

Competition, cooperation and security in the Red Sea

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The Red Sea and its environs, which includes several countries in the Horn of Africa, are lately receiving increased global attention. Several geopolitical dynamics make it a unique space, often marked by division rather than unity. There are concerns that the shared space is not adequately managed and that new responses are needed to address this. This report assesses current developments, covering ongoing rivalries in the Red Sea and recommendations for future collaboration.

Key findings

- ▶ The Red Sea maritime space is a complex geopolitical environment, marked by geographic vulnerability, diversity among its members, state-to-state rivalries and external interest.
- ▶ The recent increased attention paid to the Red Sea space has been driven by concerns regarding a gap in maritime management, despite the existence of the status quo for decades.
- ▶ A range of current threats exist within the maritime space, primarily driven by insecure environments and the emergence of non-state actors. Yet to date, major disruptions to maritime traffic have not occurred.
- ▶ A number of organisations are taking on an increased Red Sea mandate. Nonetheless, many of those present are geographically limited, have alternative focuses or suffer from other challenges, such as a lack of internal consensus when it comes to the Red Sea and/or maritime security.
- ▶ The establishment of maritime governance mechanisms in other similarly complex environments provides potential lessons for the Red Sea. Chief among these are the need to limit mistrust and competition, define clear areas of cooperation, start small and grow with time, sustain efforts as interest wanes and prioritise coordination to avoid duplication and overlap.

Recommendations

- ▶ Including all relevant nations in future collaborative efforts around the Red Sea ensures the greatest chance of success.
- ▶ Resolving underlying political grievances and fault lines may ultimately help facilitate greater cooperation, while lessening existing security threats. Generally, there is a need to overcome inherent tensions, rather than ignoring or embedding them within new mechanisms.
- ▶ Starting small around a limited mandate, and expanding over time as trust and cooperation grows, may be useful. Outlining a common set of threats and provisions for information sharing can be an entry point to building confidence.
- ▶ Considering flexible and creative mechanisms that avoid infringements on national sovereignty while balancing organisational efficacy, may ultimately increase participation.
- ▶ Avoiding overlap or duplication of efforts is key. Cooperative mechanisms should take stock of existing arrangements and determine clear lines of collaboration. In addition, existing organisations that are increasingly taking on a Red Sea mandate should clearly determine the extent of their capacity and responsibilities.
- ▶ Maintaining interest as political and security developments change is also pivotal. Sustained engagement beyond a narrow frame will be pivotal to ensuring the long-term success of any Red Sea management framework.

Introduction

The Red Sea and its environs, a diverse area where multiple sub-political zones converge (see maps on pages 14 and 15), has been the subject of increased global attention in recent years. The region has also experienced sudden and fluctuating political and security dynamics, which, combined with its diversity, make it a complex area often marked by division rather than unity.¹

Despite this complex geopolitical context, maritime transport and the free and safe movement of shipping have largely gone undisrupted in recent years.² This reflects the overwhelming interests of all state actors in upholding and ensuring the core principles of freedom of navigation and innocent passage for unimpeded maritime use of the Red Sea. The costs of disrupted or threatened shipping, firstly to the littoral countries of the Red Sea, secondly to the nations of origin and destination of the traffic, and finally to all others involved in terms of port management or other interests, appear to have deterred the disruption of maritime traffic in the space.³

Maritime transport and shipping have largely gone undisrupted in recent years

Yet even with this history of unimpeded passage, augmented recent attention towards the Red Sea is indicative of rising security concerns over the maritime context, amid heightened tensions in an increasingly crowded space. In other words, recent developments reflect concerns that the hitherto relative safety of the Red Sea passageway should not be taken for granted, and may become vulnerable to unprecedented disruption in the future. This has resulted in a search for new thinking and initiatives around the establishment of cooperative mechanisms which can help manage the maritime context.

This report unpacks some of the contemporary dynamics present in the Red Sea, in order to further understand the challenges of collaboratively ensuring security across this complex maritime space. Key questions underpinning the research include:

- What defining characteristics of the Red Sea context underpin its unique geopolitical position?

- What are the current sources of insecurity to maritime passageway in the Red Sea, and how much of a threat do they pose?
- To what extent is there a gap in Red Sea maritime management, and does this imply the need to develop new mechanisms? What roles do existing organisations play?
- Finally, what lessons can be drawn from the establishment of similar maritime governance mechanisms in other complex environments?

This report is based on desktop research and regional discussions in the Horn of Africa, incorporating interviews with selected key actors and resource personnel. The report covers issues relevant to both sides of the Red Sea, but with a dominant Horn of Africa frame in mind. In addition, while the focus primarily revolves around the geographic confines of the Red Sea, the discussion also includes the adjacent Gulf of Aden where relevant.

Towards a Red Sea forum?

On 12 December 2018, a meeting in Riyadh between representatives of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen took place. The discussions centred around the creation of a new alliance or forum focused on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden maritime zones, building off a similar December 2017 conference of senior officials in Egypt.⁴

Described as the initial phase of a longer process, few concrete or binding outcomes emerged from the Riyadh meeting, but the parties agreed to continue with technical discussions. Since then, a series of meetings in Cairo on 13–14 February and 11–12 March 2019, and in Riyadh on 21–22 April 2019 took place, but little clarity on the way forward had emerged at the time of writing.⁵

A key question has revolved around the selection criterion of the participants, and the prospects for unity within the Red Sea zone. Eritrea did not attend the initial meetings, while Israel, another nation with an outlet to the Red Sea, was not invited.⁶ Other regional actors without a Red Sea coastline but with specific interests or investments in the space, such as Ethiopia or the United Arab Emirates (UAE), also have not been involved to date.⁷ In addition, a number of countries on the western side of the Red Sea are

involved in multiple ongoing efforts (see the section below, ‘A gap to be filled’), raising questions regarding overlap and/or the potential for conflicting outcomes between the various initiatives.⁸

Officials knowledgeable about the process stress that the discussions thus far have been promising and a concrete outcome is imminent. Yet agreements on outstanding issues such as the location of a secretariat, in addition to the ongoing transition in Sudan, have delayed matters. In addition, others have noted that the engagement of non-littoral nations with Red Sea interests is an issue tabled for a later stage, after initial formation of the mechanism.⁹

At the end of December 2018, the ‘Red Wave 1’ joint naval drills also occurred off the Saudi Arabian Red Sea coast.¹⁰ The five-day exercises, which included the same participants as the Riyadh meeting a few weeks earlier, focused on enhancing maritime security, boosting cooperation and exchanging experiences.¹¹

Combined, the continuing discussions and naval drills symbolise the increasing attention paid to the Red Sea context, and the importance attached to creating new mechanisms to address concerns regarding a management gap in the shared space. These activities have also inspired other discussions around the Red Sea, especially on the western side, as actors aim to develop coordinated positions in the wake of the advancing developments (see ‘A gap to be filled’).¹²

Red Sea geopolitical context

Despite the nascent attempts at cooperation, the Red Sea space is marked by a history of complex geopolitical relations, combined with increasing external interest in the area. The following section briefly outlines some overarching contemporary issues affecting the Red Sea maritime space, with a particular emphasis on competitive state-to-state dynamics.

Geographic vulnerability

Geographically, the Red Sea became one of the most globally important maritime routes or Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) with the completion of the Suez Canal in the late 19th century. This cut the travel distance between Europe and Asia by approximately 4 000 miles.¹³ One indication of the utility of the Suez route is the fact that 4.8 million barrels of oil travelled through this passageway per day in 2016, linking markets in Europe and North America with production centres in the Persian Gulf.¹⁴

Nonetheless, the Red Sea maritime route is bounded by two of the world’s most significant maritime chokepoints at its southern and northern ends.¹⁵ Chokepoints are geographical features that narrow or restrict vessel movement and traffic, causing congestion and raising the risk of accident or attack, given the volume of shipping in a confined space. The Bab al-Mandab to the south is just 29 km wide at its narrowest point between Yemen and Djibouti/Eritrea, which restricts traffic to two channels, one of which is approximately 3 km wide.¹⁶

Table 1: Population and economic diversity of littoral Red Sea nations

Population	(in millions)	GDP	2018 (current USD, in billions)	GDP per capita	2018 (current USD)
Egypt	89.42	Saudi Arabia	782,483.47	Israel	41,614.0
Sudan	41.8	Israel	369,690.43	Saudi Arabia	23,219.1
Saudi Arabia	33.69	Egypt	250,895.47	Jordan	4,247.8
Yemen	28.50	Jordan	42,290.83	Egypt	2,549.1
Somalia	15.01	Sudan	40,851.54	Djibouti	2,050.2
Jordan	9.96	Yemen	26,914.40	Sudan	977.3
Israel	8.88	Somalia	7,484.00	Yemen	944.4
Eritrea	3.21	Eritrea	2,607.74	Eritrea	811.4
Djibouti	0.96	Djibouti	1,965.98	Somalia	498.7

Source: <https://data.worldbank.org>

The Suez Canal in the north is also a narrow channel, despite the recent completion of a project to expand its capacity.¹⁷ It now accounts for 8% of global maritime trade, which, combined with the fact that much of this traffic also passes through the narrow Bab al-Mandab straight, makes the Red Sea a significant yet vulnerable SLOC.¹⁸

Regional diversity

The Red Sea is a diverse space, encompassing the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Gulf and North Africa/the Levant. Despite a long history of interaction, the differing political, economic and cultural systems present a challenge in greater coordination. This has been exacerbated by traditional definitions of Africa and the Middle East, in which the Red Sea has been utilised as a dividing line, rather than a unifying geographic feature.

