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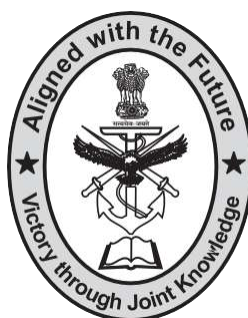
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Yemen: The Forgotten War and The Proxy Template



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Abstract

Yemen's civil war, now in its second decade, has functioned as a template through which regional and extra-regional powers have contested influence in the Arabian Peninsula without engaging one another directly. The paper examines how a Saudi-led, United States-backed coalition and Iran-aligned Houthi forces produced a protracted stalemate that devastated Yemen's state capacity while converting the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait into one of the world's most contested maritime chokepoints. It situates the conflict within the broader analytical literature on proxy warfare, traces the pattern and limits of U.S. involvement and assesses the humanitarian and strategic costs borne by Yemen itself. The paper then turns to India's stakes in this conflict: the 2015 evacuation of over 6,700 nationals in Operation Raahat, the Indian Navy's sustained anti-piracy and maritime security presence in the Gulf of Aden, and New Delhi's calibrated, non-aligned diplomatic posture toward both Riyadh and Tehran. It argues that Yemen offers a cautionary

template for how an internal political crisis, once internationalised, can generate durable maritime insecurity with direct consequences for India's energy security, trade and diaspora welfare and that India's response anchored in the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine and an independent naval posture offers a viable model of rule-based order amid great-power and regional rivalry.

Keywords: Yemen, India, Maritime chokepoints, Operation Raahat

Introduction

Yemen occupies a position of outsized geopolitical consequence relative to its economic weight. Positioned astride the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, through which a substantial share of world trade transits between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean via the Red Sea and Suez Canal, Yemen's internal stability has had implications far beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Since 2014, the country has been consumed by a civil war that pitted the Houthi movement, Ansar Allah, a Zaydi Shia revivalist group based in the northern Sa'dah region, against Yemen's internationally recognised government, backed from March 2015 by a Saudi Arabia-led military coalition.¹ Iran's political, financial and material support for the Houthis, alongside the United States' logistical, intelligence and arms-transfer relationship with the Saudi-led coalition, has led many scholars and policymakers to characterise the Yemen war as a proxy conflict emblematic of the broader Saudi-Iran regional rivalry.²

This characterisation is not without controversy. A substantial body of scholarship cautions against treating Yemen's war as reducible to great-power or regional-power competition, noting that local grievances like tribal, sectarian and economic predate and outlast external patronage and that framing the conflict primarily through a proxy lens can obscure Yemeni agency and complicate conflict resolution.³ Nonetheless, the external dimension of the war is undeniable, as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have conducted a sustained air campaign since 2015 involving tens of thousands of sorties, with substantial U.S. logistical and intelligence support in the war's early years.⁴ Iran, for its part, has been repeatedly linked by the United Nations Panel of Experts reporting to

the smuggling of weapons, including anti-tank guided missiles and drone components, to Houthi forces.⁵

Yemen is instructive less as a case study in ideology than as a template, a demonstration of how an internal political collapse, once internationalised through great-power and regional-power patronage, mutates into a long-duration conflict that generates strategic externalities, chiefly maritime insecurity, well beyond the belligerents' own borders.

Yemen as a Proxy Template: Conceptual Foundations

The academic study of proxy warfare provides a useful frame for understanding Yemen's trajectory. Andrew Mumford's influential definition describes proxy warfare as "the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome," a formulation broad enough to encompass both state and non-state proxies while capturing the essential strategic logic: greater powers achieve their objectives while avoiding the costs, risks and escalatory dangers of direct confrontation.⁶ The concept, first articulated in state-centric terms by Karl Deutsch during the Cold War to describe conflicts between external powers fought on the territory of a third state, has since been broadened by scholars such as Geraint Hughes and Vladimir Rauta to account for the far more complex web of state and non-state sponsorship relationships that characterise contemporary intra-state wars.⁷

