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BAB EL-MANDEB AND INDIA'S MARITIME VULNERABILITIES: MANAGING CHOKEPOINT DISRUPTION AND BUILDING STRATEGIC RESILIENCE

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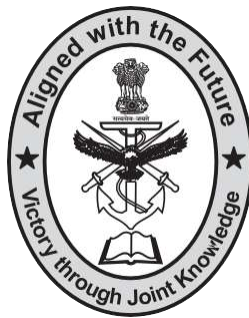
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RESILIENCE**

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Bab el-Mandeb and India's Maritime Vulnerabilities: Managing Chokepoint Disruption and Building Strategic Resilience



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Introduction

Bab el-Mandeb is not just a chokepoint but an intersection of competing interests of the littoral states across the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Horn of Africa. The strait is surrounded by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen, each with distinct and conflicting interests. The region has become a fragmented strategic space engulfed in long-standing sectarian conflicts, civil wars, weak governance, interstate rivalries, and territorial disputes. Non-state actors like the Houthis and the Southern Transitional Council in Yemen, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and Darfur Armed militias in Sudan further make the region politically unstable. The pursuit of ports, military access, and a commercial foothold in the region has brought Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt into conflict. The competition is to gain control over ports like Berbera (Somaliland), Bosaso (Puntland), Assab and Djibouti. These regional rivalries have been threatening the international shipping routes in the Red Sea, leading to increased military presence of extra-regional countries like the US (Camp Lemonnier military base), China (PLA support base), Japan (SDF base near Ambouli), Italy (BMIS, Amedeo Guillet),

France (Heron naval base), and India to protect and support maritime traffic to and from Asia and Africa to Europe.

Such a fragmented security environment has been further complicated by renewed conflict in Yemen in July 2026. Saudi's attack on Sanaa Airport under the Houthis' control escalated the conflict between the two. The confrontations increased as Houthis advanced to gain control of the western and southern parts of Yemen near the Bab el-Mandeb. The unilateral embargo imposed by the Houthis on Saudi Arabia, followed by attacks on ships in the strait, has increased the risk of converting a regional rivalry into an international shipping crisis.

This strait is particularly vital for India's trade with Europe, as it carries substantial volumes of merchandise, energy and container traffic across the continent. If the conflict continues for long, it would have major repercussions for India. As the situation in West Asia remains volatile, its impact on India is yet to be assessed. However, the assessments of the 2023 Houthi attacks against Israel during the Gaza war provide a relative picture of how Indian interests could be jeopardised. This article subsequently suggests some measures that India could take to reduce the impact of ongoing conflicts on India.

Geography and Maritime Boundaries

The Bab al-Mandeb strait is strategically significant, connecting the Gulf of Aden in the Arabian Sea with the Red Sea. It provides the shortest passage from the Mediterranean Sea, through the Suez Canal, to the Indian Ocean (Map 1). The strait delineates the geographical boundaries between Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan on the African side, and Saudi Arabia and Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula. There are two critical narrow sections within the strait that measure less than 10 nautical miles (NM) (Map 2).

