

GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICTS IN THE RED SEA AND THEIR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS ON YEMEN

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doi: 10.17977/um066.v6.i5.2026.1

Keywords

Geopolitical Conflicts
Red Sea
Yemen
Bab al-Mandab Strait
Economic Impacts
Political Impacts
Maritime Security
Regional Stability

Abstract

The Red Sea is a strategic international waterway linking Asia, Africa, and Europe, playing a crucial role in global trade, energy security, and maritime stability. At its southern entrance lies the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a narrow yet vital shipping route through which a significant portion of global oil and commercial traffic passes. Yemen's geographic position along this strait makes it a pivotal but highly vulnerable actor in regional geopolitics. Since the escalation of the Gaza conflict, tensions in the Red Sea have intensified as Yemeni forces targeted vessels associated with Israel and Western countries, increasing maritime insecurity and geopolitical confrontation. In response, the United States, the United Kingdom, and allied states conducted multinational naval operations aimed at ensuring freedom of navigation, although these actions were widely viewed as demonstrations of strategic power in a critical maritime corridor. The conflict has generated substantial economic consequences, including disruptions to international shipping routes, rising insurance and freight costs, supply chain instability, and inflationary pressures on global energy and food prices. Many shipping companies redirected vessels through the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transportation time and operational expenses. For Yemen, already affected by prolonged civil war, economic collapse, and humanitarian crises, these developments worsened conditions through currency depreciation, reduced trade activity, and growing food insecurity. This study examines geopolitical conflicts in the Red Sea from 2019 to 2025 and analyses their political and economic impacts on Yemen, focusing on maritime insecurity, regional power competition, and the broader implications for global economic stability.

1. Introduction

The Red Sea is a strategically vital waterway. This relatively narrow body of water runs from the Suez Canal in the north to the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the south and connects three continents, and is the primary shipping route between Europe and the natural resource economies of the Gulf. It carries 12% of global trade each year, carrying vital oil exports, containers and liquefied natural gas (LNG) that are the lifeblood of entire economies and, in some instances, are used to keep people living and warm (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024).

This is a hugely important region for Yemen. The Red Sea lies at Yemen's western seaboard and the Bab al-Mandab Strait - so vital it has immediate impacts on global shipping and oil prices - at its southern tip. This has historically meant that Yemen has been of interest to those who would control it. This is increasingly so in the 21st century (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2024).

Since 2019, the security situation in the Red Sea has deteriorated, as a result of local and international disputes, great-power rivalry and proxy warfare. This was compounded by the start of the Gaza war in late 2023 and the attack on Israeli-flag and Western commercial vessels by the Houthis in Yemen. As a result, the US and its allies stepped up their operations and attacked Yemen's infrastructure, escalating the conflict into the waters around Yemen. What started as a civil war suddenly became an international maritime concern (World Bank, 2023).

This has had significant political ramifications, which continue to unfold. There has been an escalation of foreign naval forces operating in Yemeni waters, and a division in diplomatic relations

between Arab states over how to respond to Western naval forces, and a further erosion of Yemen's fragile sovereignty. Within the country, domestic political forces have used the maritime conflict to justify their claims, polarise the population and expand the limits of domestic political settlement (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The impacts have been economically devastating. With large shipping companies rerouting vessels around the southern tip of Africa to avoid the Red Sea, shipping costs rose as transit times increased by weeks, fuel prices spiked, and shipping rates increased - some almost trebling during escalations. For Yemen, an almost entirely imports-driven economy, this translated to greater food, fuel and medicine prices (European Council on Foreign Relations [ECFR], 2023).

This research seeks to answer why. It traces the geopolitical competition that has led to insecurity in the Red Sea and assesses the effects of this insecurity on the political environment in Yemen, and the economic consequences for Yemen and the region. The period under investigation is 2019-2025, and includes the escalations, the reasons for these, and their impacts.

2. Method

2.1. Research Problem

The Red Sea is among the world's most contested waters. Its role as a strategic thoroughfare for world trade, energy and military transportation has led to a power struggle between regional and international players over its influence, access and control. Yemen - through its control of the Bab al-Mandab Strait - is caught in the middle of these developments. This research addresses the question:

Why are regional and global players trying to stake a claim in the Red Sea and what are the implications of this geopolitical competition for the politics and economy of Yemen?

This is a question of interest to those who study the Middle East, but also those who study the global economy, maritime security, supply chain management and geopolitics. The crisis in Yemen is, in many ways, about what it means to be a weak state in the middle (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023).