Yemen fits this template with unusual clarity, though scholars caution against oversimplification. Saudi Arabia's 2015 intervention was framed explicitly around the danger of an Iranian proxy consolidating power on the Kingdom's southern border, a strategic anxiety rooted in the "Axis of Resistance" framework through which Iran has cultivated relationships with non-state armed actors like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen as a means of extending strategic depth and deterrence without the costs of conventional force projection.⁸ Yet as researchers affiliated with New America's Future of Proxy Warfare project have documented through fieldwork in Taiz, Yemen's third-largest city, local dynamics like competition among Yemeni political factions, tribal structures and even intra-coalition rivalries between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have often mattered as

much as, or more than, the Saudi-Iran rivalry in determining battlefield outcomes.⁹ The proxy lens, in other words, illuminates an important structural driver of the war's persistence without fully explaining its conduct.

What is less contested is the empirical record of external material support. Since the imposition of a United Nations arms embargo on the Houthis in 2015 under Security Council Resolution 2216, successive reports of the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen have documented a persistent pattern of weapons smuggling, chiefly via dhows across the Arabian Sea and increasingly via land routes through Oman, of components bearing technical characteristics consistent with Iranian manufacture, including anti-tank guided missile launch tubes and unmanned aerial vehicle components.¹⁰ The Panel's most recent reporting indicates that the Houthis have themselves become a regional hub for onwards arms trafficking to groups including Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, complicating the assumption of a simple, unidirectional patron-client relationship.¹¹ On the coalition side, the Congressional Research Service records that Washington provided the Saudi-led coalition with logistical, intelligence and advisory support from the outset of the March 2015 intervention, including aerial refuelling that continued until November 2018, when it was discontinued amid mounting congressional concern over civilian casualties.¹² The Centre for Strategic and International Studies similarly documents sustained U.S. advisory and intelligence-sharing arrangements with Riyadh through the war's most intensive phase.¹³

The Evolution of the Conflict and the Limits of U.S. Involvement

Yemen's descent into civil war followed the broader arc of Arab Spring-era instability. Popular protests in 2011 forced the resignation of long-serving president Ali Abdullah Saleh, triggering a United Nations-mediated political transition intended to produce a more inclusive government under President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.¹⁴ This transition collapsed when the Houthi movement, opposed to the terms of the settlement, resumed an insurgency that culminated in the September 2014 seizure of Sana'a and a subsequent advance toward Aden. Hadi's government fled the country and formally requested international military intervention.¹⁵

In March 2015, a nine-state coalition led by Saudi Arabia and including the United Arab Emirates launched a campaign combining air strikes with a naval blockade intended to prevent Iranian arms transfers and restore the internationally recognised government.¹⁶ The United States, under President Barack Obama, authorised logistical and intelligence support to the coalition within days of the intervention's launch, reflecting Washington's assessment that supporting a longstanding Gulf partner against Iranian-backed expansionism served U.S. regional interests without direct American combat participation.¹⁷ This arrangement of material and intelligence support without direct combatant status is itself a textbook illustration of the proxy dynamic; it allowed Washington to signal resolve against Iranian regional influence while avoiding the costs of direct military engagement.

The coalition's air campaign, which the Council on Foreign Relations estimates involved more than twenty-five thousand strikes over the subsequent decade, achieved neither rapid victory nor political resolution.¹⁸ Instead, the war produced a prolonged and costly stalemate, with a June 2015 Saudi naval blockade prompting an Iranian naval deployment that raised, without triggering, the risk of direct Saudi-Iran confrontation at sea.¹⁹ Rising civilian casualties generated sustained scrutiny in the U.S. Congress. A September 2020 report to the UN Human Rights Council found "reasonable grounds" to conclude that coalition members, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, had committed violations of international humanitarian law and explicitly criticised third-party arms suppliers including the United States, United Kingdom, France and Canada for "continuing their support of parties to the conflict...thereby helping to perpetuate the conflict".²⁰ This scrutiny culminated in the Trump administration's May 2019 invocation of an emergency provision under the Arms Export Control Act to bypass a congressional hold and complete \$8.1 billion in arms sales to coalition members, prompting a State Department Inspector General investigation.²¹

The Biden administration entered office in January 2021 pledging to end "all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales".²² In practice this recalibration proved only partial, reporting indicated continued "defensive" support, including maintenance servicing for Saudi aircraft and ongoing intelligence

assistance, leading critics to argue that meaningful U.S. disengagement never fully materialised.²³ This pattern of declaratory withdrawal paired with continued indirect support underscores a recurring feature of externally sponsored civil wars, where patron states rarely disengage cleanly, since doing so risks ceding ground to rival patrons.