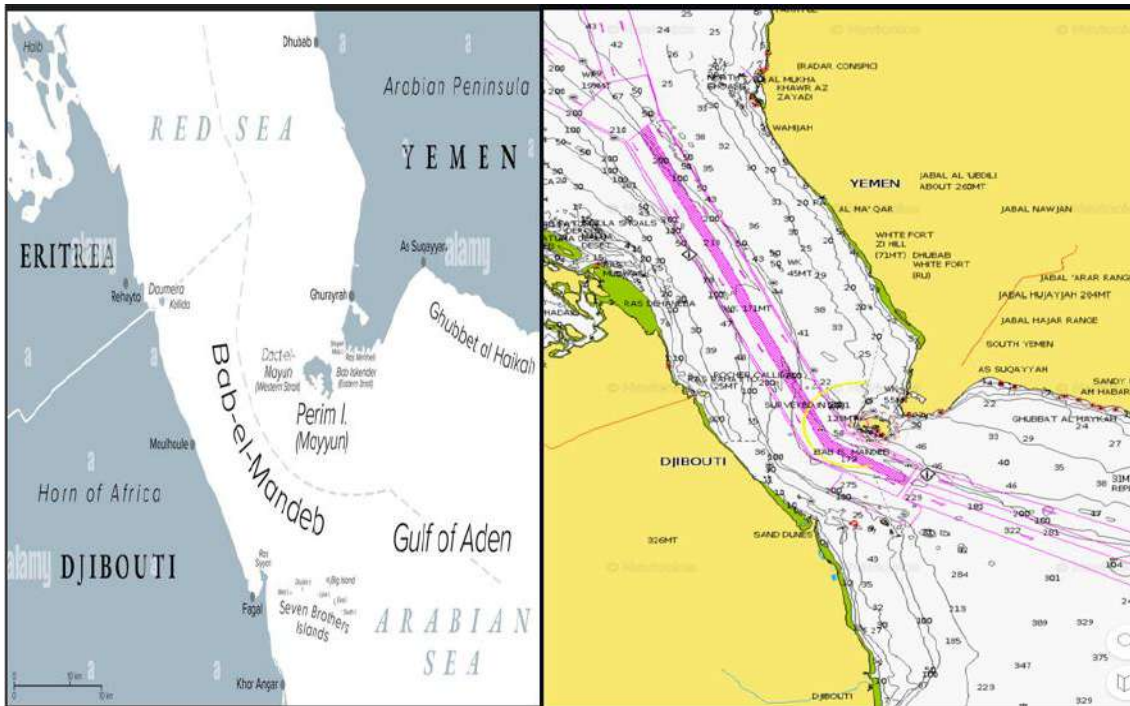


Map 1: Bab el-Mandeb, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden¹



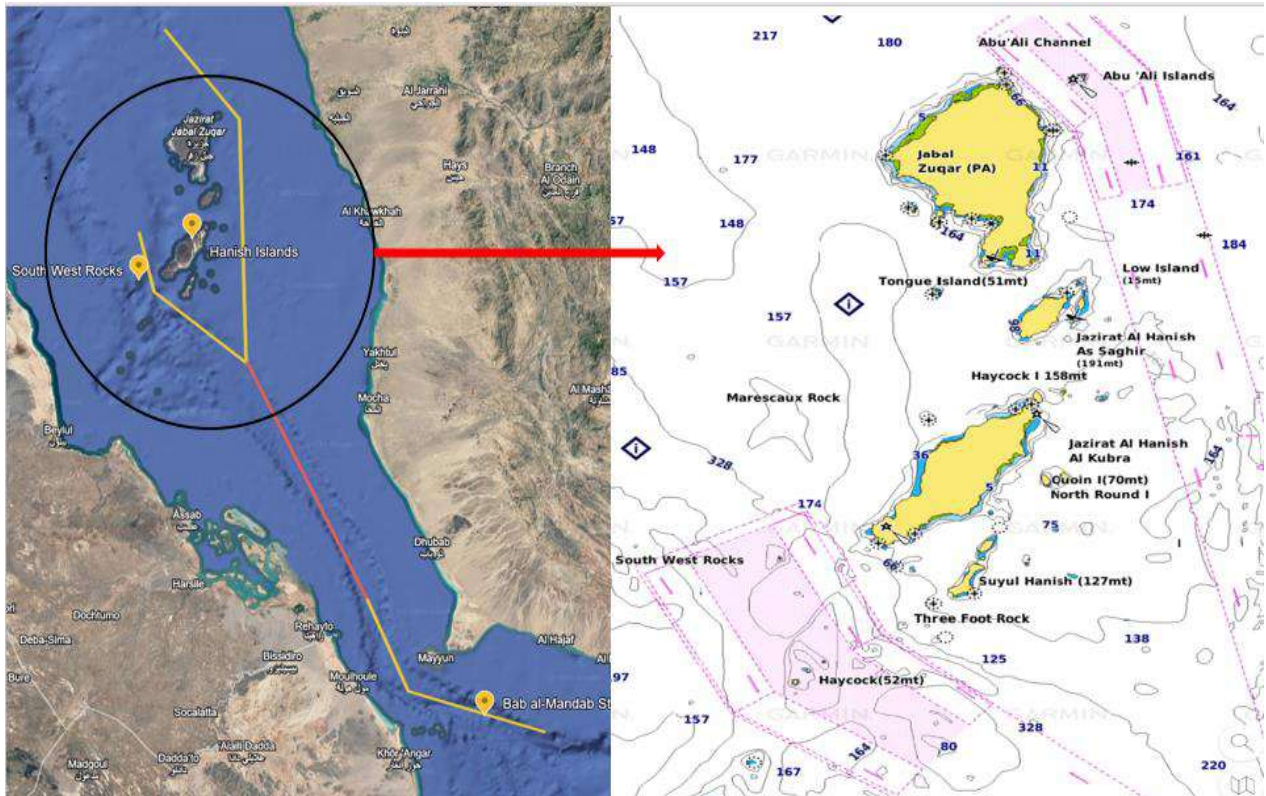
Map 2: Two narrow sections of the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb map from Alamy²

