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The Red Sea: Britain's uncertain link

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Contents

Foreword	1
Executive summary	2
1.0 Introduction	5
2.0 The strategic significance of the Red Sea	7
3.0 Contemporary British geopolitical interests	11
4.0 Strategic challenges	14
4.1 Piracy	14
4.2 State-sponsored terrorism	16
4.3 Regional powers	17
4.4 External actors	18
5.0 British policy options	20
6.0 Conclusion	23
About the author	24
Acknowledgments	25
About the Council on Geostrategy	26



Foreword

The Red Sea is once again in the news. Iran-backed Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, particularly around the Bab-el-Mandeb, one of the world's most important strategic chokepoints, have reached new heights. The Houthis have also attempted to strike British and American warships sent to the waterway to protect commercial shipping. With many container vessels diverting around the Cape of Good Hope to avoid the Houthi danger, transit times have grown substantially – and, consequently, the cost of energy and manufactures has started to go up.

The Red Sea has been in the news before. Around 15 years ago, piracy in the Gulf of Aden exploded, forcing the dispatch of a coalition of British, European and American warships to repress it.

Today, the Red Sea, which still carries Britain's principal maritime communication line to the energy reserves of the Gulf and the factories of East and Southeast Asia, deserves greater attention, not least if His Majesty's (HM) Government intends to make the Indo-Pacific region a 'permanent pillar' of British foreign policy and draw the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions together.

To contribute to the debate, we are delighted to publish this Policy Paper by Dr James Fargher FRGS AKC, William Hewett Associate Fellow in Red Sea Geopolitics at the Council on Geostrategy. It explains the historical importance of the Red Sea to the United Kingdom, as well as the waterway's contemporary significance. Identifying four different policy responses to overcome growing insecurity in the waterway, the Policy Paper argues that a more permanent British naval presence is needed in the region.

James Rogers

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Executive summary

- Vital to His Majesty's (HM) Government's vision of 'Atlantic-Pacific partnerships' which link the United Kingdom's (UK) strategic ties in the Euro-Atlantic with the Indo-Pacific will be the continued and unfettered access to the maritime communication lines which link the regions together.¹ The Red Sea is one of those waterways, and is arguably the most important to British interests.
- The Red Sea has been an important trade route between Europe and Asia since ancient times, and continues to form a vital link in the global commons; as of 2023, approximately 12% of all world shipping passes through the Red Sea, including 30% of global container traffic.²
- Free passage through the Red Sea will remain important for the Royal Navy as Britain seeks to 'tilt' further towards the Indo-Pacific. For example, the UK's obligations to protect British Indian Ocean Territory, including the large UK-US naval and air facilities on Diego Garcia, calls for the ability to deploy naval and air assets from bases in Europe through the Suez link.
- While free access through the Red Sea is expected to be an important assumption underlying Britain's focus on the Indo-Pacific, the challenges to the maintenance of free navigation should not be discounted. These include piracy, state-sponsored terrorism, regional powers, and other external actors.
- With Britain's departure from the European Union's (EU) anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, Operation Atalanta, and with many other powers now looking to establish naval facilities

¹ 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office (United Kingdom), 16/05/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