2.2. Research Hypothesis

The main hypothesis of this research is that the geopolitical rivalry between international and regional powers, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, and other actors over the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait has significant political and economic implications for Yemen in terms of its sovereignty, economic security and political decision-making. This has become more apparent with recent Yemen military action to deny commercial vessels associated with Israel from entering maritime passages that are associated with Israeli occupied territories, as an act of political and military solidarity with Gaza. This has led to more intense international military response, and increased Yemen's geopolitical significance (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2024; Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies [ACRPS], 2022).

2.3. Research Significance

This study is significant as it highlights the geopolitical significance of Yemen's location on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and its role in regional and global affairs. Yemen's capacity to impact security in one of the most important shipping lanes in the world demonstrates that geography still matters in international relations, especially in areas of political instability and foreign competition.

This study is significant because it illustrates the strategic importance of the Red Sea as a vital international maritime trade route connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe, while also examining the political and economic consequences of regional and international power struggles in the area. Furthermore, the study highlights the impacts of instability in the Red Sea on Yemen's economy, sovereignty, and human rights conditions, as well as the influence of foreign interventions on regional security dynamics. In addition, it explores the close relationship between maritime security and global economic stability, particularly regarding international trade, energy transportation, and energy security. Also, the research provides new insights into the role of geopolitical contestations

in the maritime environment in internationalizing local conflicts and Yemen as a case study in regional security (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies [ACRPS], 2022).

2.4. Limitations of the Research

The limitations of this research are defined through both spatial and temporal boundaries. Spatially, the study focuses on the Red Sea area extending from Midi in northern Yemen to the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the south, covering Yemen's approximately 450-kilometer coastline along the Red Sea, including several strategically significant islands and ports that influence regional security and trade dynamics (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2023). Temporally, the research is limited to the period from 2019 to 2025, a timeframe chosen to capture major geopolitical, military, and economic developments in the Red Sea region and to analyse their impacts on Yemen during these years (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2024).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Chapter One: Yemen, The Geography of The Red Sea, Ports, Islands, Economy, And Causes of Conflict

3.1.1. Geography of the Red Sea

The Red Sea is a geo-politically important body of water, which acts as a natural bridge between the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa and links Asia, Africa and Europe. It is a bridge between the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal and is one of the most important shipping lanes in the world (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024).

The Red Sea extends from the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the south to the Suez Canal in the north with a length of about 2,450 kilometers and an area of almost 438,000 square kilometers. Several Arab and African nations border the Red Sea, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea and the occupied Palestinian territories. The Arab coasts of the Red Sea extend for a considerable length of the total length of the sea, which indicates the importance of the Red Sea for the Arab economic and national security (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2024).

There are many islands in the Red Sea (more than 1,300 islands), with most located in Arab waters. These islands play a significant military and economic role as they provide strategic control of maritime traffic and trade routes (particularly off the Bab al-Mandab Strait). This has transformed the Red Sea into a strategic hotspot of geopolitical contestation between local and international players.

Not only is it important for commercial purposes, but it is also important for military, energy and global supply chain management. The sea route is used to transport 12% of the world's trade and a substantial share of the world's oil exports annually, and any disruptions in the region are a matter of global interest (World Bank, 2023).

3.1.2. The Geographical Position of Yemen

Yemen is in southwest Asia and the southernmost part of the Arab Peninsula. It is bordered by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Sultanate of Oman to the north and east, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden to the south and the Red Sea to the west. Geographically, Yemen is of strategic importance as it is situated on the Bab al-Mandab Strait, one of the most important choke points in the world (International Crisis Group, 2024).

It has a surface area of 555,000 square kilometers and the capital is Sana'a. Historically, Yemen is one of the cradles of civilization in the Arab world, home to ancient civilizations such as the Saba, Ma'in and Hadhramaut Kingdoms, which contributed a great deal to human civilization and commerce. Historically, its location enabled it to serve as a bridge between Africa, Asia and the Mediterranean.

Geopolitically, Yemen's location on the western coast of the Red Sea allows for control of shipping between the Gulf and Europe. This positions Yemen as a regional security player and a potential geopolitical target. Control of the waters near Yemen affects global trade, shipping and movement of the world's navies (European Council on Foreign Relations [ECFR], 2023).

3.1.3. Yemeni Ports and Islands.

Yemen possesses several strategically significant commercial and energy ports that play an essential role in trade, maritime security, and economic activities. The Port of Aden is the country's largest and most prominent port, capable of accommodating medium-sized cargo ships and oil tankers, while also providing ship refuelling and oil refining facilities due to its strategic location near major sea routes (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023).