- Southern Narrow Point:** It lies between Yemen and Djibouti and is divided into two sections by a broad, deep strait with Yemeni Perim Island (Mayun) at its centre. The eastern channel, known as Bab Iskender, situated between the Yemeni coast and Perim, measures approximately 1.5 nautical miles in width and has a maximum depth of approximately 31 meters (Map 3).³ The western channel, Dact-el-Mayun, has a width of approximately 13 NM and a depth of around 300 metres.⁴ Located further south are the ‘Seven Brothers’ Islands, also known as the Sawabi Islands, which fall under the jurisdiction of Djibouti. These islands are situated approximately 9.5 nautical miles from Perim Island.⁵



Map 3: a) Southern Narrow Point of Bab el-Mandeb: Dact el-Mayun and Bab Iskender; b) Traffic Separation Scheme, Garmin, Marine Maps ⁶

- Northern narrow section:** It is situated roughly 72 NM north of the southern section and divides Hanish Island of Yemen from Eritrea's Southwest Rocks, having a distance of approximately 4 NM.⁷ The geographical location of the Hanish Islands offers an alternative passage measuring 15 NM in width via the Abu' Ali Channel, situated between the mainland of Yemen and Hanish Island. (Map 4)



Map 4. a) Northern Narrow Section -Authors' own; b) Traffic Separation Scheme, Garmin, Marine Maps⁸

At both narrow points of the strait, since the distance is less than 24 NM, Yemen's territorial waters overlap with those of Djibouti and Eritrea, respectively. The strait links the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Eritrea in the Red Sea, along with Djibouti, Somalia, and Yemen in the Gulf of Aden. Notably, all neighbouring countries except Eritrea are parties to UNCLOS. Because this strait facilitates international navigation, Article 38 of UNCLOS affirms that nations have the right to transit passage through this route.⁹ The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) adopted Resolution A. 284 (VIII) in 1973, establishing a Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) for this strait, based on the British Admiralty Chart of 1925 (Map 3 and 4).¹⁰ It details the coordinates of the northbound and southbound traffic lanes, along with a 1 NM wide separation zone.

How Sensitive is Bab el-Mandeb and its Significance?

The spatial significance of this strait can be traced to the colonial period, when Britain gained complete control of Perim Island as a refuelling station in 1856, along with a naval base at the Port of Aden.¹¹ The operationalisation of the Suez Canal in

1869 established its status as a preferred shipping route connecting resource-rich Asia with industrialised Europe. Its significance rose again following the discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula in the 20th century and the rise of trade from South and East Asia. In the contemporary era, the strait continues to occupy a central position in global maritime security and economic connectivity.