There is an inherent economic imbalance, in addition to a great difference in population sizes of the littoral Red Sea nations

There is also an inherent economic imbalance, in addition to a great difference in population sizes of the littoral Red Sea nations (Table 1). The former aspect ranges from rich oil-producing countries like Saudi Arabia, to economies facing a severe and prolonged crisis, such as Sudan. The economic diversity of these nations allows for a power imbalance in terms of relations – for example, financial incentives proffered to countries like Somalia and Sudan to suspend their relations with Iran (see below) serve as an indicator of the level of transactional diplomacy associated with the Red Sea space, and the dominant role of larger power interests.¹⁹

Combined with the clustering of external military bases in Djibouti, the waters from the Suez to Aden are marked by the presence of not just dominant regional powers, but also world superpowers (see below).²⁰ In this broader view of power politicking, states on the African side of the Red Sea tend to be marginalised in most framings and analysis, save as sites for geopolitical investment or of instability, even if they are not merely passive recipients of external influence.²¹ Both these factors diminish the agency of some of the less dominant littoral Red Sea nations in the realm of maritime affairs, which can complicate new endeavours at achieving cooperation based on a level playing field.²²

Layers of state-to-state competition

The presence of state-to-state rivalries is an enduring feature of the Red Sea space. Currently, a number of emerging dynamics complicate attempts at engendering unity, ranging from internal developments in the Horn of Africa, the interaction and spillover of Gulf rivalries to the Horn of Africa side, and the presence of further-flung world powers in the Red Sea context (see Figure 1). Each dynamic is elaborated below.

A stylized icon representing 8%, consisting of the number '8' followed by a percentage sign, rendered in a light grey, thin-lined font.

PROPORTION OF GLOBAL MARITIME
TRADE THROUGH SUEZ CANAL

Cooperation amid shifting political winds in the Horn?

At an internal level, after years of political stagnation, the Horn of Africa underwent significant changes over the past year. The initial catalyst for this was the ascension of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia following years of sustained anti-government protests, and the subsequent launching of an ambitious reform agenda. Nonetheless, Abiy's reform agenda has been challenged by internal insecurity and a reduction in government coherence.

More recently, a street protest movement also forced Omar al-Bashir from power in Sudan after three decades, resulting in an uneasy transitional agreement between civilian and military leadership.²³ While the long-term ramifications remain uncertain, especially given continued jockeying for control in both contexts, the sweeping away of long-time power structures by popular movements potentially signals a new era in the Horn of Africa. This carries significant implications for future political and security dynamics.

After years of political stagnation, the Horn of Africa underwent significant changes over the past year

The change in Ethiopian leadership in particular facilitated a new status quo in the Horn, as Ethiopia and Eritrea moved to resolve their two-decade-old dispute, lessening Eritrea's status as a regional pariah and allowing for its reintegration into the region. Somalia has also become a part of this new dynamic, signing a tripartite agreement for cooperation with Ethiopia and Eritrea in late 2018. Other endeavours have occurred to bring on board countries like South Sudan and Kenya as part of a regional integration project, with varying results.

While visible manifestations of the new relationships have yet to go much beyond leadership visits, the dynamics signal a new potential era of state-to-state cooperation in the Horn, and even across the Red Sea given the (uncertain) behind-the-scenes role Saudi Arabia and the UAE played in facilitating the Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement.²⁴

Yet, while resolving one key rivalry and source of contention, the developments raise other questions over

the longevity of this newfound cooperation in the Horn. The rapid nature of the Ethiopia–Eritrea peace deal has led to concerns about its sustainability amidst a lack of institutionalisation and technical discussion.²⁵

The changing relationships in the Horn also raise questions for entities like Djibouti and the unrecognised administration of Somaliland, which find themselves in a new dynamic given that Ethiopia has reconciled with administrations previously perceived as adversarial. Furthermore, the actual status in any new regional integration project of countries outside some traditional definitions of the Horn of Africa, such as Sudan and Kenya, is uncertain.

Moreover, the role of intergovernmental organisations – such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU) – in any new dynamics also remains unclear. Furthermore, some new areas of competition in the Horn of Africa have taken on increased intensity recently, such as the discord between Kenya and Somalia over their maritime boundary, complicating efforts at wider regional cooperation.²⁶

The change in Ethiopian leadership has led to another positive but unclear outcome regarding a key potential source of friction among Red Sea states – that of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile River. Given the potential benefits for Ethiopia in terms of electricity production and for Sudan in terms of an expanded agricultural space, both have been strong proponents of the project, while Egypt maintains concerns regarding the river's flow.

The heated rhetoric which characterised the dispute in the past has lessened, but there has been little technical resolution regarding the central question of the filling rate of the dam.²⁷ In the past, Egypt engaged Ethiopia's Red Sea neighbours, like Eritrea and Somalia, as a means of putting pressure on the landlocked nation over the Nile issue – taking aim at Ethiopian vulnerability when it comes to maritime outlets like the Red Sea.

In this sense, while the popular protests and resulting leadership changes in the Horn of Africa have led to newfound alliances, the rapid and evolving nature of these ties also raises questions as to collaboration amidst a shifting regional status quo. Such dynamics will undoubtedly influence future efforts to develop cooperative mechanisms around the Red Sea as well.

Exporting regional competition to the Red Sea

At a regional level, some key geopolitical rivalries underpin contemporary understanding of the Red Sea space.²⁸ Chief among these is the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The long-standing rivalry between the two Middle Eastern powers has taken on an increased tone in recent years. This is evidenced by Saudi Arabia's suspension of diplomatic relations with Iran in 2016, following the ransacking of its embassy in Tehran by a crowd protesting the execution in Saudi Arabia of prominent Shi'ite cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr.²⁹

The war in Yemen can be described as a proxy battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran

While the proxy element to that rivalry plays out in a number of different arenas, the most pertinent to the Red Sea space is that of Yemen. Iran is assumed to be an external backer of the Houthi movement, although the specific nature of support is subject to debate.³⁰ Following the Houthi takeover of the Yemeni capital of Sana'a in 2014, Saudi Arabia intervened in favour of the Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi government in March 2015. This resulted in the establishment of a coalition in which the UAE has been a main partner, but also dragged in other Red Sea states like Eritrea, Egypt, Sudan and Jordan.³¹

In this sense, the war in Yemen can be described as a proxy battle in the ongoing regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and perhaps the single most significant development that has spurred a greater focus of Gulf actors on both sides of the Red Sea. With Houthi control of key areas of the coastline, such as Hodeidah port until a ceasefire agreement in late 2018, the spectre of an Irani-aligned organisation with the ability to impede Red Sea traffic has become a major concern for Saudi Arabia and others, adding to the intensity of this rivalry.³²

An uptick in Houthi-claimed drone and missile attacks aimed largely at infrastructure targets in southwestern Saudi Arabia in mid-2019 demonstrated both technological advances and an escalation of intensity, symbolising this vulnerability (see below).³³

On another level, in June 2017 Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt – the first three being members of the regional Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – initiated a boycott of Qatar and presented a series of 13 demands in order to resolve the situation.³⁴ This was the second time in a few years that Saudi Arabia broke relations with Qatar, following an eight-month period in 2014. The strident rhetoric and the lengthy demands surrounding the boycott in 2017 signalled the intensity of this latest dispute, one that continues at the time of writing.

The Saudi-led bloc's chief concerns have revolved around Qatar's ties to Iran and its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, though many have pointed out Qatar's real violation has been the pursuit of an independent foreign policy not aligned with Saudi interests.³⁵

The rift within the GCC has led to the emergence of another proxy battle affecting the Red Sea region. Turkey maintains close ties to Qatar and is often perceived to be on the other side of the dispute in opposition to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, despite attempts to disassociate itself from this dynamic.³⁶ Other countries in the Red Sea space have been pressured to choose one side or the other. While some like Djibouti and Eritrea expressed quick support for the Saudi bloc, others like Sudan and Somalia refrained from making such choices, with divergent results.

Indeed, in Somalia, the effects of the crisis have been disastrous, as the federal government in Mogadishu has pursued a path of neutrality in opposition to its Federal Member States (FMS), most of which have opted for Saudi Arabia/UAE. This has exacerbated existing internal tensions. Sudan was able to play off both sides more adeptly while Omar al-Bashir was in power, extracting concessions. This was likely due in part to Sudan's leverage, given that it supplied crucial manpower for the anti-Houthi Yemen war effort. Yet in the wake of Bashir's overthrow, it appears Sudan's neutrality has been abandoned by new military leadership in favour of the Saudi-UAE axis.³⁷ While UAE forces began drawing down from western Yemen in mid-2019, it is still unclear if this implies any significant change regarding the Sudanese presence.³⁸

The GCC dispute manifests itself in the Red Sea as both blocs are active in this space, but also harbour suspicions

and attempt to outdo each other. This competition is evident across a number of different facets, of which the scramble for the control of ports and the development of military bases along the Red Sea coast may be the most prominent. For example:

- Qatar and Turkey have engaged in a partnership with Sudan to redevelop the ancient port city of Suakin, reportedly worth up to US\$4 billion.³⁹
- UAE companies DP World and sister organisation P&O Ports have secured agreements to manage the Gulf of Aden ports of Berbera (Somaliland) and Bosasso (Puntland) respectively, while the UAE also operates a military base in the Red Sea coastal city of Assab (Eritrea). Additionally, UAE efforts in the war in Yemen resulted in de facto control of Yemeni coastal areas like Aden and Mokha.⁴⁰
- Saudi Arabia has also agreed to establish its first overseas military facility in Djibouti.