The Port of Al-Hudaydah serves as a vital commercial and humanitarian port on the Red Sea, facilitating the import of food, fuel, and humanitarian aid into Yemen, in addition to having certain naval capabilities. In eastern Yemen, the Port of Mukalla in Hadhramaut Governorate supports commercial trade as well as oil-related imports and exports, maintaining its importance since its establishment in the mid-1980s. The Port of Mocha, located near the Bab al-Mandab Strait, historically functioned as a major coffee export hub and remains strategically valuable because of its proximity to an important international shipping route. Meanwhile, the Port of Salif, situated northwest of Al-Hudaydah, possesses deep waters suitable for large vessels and is primarily utilized for grain imports and storage. Beyond these commercial ports, Yemen also has major oil and gas export terminals such as Ras Isa, Balhaf, Ash Shihr, and Qana, which are highly significant for the country's energy exports and national revenues (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2024).

There are also 152 islands in Yemen, some of which hold strategic importance. The most strategic are Perim Island (Mayyun) in Bab al-Mandab Strait, Jabal al-Tair Island, Zubair Island, Hanish Islands and Zuqar Island. These islands provide military monitoring and control of shipping lanes, thereby making them more important.

3.1.4. Republic of Yemen's Economy

The Yemeni economy is one of the most fragile in the Middle East region and has experienced a sharp decline in economic activity because of the ongoing political instability, warfare and institutional collapse. Despite the agricultural potential and natural resources, such as oil and gas, the Yemeni economy is very fragile and dependent on imports for many goods and services (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies [ACRPS], 2022).

Yemen's location overlooking the Bab al-Mandab Strait has significant economic opportunities as it is located on one of the world's busiest trade routes. It connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and is a major transportation route for oil exports from the Gulf to Europe and the US. Closing the strait requires oil tankers to circumnavigate the Cape of Good Hope which increases the cost of shipping oil, the time it takes to get it to market and, therefore, the price of oil (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2024).

The key industries in Yemen include oil and gas, agriculture, and industry, all of which play important roles in the country's economy despite facing severe challenges caused by conflict and instability. The oil and gas sector remains a major source of public revenue and foreign exchange earnings, although its performance has been heavily disrupted by prolonged war and political instability. Agriculture serves as the primary source of employment for a large portion of the Yemeni population; however, its contribution to gross domestic product remains relatively small due to inadequate infrastructure, water scarcity, and limited investment. Meanwhile, the industrial sector, including mining activities, has experienced substantial decline because of poor security conditions, weak governance, and limited exploitation of natural resources. Yemen also faces broader economic challenges such as widespread poverty, unemployment, inflation, currency depreciation, dependence on imports, weak institutional governance, and insufficient investment financing. These conditions make the country highly vulnerable to economic crises, particularly those associated with disruptions in shipping routes and geopolitical conflicts in the region (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2023).

3.1.5. Causes of Conflict in the Red Sea

The Red Sea is a geopolitical hotspot because of its strategic location and its importance for global trade, military and energy security. The Red Sea is a site of competition between regional and international powers to control and influence the area to secure strategic interests and maintain trade (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2024).

The US has sought to maintain its maritime dominance of the Red Sea to maintain freedom of the seas and to prevent the rise of other powers in the region, such as Russia and China. Similarly, European powers regard the Red Sea as a vital trade and energy security route.

On the local front, Red Sea States are looking for alliances with the world's powers to protect their interests and to boost their security. This has resulted in greater military competition and proxy conflict, particularly in fragile states such as Yemen and Sudan. The escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Yemen attacks on vessels associated with Israel and its Western backers have also seen the Red Sea transformed into a conflict zone. Therefore, the United States announced collective shipping security measures. However, they have also been interpreted as moves to establish permanent military presence and control over the Bab al-Mandab Strait (World Trade Organization [WTO], 2024).

These geopolitical issues have consequences for Yemen, including increased foreign interventionism, economic instability and threats to Yemen's sovereignty. As such, Yemen is on the frontlines of complex Middle East maritime geopolitical rivalry.

3.2. The Political and Economic Impacts of The Red Sea Conflicts on Yemen.

The geopolitical importance of the Red Sea as a crucial shipping lane in the world economy has amplified the political and economic impacts of recent crises. The attacks by Yemeni forces on ships linked to Israel and Western powers have originally been implemented as a leverage to impact the Gaza conflict, and to show support for the Palestinian cause. However, the expansion of the attacks on other international sea routes led to consequences that have had a global effect on international trade routes, energy security and geopolitical relations (Brookings Institution, 2023).