- **Connecting Global Supply Chain:** At present, the geopolitical importance of this strait extends beyond the resource abundance of its littoral states. It is determined by its structural role in integrating global supply chains extending from the American and European markets in the Atlantic Ocean to the markets of Asia and the Indian Ocean, and beyond. This underlying economic function of this strait determines its political and strategic significance.
- **Crude Oil and Petroleum Liquids Trade:** Approximately 10-12% of global maritime trade transits through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait annually in normal circumstances. According to an EIA report, in 2023, approximately 9.3 million barrels per day (b/d) of crude oil and petroleum liquids were transported through this strait (Fig. 1). Following the Yemeni-based Houthi attacks in November 2023 on commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea, crude oil and petroleum liquid trade fell to 4.1 mn b/d in 2024 and 4.2 mn b/d in 2025.¹² Concurrently, the volume diverted via the Cape of Good Hope increased from 6.2 mn b/d in 2023 to 9.1 mn b/d in the first half of 2025.¹³

Location	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	1H25
Strait of Malacca	22.8	22.1	23.0	24.0	22.5	23.2
Strait of Hormuz	19.2	19.7	21.9	21.8	20.7	20.9
Suez Canal and SUMED Pipeline	5.4	5.2	7.3	8.8	4.8	4.9
Bab el-Mandeb	5.7	6.0	8.0	9.3	4.1	4.2
Danish Straits ^a	3.1	3.1	4.2	5.0	4.9	4.9
Turkish Straits (Dardanelles)	3.2	3.3	3.2	3.5	3.6	3.7
Panama Canal ^b	1.7	1.8	2.2	2.2	2.0	2.3
Cape of Good Hope	7.9	7.2	6.1	6.2	9.3	9.1
World maritime oil trade	74.1	75.9	78.6	80.2	79.7	79.8
World total oil supply	94.1	95.8	100.6	102.6	103.3	104.4

Fig 1. Oil transiting through various straits in million b/d from 2020 to 1H25.

Source: Data source: U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), *Short-Term Energy Outlook*, February 2026.¹⁴

In 2026, the conflict between Iran and the US in the Strait of Hormuz led to a 63% drop in oil transiting through Hormuz, from 20.7 mn b/d in the pre-war period to 7.6 bn b/d in August 2026.¹⁵ It compelled Saudi Arabia to reroute its oil exports via the Red Sea port of Yanbu through the East-West Pipeline. Reports indicate that by June 2026, approximately 7.4 million barrels of oil were transported daily through Bab el-Mandeb (7 per cent of the global oil supply), reflecting an increase from 4.2 bn b/d in 2025.¹⁶

- **Liquefied Natural Gas:** LNG shipping is particularly sensitive to maritime security threats. It is affected by variations in the transit distance, LNG carrier availability, and fluctuating prices. The disruption in the Red Sea in 2023 resulted in a significant decline in LNG flow, approaching zero in 2024 and the first half of 2025. This contrasts with approximately 4.2 billion cubic feet per day,¹⁷ which accounted for 8% of liquefied natural gas (LNG) trade¹⁸ transiting the Red Sea during the first half of 2023 before the Houthis' attack took place.

As per EIA data, the first quarter of 2026 saw a substantial increase in LNG transits, reaching 2.9 billion cubic feet per day through this strait.¹⁹ It is yet to be determined how much LNG export has been affected by the renewed crisis in July 2026.

- **Shipping Industry:** Before the crisis began in the Red Sea in Nov 2023, the seven-day moving average of vessels in this strait between January 2023 and October 2023 was between 65 and 81 ships per day, which included containers, cargo, tankers and dry bulk ships.²⁰ Following the Houthi attack in November 2023, daily traffic decreased to approximately 43 vessels (Fig. 1), indicating a sudden decline of about 39% in commercial shipping, which led to rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope.²¹ In 2024, traffic stabilised at approximately 31-33 vessels per day, representing a decline of 50-55% from pre-crisis levels. Even by 2025, traffic didn't return to pre-2023 crisis levels and remained at approximately 33-34 vessels per day.