This competition has evolved rapidly, with many of the agreements taking shape in the past few years. Furthermore, the GCC dispute has demonstrated little sign of an immediate resolution, indicating that the Red Sea zone will likely be marked by a continuation of this rivalry in the short to medium term.

Militarisation and the great powers

At a wider level, the international importance of the Red Sea space can be acutely demonstrated by the visible military presence of world powers in the narrow zone, manifested most dramatically on the Horn of Africa side. In fact, both the United States and China, in addition to France, Japan, Italy and possibly soon Saudi Arabia, maintain a military presence in Djibouti, a unique global situation. The following summarises and illustrates the presence and interests of major global actors in the Red Sea maritime zone:⁴¹

- United States – military presence in Djibouti since 2001 following the acquisition of Camp Lemonier; in July 2019 the Trump administration expressed interest in establishing a coalition to safeguard coastal waters around Bab al-Mandab, among other areas, in the wake of heightened confrontation with Iran.⁴²
- France – naval base in Djibouti with approximately 1 450 soldiers.⁴³

- European Union (EU) – initiated Operation Atalanta to combat piracy in the Western Indian Ocean in 2008; also revised its Maritime Security Strategy (EU MSS) Action Plan in mid-2018 to include a section dedicated to the Horn of Africa–Red Sea.
- Russia – rumoured to be interested in establishing a military presence in the Red Sea, with explorations along the coasts of Sudan, Eritrea and Somaliland.⁴⁴
- China – opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017; also invested heavily in infrastructure projects in the Horn, including various involvements in multiple Djibouti ports.⁴⁵

The presence of so many global actors in such a small space, and the resulting militarisation under the pretext of protecting commercial interests, raises the spectre of an additional third layer of external competition, on top of those already present within the western side of the Red Sea (first layer) and the aforementioned rivalries exported from the Arabian Gulf (second layer). This is especially relevant given recent United States' characterisations of Chinese and Russian presence in Africa, which place it in a competitive light. However, it is unclear to what degree others in the region and internationally view the dynamic in similarly competitive terms.⁴⁶

The presence of so many global actors, and the resulting militarisation, raises the spectre of external competition

The Red Sea space has thus become increasingly securitised in recent years, with nearly all relevant global actors partaking. These developments have not been limited to outside interests either. Egypt's navy formed a Southern Fleet Command to patrol its Red Sea space, while Ethiopia recently began discussing the reintroduction of its naval force, which disbanded after Eritrea's independence in 1993 left the nation landlocked.⁴⁷ Such manoeuvres point to the militarisation of the Red Sea space and the interests of actors to ensure commercial traffic is not threatened, but also raise the stakes in a seemingly unending cycle of competitive demonstrations of dominance.

State rivalry vs Red Sea unity

Overall, while state rivalries continue to exist at all three levels in the Red Sea space and an increasing amount of military hardware is present, there has been an absence of outright confrontation in a manner that would threaten maritime traffic, given shared interests in preventing disruptions. Indeed, in the Red Sea context, the reduction of tensions within the Horn following the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, in addition to Saudi Arabia's ascendancy vis-à-vis Iran and to a lesser extent Qatar, in some ways has led to a greater convergence around certain issues.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, significant actors have been left out of these developments, which are still emerging, fragile and in some aspects based on transactional diplomacy and furthering narrow state interests, rather than durable elements of sustained cooperation. Instead, the indirect impact of continued tensions, and not direct confrontation, has arguably produced some of the greatest threats to the Red Sea space. The proxy battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen is a case in point.

The continued prospect for such political state-to-state rivalries, encompassing those internal to the Red Sea area, regional aspects exported to the arena and the future possibility of competition between world powers, will be a challenge for the region to manage going forward, with a lack of trust having the potential to stymie cooperation and unity in the Red Sea arena. It is imperative that frameworks for maritime cooperation take measures to reduce rather than accentuate such tensions, in order to overcome these challenges and enjoy future success.

Threats to Red Sea maritime security

While the Red Sea maritime passageway has hitherto remained fairly open, specific threats to its continued security remain. These chiefly emanate from sources of internal insecurity in the region and the presence of non-state actors, though some contexts have been exacerbated by the level of state-to-state competition described above. The following section highlights some specific areas of concern.

War in Yemen

The conflict in Yemen is a situation where internal instability in a Red Sea state, combined with competitive

state-to-state rivalries, carries ramifications for maritime security. To illustrate, the establishment of a Saudi-led coalition to counter the Iranian-backed Houthis in 2015 resulted in increased threats to safe passageway around Yemen's waters, rather than reducing such concerns.⁴⁹

Houthi presence around the Yemeni port of Hodeidah and the subsequent targeting of vessels associated with Saudi Arabia, sometimes with 'drone' boats, demonstrates the potential threat.⁵⁰ While to date specific incidents have mostly targeted coalition ships in reaction to its war effort, the presence of another armed non-state actor with the capability to target maritime traffic within the Red Sea space remains a concern, even if the disruptions to global traffic have thus far been minimal.⁵¹

A recent guidance note on maritime security in the southern Red Sea from the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) outlined some of the new threats. Chief among these are anti-ship missiles, sea mines and waterborne improvised explosive devices. The note warns that while military vessels that are part of the Saudi war effort are the likely target of these activities, the potential for both misidentification and collateral damage remains for commercial traffic.⁵²

While the Red Sea maritime passageway has remained fairly open, specific security threats remain

A 2017 rocket-propelled grenade attack on the tanker *M/V Muskie* and another by a skiff on the liquefied natural gas carrier *Galicia Spirit*, while not damaging, were emblematic of this new threat around the Bab al-Mandab.⁵³ More concerning was Saudi Aramco's temporary suspension of crude oil shipments after two of its tankers in the area were attacked in July 2018. This followed an April 2018 missile attack on another Saudi tanker, and served as a crucial indication of how Red Sea traffic could be imperilled by continued conflict in Yemen.⁵⁴

Piracy

As another example of internal instability combined with the presence of non-state actors, pirate attacks off the coast of Somalia became commonplace between 2008 and 2012, sparking widespread concern and unilateral,

bilateral and multilateral counter-piracy measures. While the majority of incidents occurred in the Gulf of Aden and further out into the Indian Ocean, a number took place at the entrance to the Red Sea passageway between Yemen and Somalia, at the site of the International Recommended Transport Corridor – a narrow maritime route in the Gulf of Aden intended as a safe path for merchant ships and protected by international naval forces.

Some states adopted unilateral patrol capacity and operations, notably China, whose frequent deployments of People's Liberation Army Navy vessels eventually contributed to its establishment of a military presence in Djibouti. Other bilateral engagements, such as Japan's creation of a self-defence force in Djibouti, and the UAE's training of the Puntland Maritime Police Force in Somalia, also occurred under the rubric of preventing pirate attacks.⁵⁵

The majority of the pirate networks were based in Somali coastal cities along the Indian Ocean

Notable multilateral initiatives include the establishment of the EU's Operation Atalanta, initially tasked to protect World Food Programme ships carrying aid to Somalia. The United States also initiated Combined Task Force 151, a multinational anti-piracy naval force. While the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) Ocean Shield operation, with a similar objective in the area, ended in 2016, upwards of 50 navies continue to, or plan to, operate in the area, allowing the various states involved a distinct opportunity to collaborate and cooperate against a common threat.⁵⁶ It also signifies the diverse interests in the Indian Ocean–Gulf of Aden–Red Sea maritime passageway, and the global concern the piracy attacks engendered.

The majority of the pirate networks, however, were based in Somali coastal cities along the Indian Ocean, like Hobyo, Haradheere and Eyl, denoting how internal insecurity and a permissive environment can in turn lead to wider threats across the Red Sea. Few pirates originated along the Gulf of Aden in the Bari region of Puntland, or across Somaliland. The rugged coastline and more developed state institutions of the latter denied

easy launching and harbouring opportunities.⁵⁷ In this sense, the root causes of the piracy phenomenon lay primarily in a failure of governance systems on land and a lack of economic opportunities, which in turn manifested into a maritime threat.

A small resurgence in attacks in early 2017 indicated that some pirate networks were still prepared to attack shipping. While the costs and risks for the pirate groups have increased, their presence, and thus the threat posed to the Red Sea maritime passageway, has not been completely eliminated.⁵⁸ It is also important to note that while in March 2017 the *Aris* was the first merchant vessel to be hijacked in five years (since the *Smyrni* in May 2012), other hijackings – typically of smaller fishing vessels – have occurred.

