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Global Power Shifts are Playing out in the Red Sea Region: Why This is Where the Rules are Changing

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Federico Donelli, *University of Trieste*

The competition for global influence and control is shifting. One of the places where this dynamic is playing out is the Red Sea region, which encompasses Egypt, Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Here, international rivalries, regional ambitions and local politics collide. Federico Donelli, who has studied these political dynamics and recently published Power Competition in the Red Sea, explains what's driving the region's geopolitical significance.

What defines the Red Sea as a region?

The region stretches from the Suez Canal to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, covering approximately 438,000km². The Red Sea borders some of the world's most volatile regions: the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the western shore of the Indo-Pacific area.

The Red Sea region

The Red Sea is rapidly becoming a highly contested zone, where traditional and emerging global powers are vying for influence and control. The decline of western geopolitical centrality, the rise of alternative powers and the increasing assertiveness of regional actors converge in the Red Sea.

This has created a complex and dynamic arena in which to test future global power hierarchies. The Red Sea region is challenging the liberal international order that emerged at

the end of the cold war in 1989. That order is based on:

- multilateralism – cooperation among multiple states
- a free market – limited state intervention in the economy
- liberal democracy – political pluralism and individual rights.

These tenets have been eroded by a combination of internal weaknesses and external challenges over the past 20 years.

While competition for global power between the United States and China tends to dominate the headlines, the true laboratories of the post-liberal world order are found in regions where international, regional and local dynamics collide.

The broader Red Sea region is one of them. Others are the Arctic, the South Indo-Pacific and the Balkans.

Why is the Red Sea region a stage for global power competition?

The region lacks a clear dominant power that is capable of imposing order. This makes it an open arena of competition among states with overlapping interests.

The Red Sea has great strategic value. It connects the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific, and is a maritime route for global trade and energy. It also borders several fragile states like Sudan, Eritrea and Yemen.

This combination – on the one hand, limited or contested authority that leaves the area exposed to external penetration, and on the other, its significant strategic value – has turned the region into a magnet for external involvement.

The United States and China both have military facilities in Djibouti. Russia has sought access to Port Sudan. Gulf powers, notably Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, have expanded their presence across the Horn of Africa. They've done this by investing in ports, infrastructure and military cooperation especially in Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia.

Turkey, Iran and Israel have also established political, economic and security ties. This links the Red Sea to the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

However, external powers are not the only drivers of change in the region.

Local actors, from Ethiopia to Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt and Somalia, are exploiting global rivalries to advance their strategic objectives. They are courting competing external powers by trading military access for security guarantees, or seeking investment in strategic infrastructure. They are also using diplomatic alignment with the US, China, Gulf states or Turkey to strengthen domestic and regional positions.

These actions create a complex web of overlapping interests. These blur the line between regional and global politics. Governments and non-state actors now have multiple external patrons to choose from. They can play one power against another.

This “multi-alignment” gives regional players leverage. It also increases volatility and uncertainty. For example, rival factions in the ongoing Sudanese civil war have sought support from external players, ranging from Saudi Arabia to the UAE. This has transformed an internal conflict into a proxy battlefield.

In Somalia, local and clan authorities negotiate security and economic deals directly with foreign powers like Turkey and Gulf states, often bypassing weak local institutions.

Meanwhile, landlocked Ethiopia’s search for sea access has drawn it into new diplomatic and security entanglements with Somaliland, Somalia, Eritrea, Egypt and Gulf countries.

These examples reveal how the Red Sea arena has become a microcosm of the post-liberal order: fragmented, transactional and deeply interconnected.

What are the main outcomes and lessons from this alignment?

The Red Sea region reflects the broader transformation of global politics.

Rather than producing a new balance, the decline of western influence has created a decentralised and competitive system.

In this environment, regional areas serve as testing grounds for new patterns of interaction between global and local powers, state and non-state actors, and formal alliances and informal partnerships.

While western-centric “universal” rules and institutions defined the liberal international order, the post-liberal order is characterised by selective engagement, bilateral bargains and flexible alignments.

The result is a world where order emerges from competition rather than consensus.

Competition among great powers now occurs less through international institutions and more through regional arenas. Military presence, infrastructure investment and political alliances now serve as instruments of influence.

What conclusions do you draw?

The Red Sea region is a reminder to scholars and policymakers that the future of international politics will not be defined solely in Washington, Beijing, Brussels or Moscow. It will also be defined in places like Port Sudan, Aden and Djibouti, where the new global order is being shaped.

Regions have become true laboratories of international change. They are places where global competition interacts with local conflicts, and new models of governance and influence emerge.

Local actors, state and non-state, are no longer passive recipients of external interference. They are active participants in shaping their own security environments.

Federico Donelli, Associate Professor of International Relations, *University of Trieste*

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