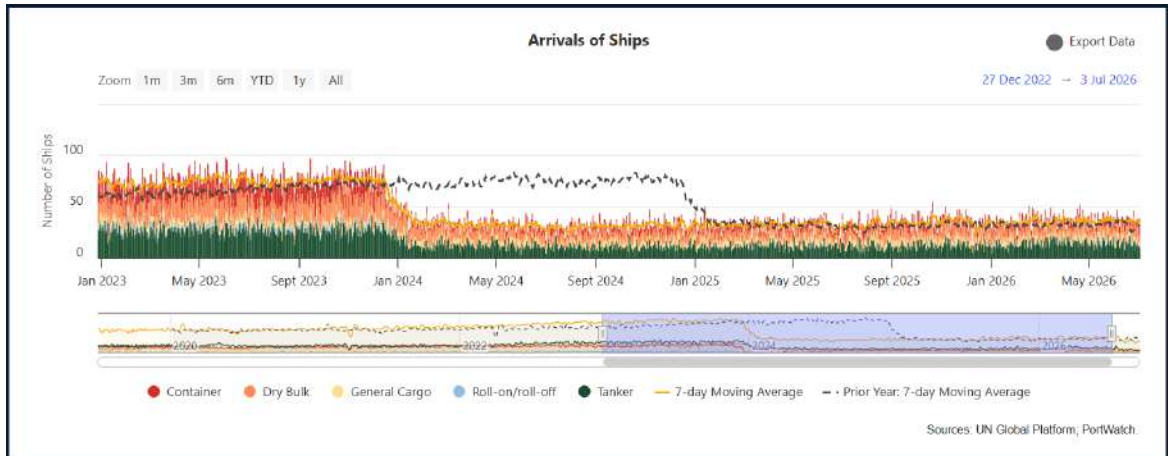


Fig 1: Arrival of Ships in Bab el-Mandeb between Jan 2023 and May 2026, Portwatch²²

During this period, major oil and natural gas companies halted their shipping through the Red Sea. In the first two weeks of January 2024, Reliance, a key provider of diesel and gasoil to Europe, did not export any products to the continent.²³ Much of the shipment was diverted to the Cape of Good Hope. This led to delays of 10-14 days, reducing the number of voyages and the availability of vessels; a 20-30% rise in fuel costs; and increased global freight rates and insurance premiums.

Current Scenario

In July 2026, the Houthis declared a unilateral maritime embargo against Saudi Arabia as a response to an attack on Sanaa airport. Subsequently, the Houthis advanced into the western and southern regions of Yemen and secured control over cities such as Taiz and Hodeidah, as well as the strategically important port city of Mocha (Mokha), the coastal region of Dhubab, and the Greater and Lesser Hanish Islands, along with Perim Island. These regions hold strategic advantage, as they offer elevated coastal terrain, access to a deep-water port, and direct visibility over maritime activities. From these positions, they could easily launch short-range missiles and suicide drones to strike with limited reaction time for the passing ships. Houthis also launched attacks on King Khalid Air Base and the east-west Saudi pipeline²⁴ and other infrastructure in the southwestern cities of Abha, Khamis Mushait, Jizan, and Najran with missiles and drones, endangering Saudi interests along this route.



Map 3: Perim, Mocha, Dhubab, Hanish Island; **Source:** Authors' own.