There have been limited successful incidents since, while other attempts have been repelled.⁵⁹ Yet the lack of prosecutions of key instigators of attacks, and the continued presence of conditions on the ground that allowed the criminal networks to thrive in the first place, mean that reorganisation could occur, especially if any shifts in the area result in a more conducive environment.⁶⁰

Presence of terrorist organisations

The presence of violent extremist organisations (VEOs) with linkages to global jihadist outfits al-Qaeda and the Islamic State also raises concerns regarding security in the Red Sea. The historical precedent of the 2000 *USS Cole* bombing and the 2002 *Limburg* oil tanker attack, both in the Gulf of Aden and claimed by al-Qaeda, signals the previous capacity and desire of terrorist outfits to target maritime security in the region.⁶¹

In recent years, such actors have not conducted a major operation threatening the Red Sea. Yet the presence of VEOs affiliated with larger outfits that have demonstrated such ambitions before, is of continued concern. Three Red Sea nations in particular struggle with active extremist organisations:

- Yemen – both al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which holds sway across a swathe of territory in the country, and a smaller outfit of the Islamic State in Yemen, are active in the country. AQAP is often referred to as one of al-Qaeda's most lethal branches, although the majority of its presence

is restricted more to Yemen's east, rather than Red Sea, coast.⁶² The branch of the Islamic State is more marginal, with an estimated capacity of just a few hundred militants.⁶³

- Somalia – Al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab is predominately active in south-central Somalia, but maintains cells further north in Puntland, and is reported to use sea routes across to Yemen to resupply.⁶⁴ Previous loose linkages to certain pirate groups have been alleged, and demonstrate the potential of a criminal–terror nexus, but little evidence of widespread collusion has emerged.⁶⁵ A smaller jihadist unit aligned to the Islamic State is also active in Puntland, and seized the small coastal town of Qandala in the Gulf of Aden for two months in 2016.⁶⁶ It has struggled to maintain a similar level of operation since, but continued insecurity in the port city of Bosaso demonstrates the reach of both groups up to the coast.⁶⁷
- Egypt – Islamic State in the Sinai has waged an active campaign against security forces in the area since 2014, part of a wider pattern of insecurity in the peninsula.

While these groups have demonstrated little recent intention to disrupt Red Sea maritime traffic, in 2013 the *COSCO Asia* containership came under attack by suspected militants in the Suez Canal.⁶⁸ The damage was minimal, but along with previous limited rocket attacks by like-minded organisations on the Israeli and Jordanian Red Sea ports of Eilat and Aqaba respectively, the continued presence of such VEOs in this space is another cause for concern.⁶⁹

Territorial disputes

In addition to state-to-state rivalries, specific territorial disputes exist within the Red Sea space that can also hinder cooperation and heighten tensions, if not outright conflict. Some historical disputes have been resolved, providing optimism and lessons for ongoing squabbles. For example, Eritrea and Yemen fought a brief war in 1995 over the Hanish Islands, but an external arbitration process in 1998 delimited the maritime boundary between the two, settling the matter.⁷⁰

More recently, Saudi Arabia and Egypt bilaterally resolved a contention over the islands of Tiran and Sanafir,

when Egypt agreed to cede them, despite domestic opposition.⁷¹ In 2012, Saudi Arabia and Sudan signed the Atlantis II agreement, which specifies joint collaboration and resource division from a prospective deep sea mining project in the Red Sea, demonstrating cooperation rather than competition along a shared maritime resource. However, the technical capacity to implement the agreement and share the resources remains in question.⁷²

Currently, a territorial fault line exists between Sudan and Egypt over Halayeb Triangle, while the border between Eritrea and Djibouti remains unresolved, despite the normalisation of relations in late 2018.⁷³ Mediation for the latter may be ongoing, but suffered as a result of the GCC crisis when Qatar pulled a peacekeeping force out of the area. Tensions between Sudan and Egypt were aggravated in March 2019 following Egyptian plans to auction 10 oil and gas exploration blocks in the area.⁷⁴ The dispute signals how the control of contested resources in the Red Sea may complicate future cooperation on other aspects of the shared maritime space.

Specific territorial disputes exist within the Red Sea space that can hinder cooperation

The unresolved nature of Somaliland's legal status vis-à-vis Somalia presents another challenge, given its long coastline along the Gulf of Aden at the entrance of the Red Sea. The unclear status results in Somaliland's exclusion from regional initiatives, such as IGAD's new Red Sea task force (see below). This has spurred complaints from Somaliland, while raising considerations regarding the inclusivity of all relevant littoral entities to ensure the success of any emerging framework.⁷⁵

Criminal activity and environmental concerns

The Red Sea and wider arena also experience myriad forms of criminal activity, given the attractiveness of the route. This has taken the form of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing off the coast of Somalia; concerns regarding drug trafficking connections between South Asian, East African and European markets;⁷⁶ the illegal dumping of toxic waste in the area; arms smuggling networks between Yemen and Somalia;⁷⁷ and the

trafficking of humans and smuggling of migrants across its waters.⁷⁸ More recently, the threat of cyber maritime crime has also become a concern.

While these activities demonstrate the presence of non-pirate criminal networks in the Red Sea space, it is also clear that such networks benefit from open passage to move illicit goods, indicating a shared interest in avoiding disruptions to the waterway that would impede business. Nonetheless, the presence of criminal actors and their activities represents another challenge and potential threat in maintaining a secure and open Red Sea passageway, especially as some countries struggle to prevent such activity within their maritime zones.

In addition, some officials have expressed increased anxiety regarding environmental protection, which may become an issue due to conflict-related developments, such as the impact of sea mining on coral reefs, or the potential for an actor to release and burn oil in the narrow passageway. Much of this concern stems from the fact that current mitigation measures are limited to non-existent, meaning that the region would suffer tremendously in the event of a conflict-related maritime or environmental disaster.⁷⁹

A gap to be filled

The previous section briefly described some of the challenges associated with maintaining maritime security in the Red Sea, despite the lack of major disruptions in recent years. This section examines the extent to which there is a gap in the management of this shared space, beyond bilateral manoeuvres. This entails a review of the maritime efforts of relevant regional organisations, with a particular focus on Red Sea activities. A key characteristic that emerges is the membership of littoral Red Sea states of multiple and overlapping regional organisations, but none with a clear mandate to coordinate across the maritime space (see Figures 2–7).

Intergovernmental Authority on Development

IGAD is an important regional organisation concerned with Red Sea and Gulf of Aden governance, but its membership is limited to nations on the Horn of Africa side, including littoral Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia and Eritrea – although the latter’s participation in the wake of the rapprochement with Ethiopia has not been officially secured.⁸⁰ In addition, IGAD’s membership includes

non-littoral nations like Ethiopia, Uganda and South Sudan, which retain special maritime interests, an aspect IGAD integrates into its approach.⁸¹ Nonetheless, the limitations of organisational membership demand engagement with other Red Sea states in order to ensure a cooperative approach over the space.

IGAD has also maintained active involvement in various regional and African maritime security programmes, providing it with crucial experience and interest. Nonetheless, this has not translated into member state determination to implement its own maritime strategy. IGAD’s draft 2030 Integrated Safety and Security Maritime Strategy (influenced by AIMS 2050 – see next section), while validated by a group of experts convened to assess it in 2015, has nevertheless yet to be adopted by the organisation, and its funding mechanisms are unclear.

The strategy outlines regional maritime aspirations for the next 15 years and is based on eight overarching objectives, undertaking a comprehensive approach to the maritime domain beyond a focus just on piracy.⁸² However, the time that has elapsed since its drafting and validation process, and the changing geopolitical context of the Red Sea, means it would require substantial revisions to its implementation plan and provisions.⁸³

Littoral Red Sea states are members of multiple and overlapping regional organisations

Over the past two years, IGAD has rather pivoted towards focusing on implementing the EU Programme to Promote Regional Maritime Security (EU MASE) project.⁸⁴ EU MASE brings together IGAD, the East African Community, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean Commission with the aim to promote maritime safety and security in the Eastern and Southern Africa–Indian Ocean region. As part of this effort, MASE has established five result areas, with each assigned to a separate organisation. IGAD is responsible for Result 1: ensuring that alternative livelihoods through vocational development initiatives and advocacy against piracy are supported, and that maritime coordination mechanisms are reinforced in Somalia.

IGAD has also indicated that it is making the Red Sea a key organisational priority. During the 46th Ordinary Session of its Council of Ministers (CoM), IGAD discussed political dynamics in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden at length. IGAD's CoM recommended a common platform of its member states with regards to maritime security, while expanding the mandate of its special envoy to Somalia to also include new responsibilities related to the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea.⁸⁵

A preliminary meeting was held in Nairobi on 3–4 April 2019, in which a taskforce comprised of three experts from diverse institutions within each member state was established. It will work to create a regional plan of action and outreach strategy.⁸⁶ Key to this is undertaking efforts beyond just maritime security, and including economic interests as well as a special focus on non-littoral nations.⁸⁷ These outcomes will in turn influence IGAD's approach to the Red Sea space, an aspect it is closely coordinating with AU efforts.⁸⁸

The presence of outstanding internal disputes and other issues within the IGAD region may complicate a coherent response towards the Red Sea

IGAD is taking a more active interest in Red Sea dynamics, and the regional plan of action from its taskforce may serve as a useful mechanism for the development of a common agenda among its members. This is still a work in progress, however, and the regional organisation would need to cooperate either on an organisational or a bilateral level with non-member Red Sea nations, in order to ensure adequate coordination across the shared space.