The Red Sea is an important route for the international shipping of oil, LNG and containers between Asia, Europe and Africa. Any disruption in this passage has direct effects on global supply chains, with devastating economic implications for the developed and developing world. As a result, the continuation of the military operations in the region transforms a regional conflict into a global economic crisis with political implications (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2023).

3.2.1. Political Implications.

Elevation of Regional and International Tensions

The Red Sea conflict has heightened regional and global tensions. Yemen's attacks on international vessels with ties to Israel threatened Western interests, particularly the US and the UK, which have retaliated with heightened maritime presence and military operations in the name of maintaining maritime security.

Escalation in the militarization of the Red Sea has increased the possibility of war between the Gulf states, Iran, Israel and Western powers. It has also rendered maritime security a sensitive geopolitical issue that affects military and diplomatic dynamics in the Middle East (Chatham House, 2024)

Expansion of Foreign Military Intervention

Multinational naval operations, such as US maritime security patrols, are part of a growing foreign military involvement. This is in response to what is claimed to be a threat to freedom of navigation and protection of maritime interests; yet it is viewed by many as part of a geopolitical strategy of asserting its longer-term control of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Red Sea.

This intervention adds to the political challenges in Yemen by increasing international pressure on its political processes and undermining the country's ability to politically resolve its domestic political crises (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2024).

Complexity of the Regional Diplomatic Relations

The Red Sea crisis has led to a divide among Arab and regional states in terms of participating in regional maritime security arrangements. Some are more supportive of global effort to protect sea lanes, while others are more cautious due to political concerns over Palestine, public opinion, and military co-alignment with the Western alliance.

This has hindered the prospect of a collective security and political unity in the Arab political system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023).

Impacts on Yemeni Sovereignty and Politics

Foreign military presence in the waters around Yemen contributes to its loss of sovereignty. The elite of Yemen are increasingly engaged with regional politics, which affects domestic politics.

Likewise, the local actors' employment of maritime operations to bolster political legitimacy entrenches domestic divisions and destabilises the country. Therefore, the Red Sea crisis impacts on Yemen's international relations and domestic politics (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia [ESCWA], 2023).

3.2.2. Economic Implications

Redirection of International Shipping

Perhaps the most visible consequence of insecurity in the Red Sea has been a change in international shipping patterns away from the Bab al-Mandab Strait and towards the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa. The move has been made by international shipping companies to avoid security risks and insurance.

This affects the time, fuel, labour and shipping costs, and has inflationary consequences around the world. Container shipping rates from Asia to the Mediterranean have been high, with claims of almost tripling during escalation peaks (Arab Monetary Fund [AMF], 2023).

Increasing Insurance Rates

Overseas insurance companies' war-risk classification has resulted in higher insurance costs (Freightos Research, 2024). Higher insurance costs put pressure on shipping companies that are passed on to consumers as higher prices for imported products and services, such as food and medicine.

This worsens inflation and constrains food, fuel and medicine imports for vulnerable nations, such as Yemen (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2024).

Impacts on Energy Trade

The Red Sea is an essential route for oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports from the Gulf to Europe and the world. Any prolonged disruption may threaten global energy security, and cause price volatility in oil and gas markets.

Europe, particularly after the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, is heavily dependent on Gulf oil and gas resources, making the Red Sea a vital artery for Europe's energy security (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2023). This makes the world's concern for maritime security in Yemen more sensitive (Freightos Research, 2024).

Effect on the Humanitarian and Economic Crisis in Yemen

Yemen is already suffering from economic crisis and food insecurity, relying on humanitarian aid. The Red Sea conflict places additional pressures on the country with rising import costs, currency depreciation, limited availability of essential goods and humanitarian aid.

Global humanitarian reports demonstrate Yemenis are still dependent on aid, inflation and shipping delays restrict the import of essentials. Increases in shipping and insurance costs impact livelihoods and poverty (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2023).

Pressure on Regional Economies

The Red Sea crisis isn't just about Yemen for example, Egypt suffered revenue losses from the reduced volume of goods transiting the Suez Canal and the food importing countries in the North African and Middle East region may experience a further increase in inflation.

These impacts reveal the Red Sea crisis is not just a regional maritime security crisis, but also a global economic, and regional political security crisis (Gulf Research Center, 2022).