Since July 2026, as per various sources, Houthis have reportedly targeted two Saudi tankers, the *Encelia* and *Layla*, asserting that they breached the embargo.²⁵ In August, Houthis attacked a Tanzania-flagged *Tihamah* cargo vessel close to Perim Island,²⁶ followed by an attack on two commercial tankers, M/Ts *AMZAN* and *DAISY*. The US Department of Transportation issued an advisory to US-flagged commercial vessels transiting the Gulf of Aden, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Red Sea to switch off Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders and remain distant from Yemen's coast to avoid getting targeted, especially for vessels with US, Israeli, UK, and Saudi associations. This led to increased security concerns in the strait, further resulting in a decrease in average daily traffic, from 39 vessels on July 20, 2026, to 24 vessels per day in September 2026.²⁷

Implications for India's Maritime Interests

The renewed confrontation in Bab el-Mandeb, along with the maritime blockade by Houthis, is thought to be directed only towards Saudi-linked shipping as of now. However, its consequences could extend well beyond the region. The current situation in the Red Sea presents India with a parallel maritime security challenge, along with the ongoing crisis in the Strait of Hormuz.

- Shipping and Logistics:** Around 95% of India's trade by volume and 68% by value is facilitated through maritime routes across the globe.²⁸ Despite the growth of India's shipping sector over the last few years, approximately 95% of the country's seaborne trade and around 88% of its crude oil imports by sea are carried out using foreign-flagged vessels.²⁹ These vessels hauling Indian commodities avoid conflict-prone routes, as this makes them commercially unreliable. The reduction in total commercial shipping traffic from the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb region post-July 2026 clearly illustrates that the shipping sector is extremely vulnerable to perceived maritime threats and does not require explicit targeting to alter its operations. A comparable trend was observed during earlier Houthi attacks in 2023 amid the Gaza war, as numerous shipping companies either halted Red Sea bookings or rerouted vessels through alternate routes. During that period, war risk insurance rates escalated by 500%, increasing from around \$50,000 per voyage to between \$250,000 and \$400,000.³⁰
- Energy Security:** India imports around 88% of its total crude oil consumption.³¹ Following the closure of the Strait of Hormuz in early 2026, India decreased its reliance on crude oil from Hormuz from 70% to around 30%, diversifying its imports from Russia, West Africa, Latin America, and the United States through alternative routes.³² In June 2026, India imported approximately 2.6 mn b/d, accounting for 53.5% of the nation's total crude imports from Russia.³³ Saudi Arabia also continued to be a significant supplier of crude oil, exporting around 600,000 b/d in March-April 2026 to India from the Red Sea through Bab el-Mandeb. However, after the Houthi attacks in July 2026, Saudi exports to India were hampered and fell to about 315,000 b/d in August.³⁴

For India, the primary concern lies not in the loss of Saudi crude but rather in the potential rise in costs associated with obtaining alternative supplies. In September 2026, Brent prices attained \$107 per barrel, while the UAE's Murban crude approached \$119 per barrel.³⁵ Refiners in India are now looking to other regions to diversify their supply chains. Even so, an extended disruption in the strait may compel Asian refiners to compete for alternative feedstocks, resulting in increased crude differentials and freight expenses.

India has invested considerable time in diversifying its crude oil sources, enhancing inventory levels, and strengthening its capacity to address supply disruptions. However, diversification cannot completely shield the economy when multiple maritime corridors are simultaneously under pressure.

- **Trade with the European Union (EU):** The implications extend beyond the energy sector to encompass India's broader economic interests. In 2024–2025, India's overall merchandise trade with the EU was roughly USD 136.54 billion, of which USD 75.85 billion came from Indian exports.³⁶ Trade between the two is heavily dependent on the Red Sea corridor, with approximately 80 per cent transiting through Bab el-Mandeb.³⁷ The delays may impact exports of essential goods, like machinery and engineering goods, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, textiles, agricultural products, and automotive components. MSME exporters are more vulnerable because many operate on thin margins and limited working capital buffers, which limits their ability to absorb unexpected increases in logistics costs.
- **Inflation and Currency Depreciation:** As India relies significantly on sea routes and regions connected to West Asia for energy resources and trade exports, perceived maritime threats around the strait render its trade vulnerable to maritime risks. A brief disruption may be managed through inventory adjustments and rerouting strategies. Nevertheless, the risk escalates if disruptions at Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz continue simultaneously, as extended rerouting would increase shipping charges, freight costs, insurance premiums, and prices for crude and LPG, along with consequential effects on the economy related to inflation and its spillover effect on other sectors of the economy.³⁸ Long-term disruptions to these crucial chokepoints would have a spillover effect on a wider range of commodities and services.³⁹ The increased oil import expenditure could lead to a widening of the current account deficit and a depreciation of the currency. This could put central banks in a challenging position since core inflation may keep rising even while economic demand declines, further straining monetary policy.