Moreover, the presence of member states in the IGAD Red Sea taskforce, but also in other initiatives like the ongoing discussions around a Red Sea forum, raises questions regarding the positions of member states, especially if the initiatives undertake divergent and potentially clashing trajectories.⁸⁹

Concerns have also been expressed that while IGAD and the AU (see below) are making efforts, they are playing catch up compared to the wider region in terms of Red Sea maritime issues, placing an imperative on the rapid development of internal positions.⁹⁰ The presence of outstanding internal disputes within the IGAD region, such as the maritime boundary row between Somalia and Kenya, in addition to the questions over the future leadership and organisational structure of IGAD itself, are also issues that may complicate a coherent response towards the Red Sea.⁹¹

African Union

The AU suffers from a similar geographic limitation in that while its Red Sea membership is greater than that of IGAD, given that it includes Egypt as a member, its remit still stops at the western side of the Red Sea. More



IGAD'S RED SEA TASKFORCE WAS
ESTABLISHED IN APRIL 2019

Figure 1: Red Sea Forum Participants



Figure 2: IGAD

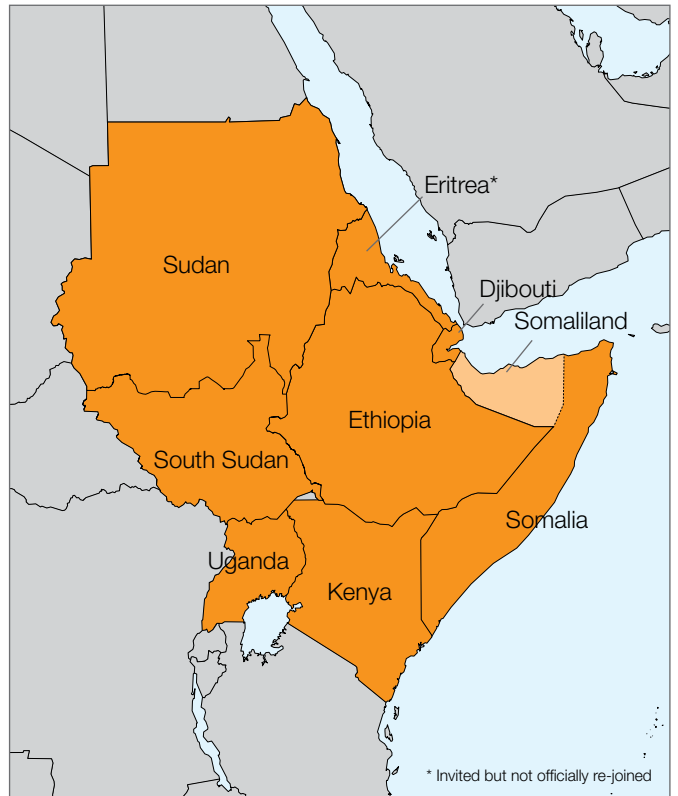


Figure 3: African Union



Figure 4: Gulf Cooperation Council



Data source: Regional organisations' websites

Figure 5: Djibouti Code of Conduct



Figure 6: Arab League



Data source: Regional organisations' websites

generally, the AU adopted a maritime strategy in 2014 (Africa's Integration Maritime Strategy – AIMS 2050), indicating the continental body's interest in and importance of this topic.

Approximately 90% of Africa's trade is conducted at sea and the maritime sector is seen as both relatively underdeveloped and the source of future jobs and wealth. It is therefore the sector upon which some have suggested Africa's future growth and security will depend. In line with this, the AU has acknowledged it as the 'new frontline of Africa's *renaissance*,' while noting 'the future of Africa . . . resides in her blue economy.'⁹²

Member states have split and overlapping focuses and few assets or resources to devote to maritime projects

AIMS combines a concern regarding challenges to maritime security with a focus on developing economic opportunities based on the maritime sector. Nonetheless, the AU Commission (AUC) has not only struggled to coordinate a diverse set of states and interests – there are 55 African states, 38 with coastlines and of which six are islands – but often has to contend with the fact that many states do not prioritise maritime security or governance.⁹³ In addition, the lack of a specific maritime office or department within the AUC dedicated to coordinating and leading on AIMS has been another challenge in sustaining momentum.⁹⁴

Member states have split and overlapping focuses and few assets or resources to devote to maritime projects. Implementation of the maritime strategy has fallen behind, leaving the AU little to facilitate in regards to closer maritime cooperation or coordination between member states against common threats.

It has also seldom featured on the agenda of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) as a dedicated topic, and maritime links to other issues often go undiscussed. The continued failure of AU member states and signatories to sign and/or ratify the Revised African Maritime Transport Charter, adopted in 2010 and with many provisions similar in shape and spirit to those of the Lomé Charter, should therefore be cause for concern for the continental body.⁹⁵

However, the AU has also recently taken on increased interest in the Red Sea maritime space, expanding the engagement of its High-Level Implementation Panel, led by former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, in November 2018 to include the Red Sea.⁹⁶ As part of that work, consultations with African member states were ongoing as of July 2019 to better understand local positions on a range of issues related to regional integration, including Red Sea dynamics.⁹⁷ This will assist in the development of more concrete and common regional positions, after which further engagement with the eastern side of the Red Sea is planned.⁹⁸



±90% OF AFRICA'S TRADE
IS DONE AT SEA

The principles of subsidiarity, in which the AU relies on regional economic organisations (RECs) such as IGAD to be the primary means of intervention in areas of peace and security given their greater familiarity with the context, in addition to complementarity and comparative advantage, underpin interactions between the AU and IGAD.⁹⁹ In this context, while IGAD is closer to the Red Sea space, the AU is more inclusive given Egyptian membership. These dynamics thus drive a closely coordinated effort between the two on Red Sea dynamics, in line with the working principles guiding AU–REC relationships.¹⁰⁰

Arab League

While the Arab League excludes non-Arabic-speaking Red Sea actors like Israel, it is the most wide-ranging regional organisation in terms of littoral Red Sea member state inclusion (Eritrea is not a member, but has observer status). Yet, the organisation has long been regarded as ineffective and undermined by internal divisions, driven in part by Article VII of its charter, which stipulates that decisions are binding on member states only if they vote for them.¹⁰¹ Its membership is also larger than the littoral Red Sea and the organisation has not yet demonstrated an acute interest generally in maritime security, making it a less likely vehicle to engage over Red Sea maritime dynamics.¹⁰²

Nonetheless, the Arab League has been involved in a number of discussions around the Red Sea to date and appears to be taking an increased interest in the space, but has yet to formulate an organisational policy.¹⁰³ It may emerge as a more active player in the future, however, if such trends continue.¹⁰⁴

United Nations and the Djibouti Code of Conduct

The United Nations (UN) and its sub-agency the IMO are the only intergovernmental organisations that include all coastal Red Sea nations and have active maritime components, albeit at a global level. Some have suggested that the UN, more so than regional or other organisations, may be able to generate cooperation more easily among nations that otherwise would not work together.¹⁰⁵

In addition, the March 2019 appointment of Parfait Onanga-Anyanga as special envoy for the Horn of Africa symbolises the UN interest in this area and provides an

opportunity for regional political engagement, although the mandate of his office does not specifically include the Red Sea itself.¹⁰⁶

At the height of pirate activity off the coast of Somalia, the IMO facilitated a meeting in Djibouti in 2009, resulting in the adoption of the Code of Conduct Concerning the Repression of Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden – the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC). By 2017, the DCoC covered 20 littoral states of the Western Indian Ocean.

Member states agreed to cooperate on fighting piracy and armed robbery at sea, including in the realm of law enforcement, prosecution and sea rescue. The DCoC also established the basis for national and regional training and capacity building to be conducted by external partners like NATO and the EU Naval Force (NAVFOR), among others. In addition, regional information-sharing centres (ISC) were created in Kenya, Tanzania and Yemen to facilitate the exchange of information between member states.¹⁰⁷

Although undermined by internal divisions, the Arab League seems to be taking an increased interest in the Red Sea

During the meeting in 2017 in Jeddah, 17 of the original 20 signatories agreed to broaden the scope of the DCoC to encompass all maritime crime, including human trafficking, trafficking of arms and drugs, smuggling, illegal waste dumping and illegal and IUU fishing, among others.¹⁰⁸ Under the Jeddah Amendment, member states also recognised the importance of developing a sustainable blue economy, and committed to creating national legislation for the protection of marine environments.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, the littoral Red Sea nations of Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea have not signed the Jeddah Amendment.

The DCoC and its 2017 Jeddah amendments, as conceived and implemented, are one of the pivotal initiatives for securing the waters of the Western Indian Ocean, including the Red Sea, against the threats and costs of maritime crimes. The DCoC has also been used as the basis for the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCoC), demonstrating its utility as a model for other regions.¹¹⁰ The

success of the DCoC and the Jeddah Amendment in terms of bringing together the diverse array of states from the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Western Indian Ocean region, and reaching an agreement on common regional maritime threats and goals, indicates the demand and interest for regional maritime institutions within the space.

Of the existing mechanisms, the DCoC is the tool with the greatest Red Sea maritime presence. Yet it also has a wider focus, meaning that narrow Red Sea issues may not be as appropriate for an initiative tasked with larger considerations. Rather, the DCoC is a tool that can reinforce other initiatives, instead of precluding their development. As a result of the DCoC, there already exist a number of outputs upon which any emerging Red Sea cooperation could draw.

Other organisations

There are other organisations that demonstrate the potential for diverse cooperation in the Red Sea, such as the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. But the limited nature of its mandate and the focus on non-security aspects preclude a greater relevance.

