way attack drone just 210 nautical miles off Dwarka, Gujarat.^{xxxiv} This was the first such attack by the Houthis targeting commercial vessels so far from their traditional area and in the Arabian Sea so close to the Indian coast. In response to this, New Delhi adopted a more proactive approach and deployed various guided missile destroyers, frigates, and aerial surveillance systems, such as INS Kolkata, INS Kochi, INS Mormugao, and P-8I aircraft, to maintain maritime domain awareness and real-time information sharing across the Arabian Sea and the Horn of Africa Coast.^{xxxv}

Although India adopted an independent and non-aligned approach in dealing with the crisis and did not join any of the international naval coalitions despite a formal request by the United States, the Indian Navy maintained a sustained and swift presence in

the region to secure the shipping routes. For instance, INS Vishakhapatnam swiftly responded to a distress call from a Marshall Islands-flagged vessel, MV Genco Picardy, in January 2024.^{xxxvi} This pragmatic diplomacy allowed New Delhi more flexibility, as can be inferred from the joint statement released during the state visit of the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to Iran in January 2024, which highlighted that *“this fraught situation is not to the benefit of any party and this must be clearly recognised.”*^{xxxvii}

Conclusion

The contemporary global economic health primarily depends upon the uninterrupted flow of trade, which requires freedom of navigation in the maritime routes. The Red Sea crisis has brought into light the complex interconnection between political geography, international commerce, and geopolitical rivalries. Therefore, the continuous and strong presence of naval forces with deep coordination between regional and extra-regional actors, along with the greater involvement of Red Sea coastal states, is necessary to secure the pivotal maritime chokepoints from becoming a persistent geopolitical risk.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is the author’s individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS, the Defence forces, or the Government of India. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished, and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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