

An overview of security landscape in the Arabian Sea in the backdrop of Israel-Hamas Conflict

Introduction

The Arabian Sea in the recent times has seen a spillover of the maritime threats emanating from the Israel-Hamas conflict with attacks on commercial ships. These first originated in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in late November when suspected bomb carrying Shahed-136 drones were fired towards a container ship owned by the Eastern Shipping Company, which is controlled by Israeli billionaire Idan Ofer.[\[1\]](#) The Yemeni Houthi rebels, who have recently escalated the maritime security threat in the Red Sea zone targeting commercial shipping vessels. They have declared that any vessel having direct contact with Israeli owners or Israeli ports will become their legitimate target.[\[2\]](#)

But recent attacks on commercial ships with Indian interests in the contiguous seascape stretching from the northern IOR to the Red Sea have created threats for Indian maritime interests. In the first incident, India-bound MV Chem Pluto with 21 Indian crew was hit by a projectile. Second attack occurred when crude carrier MV Sai Baba with 25 Indian crew on board faced a drone attack in the southern Red Sea.[\[3\]](#) These incidents will have various implications for India, prominent being trade, economic, security and geopolitical aspects.

India's stature as net security provider in the IOR at stake

The fact that such attacks are occurring so close to India's vicinity has a direct bearing on India's image as a net security provider in the IOR. For example, MV Chem Pluto was hit 200 nautical miles (370km) south-west of the city of Veraval in India's Gujarat state, according to United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO).[\[4\]](#) The messaging from this attack is that even if the ships are far away from the Houthi controlled coasts, such attacks can be carried out if countries are supporting or doing maritime trade with Israel directly or indirectly. The distance from the Iranian coast is near to this attack site. The one-way drone used in this attack seems to be the Iranian built Shahed-136 loitering ammunition which has a range of around 2500 km.

These attacks will bring down the confidence among shipping companies, specially oil carrying container vessel companies that even the waters close to India are not safe from maritime attacks. India's major ports, close to the western coasts conduct a lot of imports and exports. India mainly imports crude oil. Such attacks will definitely have a bearing as no shipping company will agree to carry fuel towards Indian coasts or pass through the Arabian Sea towards the Bay of Bengal. This will subsequently increase the price of oil which will increase the price of essential commodities.[\[5\]](#) Already the disruption has caused hike in oil prices. The price of Brent crude oil futures, the global benchmark, rose by 1.2 per cent above 80 USD. Further price increases could eventually feed through to consumer energy tariffs, adding to inflation.[\[6\]](#)

Additional maritime threats in Eastern coast adds burden on Indian Navy

India's coasts are brewing with additional illegal activities. One example is the problem of diesel smuggling which occurs rampantly around Indian coasts, near to Mumbai. These activities are occurring at over 12 nautical miles in the dead of the night. These activities lead to exchange of around 30,000-60,000 litres of diesel, which carries a price in American dollars.[\[7\]](#) This illegal money can be routed for more anti-social activities.

The second problem deals with hijacking and piracy activities. Recently on 14th December 2023, Indian Navy's mission deployed platforms responded swiftly to a hijacking incident in Arabian Sea involving the hijacking of Malta Flagged Vessel MV Ruen. The vessel, with 18 crew onboard, had sent a mayday message on the UKMTO portal, indicating boarding by approximately six unknown personnel. This ship was heading towards the coast of Somalia.^[8] This shows that even the hijacking incidents are occurring routinely and this adds to the overall responsibility towards Indian navy to deploy its resources to tackle high seas smuggling and piracy.

Geopolitical Implications

The Houthi attacks have geopolitical implications for India. Already the United States (US) has accused Iran of masterminding the drone attack on MV Chem Pluto.^[9] US says that Iran provided the critical tactical intelligence to the Houthis to target the vessels of India's coast.^[10] Some others suggest the involvement of Iran Revolutionary Guards (IRG) in this attack because they have developed this long-range maritime attack capability in the past.^[11] In response to these US allegations, Iran has responded by countering. Nasser Kanaani, spokesperson for the ministry of Foreign Affairs dismissed the US claims and said, "Such claims are aimed at projecting, distracting public attention, and covering up for the full support of the American government for the crimes of the Zionist regime (Israel) in Gaza".^[12]

Therefore, now India will be in a dilemma about solving this security situation. On one hand, the US may be looking to involve regional players like India to join its multinational maritime effort dubbed 'Operation Prosperity Guardian', to control the Iranian controlled Houthi attacks. The US may anticipate to score a geopolitical goal, if somehow, it could make India go against Iran for attacking vessels near the Indian coast. But Iran and India have friendly bilateral relations. Whereas joining this 'Operation' may not bring much relief to India at present because this initiative mostly focusses in the Gulf of Aden and the Southern Red Sea, rather than the Arabian sea.^[13] Also, we must not forget the fact that Houthis' Information Minister told Qatari newspaper Al-Araby Al-Jadeed that any country that joins the US-led international maritime coalition to protect Red Sea trade will become a target from the Yemeni rebels.^[14] Therefore, from all aspects, this maritime conflict doesn't look to cool down unless the Gaza conflict ends.

Efforts Undertaken and Recommendations

In response to these attacks, the Indian Navy has substantially enhanced maritime surveillance efforts in the central/north Arabian Sea and augmented force levels. Task groups comprising destroyers and frigates like INS Kolkata, INS Vishakhapatnam, INS Kochi, INS Chennai and INS Mormugao have been deployed in the Arabian Ocean.^[15] But it is also well acknowledged that maritime forces in the IOR have little experience dealing with drone strikes on civilian shipping. The challenge remains in inadequacy of tactical countermeasures. The available limited technologies for jamming and spoofing are unavailable to merchant ships. Jamming is problematic as it has the potential to interfere with friendly communication systems. Spoofing too can sometimes lead to the target behaving erratically. Directed Energy Weapons such as laser systems and high-power microwave weapons are more effective in countering armed drones, but these technologies are expensive and inaccessible to many regional navies.^[16]

It has been seen that the recent spate of attacks on commercial vessels by Yemen-based Houthi rebels have not impacted flow of Russian crude through the Suez Canal-Red Sea route, even as a number of global shipping lines and oil companies are now avoiding the important

global trade artery.[17] This means that the Houthis or the IRG would not like to provoke Russia by attacking their container ships in the Arabian sea. Hence India should use its good relations with Russia to cool down tempers of Iran so as not to disturb the Arabian Sea.

Conclusion

The current Israel-Hamas conflict is poised to extend for a long time. Its effects will be definitely heating up in the Red Sea zone. India's interest lies in a calm Arabian sea. Naval operations along with Russia will serve as a deterrence for Iranian proxies. In the meantime, India can utilise its relations with Russia to make Iran understand that attacking Indian interests in Arabian sea is not good for future relations.

End notes

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Ajay Kumar Das, Independent Researcher and Analyst of International Affairs and Security Studies.

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