Resources and experience can be drawn from existing organisations to avoid 're-inventing the wheel'

Given that the Red Sea serves as a confluence of multiple regions, this section has noted that no single regional organisation as currently configured exists with a mandate or the capacity to oversee its management. Those that are present are geographically limited, have alternative focuses or suffer from other challenges, such as a lack of internal consensus when it comes to the Red Sea and/or maritime security. This absence of a regional bloc dedicated to the Red Sea contributes to emerging perceptions of a vacuum, despite the persistence of this situation for decades.

At the same time, however, resources and experience can be drawn from existing organisations to avoid 're-inventing the wheel,' including the various maritime strategies and programmes previously developed by regional organisations within the Red Sea space.¹¹¹ In addition, the question of whether existing organisations,

despite their current deficiencies, could be adjusted or incorporated to fill the gap in some sort of collaborative manner, compared to the need to establish new mechanisms, remains uncertain.¹¹² Regardless, given the number of actors involved, clear coordination between existing institutions and emerging ones will be necessary in order to properly address the management gap in the Red Sea maritime space.

Lessons from other contexts

Several other global maritime arrangements in complex environments provide lessons that may be applicable within the Red Sea space. The following section briefly reviews some relevant arrangements, primarily focusing on the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships (ReCAAP) in East Asia, the Sea Surveillance Co-operation Baltic Sea (SUCBAS) in the Baltic Sea, BLUEMASSMED in the Mediterranean, the DCoC in the Western Indian Ocean and the YCoC around the Gulf of Guinea (see box on page 19).

While these models differ in certain respects with regards to the Red Sea context, their inclusion is primarily due to their relevance in terms of establishing cooperative mechanisms across a diverse and potentially contentious maritime space, convergence around a common set of goals and/or emergence to address what was previously considered a gap in management.¹¹³

Less mistrust and more competition

Mistrust and competition can undermine the effectiveness of any cooperative maritime arrangement, resulting in unhelpful outcomes like duplicated efforts and/or the exclusion of certain actors. For example, in the DCoC, the inability to agree on the location of an ISC led to the development of three separate centres in Yemen, Kenya and Tanzania, rather than a single cohesive unit.¹¹⁴

The effectiveness of ReCAAP in East Asia has similarly suffered as a result of the non-participation of major nations like Malaysia and Indonesia, driven in part by competition and mistrust.¹¹⁵ The location of the new ISC in Singapore as per the agreement and national rivalries within the area may also have contributed to such concerns.¹¹⁶ Similarly, while Russia declined to participate in SUCBAS, the deterioration of its relations

Summary of review of maritime mechanisms

- **ReCAAP** – was established in 2006 and now has 20 members engaged in information sharing, capacity building and cooperative arrangements to combat armed robbery and piracy in East Asia, particularly around the geographically vulnerable but economically vital Straits of Malacca. The organisation has enjoyed success, but the refusal of Malaysia and Indonesia to join has hampered overall effectiveness.¹⁴⁵
- **SUCBAS** – emerged out of a narrower collaboration between Sweden and Finland, to a wider arrangement among Baltic Sea states in 2009. The organisation prioritises information sharing to enhance maritime situation awareness, and includes all littoral Baltic Sea nations aside from Norway and Russia, both of which were invited to join but declined.¹⁴⁶
- **BLUEMASSMED** – was an EU-funded pilot project in the Mediterranean between 2010 and 2012, bringing together six Mediterranean EU members. The goal was to facilitate a greater exchange of information, and to cooperate against illicit trafficking, illegal migration and environmental pollution.¹⁴⁷
- **DCoC** – an arrangement stemming from 2009 and involving 20 primarily Indian Ocean nations concerned about the threat of piracy. The 2017 Jeddah Amendment to the code expanded the focus to a wider array of maritime crimes.
- **YCoC** – modelled on the DCoC, the YCoC emerged in 2013 to address the growing threat of piracy, armed robbery and illicit maritime activity around the Gulf of Guinea, bringing together the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC). Given this set-up, a number of landlocked nations are party to the code.¹⁴⁸

with the West has resulted in concerns among the other Baltic Sea SUCBAS members regarding its maritime activities in the space, in turn contributing to increased mistrust.¹¹⁷

National sovereignty is a key consideration that mitigates against multilateral efforts, and is intimately tied to the presence of political will to address maritime issues in a collaborative manner. Indonesia based its objections to ReCAAP around a concern that it would undermine its sovereignty given a perception that the agreement was ‘internationalising’ its maritime space.¹¹⁸ This is in spite of the organisation’s institutional emphasis on respect for sovereignty, and a consensus-based decision-making model.¹¹⁹

Non-binding agreements and consensus-based decision-making models have been used to mitigate sovereignty considerations elsewhere, with varying results. Part of the DCoC’s success was specifically due to the non-legally binding nature of the code, as during the preparatory meetings in 2008 it emerged that not all were in support of a legally binding model.¹²⁰ While this could impact progress and

compliance with the DCoC’s decisions, the non-binding nature of the code also allows for sufficient flexibility to ensure the interest and participation of the member states, helping to maintain a minimum level of cooperation without threatening national sovereignty considerations.

Nonetheless, while the YCoC followed a similar non-binding approach, this led to issues regarding implementation and operationalisation, as it was initially designed in 2013 as a preliminary agreement that would take on greater substance after three years.¹²¹ There is thus a need to strike a balance between non-binding mechanisms and respect for national sovereignty and the practicalities of implementation, especially if political will around the latter is lacking or subject to fluctuation (see below). SUCBAS has attempted to innovatively address this dynamic by incorporating a three-tiered model of cooperation, allowing member states to participate as interested.¹²²

In short, measures like the varied cooperation levels and emphasis on consensual decision making can help address sovereignty concerns, but the ReCAAP example

demonstrates that despite such efforts, full cooperation within any diverse space is difficult to achieve. Flexible means of consideration for those who are sceptical may be necessary to ensure a minimum level of engagement.

Define clear areas of cooperation

Lessons from elsewhere also demonstrate the utility in determining clear areas of cooperation as a starting point for collaboration, in addition to common definitions and principles.

For example, SUCBAS is centred around a clearly defined shared interest between Baltic Sea states in maintaining Maritime Situational Awareness, through sharing information on ships, cargo, suspicious navigational behaviour and other maritime activities in their waters, as well as civil and military intelligence.¹²³

Information sharing is a pivotal aspect of most cooperative maritime arrangements

This regional response to emerging security challenges is driven by the geography of the region, which makes it difficult for any single state to respond to maritime issues in an effective and timely manner.¹²⁴ This clearly defined interest and need has been pivotal to the development of SUCBAS.¹²⁵

Information sharing in particular is a pivotal aspect of most cooperative maritime arrangements. The BLUEMASSMED project developed a common set of principles to encourage the exchange of information, revolving around the responsibility to share, the need to know and the interest to share.¹²⁶ This allowed the project to go beyond sharing information just about ship positions, but to include wider aspects related to the maritime domain. Despite the exclusion of some key actors, the success of the ReCAAP mechanism in South East Asia has also been attributed to its prioritisation of information sharing as a key area of cooperation among its diverse partnerships.¹²⁷

Nonetheless, as noted, differences of opinion are likely to emerge within any diverse grouping of actors. While many external nations viewed piracy as the key threat in the Western Indian Ocean in the late 2000s and

early 2010s, some coastal nations downplayed this compared to the dumping of toxic waste in their waters, which resonated more strongly given its impact at a local level. Furthermore, while DCoC member states agree on a broad scope of maritime issues, the precise definition and priorities of maritime security are still subject to member state interpretation.¹²⁸

Likewise, piracy provided a significant impetus to cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea, but some regional states were more concerned about the destruction of local fishing livelihoods.¹²⁹ These different perceptions influence different approaches, with littoral nations in the Gulf of Guinea arguing that the international response did little to address the root causes of piracy.¹³⁰ Similarly, Indonesia's view of piracy as a domestic issue that could be addressed through national measures is a factor behind its non-participation in ReCAAP.¹³¹ In sum, the acknowledgement and management of divergent approaches and opinions is important to maintaining cooperation around a clearly defined and common set of activities.

Start small and grow big

Some successful maritime arrangements started with a narrow focus, while maintaining the flexibility to expand both activities and actors after establishing initial trust and cooperation.

The Jeddah Amendment to the DCoC in 2017 significantly expanded the range of maritime considerations beyond a narrow focus on piracy and armed robbery. This was possible due to the success of the DCoC, which allowed for greater collaboration around an augmented set of issues after initial trust and cooperation had been established. The fact that all but three nations signed the Jeddah Amendment is an indication of this success. However, participation also declined as the mandate expanded – another balancing act to take into consideration.

SUCBAS's roots lie in an initial bilateral cooperation model between Finland and Sweden on sea surveillance and information sharing – the Sea Surveillance Cooperation Finland Sweden. That model increased in both scope and membership around the Baltic Sea, attracting wider interest as it demonstrated its utility amid methodological expansion.¹³²

Certain arrangements have sought to include further-flung actors with special interests in their space over time. For example, the United Kingdom, though it does not border the Baltic Sea, joined SUCBAS in 2015. ReCAAP also now includes partners as diverse as Denmark and the United States, given that fleets from those countries frequently operate in the area.¹³³ Recognition of the special interests of nations not directly adjacent to certain maritime zones allows for greater cooperation beyond narrow confines, while providing an outlet for those who otherwise may be concerned about the geographic limitations of such arrangements.