A fragile de-escalation nonetheless took hold. The UN-mediated truce agreed in April 2022 substantially reduced hostilities even after its formal expiration in October and a 2023 China-brokered Saudi-Iran rapprochement, which created diplomatic space for backchannel talks between Riyadh and the Houthi leadership.²⁴ Political authority within the internationally recognised government was also restructured, with a Presidential Leadership Council formed in 2022 to unify a fractious anti-Houthi coalition that included forces aligned with the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) as well as Saudi-aligned factions.²⁵

This equilibrium has proven brittle. Yemen's war re-escalated sharply and unexpectedly in 2026, in ways of particular significance for the proxy template and for India's maritime interests. The proximate cause was not a renewal of the original civil war but its entanglement in a far larger conflagration, a direct U.S.-Israel military campaign against Iran that began in early 2026 and the subsequent closure and contested reopening of the Strait of Hormuz.²⁶ The Houthis, as a constituent of Iran's "Axis of Resistance," entered this wider war in March 2026 by launching missiles toward Israel and by July 2026 had declared a formal maritime blockade against Saudi Arabia in the Red Sea, characterising it as retaliation for a Saudi "siege" on Yemen, an allegation Riyadh denied.²⁷ This declaration effectively terminated the four-year de facto truce with the Saudi-led coalition, and by August 2026 fighting had resumed across multiple governorates, with Houthi strikes reported against Saudi positions in Marib and Hadramawt and against the government-held port of Mokha, which was forced to suspend operations.²⁸ The events of 2026 confirm rather than complicate the proxy template that Yemen's internal conflict, dormant but never resolved, was reactivated the moment its external patron entered a larger confrontation with the United States, demonstrating precisely the transmission mechanism through which regional rivalry converts a localised dispute into a recurring flashpoint.

Maritime Chokepoint: The Bab-el-Mandeb and the Militarisation of the Red Sea

Yemen's most consequential strategic externality is maritime. The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, at its narrowest point a mere twenty-nine kilometres wide, connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and thence to the Indian Ocean and functions as one of the world's principal chokepoints for trade and energy shipments moving between Asia and Europe via the Suez Canal.²⁹ Houthi control over Yemen's western coastline, including the port of Hodeidah, has given the group, and by extension Iran, an unprecedented forward capability to threaten this chokepoint directly, one without precedent in the history of the Saudi-Iran rivalry.³⁰

This threat materialised following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023. The Houthis began a sustained campaign of missile and drone strikes against merchant shipping in the southern Red Sea from November 2023, framing it as solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza.³¹ The disruption was substantial, as carriers representing an estimated forty percent of global ocean shipping capacity, including Maersk, Mediterranean Shipping Company and Hapag-Lloyd, suspended Red Sea transits and rerouted around the Cape of Good Hope, adding 3,000 to 3,500 nautical miles and roughly ten days to Asia-Europe journeys.³² Oil shipments through the strait fell from 9.3 million barrels per day in 2023 to 4.1 million in 2024.³³ The Red Sea's significance extends beyond physical trade; the waterway also carries an estimated ninety percent of undersea fibre-optic cable capacity, linking Europe and Asia, making it a "digital chokepoint" whose disruption carries consequences well beyond shipping and energy.³⁴

The international response combined unilateral naval deployments with a U.S. organised coalition. In December 2023, U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Operation Prosperity Guardian, involving the United States, United Kingdom and eight other states, intended to escort commercial shipping through the Bab-el-Mandeb.³⁵ The United States and United Kingdom subsequently struck Houthi military targets from January 2024, an operation expanded under the Trump administration in 2025 as Operation Rough Rider, involving hundreds of strikes against Houthi radar, missile and drone infrastructure.³⁶ Despite this pressure, Houthi attacks persisted intermittently through 2025, with the U.S.