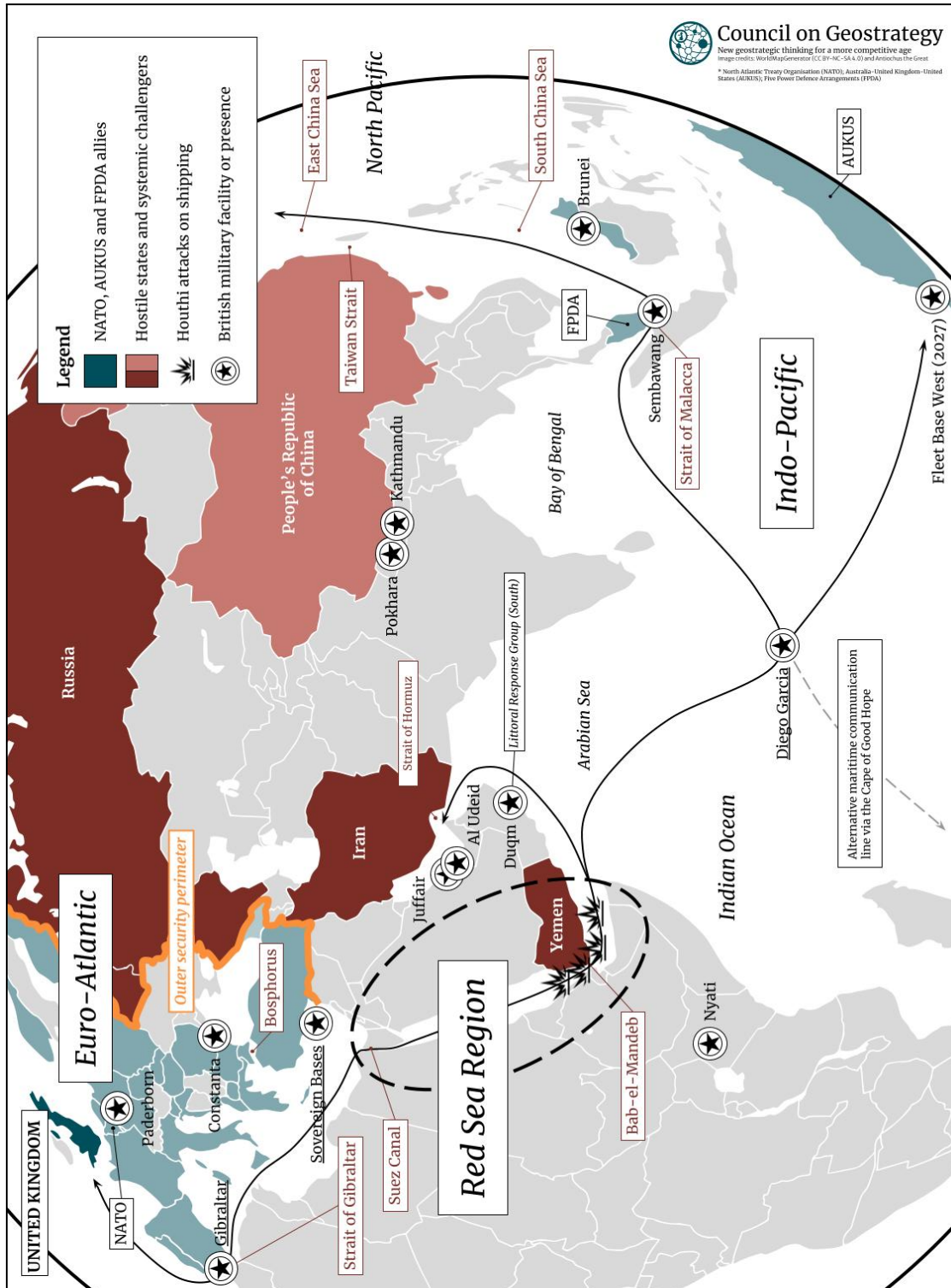
² Jonathan Yerushalmy, 'Red Sea crisis explained: what is happening and what does it mean for global trade?', *The Guardian*, 19/12/2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



in the region, HM Government should consider additional measures to protect the UK's vital interests. The UK's posture towards the waterway could take four different forms:

- No change. The UK would continue to maintain a similar level of engagement.
 - Increase the number of transits through the Red Sea by Royal Navy surface and sub-surface combatants and the Carrier Strike Group.
 - Mount regular security patrols and freedom of navigation exercises in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, while replenishing at allied bases in Djibouti.
 - Enhance the Royal Navy's standing deployment at Duqm.
- Of these, the UK should embrace the establishment of a more permanent presence, using the facility at Duqm as a forward operating base to uphold freedom of navigation in the Red Sea.