Sustain efforts amid declining interest

Regional collaboration tends to be highest when consolidated around a common threat. Arguably, Russia's aggressive posture towards its neighbours, as well as its increasing military presence in the Baltic Sea, has served as an impetus for continued collaboration between SUCBAS states.¹³⁴

ReCAAP's formation was also based around an anti-robbery and anti-piracy mandate in Asia, with a recognition that no one state could effectively tackle the issue alone.¹³⁵ It has maintained this narrow mandate over the past 13 years, despite calls to expand coverage to other maritime crimes.¹³⁶

Cooperation coalesces when the threat level is high, but in order to mitigate potential future threats, it needs to be sustained

The DCoC enjoyed a similar initial convergence around anti-piracy actions. The common concerns around illegal migration, among other issues, also drove the establishment of the BLUEMASSMED pilot project. Within these select maritime organisations, nations that may not otherwise have worked together anchored their cooperation around a common set of threats.

Yet there is also a need to maintain maritime security on the agenda, especially as immediate threats recede. Cooperation coalesces when the threat level is high, but in order to mitigate potential future threats, it needs to be sustained.¹³⁷ Arguably, while piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Western Indian Ocean may no longer be as much of a concern as it was a few years ago, the cooperation around it should be sustained and developed into further areas in order to continue to build a common understanding and ensure future maritime security, especially given the potential for this threat to resurface.¹³⁸ The Jeddah Amendment to the DCoC is reflective of this approach. But it is also indicative of the continual confidence and trust-building mechanisms between members, facilitated by the IMO and relevant partners, given that the wide scope and extent of the DCoC has meant that at times member states lacked common ground, especially beyond the issue of piracy.¹³⁹



THE DJIBOUTI CODE OF CONDUCT EXPANDED ITS MARITIME CONSIDERATIONS WITH THE 2017 JEDDAH AMENDMENT

Avoid organisational overlap

Coordination is also pivotal to avoid duplication and overlapping architectures. In the West African maritime space, a number of different organisations, such as the GGC, ECCAS and ECOWAS, in addition to others such as the UN Office for West Africa, have all had maritime security mandates and various geographical focuses. Such aspects confound policymaking and can even spur competition, making coordination a key imperative.¹⁴⁰ The YCoC in 2013 sought to coordinate among these while building off of existing institutional frameworks, rather than creating something new.

In the West African maritime space a number of organisations have all had maritime security mandates and geographical focuses

The YCoC resulted in the creation of an Interregional Coordination Center (CIC), based in Yaoundé, Cameroon. The CIC draws from regional coordination centres established by ECCAS and ECOWAS, which in turn receive information from centres in five different maritime zones.¹⁴¹ In this manner, the YCoC ensures cooperation among various regional partners by bringing them together in a common system, while creating a structure that incorporates existing institutions rather than setting up new ones. This allows it to tap into existing resources and relationships in the region, helping to reduce the overall burden.¹⁴²

As noted, the presence of duplicate measures can also lead to exclusion. Norway declined to participate in SUCBAS given concerns over its utility, while championing a similar initiative in the Barents Watch project.¹⁴³ Similarly, Malaysia refused to join ReCAAP in part because it viewed the creation of a new ISC in Singapore as duplication of the already existing International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre.¹⁴⁴ Coordinating with existing organisations amid clearly defined areas of cooperation may thus be necessary measures to help avoid perceptions of overlap.

Recommendations for cooperation around the Red Sea

The above survey of other regional maritime mechanisms can provide some lessons for the Red Sea space. Political will is clearly a key overarching factor, as nations will cooperate as long as they remain interested in doing so. Given that there is generally a shared interest in keeping the Red Sea maritime passageway open, this can be used as a starting point to enhance cooperation in line with that objective. A few other points should be kept in mind when considering mechanisms for cooperation around the Red Sea space.

1. The inclusion of all relevant nations ensures the greatest chance of success. Whether relevance is defined initially to littoral nations or not, consideration should be given to some form of flexible engagement with



COORDINATION IS KEY TO
AVOID DUPLICATION

others who retain special interests, especially non-littoral nations dependent on the Red Sea maritime space. Similarly, participation between members must be predicated on an equal basis, in order to avoid the domination of larger actors.

2. In line with the principle of inclusion, endeavours to resolve underlying political grievances and fault lines that manifest themselves within the Red Sea may ultimately help facilitate greater cooperation as well, while lessening existing security threats. Conversely, sustained cooperation around a less politicised objective such as maritime security could in turn spur greater political cooperation between adversaries. Generally, there is a need to overcome inherent tensions, rather than ignoring or embedding them within maritime mechanisms.
3. It may be useful to start small around a limited mandate, and expand over time as trust and cooperation grows and relevance is demonstrated. Outlining a common set of threats, and provisions for information sharing around them, can be a useful entry point to building confidence in the short term, and serve as a prelude for greater engagements in the long term.
4. Flexible and creative mechanisms should be considered that avoid infringements on national sovereignty while balancing organisational efficacy. The introduction of differing levels of commitment may be useful to consider, with members able to opt in to those which suit them. Such flexibility can also be considered in terms of the levels of engagement with actors involved in the Red Sea but based outside of it, or entities whose inclusion might otherwise be problematic.
5. It is also important to avoid unnecessary overlap or duplication of efforts. Cooperative mechanisms should take stock of existing arrangements and determine clear lines of collaboration. In addition, existing organisations that are increasingly taking on a Red Sea mandate, such as the AU and IGAD, should clearly determine the extent of their capacity and responsibilities, while fostering cooperation with others on a multilateral or bilateral basis, as need be. Generally, greater coordination between both member states and

intergovernmental organisations present on the western and eastern sides of the Red Sea will be pivotal in the pursuit of collaborative mechanisms.

6. Finally, there is a need to maintain interest as political and security developments change. For example, while interest around the Red Sea is high right now, a resolution of the conflict in Yemen and reduction in the threat from the Houthi militia could change this. Sustained engagement beyond a narrow frame is pivotal to ensuring the long-term success of any Red Sea management framework.

Conclusion

The Red Sea is a politically complex and geographically vulnerable maritime zone that suffers from a range of security threats. Nonetheless, maritime traffic has rarely been disrupted at a significant level, demonstrating the interest of actors in maintaining such a situation. At the same time, however, the Red Sea suffers from a gap in management amid new and emerging threats, making the development of fresh initiatives around collaborative Red Sea efforts a relevant process to overcome the perceived deficit.

The most prominent issue to be addressed is perhaps state-to-state competition in the Red Sea

Yet for any new organisations or efforts to be both collaborative and effective, a number of key issues will have to be addressed, the most prominent of which is perhaps state-to-state competition in the space. In addition, such efforts should secure buy-in from both littoral Red Sea nations and others with a clear interest in the passageway, coordinate with existing organisations to avoid duplication and unnecessary competition, and present clear mandates upon which future endeavours can be built.

While the identification of a management gap in the Red Sea and the emerging proposals to address it are important, ensuring the developments proceed in a manner that ultimately eases existing security concerns rather than unnecessarily complicates them,

is crucial for current efforts. It is thus time to reconsider dynamics within the Red Sea in line with the aim of building confidence among actors in order to advance common economic and security interests, as well as to ensure the future development of the shared maritime space.