How can India prepare itself?

India's Maritime Security Strategy 2025 clearly highlights the importance of the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and their littoral regions, along with Bab el-Mandeb, as primary areas of maritime interest.⁴⁰ These areas can't be treated as distant waters but as extended areas integrated with the Indian economy and security. The Houthi strikes in 2023 began with attacks on shipping associated with Israel but subsequently broadened their scope to include international commercial vessels. Similarly, as of now, the recent maritime blockade by Houthis is specifically targeted against Saudi-linked shipping. But what if the embargo expands to vessels carrying Gulf-origin cargo irrespective of the flag on the vessels? There is a possibility that these threats would become a security concern for India in the Western Indian Ocean. Thus, it should not wait for the crisis to occur but rather carefully protect its supply lines through the Bab el-Mandeb while maintaining a balanced diplomatic gesture to prevent antagonising Yemen's Houthi rebels.

- **Digital Trade Facilitation:** India has established the Maritime Single Windows (MSWs) system via the SagarSetu platform, in accordance with international standards established by the IMO.⁴¹ It facilitates the electronic submission and transfer of essential information necessary for port calls, including the arrival, duration of stay, and departure of vessels, as well as the personnel and cargo on board. In case of trade disruptions, it enables prompt approval by multiple authorities, such as Ports, Immigration, and Customs and thus helps in minimising clearance delays and administrative friction.⁴² In case the crisis in Bab el-Mandeb escalates, it will aid in managing the added logistical complexity and reducing port-side delays caused by rerouting upon arrival at the Indian port.
- **Multiple Alternate Routes to Secure Energy Supplies:** India has significantly expanded its crude oil supply chains in response to the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz. Given the ongoing threats in the Red Sea, it is imperative for India to explore alternative transshipment routes within the Indian Ocean region. For instance,
 - Duqm and Salalah, along with Sur and Muscat ports in Oman, possess significant potential and are strategically located outside of these two critical chokepoints. However, it is essential to strengthen this by

establishing pipeline infrastructure that connects to oil terminals and creating specialised facilities at the port for loading operations.⁴³

- Australia has substantial hydrocarbon reserves yet is heavily dependent on an overseas refined fuel supply due to its limited refining capacity. India, on the other hand, has a large and flexible refining system capable of processing diverse crude/feedstocks. Thus, Australia can strengthen India's upstream supply security, while India's refining and downstream capacity can contribute to Australia's energy resilience. However, Australian crude may not always be the most competitive on landed cost, but its strategic value increases when conventional supply chains face disruption. The recent crisis in the Middle East has made Pyrenees, a medium-sweet grade produced off Australia's Northwest coast, the most expensive crude, reaching \$138 per barrel in September from \$70.59 in February 2026.⁴⁴ In such circumstances, both countries can secure a long-term offtake agreement for a fixed period at a mutually agreed pricing formula. Apart from this, crude blending, strategic storage and resilient shipping arrangements between the two countries could ensure a reliable supply and an alternate energy corridor.
- **Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves, Commercial Inventories:** India and the UAE, in May 2026, formalised an MoU, allowing the UAE's Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) to potentially expand its liquid natural gas and liquid petroleum gas storage, along with crude oil storage, within India's strategic petroleum reserves to a capacity of up to 30 million barrels.⁴⁵ It also includes looking for the possibility of expanding Indian reserves through crude storage in Fujairah.
- **Strengthen Domestic Shipping Capacity:** The Indian shipping sector has demonstrated consistent growth, as indicated by the increase in the number of Indian-flagged vessels from 1246 in 2015 to 1549 in 2025. Meanwhile, India is still heavily reliant on foreign vessels. The Basic Port Statistics of India data highlights that approximately 93.92% of India's overseas trade was carried by foreign-flagged vessels in 2024-25.⁴⁶