Map 1: The Red Sea: The Atlantic-Pacific link





1.0 Introduction

In the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh (IRR), His Majesty's (HM) Government outlined its vision of a growing network of so-called 'Atlantic-Pacific partnerships', linking the United Kingdom's (UK) strategic ties in the Euro-Atlantic with those in the Indo-Pacific.³ Vital to the ambition to integrate efforts across both strategic arenas will be continued and unfettered British access to the maritime communication lines link the two regions together (see Map 1). Per the IRR, Britain will 'balance and shape' in the maritime domain, access and presence within which remains essential to ensure continued global connectivity. Specifically, as part of this effort, the IRR indicates that the Royal Navy will deploy more of its assets to protect the world's maritime communication lines and strategic chokepoints.

One of the most vulnerable links in this geopolitical web is the Red Sea, as demonstrated most recently in December 2023 with a spate of missile attacks directed against commercial shipping, as well as the naval vessels sent to protect it, off the Yemeni coast.⁴ These attacks, and the subsequent suspension of at least one major UK commercial line of operations in the Red Sea, underline how important the waterway connecting the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean continues to be to British national interests.⁵ Indeed, as post-Brexit UK prepares to tilt further towards the Indo-Pacific by entering the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (its accession awaits ratification in existing members) and further developing its regional partnerships, such as through the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and AUKUS, the Red Sea's importance will only grow.

In addition to attacks on international shipping, however, there remain other considerable geopolitical risks to the UK's long-term

³ 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office (United Kingdom), 16/05/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁴ 'HMS Diamond joins US-led operation to protect shipping in Red Sea from attack by militants', *Forces Net*, 19/12/2023, <https://www.forces.net/> (checked: 07/02/2024) and Lora Jones, 'BP pauses all Red Sea shipments after rebel attacks', *BBC News*, 18/12/2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁵ Lora Jones, 'BP pauses all Red Sea shipments after rebel attacks', *BBC News*, 18/12/2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024) and 'Boris Johnson Pledges Security, Defence And Foreign Policy Review', *Forces Network*, 01/12/2019, <https://www.forces.net/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



strategic interest in unhindered access to the waterway – not least of which include the intentions of adversarial regional and global powers. With Britain's departure from the European Union's (EU) anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, Operation Atalanta, and with many now looking to establish naval facilities in the region, HM Government should consider additional measures to protect the UK's vital interests. For example, while the establishment of a regional expeditionary capability with the Littoral Response Group (South) at the new UK Joint Logistics Support base in Duqm, Oman is welcome, enhancing Britain's regional blue-water capability by including a frigate or destroyer would help to restore to a degree the effectiveness of Britain's naval presence in the region lost since leaving Aden in 1967.

The following Policy Paper will make this case by first providing an overview of the Red Sea's importance to global patterns of trade and communication, with particular reference to the waterway's relevance to British interests. It will then explore the main challenges to: British objectives in the Red Sea; piracy, which remains a latent threat despite international efforts; the persistent presence of hostile, state-backed terrorist groups along key stretches of coastline; and the expansion of naval bases in the region by outside powers. This Policy Paper will then suggest several policy options with specific reference to the new naval facility in Duqm.



2.0 The strategic significance of the Red Sea

The Red Sea forms an elongated arm of the Indian Ocean, marking the tectonic fault line between the African and Arabian plates. The territories surrounding the waterway are largely arid and thinly-populated, and the sea itself was notorious in previous centuries for its sharp reefs, contrary wind patterns, and profusion of rocks and treacherous archipelagos.

Despite these obstacles, the Red Sea has been an important trade route between Europe and Asia since ancient times, with attempts to cut a trans-isthmus canal dating back to at least 600 BC.⁶ The canal, and by extension the Red Sea, continues to form a vital link in the global commons connecting some of the world's largest markets. As of 2023, approximately 12% of all world shipping passes through the Red Sea, including 30% of global container traffic.⁷ Over 17,000 vessels per year transit the canal and 22,000 through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait at the Red Sea's southern mouth, which in addition to cargo, also carry a considerable portion of the world's energy supplies.⁸ In 2023, for example, approximately 8.8 million barrels of oil and petroleum products per day passed through the Bab-el-Mandeb – around 12% of total seaborne-traded oil.⁹ While shipping between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific can be rerouted around the Cape of Good Hope, the interdiction of free passage through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden carries a significant cost – the Houthi attacks in December 2023 and January 2024 are estimated to have increased the cost of container

⁶ Carol A. Redmount, 'The Wadi Tumilat and the "Canal of the Pharaohs"', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 54:2 (1995).

