

ORION FORUM

Bridging Land and Sea: Rethinking Security in the Red Sea Arena

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The Red Sea has shifted from a central shipping lane to a strategically important area linking Africa, Arabia, the Indo-Pacific, and global powers. The distinction between land and sea is fading — as are old assumptions about regional order.

From Peripheral Sea to Global Chokepoint

Long seen as a peripheral waterway, the Red Sea remained largely marginal until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 transformed it into a vital artery of global trade. During the twentieth century, the canal's strategic value repeatedly drew the world's attention — from the Suez Crisis of 1956 to the Six-Day War in 1967. After the Cold War, however, the strategic focus shifted southward to the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden, where piracy, terrorism, and state fragility turned the area into a new locus of insecurity. The Arab Spring and the war in Yemen further revealed how unrest on land could threaten one of the world's busiest maritime corridors. Today, Houthi attacks on shipping and the militarization of ports and islands show that the Red Sea's instability is no longer episodic or contained. Land and sea are now inseparably linked — a single theater where violence, trade, and power projection converge.

The Red Sea's New Reality

Once viewed merely as a narrow maritime corridor between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea has become one of the world's most contested geopolitical spaces. The days when its rugged coasts and fragile states stood at the margins of global politics are over. Today, conflicts on land and at sea are deeply intertwined, creating a connected security system in which instability and insecurity reinforce each other. From Sudan to Yemen, and

from Djibouti to the Gulf monarchies, rivalries and alliances now cut across borders and domains. Understanding this new reality requires abandoning the old divide between land and sea, and recognizing the Red Sea as a single arena where violence, commerce, and power projection converge.

A Crowded and Complex Region

The Red Sea's geopolitical landscape stretches well beyond its shores. At its core lie Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen — but the region's dynamics also involve a wider cast of actors. Israel and Jordan connect through the Gulf of Aqaba, while landlocked Ethiopia exerts influence through economic and diplomatic means. Gulf states such as the UAE and Qatar have built networks of ports, bases, and investments on both sides of the sea, linking commercial ambitions with strategic control. This overlapping geography has produced a dense web of rivalries and dependencies. Wealthy Gulf monarchies project influence across the African shore through infrastructure, logistics, and financial leverage, while fragile coastal states struggle with poverty and political fragmentation. The resulting asymmetry — between rich and poor, stable and unstable — fuels mistrust and competition. Meanwhile, global powers have reasserted their presence. The United States, China, France, Turkey, Italy, and Japan now operate military facilities in the region, underscoring that the Red Sea has become not only a maritime corridor but also a focal point of global strategic contestation.

Conflict on Land: Weak States and Rival Ambitions

The Red Sea region is shaped by fragile states and overlapping rivalries rooted in colonial borders, weak institutions, and chronic governance failures. Countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, and Yemen face internal divisions and contested frontiers that political elites often exploit to consolidate power. Governments across the Horn of Africa have long used proxy groups in neighboring states, sustaining a cycle of intervention and instability. Endemic poverty, scarce resources, and fragmented societies further erode state capacity, encouraging mobilization along ethnic or sectarian lines. Meanwhile, Gulf monarchies project influence across the western shore through investments, infrastructure projects, and, at times, direct military intervention. Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen exemplify how domestic fragility intersects with

regional rivalries to magnify instability. In Sudan, the civil war between rival military factions has drawn in neighboring powers seeking influence along the Nile and the Red Sea. In Somalia, external involvement — from Gulf states to Turkey and Egypt — overlays long-standing internal fragmentation. Yemen remains the starkest case, where local, regional, and global rivalries converge in a protracted war that has generated both humanitarian catastrophe and security spillovers across the Red Sea basin. Together, these conflicts illustrate how the region's crises are not isolated events but interconnected manifestations of a wider systemic fragility.

At Sea: Cooperation under Strain

While land conflicts have festered, the maritime space of the Red Sea has historically operated under a different logic. The need to protect global trade fostered pragmatic cooperation among rivals. When Somali piracy surged between 2006 and 2012, the world responded with unprecedented coordination, including multinational naval missions, information-sharing frameworks, and the Djibouti Code of Conduct. By the mid-2010s, piracy had been mainly contained by multilateral operations, and the Red Sea had become a fragile yet functioning maritime security regime. However, this relative stability is eroding. The same forces of fragmentation that plague the region on land are now spreading to the sea. New forms of maritime crime, ranging from illegal fishing to arms smuggling, are spreading. More importantly, land-based armed groups have begun to project force across the water. Since late 2023, for example, the Houthis in Yemen have targeted commercial vessels in the Bab al-Mandab Strait with drones and missiles, disrupting global shipping and driving up costs. These attacks demonstrate how land wars can spill into maritime domains, thereby undermining established security arrangements. The undersea cables of the Red Sea — which carry most of the digital traffic between Europe and Asia — have also emerged as potential strategic targets, underscoring that infrastructure itself is now part of the conflict landscape.

A Single, Interconnected Security System

These converging trends show that the Red Sea can no longer be viewed as two distinct arenas — unstable on land and cooperative at sea. The two domains have fused into a single,

interconnected security system. The same actors — state and non-state, local and global — now operate across both spaces. Ports serve not only as commercial gateways but also as instruments of power projection; militias control sections of coastline and shape maritime traffic; and global powers deploy naval assets while negotiating access to land bases.

This fusion represents a fundamental shift in how security is produced and contested around the Red Sea. Maritime stability increasingly depends on governance and state capacity ashore, while conflicts on land are shaped by rivalries over sea lanes, coastal infrastructure, and digital connectivity. The region has thus evolved into a hybrid security complex — a single ecosystem where threats, alignments, and flows of power move seamlessly across domains.

Implications for Policy and Research

Recognizing this hybrid reality carries major implications for both policy and research. First, it challenges the enduring sea-land divide that still informs most security thinking. Ensuring safe navigation and the protection of global trade routes requires tackling governance failures and state fragility along the Red Sea's shores. Maritime patrols and deterrence are necessary but insufficient if the states behind them are collapsing. Second, it demands greater attention to non-state actors. Groups such as the Houthis, al-Shabaab, and regional militias have become pivotal in shaping both land and maritime dynamics. They exploit porous borders, weak institutions, and transnational networks to operate across multiple domains — from coastal zones to offshore waters. Third, it calls for a more integrated understanding of how global and regional powers interact. Rivalries between the United States and China, or among Gulf states themselves, are not merely projected onto the Red Sea — they are reshaped by it. Local conflicts, economic ambitions, and external power competition now form a single ecosystem of influence. Ultimately, the Red Sea illustrates the character of 21st-century security: fragmented yet interconnected, local and global at once. Stability at sea cannot be achieved without addressing fragility on land — and the governance of the shore will increasingly depend on what happens offshore.

From Corridor to Crucible

The Red Sea's transformation from trade corridor to geopolitical crucible is reshaping how states, companies, and militaries conceive of security. The erosion of the line between land and sea means that every crisis — whether in Sudan, Yemen, or along the Somali coast — now reverberates across regions and beyond. For policymakers, this demands a more systemic approach: one that integrates maritime strategy with state-building, infrastructure with governance, and local peacebuilding with international diplomacy. Managing the Red Sea's security challenges will require cooperation that is as interconnected as the threats themselves — bridging institutions, domains, and shores. Ultimately, the Red Sea's story is no longer about what divides its coasts, but about what binds them together — a frontier where the boundaries between war and trade, land and sea, regional and global, have all but disappeared.

**image credit:* VOA.

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