- **Build Strategic Freight Resilience Through Trade Finance and Insurance Security.** In response to the Strait of Hormuz crisis in March 2026, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry implemented the Resilience & Logistics Intervention for Export Facilitation (RELIEF) programme through ECGC, which provided credit insurance cover for exporters with insurance premiums at pre-conflict rates.⁴⁷ However, it was time-bound, whereas the crisis is open-ended. Thus, India should implement a tailored system, such as creating a standing Maritime Crisis Relief Window, activating automatically to cover short-term war risk and rerouting expenses for vulnerable export industries, especially MSME-intensive sectors. It could be funded primarily through commercial premiums and supported by a government contingency fund.
- **Expand Naval Presence and Coordination with Other Navies:** The Indian Navy, in coordination with other national agencies, should maintain mission-deployed assets in the western Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden. It could be supported by surveillance through P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, unmanned systems, frigates, destroyers and IFC-IOR information-sharing mechanisms to assist merchant vessels in case of any incident and protect Indian interests. It will allow India to maintain its strategic autonomy and to cooperate with other friendly navies without becoming a party to wider regional conflict.
- **Formation of a Maritime Crisis Management Group for the Red Sea-Bab el-Mandeb-Gulf of Aden corridor:** this would bring the concerned ministries along with other stakeholders like the Navy, Coast Guards, the shipping industry and refiners to establish an inter-agency information-sharing mechanism based on real-time reporting and monitoring and assess the daily strategic and economic risk picture in these regions. Accordingly, it would lead to comprehensive decision-making to deal with such developments.

Conclusion

In the previous crisis, India diversified its trade structure and rerouted its shipments, which prevented the disruptions from bringing a systemic shock to the Indian economy. However, the current situation carries bigger risks, as the disruptions in Bab el-Mandeb coincide with the instability in Gulf energy supplies. This has the potential to become not only a shipping security problem but also to involve energy and trade-related risks, along with rising inflation.

The instability in these regions is going to persist and will be recurrent, creating similar vulnerabilities in the future for India linked to its economic security and strategic interests. To begin with, India's response must be to create strategic resilience, which demands adaptability, vigilance, credible naval presence, and maritime domain awareness. Second, disruption in one place might swiftly spread to other areas, putting pressure on another critical chokepoint. Thus, India's prospective maritime preparedness in this region must be conceived under an Indian Ocean-West Asian security framework rather than looking at it from two different geographic regions. Third, India could reduce the consequences of the disruptions by preparing itself by expanding its strategic reserves, undertaking long-term offtake agreements with oil-producing nations in the Indian Ocean and maintaining its independent diplomatic engagement.

The horizon of maritime threats is expanding continuously in these regions. India needs to prepare itself not only for the impact of conventional conflicts in the regions but also for rising unconventional threats like the use of drones to launch attacks; cyber threats at ports or energy-linked critical infrastructure, where hackers steal sensitive data and disrupt the flow of resources; and electronic interference through jamming and spoofing, AIS manipulations and much more. A combination of such methods creates a bigger risk and could lead to the formal closure of the chokepoints.

In view of this, India needs to enhance its maritime capability, port modernisation, contingency planning, along with robust monetary and financial instruments in place to protect Indian interests along with macroeconomic stability. Such crises, along with the rise of unconventional maritime threats, are tests of India's ability to secure the wider economic and maritime networks on which India's growth depends.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

ENDNOTES

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