⁷ Jonathan Yerushalmy, 'Red Sea crisis explained: what is happening and what does it mean for global trade?', *The Guardian*, 19/12/2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁸ Nathanael Melia, Keith Haines and Ed Hawkins, 'Future of the Sea: Implications from Opening Arctic Sea Routes', Government Office for Science (United Kingdom), 03/08/2017, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁹ Candace Dunn and Justine Barden, 'Red Sea chokepoints are critical for international oil and natural gas flows', US Energy Information Administration, 04/12/2023, <https://www.eia.gov> (checked: 07/02/2024).



shipping by as much as 15% during the first week of January 2024, and 80% for some tankers.¹⁰

Britain's involvement in the Red Sea far predates the opening of the Suez Canal, and dates back to at least 1606 when the first English ship was recorded as entering the Red Sea, bound for the port of Mocha. By the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars, the sea route linking India and Suez had assumed strategic importance for British interests in the Indian Ocean, offering a faster means of communication between London and British territories in India. The landing of French troops in Egypt in 1798 was viewed as a grave threat to the security of Britain's dominant position in India, not only as it severed the overland communications route but because it also appeared to raise the possibility of a French seaborne army descending south from Suez to land on the Indian subcontinent.¹¹

In response, in 1799 HM Government attempted to occupy the small island of Perim in the middle of the Bab-el-Mandeb to block the passage of a hypothetical French fleet out of the southern entrance of the Red Sea.¹² This move proved to be the start of a pattern which would be repeated throughout the course of the 19th century, as successive British governments annexed territory in the region to maintain the Royal Navy's supremacy over the sea lane between Suez and the Indian Ocean.¹³ For the same reason, as attempts by rival powers to establish naval footholds in the sea intensified following the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, the UK gradually acquired control over increasingly large tracts of territory surrounding the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. By 1914, Britain had cemented its position as the dominant power in the waterway, controlling the majority of the region's ports as well as the entrances to both the Red Sea and the Gulf. The ability to reliably shuttle warships and troops from the eastern territories of the British Empire into the Eastern Mediterranean, and to communicate via

¹⁰ See: Michael Race, 'What do Red Sea assaults mean for global trade?', *BBC News*, 12/01/2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024) and Florence Tan, Mohi Narayan and Ron Bousso, 'Energy traders, shippers grapple with Red Sea fallout', *Reuters*, 31/01/2024, <https://www.reuters.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

¹¹ Alexander Dalrymple, 'Memoir concerning Egypt and the Red Sea (IOR/G/17/7)', Correspondence and Papers about Egypt and the Red Sea (1787-1806), British Library, No date, <https://www.eastindiacompany.amdigital.co.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

¹² For more on this, see: Edward Ingram, 'A Preview of the Great Game in India: I: The British Occupation of Perim and Aden in 1799', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 9:1 (1973).

¹³ Agatha Ramm, 'Great Britain and the Planting of Italian Power in the Red Sea, 1868-1885', *The English Historical Review*, 59:234 (1944).



undersea cable would prove to be major strategic assets during the world wars, improving the UK's ability to concentrate imperial forces from distant colonies and dominions on campaigns in mainland Europe.

Beginning in the 1950s, however, Britain began relinquishing its imperial hold over the Red Sea region as it focused its strategic effort on Europe to contain the Soviet Union, beginning with granting independence to Sudan in 1956 followed by Somaliland in 1960 and South Yemen in 1967. Combined with the decision of Harold Wilson, British Prime Minister (1964–1970, 1974–1976), to withdraw armed forces from outposts 'east of Suez', the permanent British presence in the Red Sea ended with the cessation of South Yemen, including Aden – the 'Gibraltar of the East' – leaving France and the Soviet Union as the only European powers with naval facilities in the region.¹⁴