Maritime Administration recording the sinking of two vessels, the Magic Seas and the Eternity C, near Hodeidah in July 2025 and a fatal strike on a Dutch-flagged cargo vessel in the Gulf of Aden that September.³⁷

The events of 2026 have escalated this threat to an unprecedented degree. With the Strait of Hormuz effectively closed to ordinary transit for extended periods amid direct U.S.-Iran hostilities, traffic fell to as few as sixteen vessel transits over a two-day period in August 2026, down from a pre-war average of 130 to 140 daily transits³⁸, the Bab-el-Mandeb has assumed dual significance as an alternative export corridor for Gulf oil producers bypassing Hormuz and simultaneously a potential "Second Hormuz" that Iran-aligned forces could close to compound the disruption.³⁹ Saudi Arabia's diversion of millions of barrels per day via pipeline to its Red Sea terminal at Yanbu, precisely to route around a blockaded Hormuz, has made Bab-el-Mandeb security a direct determinant of whether global oil markets retain any relief valve during the wider crisis.⁴⁰ The Houthi blockade declaration against Saudi Arabia in July 2026 and subsequent lethal attacks, including one in August 2026 that killed six crew members, the first Red Sea shipping fatalities in over a year, therefore, carry stakes graver than the 2023-2024 disruption, since they threaten to close the only major maritime alternative to a strait that is itself contested.⁴¹

Humanitarian Costs

The human toll of Yemen's decade-long conflict has been severe and disproportionate to the country's small population of roughly thirty-two million. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, an estimated 19.5 million Yemenis required humanitarian assistance and protection services in 2025, an increase of 1.3 million over the preceding year.⁴² More than 4.5 to 4.8 million people remain internally displaced, many multiple times over, while over 17 million face acute food insecurity, including several million on the brink of famine-like conditions.⁴³ The Yemeni economy has contracted by more than half since the war's onset, and over eighty percent of the population now lives below the poverty line.⁴⁴ Humanitarian funding has simultaneously declined even as needs have grown: the Yemen Humanitarian Fund recorded

contributions falling from \$47.9 million in 2024 to \$38.9 million in 2025, while the broader Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan was funded at only twenty-nine percent of target, forcing agencies to scale back critical services.⁴⁵ The renewed tensions since mid-2026 threaten to compound this trajectory precisely as international attention has been diverted towards the wider regional war.

India's Stakes: Energy Security and Maritime Trade

India's interest in Yemen's stability is structural, arising from deep dependence on maritime routes passing directly through Yemen's territorial waters. India imports over eighty-five percent of its crude oil and moves more than ninety percent of its trade by volume via sea, with the Red Sea-Suez Canal corridor and the Strait of Hormuz constituting two of the four maritime chokepoints on which this trade critically depends.⁴⁶ Prior to the intensification of hostilities in the 2026 regional war, close to half of India's crude oil imports and the majority of its LNG imports transited through Hormuz.⁴⁷ Diversification efforts, including increased Russian crude purchases since 2022, have not eliminated route dependency, as much of this diversified crude still moves via the Red Sea corridor, meaning a combined estimate of crude dependent on the Red Sea route, inclusive of Saudi crude shipped from Yanbu, may approach seventy percent of India's total import.⁴⁸ India's Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas has responded by expanding non-Hormuz sourcing to roughly seventy percent of crude imports, up from about fifty-five percent before the war, alongside a strategic petroleum reserve covering some seventy-four to seventy-seven days of demand.⁴⁹ This underscores India's pragmatic energy security management, but it does not remove the underlying vulnerability: alternative routes converge on the same constrained chokepoints, of which the Bab-el-Mandeb is foremost.