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Notes

- 1 Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been at the forefront of previous, albeit restrictive, discussions around shared security in the Red Sea zone, such as references to the area as an 'Arab Lake' during the Cold War Era. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Emma C Murphy, *The international politics of the Red Sea*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, 11; Roberto Aliboni, *The Red Sea region: Local actors and the superpowers*, London and New York: Routledge, 1985, 4. One account from the early 1990s (prior to Eritrean independence) noted that Arab League members comprise 81% of the total Red Sea coastline, and control approximately 67% of all islands in the space, which gave rise to considerations of the Red Sea as an 'Arab Lake.' The same article suggested that a driving objective of the 'Arab Lake' designation was a strategy to ensure Arab solidarity in order to counter Israeli navigation in the Red Sea, which in turn also drove support from Arab nations for Eritrea's independence from more Christian Ethiopia, under the assumption that an independent Eritrea would act in solidarity with Arab powers. Daniel Kendie, An aspect of geopolitics of the Red Sea, *Northeast African Studies*, 12:2/3, 1990, 121–122.
- 2 One major concern, however, revolved around a series of mines laid in the Red Sea and Gulf of Suez in 1984 that damaged commercial ships and was blamed on Libya. Judith Miller, Egypt says Libyan role in blasts in Red Sea is 'almost confirmed,' *New York Times*, 22 August 1984, www.nytimes.com/1984/08/22/world/egypt-says-libyan-role-in-blasts-in-red-sea-is-almost-confirmed.html; CIA, The roots of Libyan foreign policy: Qadhafi and his advisors, 5 March 1985, www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87M00539R001702670013-2.pdf. In addition, in the context of the Arab–Israel wars, the Suez Canal was closed between 1967 and 1975. Similarly, the Israeli port of Eilat was also subject to an Egyptian blockade across the Straits of Tiran in 1956 and 1967.
- 3 The heavy presence of global security actors in and around the Red Sea may also deter maritime disruption. Alex de Waal, Beyond the Red Sea: A new driving force in the politics of the Horn, *African Arguments*, 11 July 2018, <https://africanarguments.org/2018/07/11/beyond-red-sea-new-driving-force-politics-horn-africa/>. The lack of previous interruptions to shipping may have also resulted in a previous apathy regarding the development of cooperative security architecture around the Red Sea space. Alex de Waal, Pax Africana of Middle East Security Alliance in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea, *World Peace Foundation*, January 2019.
- 4 Saudi Arabia's increased recent interest may also be tied to its Saudi Vision 2030 programme, which aims to develop non-oil sectors of its economy. This includes development projects along its Red Sea coast, such as a US\$500 billion investment towards the creation of a new city (Neom) by the Egyptian and Jordanian borders, and an interest in developing tourist attractions in the area. See www.travelweekly.com/Middle-East-Africa-Travel/Saudi-Arabia-opens-up-as-Red-Sea-Project-gets-off-the-ground. Saudi Arabia also maintains a 1 200 km east–west pipeline running across the country from its main oil fields in the east to the Red Sea coast, as an alternative export outlet in case the passageway through the Strait of Hormuz is closed. Anthony Dipalo, Trump's war of words with Iran shines spotlight on vital oil route, *Bloomberg*, 23 July 2018, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-23/trump-war-of-words-with-iran-shines-spotlight-on-vital-oil-route. Various other calls for the development of a regional Red Sea forum have emerged in recent years. The European Union (EU) argued for the creation of such an arrangement during a council meeting in June 2018, while regional analysts such as Alex de Waal have warned about the rising tensions in the region and similarly advocate for the convening of some sort of forum between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the African Union (AU) as early as 2016. See <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/17/africas-700-billion-problem-waiting-to-happen-ethiopia-horn-of-africa/>. Another attempt by Germany and the EU to organise a meeting on the Red Sea at the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2018 floundered. Interview with regional official, June 2019.
- 5 Contestation over leadership of the initiative between Egypt and Saudi Arabia has also characterised the process, in addition to a debate over whether the mechanism should be restricted to the Red Sea or also incorporate the Gulf of Aden. Another issue has been suspicions that Saudi Arabia's agenda behind the forum is primarily to drive out Iran from the space, compared to the security concerns of others. One interviewee described Egypt as the brains behind the initiative, with Saudi Arabia providing the funds. Interviews with regional officials, May–July 2019.
- 6 Eritrean presidential adviser, Yemane Ghebreab, attended the April 2019 meeting in Riyadh, but called for a 'patient and methodological approach' to the formation of any new institution in addition to concerns over duplication, demonstrating a degree of continued reluctance over the proposal. Shabait, Eritrea's Statement at the Meeting of High-Level Officials of Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, 22 April 2019, www.shabait.com/categoryblog/28378-eritreas-statement-at-the-meeting-of-high-level-officials-of-red-sea-and-gulf-of-aden. Speculation over Eritrea's initial non-participation has also been linked to the exclusion of Ethiopia – a mark of solidarity amid rapprochement with its larger neighbour – while others have chalked it up to a resistance from the country to engage in multilateral forums. Discussions with regional officials and researchers, May–July 2019.
- 7 As part of the reforms under way in Ethiopia, there has been a renewed push to develop an Ethiopian naval force. The location of any new force has not yet been officially determined, but Djiboutian leader Ismail Omer Guelleh claimed in April 2019 that it would be based in Massawa, Eritrea. Regardless of the location, such a development would increase Ethiopia's relevance within the Red Sea, while signifying the nation's desire to develop its maritime capabilities amid an increasingly crowded space. See <https://hornglobe.com/ethiopian-navy-will-be-based-in-eritrea/>.
- 8 Interview with regional official, May 2019.
- 9 Interview with regional diplomats, June 2019; seminar on Red Sea maritime space, Addis Ababa, July 2019.
- 10 Somalia was an observer, rather than direct participant, in the joint naval drills. Arab parliament commends Saudi led naval drill, *Halbeeg News*, 1 January 2019, <https://en.halbeeg.com/2019/01/01/arab-parliament-commends-saudi-led-naval-drill/>. Other unilateral, bilateral and/or joint naval exercises with various non-Red Sea partners have occurred in the past. UAE warship docks Port Sudan for joint military exercise, *Sudan Tribune*, 7 December 2017, www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article64187; Egyptian Armed Forces, Egyptian naval forces carry out drills in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea with the Italian and Greek naval forces and the South Korean Navy, 20 August 2018, www.mod.gov.eg/ModWebSite/NewsDetails.aspx?id=33514; Sudanese army conducts largest-ever military drills on Red Sea, *Sudan Tribune*, 17 December 2018, www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article66780; Sudan, Saudi Arabia conclude joint naval exercise, *Sudan Tribune*, 2 March 2019, www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article67150.
- 11 Saudi naval forces prepare for Red Wave 1, *Arab News*, 27 December 2018, www.arabnews.com/node/1426781/saudi-arabia.
- 12 Discussion with regional official, July 2019.
- 13 Suez Canal Authority, Importance of the Suez Canal, www.suezcanal.gov.eg/English/About/Pages/WhySuezCanal.aspx; US Energy Information Administration, World Oil Transit Chokepoints, 25 July 2017, www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/special_topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints/wotc.pdf.
- 14 US Energy Information Administration, World Oil Transit Chokepoints, 25 July 2017, www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/special_topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints/wotc.pdf.
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- 17 BBC, Egypt launches Suez Canal expansion, 6 August 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33800076.
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 - 19 One interviewee expressed concern regarding whether Saudi Arabia truly views the Red Sea as a shared space, or more an area where it can impose its will due to financial dominance. Interview with regional official, June 2019.
 - 20 The United States and China maintain military facilities in Djibouti, while Russia has been rumoured at various times to be interested in establishing some sort of a presence in Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan.
 - 21 States in the Horn of Africa have certainly demonstrated a degree of agency with regards to Gulf relations – the ability of Omar al-Bashir to play off both sides in the GCC dispute is a clear example of this. At the same time, however, the economic and power relations heavily favour the Gulf side, narrowing overall manoeuvrability. For more on the bidirectional but imbalanced nature of this relationship, see Alex de Waal, *Pax Africana of Middle East Security Alliance in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea*, World Peace Foundation, January 2019.
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 - 23 While the contours of an agreement between civilian protest leaders and the military council that seized power from Bashir had been reached at the time of writing, discussions regarding the details were ongoing.
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 - 25 Conference on Ethiopian political reforms, Addis Ababa, April 2019.
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 - 27 While the timeline for the conclusion of the GERD construction is unclear, Ethiopia has suggested a quicker period to fill the dam in three years, while Egypt has pushed for a more gradual 15-year allotment. International Crisis Group, *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, 20 March 2019, ii.
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 - 29 Saudi Arabia is a monarchy governed by a Sunni Muslim family; Iran, since its 1979 revolution, is an Islamic theocracy governed by the Shia faith. The clash over hegemonic domination of the region, underpinned by the religious divide, has led the two countries to become adversaries for the last 40 years. Saudi Arabia is also sensitive to Iranian influence beyond its borders given its own Shia minority in its northeast region, in addition to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons.
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 - 33 Aya Batrawy, Saudis blame Iran for drone attack amid calls for US strikes, *The Washington Post*, 16 May 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudis-blame-iran-for-drone-attack-amid-calls-for-us-strikes/2019/05/16/7dfd0254-7843-11e9-a7bf-c8a43b84ee31_story.html.
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 - 37 Samy Magdy, As Sudan uprising grew, Arab states worked to shape its fate, *Star Tribune*, 8 May 2019, www.startribune.com/as-sudan-uprising-grew-arab-states-worked-to-shape-its-fate/509626892/?refresh=true.
 - 38 Interviews with multiple researchers, June 2019.
 - 39 Nonetheless, the level of development regarding the port was unclear at the time of writing, while some discounted the idea of a Turkish–Qatari military base in the area as a result of efforts by rivals to tarnish the project. Rather, thus far the biggest signs of activity have been the restoration of old Ottoman buildings. Interview with researcher who recently visited Suakin, Khartoum, March 2019; Sudan, Qatar to sign \$4 billion deal to develop Suakin seaport, *Sudan Tribune*, 2 March 2016, www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article65026. In addition, it is unclear what path new leadership in Sudan will take in reference to the Suakin development.
 - 40 Zach Vertin, Red Sea rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa & the new geopolitics of the Red Sea, Brookings, January 2019, www.brookings.edu/interactives/red-sea-rivalries/.
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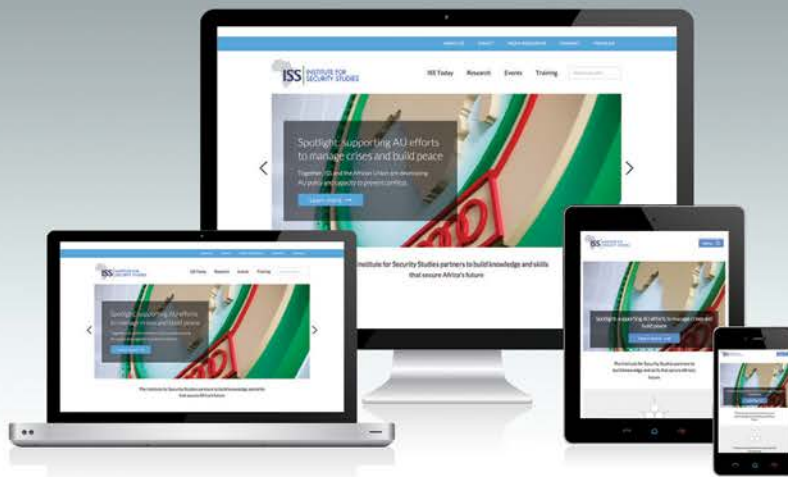
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