Nevertheless, despite Britain's military scale back in the region, free passage through the Suez route into the Indian Ocean remained important for the UK's global interests. In the same year of Yemeni independence, for example, Gamal Nasser, President of Egypt (1954–1970), closed the Suez Canal at the outbreak of war with Israel, forcing international trade around the lengthier Cape route until the canal reopened in 1975.¹⁵ Moreover, by the 1970s the Soviet Union had attempted to project its own influence over the Bab-el-Mandeb by establishing naval and air bases on: the island of Socotra; in Berbera, the former capital of British Somaliland; the Royal Navy's traditional base at Aden; and later in the Dahlak archipelago – then under Ethiopian administration.¹⁶ During the Iran–Iraq War, the Royal Navy and its partners were dispatched to clear ordnance from the waterway after a cargo vessel from Libya, covertly supporting Tehran, laid smart mines in the Red Sea which damaged several civilian ships and took weeks to fully clear.¹⁷

¹⁴ John W. Finney, 'US Says Soviet Stores Missiles at Base in Somalia', *The New York Times*, 11/06/1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

¹⁵ James Feyrer, 'Distance, Trade, and Income – The 1967 to 1975 Closing of the Suez Canal as a Natural Experiment', working paper no. 15557, *National Bureau of Economic Research* (2009), p. 19.

¹⁶ Fred Halliday, 'The USSR and the Red Sea: Moscow's "Panama canal"', Abdel Majid Farid (ed.), *The Red Sea: The Prospects for Stability* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984), pp. 123–136.

¹⁷ Joseph Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon: Reagan's Undeclared War with Qaddafi*, (Naval Institute Press, 2003). For the Royal Navy's involvement, see: Caitlin Talmadge, 'Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz', *International Security* 33:1 (2008), p. 94.



During the early 1990s, the UK sought to terminate its final formal commitments in the Red Sea by ceding the last of its formal treaty rights in the waterway.¹⁸ By 1995, Britain had effectively turned over responsibility for upholding international security in the Bab-el-Mandeb to the United States (US) and France, the latter maintaining its colonial-era garrison in Djibouti at the southern mouth of the Red Sea.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, 'Red Sea Security and the Geopolitical Economy of the Hanish Islands Dispute', *Middle East Journal*, 52:3 (1998).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.



3.0 Contemporary British geopolitical interests

Along with deeper participation in NATO, Britain's integration into the European Economic Community in 1973 encouraged policymakers and the general public to overlook the traditional maritime links outside Europe which undergirded the UK's military and economic reach in previous centuries. However, as Britain attempts to re-integrate its Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific strategy and appraise its global military posture, particularly in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, upholding freedom of navigation and trade will be vital to meeting the UK's long-term strategic and economic interests. Even as Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine commands much official attention in London, the UK retains global interests and responsibilities – including security commitments – outside of Europe which cannot be overlooked.

As a case in point, the Suez link between the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean remains Britain's most important maritime communications line, connecting the British Isles to some of the largest global economic hubs. An estimated 25–30% of global shipping container volumes passed through the Suez Canal in 2023, mostly bound between Asia and Europe.²⁰ In 2022, deep-sea UK container traffic increased by 4% to 1.2 million tons, with the greatest absolute increases in traffic transiting between the People's Republic of China (PRC), India, Oman, and the UK via the Suez route.²¹ Looking ahead, the growth of the East and Southeast Asian market will only increase the UK's need to strengthen maritime trading links with this region, the majority of which will take the Suez route. As Admiral Sir Philip Jones, First Sea Lord (2016–2020), noted in 2017, 'The Asia-Pacific region contains two of the three largest economies in the world, and five of the largest 16. If the UK does wish to forge new global trading partnerships, this is somewhere we need to be.'²²

²⁰ 'Higher Shipping Freight Rates to Offset Costs of Re-Routing from Suez', FitchRatings, 21/12/2023, <https://www.fitchratings.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

²¹ 'Port freight annual statistics 2022: Route information', Department for Transport (UK), 19/07/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

²² Philip Jones, Speech: 'Admiral Sir Philip Jones speech at DSEI Maritime Conference', 11/09/2017, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