Beyond energy, India's trade with Europe and West Asia depends heavily on Red Sea transit. Principal Indian exports moving via this route include steel, engineering products, textiles, chemicals and agricultural commodities such as basmati rice and tea, while fertiliser, machinery and electronics imports have faced comparable delays during Houthi disruptions.⁵⁰ The Research and Information System for Developing Countries estimated

in 2023 that sustained threats to Red Sea shipping could reduce Indian exports by as much as \$30 billion.⁵¹ The disruption has also complicated the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced at the 2023 G20 Summit as a flagship connectivity initiative linking India and Europe via the Gulf and Israel.⁵²

India's bilateral relationship with Yemen itself, though modest in scale, has deepened even amid the conflict, reflecting New Delhi's characteristic policy of maintaining engagement with states in crisis rather than disengaging. According to the Embassy of India in Riyadh, which maintains concurrent charge over Yemen, bilateral trade between the two countries reached approximately \$1.00 billion in the 2024-25 financial year, with India ranking as Yemen's second-largest trading partner after China.⁵³ In a significant diplomatic step reflecting confidence in the trajectory of the internationally recognised government based in Aden, India opened a representative office in Aden in October 2025 to strengthen consular services for Indian nationals and deepen bilateral engagement, a move publicly welcomed by Yemen's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁵⁴

Operation Raahat: A Case Study in Evacuation Capability

India's most consequential direct engagement with the Yemen conflict came in its opening days. As Saudi-led coalition air strikes began in late March 2015, several thousand Indian nationals were employed in construction, healthcare and services sectors and remained in Yemen despite successive Ministry of External Affairs advisories, including a final urgent advisory issued on 25 March, two days before the intervention began.⁵⁵ In response, the Government of India launched Operation Raahat, a coordinated air and sea evacuation involving the Ministry of External Affairs, the Indian Navy, the Indian Air Force and the national carrier Air India.

The operation's scale is documented in an official statement to the Lok Sabha. The then Minister of State for External Affairs General V.K. Singh (Retd) informed Parliament that the operation, conducted in March-April 2015, evacuated 6,710 persons from Yemen (4,748 Indian nationals and 1,962 foreign nationals) and that it was "acknowledged as a successful operation by the international community".⁵⁶ The Ministry established an inter-ministerial Standing Group for Repatriation of Indian Nationals from Abroad, chaired at

the level of Secretary (East), to coordinate across the Ministries of Home Affairs, Defence, Shipping and Civil Aviation, alongside a twenty-four-hour control room in New Delhi and a forward camp office in Djibouti, from which the Minister of State personally supervised operations.⁵⁷

The operational sequence combined naval and air components. The Indian Navy redeployed the offshore patrol vessel INS Sumitra from an anti-piracy deployment to Aden port, where sea evacuations began on 1 April 2015, with INS Mumbai and INS Tarkash subsequently deployed to Aden, Hodeidah and Mukalla.⁵⁸ With Yemeni airspace declared a no-fly zone, the Indian Air Force and Air India coordinated an air evacuation staged through Djibouti, commencing 3 April from Sana'a and continuing until 9 April, while sea evacuations concluded on 11 April.⁵⁹ India's role extended beyond its own nationals when twenty-three countries formally requested Indian assistance, and the final parliamentary accounting recorded 1,962 foreign nationals evacuated from forty-one countries.⁶⁰ This included a notable instance of cooperation with Pakistan, whose former prime minister facilitated the transfer of eleven Indian nationals rescued from Mukalla, an episode illustrative of how humanitarian logistics can, on occasion, create space for cooperation even between historically adversarial neighbours.⁶¹

Operation Raahat is widely regarded within Indian policy commentary as a demonstration of the maturity of India's non-combatant evacuation capability, building on Navy-Air Force-MEA coordination since applied to subsequent crises, including Libya and Iraq in the same period and Sudan in 2023 under Operation Kaveri.⁶² The operation illustrates a broader principle that India's expanding global diaspora and deepening interdependence with volatile regions necessitate a standing evacuation capability, operating independent of, though often in coordination with other states' security architectures.

The Indian Navy's Maritime Security Role in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea

India's engagement with Yemen's maritime periphery did not end with Operation Raahat; it has evolved into one of the more consequential and sustained expressions of Indian naval power projection this century. The Indian Navy began stationing warships in the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy escort duties in October 2008, and this deployment has

continued without interruption since.⁶³ By March 2015, the Navy had safely escorted 3,075 merchant vessels manned by nearly 22,448 Indian sailors through the Internationally Recognised Transit Corridor, a figure that had grown to 3,749 vessels, including 390 Indian flagged ships by 2017.⁶⁴ This presence is framed within India's Maritime Security Strategy as central to its self-conception as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean Region, a doctrine formally articulated through Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2015 SAGAR vision, announced during a visit to Mauritius.⁶⁵

