

Red Sea Attacks, the Fallout from the Israel-Gaza Conflict, a Security Concern for the Indian Navy

Introduction

Following the Israeli invasion of Gaza as a fallout of the 07 Oct 2023 attacks by the Hamas, the attack on ships by the Houthis in the Red Sea has become a global concern for maritime trade. The Red Sea has been making headlines since 19 Nov 2023. Drone attacks and attempts at piracy have posed a threat to shipping in the region.

The Mediterranean Sea is connected to the Indian Ocean by the Red Sea through the Suez Canal. Along with Bab-el-Mandeb, it serves as the gateway to international trade, with 12 per-cent of global trade passing through the Suez Canal. Bab-el-Mandeb provides access for ships traveling from Asia.^[1] The fact that 50 per cent of Indian exports and 30 per-cent of imports are done through the Red Sea makes it even more crucial for India.^[2]

The attacks by the Houthis on the ships have affected the trade of almost 50 nations, 314 vessels from many big companies have diverted the route and have chosen the alternative route down the Cape of Good Hope, leading to an increase in travel distance up to 6000 Nautical Miles (nm) and stretching the time to 10-12 days resulting in increasing the cost.^[3]

Attacks in the Red Sea and Response of the Indian Navy

India positioned between the world's most crucial straits, Malacca, Hormuz, Bab-el Mandeb, and Suez Canal, faces the challenge of safeguarding itself from maritime threats due to its extensive coastline.

The escalating situation in the Red Sea has become a cause for heightened security concerns, particularly to India's trade routes in the region. The significance of the Red Sea in global trade underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to safeguard India's national interests and economic stability. The resurgence of maritime terrorism has also paved the way for the revival of piracy in the region. The protracted conflict in the Red Sea shows no signs of resolution, posing a significant challenge to India's security forces, particularly the Indian Navy (IN) and Coast Guard.

The IN has always been in the forefront since 2008 as a 'Net Security Provider' in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and has advanced to become the favoured security partner and initial responder.

However, the Israel-Palestine conflict has resulted in terrorist attacks in the Red Sea and Arabian Sea. The Houthis, from Yemen, started launching a string of attacks on ships and commercial vessels in Dec 2023. On 23 Dec 2023, MV Chem Pluto, a Liberia-flagged merchant vessel carrying a crew of 22 including 21 Indians came under an armed drone attack off the Indian west coast around 220 nm on its way to Mangalore. Another vessel MV Sai Baba was suspected of a drone attack on the same day in the Southern Red Sea (carrying 25 Indian crew members).^[4] IN had deployed its Visakhapatnam and Kolkata class destroyers, one Talwar class frigate, INS Trishul along with P-8I Poseidon aircraft and two MQ-9 Predator B drones for the Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance in the Arabian Sea.^[5]

On 04 Jan 2024, an incident of the hijacking of the Liberia-flagged bulk carrier LILA NORFOLK was reported. The vessel was hijacked by six armed perpetrators approximately 460 nm off Eyl,

Somalia. The Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region coordinated with the ship owner and the IN. Indian Naval warships and aircraft were directed towards the vessel for assistance. Surveillance by Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) and an integral helicopter compelled the perpetrators to escape, and all 21 crew members were evacuated safely.[\[6\]](#)

On 29 Jan 2024, the INS Sumitra, an offshore patrol ship, successfully prevented an attempt of piracy on the FV Iman.[\[7\]](#) Thereafter, it carried out another successful anti-piracy operation off the Eastern Coast of Somalia, rescuing the crew on the FV Al Naeemi (comprising 19 Pakistani Nationals) from a group of Somali Pirates on 28-29 Jan 2024. Positioned strategically in the East of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, the INS Sumitra, a domestic offshore patrol vessel of the Indian Navy, is dedicated to anti-piracy operations and maritime security.

On 16 Feb 2024, the Panamanian-flagged tanker M/T Pollux carrying crude oil from Russia to India, was struck by a missile launched from Yemen on its port side. The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations Agency and the British Maritime security firm Ambrey reported on the same day that the tanker had been hit approximately 72 nm northwest off the port of Mokha, off the coast of Yemen. M/T Pollux sustained minor damage, but the crew is reported to be safe.[\[8\]](#)

On 18 Feb 2024, a Belize-flagged cargo ship owned by the United Kingdom came under attack while passing through Bab-el Mandeb, the crew was evacuated safely. The abandoned ship sank a few days after the attack.[\[9\]](#)

A Liberian-flagged Container Vessel, MSC SKY II, was reportedly attacked by two anti-ship ballistic missiles on 04 Mar 2024, approximately 90 nm southeast of Aden at 1330 hrs. In the early hours of 05 Mar 24, the specialist firefighting team (12 personnel) of Indian Navy Ship Kolkata embarked on a MV and assisted in extinguishing the residual fire/smoke. All 23 crew members were safely escorted into the territorial waters of Djibouti.[\[10\]](#)

During the Munich Security Conference held from 16th-18th Feb 2024, Minister of External Affairs Dr S Jaishankar asserted that the events of 07 Oct 2023 constituted a heinous act of terrorism. India, grappling with terrorism since its Independence, experienced a paradigm shift in its challenges following the infamous 26/11 attacks. Subsequently, Indian forces have adeptly navigated various crises, successfully thwarting any threats regarding maritime terrorism to the nation's security.

Conclusion

At the commissioning ceremony of the INS Imphal, a stealth-guided missile destroyer of Project 15B on 26 Dec 2023, Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh addressed the disturbance in the Red Sea. He mentioned that the IN has increased its surveillance in the area, and emphasised that the Government of India is continuously monitoring the situation seriously.[\[11\]](#)

The significance of the IOR has increased steadily in the past decades not only for India but also for the world. Extra regional powers such as the US and China have been increasing their presence in the IOR to secure the national interests of their own countries. The greater dependency of countries including India on their Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) has resulted in ships moving through relatively small areas of maritime space at a higher density which highlights that the safety and security of SLOC is a main priority of nations. 70 per cent and 90 per cent of India's international trade by value and volume respectively are conducted through sea routes.[\[12\]](#)

The IN is playing a pivotal role in addressing maritime security challenges in both its immediate and extended neighbourhood. It stands prepared to undertake collaborative initiatives aimed at ensuring a secure passage for vessels in the region. This proactive stance underscores the IN's commitment to safeguarding not only national interests but also promoting safety and stability in the broader maritime domain.

End notes

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