From a naval perspective, free passage through the Red Sea will remain important for the Royal Navy as it seeks to tilt further towards the Indo-Pacific theatre. Despite the withdrawal from 'east of Suez' in 1971, the UK maintained permanent military posts in Nepal, at the Sembawang naval logistics facility in Singapore, and in Brunei. Furthermore, the UK has also retained strategic ties with partners in the Indo-Pacific region, most notably with Malaysia and Singapore, as well as Australia and New Zealand, through the FPDA. AUKUS and the planned rotational deployments of Royal Navy nuclear submarines to HMAS Stirling, Western Australia, starting in 2027 as well as the UK's growing strategic partnership and reciprocal access with Japan will only further accelerate this trend.²³ The UK's obligations to protect British Indian Ocean Territory, including the large UK-US naval and air facilities on Diego Garcia, also call for the ability to deploy naval and air assets from bases in Europe through the Suez link.

Indeed, recent policy announcements issued by HM Government suggest that the Red Sea will become even more important to British interests in the coming decades. In 2014, Philip Hammond, British Foreign Secretary (2014–2016), announced that the government would reactivate the Juffair naval base in Bahrain as a gesture of the UK's resolve to maintain a 'sustained presence east of Suez'.²⁴ The new base, which opened in 2018, will 'support a permanent presence in the central Gulf', including both rotating visits from large surface vessels including the Type 45 destroyers and new Type 26 frigates (once built) as well as a permanent squadron of minehunters.²⁵ Outside the Gulf, in 2018, the UK Joint Logistics Support Base opened at Duqm, capable of accommodating both submarines and the new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers.²⁶ Although located 1,700 km from the Red Sea itself, these facilities nevertheless provide the UK with 'a strategically important and permanent base east of Suez', and improve the UK's

²³ 'Submarine Rotational Force – West', Australian Submarine Agency, 01/06/2023, <https://www.asa.gov.au/> (checked 07/02/2024).

²⁴ 'UK to establish £15m permanent Mid East military base', *BBC News*, 06/12/2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

²⁵ 'Navy's new Gulf home almost ready for first sailors', *Royal Navy*, 22/12/2017, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

²⁶ 'UK flagship HMS Albion arrives in Oman to lead biggest exercise in 15 years', *Royal Navy*, 04/11/2018, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



regional maritime access to a degree of that prior to the withdrawal from Aden in 1967.²⁷

Re-supplying, communicating, and supporting these new bases and maintaining a naval presence in the Indo-Pacific proportional with HM Government's ambitions will increase the importance of the Atlantic-Pacific link further. Free navigation through the Red Sea will be vital for connecting future bases with the UK, roughly halving the distance between Portsmouth and Plymouth and Southeast Asia compared with the longer route around the Cape of Good Hope. It is also worth noting that the Suez route links existing British military posts at Gibraltar and Cyprus, providing a unified and more coherent line of supply and communication between the UK and Southeast Asia.

²⁷ Nigel Walker, Timothy Robinson, Louisa Brooke-Holland and Claire Mills, 'Carrier strike strategy and its contribution to UK defence', *House of Commons Library*, 25/02/2019, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



4.0 Strategic challenges

While free access through the Red Sea is expected to be an important assumption underlying Britain's focus on the Indo-Pacific, the challenges to the maintenance of free navigation should not be discounted. The Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden at its southern mouth, are located in a politically volatile region which is significantly affected by state failure in Somalia. Although the risk posed to shipping in the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) by pirates originating from ungoverned sections of the Somali coastline has been mitigated somewhat by the presence of international naval forces, the risk of piracy has not been eliminated completely and further instances of successful and attempted attacks on civilian shipping are likely for the foreseeable future. Houthi militants in Yemen also continue to demonstrate the intent and capability to attack both naval and civilian ships in the Red Sea, having successfully targeted Saudi and Emirati naval vessels participating in a blockade of the country's coast as well as several oil tankers with anti-ship missiles and sea mines. These attacks in turn have almost certainly been supported by Iran, which in recent years has expressed its aim of increasing its own naval presence in and around the Bab-el-Mandeb.²⁸ The strait has also attracted the attention of other maritime powers, notably Russia and the PRC, fuelling something of an international scramble for ports and berthing rights in Djibouti and other neighbouring countries to safeguard their own shipping interests. Without adopting a more comprehensive and strategic approach to the Red Sea, Britain risks exposing to interception the extended maritime communication line upon which it will continue to depend.