The Houthi campaign against Red Sea shipping since late 2023 has substantially intensified this role. The Indian Navy responded to a succession of specific attacks on vessels with Indian crew or cargo interests, including a drone attack on the Liberian-flagged MV Chem Pluto, some 217 nautical miles off Porbandar in December 2023; a strike on the Indian-manned and Gabon-flagged MV Sai Baba in the southern Red Sea; and coordinated assistance alongside French and American units to the British tanker MV Marlin Luanda after it was struck by a Houthi anti-ship missile while carrying an Indian and Bangladeshi crew in January 2024.⁶⁶ At the peak of this deployment, the Navy maintained upwards of ten warships in the northern and western Arabian Sea alongside guided-missile destroyers positioned along the Bab-el-Mandeb approach and off Socotra Island, its largest ever singular deployment in the region, which was supported by P-8I maritime patrol aircraft.⁶⁷

A defining feature of India's response has been its deliberate choice to operate independently of the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian rather than formally joining the coalition, consistent with India's broader posture of strategic autonomy. India, like France and Italy, opted for an independent naval presence rather than direct alignment with the American-led task force created specifically to counter Houthi attacks while remaining a contributing member of Combined Task Force 153 under the multi-national Combined Maritime Forces.⁶⁸ This calibrated posture reflects New Delhi's consistent effort to avoid being seen as taking sides in a dispute rooted in the Israel-Gaza conflict and the broader Iran-Saudi rivalry, while still discharging its self-declared responsibility as a first responder and net security provider in its extended maritime neighbourhood.⁶⁹

Strategic Autonomy: India's Diplomatic Balancing Act

India's approach to the Yemen conflict cannot be separated from the broader architecture of Indian foreign policy toward West Asia, which is increasingly characterised through the lens of "multi-alignment", a contemporary evolution of the Nehruvian principle of non-alignment adapted to a more interconnected regional order.⁷⁰ India has cultivated substantial partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states, deepened overt defence cooperation with Israel and simultaneously maintained a functioning relationship with Iran, notwithstanding its adherence to U.S.-led sanctions regimes.⁷¹ This balancing act was evident in External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's January 2024 meeting with his Iranian counterpart, where he raised the safety of maritime commercial traffic as a matter with "direct bearing on India's energy and economic interests", language calibrated to express concern without attributing responsibility to any single party.⁷²

The scale of India's stake in this balancing act is considerable. India's diaspora in the six GCC states numbered approximately 8.9 to 9.7 million as of 2024, out of a global Indian diaspora of some 35.4 million, and this community, despite constituting only about one-quarter of overseas Indians, accounted for close to forty percent of the roughly \$118.7 billion in remittances India received in fiscal year 2023-24, led by inflows from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.⁷³ This gives India a direct and material interest in Gulf stability that transcends energy considerations, reinforcing a diplomatic posture that avoids alienating any principal regional actor.

This posture has faced its most severe test during the 2026 regional war. As the conflict has expanded to directly involve Iran, Israel, the United States and, through the Houthis blockade, Saudi Arabia and Yemen simultaneously, Indian commentary has noted that the room for manoeuvre traditionally afforded by multi-alignment has narrowed considerably.⁷⁴ India has continued to engage Tehran diplomatically even as it deepens ties with Gulf partners and Israel, exemplified by Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi's visit to New Delhi for BRICS consultations amid the crisis.⁷⁵ This illustrates a policy designed to preserve long-term relationships across a fractured regional order

rather than strategic drift, even as short-term shocks like refinery disruptions, freight cost spikes and insurance premiums have tested the practical limits of the approach.⁷⁶

The Mecca Accord adds a further constraint to this balancing act. Signed on 7 August 2026 by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye, the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement commits the three to treat an armed attack on any one of them as an attack on all.⁷⁷ The pact was activated in October 2026, when the signatories agreed to deploy deterrence measures and forces to Saudi Arabia after the Houthi offensive along Yemen's western coast and the attacks on Saudi territory.⁷⁸ Analysts nonetheless expect Turkish and Pakistani contributions to remain largely defensive rather than extend to direct combat inside Yemen.⁷⁹

For India, the significance lies less in Yemen itself than in what the pact does to its Gulf partnership. Saudi Arabia, a principal energy supplier and host to a large Indian diaspora, is now formally bound to Pakistan through a mechanism that is operational in a theatre where India has no combat role. Former High Commissioner T.C.A. Raghavan has cautioned that the accord is more than a restatement of existing bilateral ties and that it elevates Pakistan's strategic standing.⁸⁰ These challenge the assumption that India's deepening Gulf ties insulate it from Pakistani influence in Riyadh.