The geopolitical tensions in the Red Sea have generated several major political implications for Yemen and the wider region. One of the most significant impacts has been the escalation of armed conflict, marked by increasing military confrontations and maritime attacks. This situation has also encouraged greater foreign intervention and the expansion of naval operations by international powers seeking to secure strategic shipping lanes and maintain freedom of navigation. In addition, the crisis has contributed to divisions within Arab political alignments, as regional actors adopt differing positions regarding the conflict and external involvement. Consequently, Yemen has faced growing political and security threats, further complicating its already fragile sovereignty and internal stability.

Economically, the conflict has produced wide-ranging consequences at both regional and global levels. International shipping companies have redirected maritime traffic away from the Red Sea toward alternative routes such as the Cape of Good Hope, resulting in increased transportation costs and delays in global supply chains. The instability has also intensified Yemen's humanitarian and inflation crises by disrupting imports, increasing fuel and food prices, and reducing economic activity. Furthermore, the conflict has affected oil and gas trade flows, creating uncertainty in energy markets and raising concerns over global energy security. These developments collectively contribute to broader economic risks and deepen Yemen's ongoing humanitarian and economic challenges.

According to this study, the Red Sea is not a shipping lane anymore, the Red Sea is a geopolitical environment where geopolitical actors are engaged in their geopolitical game of influence, power (military and economic). Yemen is also a part of geopolitical environment due to its geographical position of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and is involved in geopolitical activities.

The research demonstrates that in the Red Sea shipping security is not an issue. It is an issue of political, economic and international security. The escalation of military activities by parties like the U.S. and the UK indicate that their primary aim is to maintain control of one of the critical energy and shipping route, than shipping security (Brookings Institution, 2023).

The research shows that politically, the military actions in Yemen that affect Israeli and Western shipping have caused security issues. They have directly resulted in the escalation of the militarization of the Red Sea, and new competition among the global powers, the Gulf states and others. This is politically relevant as foreign presence is on the rise, the potential for local political process in Yemen has decreased and Arab states are divided on maritime security.

This research also confirms foreign military interventions, in support of world trade also undermine the sovereignty of Yemen and foreign influence in its political process. This demonstrates geopolitical rivalries in maritime spaces of geopolitical significance means weak states become a space of rivalry, rather than a space of sovereignty (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2023).

This study also demonstrates that the Red Sea crisis has spill-over effects. The detour around the Cape of Good Hope, the increased insurance premium and the impact on the energy transportation industry has inflationary and supply chain effects. This is particularly true for highly food and fuel import-dependent Yemen with a poor economy. The higher cost of transport is a factor in the food and fuel shortages and loss of purchasing power.

And the loss of efficiency and effectiveness of the shipping industry also affects other countries in the region such as Egypt due to a loss of income from the Suez Canal - and the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) economies dependent on food and fuels imports (Chatham House, 2024).

The research also shows the increase in the geopolitical importance of Yemen is not due to the economic importance, but geographical location as it relates to the world economy and energy security. So, it has geopolitical importance and institutional/economic crises. Hence, it has a high degree of externalisation and civil war.

Finally, this discussion shows the Red Sea does not have a direct security significance, but a geopolitical one, which could have regional and global economic security implications. The importance of Yemen demonstrates space, state and global economic relations.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that geopolitical competition in the Red Sea between 2019 and 2025 has become a major factor affecting Yemen's political and economic stability. The strategic importance of the Red Sea, particularly the Bab al-Mandab Strait, has attracted global and regional powers seeking control over maritime security, international trade, and energy routes, thereby increasing Yemen's geopolitical significance despite its political and economic fragility. The study finds that foreign interventions, naval militarization, and escalating maritime conflict have intensified internal political struggles, weakened Yemen's sovereignty, and hindered national political processes. Economically, insecurity in the Red Sea has disrupted global shipping, increased transportation, insurance, and energy costs, and worsened humanitarian suffering, especially in Yemen due to its dependence on imports and fragile economic structure. The research further reveals that the growing militarization of the region under the justification of maritime security has heightened geopolitical tensions and increased the risks to regional peace and stability. Based on these findings, the study recommends the development of a regional maritime security framework among Red Sea coastal states, the strengthening of Yemen's institutional and maritime governance capacity, the protection of strategic ports and coastal infrastructure, and the promotion of economic diversification to reduce dependency on oil revenues and imports. It also emphasizes the importance of maintaining humanitarian and food security mechanisms, reducing escalatory foreign military intervention through diplomatic approaches, strengthening Arab regional diplomatic coordination, and integrating maritime security into broader national economic and development planning to support long-term stability, sovereignty, and economic recovery in Yemen and the wider Red Sea region.

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