4.1 Piracy

Attacks on civilian vessels by pirates, mostly emanating from the ungoverned stretches of Somalia's coastline, continue to pose a risk to free navigation through the southern entrance of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. A 2017 report commissioned by the Government Office for

²⁸ 'Iran to Maintain Deployment in High Seas Forever', *Iranian Diplomacy*, 21/01/2015, <http://irdiplomacy.ir/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



Science identified piracy as one of the key ongoing threats to the Bab-el-Mandeb, despite international efforts to protect civilian shipping in the Red Sea.²⁹

Starting in 2008, multinational naval forces were required to implement escort patrols against the increasing number of attacks carried out by pirates in the Gulf of Aden and to create two IRTCs between Socotra and the Bab-el-Mandeb.³⁰ Despite these measures, the number of attacks continued to escalate until reaching a peak between 2010 and 2012. In 2010, over 4,000 sailors were subject to successful or attempted kidnapping attempts by pirates in the Gulf of Aden, with 49 ships being attacked.³¹

Following the deployment of additional naval forces to the area and greater coordination between various anti-piracy missions, the number of attacks plummeted from an all-time high of 212 in 2011 to seven in 2023, according to EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Operation Atalanta.³² However, longstanding failure to address systemic state collapse in Somalia suggests that piracy will return as an active threat if and when international policing forces are withdrawn. While the headquarters for EUNAVFOR has since been relocated from the UK and placed under Spanish command – a consequence of Britain's withdrawal from the EU³³ – the UK is expected to remain a contributor to multinational peacekeeping missions in the Somali basin. This will be important for British interests as even modest increases in the number of attacks attempted or orchestrated by pirates in the Gulf of Aden are expected to carry an impact on shipping insurance. Given the importance of the Suez route to British trade, the HM Government should ensure that the UK maintains an active role in protecting the waterway.

²⁹ Nathanael Melia, Keith Haines and Ed Hawkins, 'Future of the Sea: Implications from Opening Arctic Sea Routes', Government Office for Science (United Kingdom), 03/08/2017, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

³⁰ Martin N. Murphy, 'Somali Piracy: Why Should We Care?', *The RUSI Journal*, 156:6 (2011), p. 7.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 8 and, 'Pirates seized record 1,181 hostages in 2010 – report', *BBC News*, 18/01/2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

³² 'Key Facts and Figures', EUNAVFOR, 23/01/2024, <https://eunavfor.eu/> (checked: 02/02/2024).

³³ Nicholas Fiorenza, 'Spain Takes Command of EU's Operation "Atalanta" Counter-Piracy Mission', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 01/04/2019, <https://www.janes.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



4.2 State-sponsored terrorism

In addition to piracy, Houthi militants in Yemen continue to attack shipping in the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb. The collapse of Ali Abdullah Saleh, long-time Yemeni dictator, in 2011 and the subsequent capture of Sana'a by the Houthis in 2015 triggered a longstanding military intervention in the country led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Both Saudi and Emirati warships were subsequently attacked by rebel forces firing anti-ship missiles captured from Yemeni state arsenals, and in October 2016 missiles were also launched at three US naval vessels in the Gulf of Aden.³⁴ In 2017, the Houthis began targeting Saudi and Emirati ships with remotely-controlled lightweight boats – dubbed 'drone boats' – packed with explosives, a tactic which was initially successful in inflicting serious damage on several vessels off Yemen's western coastline.³⁵