New Delhi's response has been deliberately calibrated. The Ministry of External Affairs said India was assessing the pact's implications and would take all necessary measures to protect its interests, while Jaishankar questioned what the pact had achieved in addressing the wider regional crisis.⁸¹ This restraint denies Islamabad diplomatic leverage and preserves the Riyadh relationship. Yemen therefore tests strategic autonomy on a new axis: India must secure Gulf access and Red Sea stability without being drawn into a Saudi-led security architecture in which Pakistan holds a seat.

Implications and Recommendations for India

Yemen's trajectory over the past decade offers several implications for India's defence and foreign policy planning apparatus. First, the conflict demonstrates that maritime chokepoint security cannot be treated as a contingency addressed only when disruption

occurs and that it requires standing surveillance, escort and rapid-response capability of the kind the Indian Navy has progressively built since 2008 and substantially expanded since late 2023. Continued investment in platforms suited to sustained Indian Ocean Region deployment like offshore patrol vessels, maritime patrol aircraft and unmanned surveillance systems remains a prudent response to a threat environment showing no sign of abating.

Second, India's energy security planning should continue to treat route diversification, not merely supplier diversification, as the central variable. A diversified supplier base offers limited protection if alternative routes converge on the same constrained chokepoints. Strategic petroleum reserves expanded non-Hormuz sourcing, and continued exploration of alternative corridors together constitutes a more resilient posture than pursued in isolation.

Third, in order to ensure that the coordination attained in 2015 can be repeated and enhanced in future emergencies affecting India's sizable Gulf diaspora, India's evacuation and crisis-response architecture, which was honed through Operation Raahat and subsequently applied in Libya, Sudan, and elsewhere, merits ongoing institutional investment. This includes regular inter-ministerial exercises and standing logistical arrangements with regional transit hubs like Djibouti.

Lastly, instead of creating uncertainty, India's balanced, non-aligned diplomatic stance, engaging Gulf nations like Israel and Iran concurrently while refusing to formally join military alliances led by outside parties, should be seen as a strategic advantage. Even though the area has been pushed into direct great-power conflict, it has enabled India to maintain the trust of all major regional players, maintain access to Gulf labour and oil markets, and maintain the status required to urge for de-escalation. This offers a genuinely positive model for middle-power engagement with proxy conflicts more generally, reflecting a thoughtful and moral response to a situation in which India has significant interests but no belligerent role.

Conclusion

The civil war in Yemen is now a blatant illustration of proxy warfare. With the help of Saudi Arabia and initially the United States on one side and Iran on the other, what started out as an internal political crisis turned into a protracted conflict. The majority of the expenses have been borne by Yemeni civilians, and the conflict has impacted international trade, energy markets, and the security interests of nations like India via the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. This analysis is further supported by the events of 2026, when Yemen's dormant civil war was rekindled due to its involvement in the broader U.S.-Iran conflict. This is because proxy conflicts do not end simply because active fighting ceases; rather, they remain dormant and are prepared to resurface whenever the patron-client relationships that support them are drawn back into motion.

Yemen has had direct and ongoing strategic repercussions for India, including the evacuation of thousands of citizens in 2015, a ten-year naval commitment to the security of the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea, and an ongoing test of the nation's ability to maintain diplomatic balance and energy security in the face of a volatile and now intensifying regional order. India's response in each of these areas provides an instructive example of capability-backed, principled engagement that is significant enough to safeguard important national interests, moderate enough to prevent involvement in a conflict that was not India's fault, and consistent with a foreign policy tradition from non-alignment to strategic autonomy that has served India's interests during seven decades of regional unrest.

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.

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