In the summer of 2018, the number of missile and drone boat attacks against tankers and cargo ships reached such a serious level that in July Riyadh announced it would temporarily halt all oil shipments through the Red Sea until the situation stabilised.³⁶ More recently, Houthi militants responded to the October 2023 Hamas attacks in Israel and Israel's subsequent intervention in Gaza with further attacks against commercial and naval shipping in the Red Sea. Of note, on 16th December, HMS Diamond, a Type 45 destroyer, successfully shot down a Houthi armed uncrewed aerial vehicle in the Red Sea before being assigned to the Operation Prosperity Guardian multinational task force patrolling the southern area of the waters.³⁷ Continued Houthi attacks prompted an ongoing series of strikes in Yemen by UK and US forces beginning on 11th January 2023.³⁸

³⁴ Jeremy M. Sharp, 'Yemen: Recent Attacks Against U.S. Naval Vessels in the Red Sea', United States Congressional Research Service, 21/11/2016, <https://www.refworld.org/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

³⁵ 'Two dead in Houthi suicide attack on Saudi navy patrol', *Arab News*, 31/01/2017, <https://www.arabnews.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

³⁶ David Sheppard, Ahmed Al Omran, and Anjali Raval, 'Saudis Suspend Red Sea Oil Shipments After Tanker Attacks', *Financial Times*, 25/07/2018, <https://www.ft.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

³⁷ 'HMS Diamond joins new international task force to protect shipping in the Red Sea', Ministry of Defence (UK), 19/12/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

³⁸ Joshua Cheetham, Shruti Menon, Yi Ma, and Paul Myers, 'US and UK strikes fail to slow Houthi attacks', *BBC News*, 01/02/2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/>, (checked: 07/02/2024).



The Houthis' demonstrated ability to hold commercial shipping at risk provides their primary supporter, Iran, with avenues to increase its own influence over regional affairs. Since at least 2011, Tehran has signalled its intent to establish access and presence in the Red Sea by periodically deploying submarines and other naval vessels disguised as oil tankers into the waterway.³⁹ These assets, combined with the Houthi presence in Yemen, expand Tehran's options to pursue its strategic objectives by threatening international access to the waterway. In December 2023, for example, senior sources familiar with Iranian planning cited in international press alleged that Iranian and Houthi officials planned attacks against shipping as a means of increasing pressure to end Israel's intervention in Gaza.⁴⁰

4.3 Regional powers

In addition to the obvious security threat posed by the Houthis and Iran's long-term strategic ambitions, instability in the Red Sea region has prompted regional powers to take more active roles in the waterway. In early 2020, Saudi Arabia led the creation of the Red Sea Council along with Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Jordan, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen with the stated aim of enhancing security and stability in the sea.⁴¹ The council's creation was welcomed by Euro-Atlantic actors, notably the EU, and Saudi Arabia's leading role in its establishment signals Riyadh's intent to take on an enhanced leadership position in the Red Sea.

The UAE has been even more strident in expanding its regional military footprint, signing leases on at least two ports in the unrecognised autonomous territories of Somaliland and Puntland which are expected to be developed into naval facilities, in addition to establishing a large military base in Assab, Eritrea.⁴² After expelling

³⁹ Ladane Nasser, 'Iran Submarines in Red Sea to Spot Naval Vessels, Fars Says,' *Bloomberg News*, 07/06/2011, <https://www.bloomberg.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024) and 'Al Arabiya Cameras Film Suspicious Iranian Ship in Red Sea,' *Al Arabiya English via YouTube*, 10/11/2018, <https://www.youtube.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁴⁰ Aziz El Yaakoubi and Paris Hafezi, 'Saudi Arabia urges US restraint as Houthis attack ships in Red Sea,' *Reuters*, 07/12/2023, <https://www.reuters.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁴¹ 'Saudi Arabia and 7 countries form council to secure Red Sea and Gulf of Aden,' *Arab News*, 06/01/2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁴² 'Letter dated 7 November 2018 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to Resolutions 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009) concerning Somalia and Eritrea addressed to the President of the Security Council,' United Nations Digital Library, 07/11/2018, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



Houthi forces from Perim, the UAE effectively annexed the island and an Emirati garrison and military administration were despatched to the Yemeni island of Socotra, where upgrades to the local airstrip were subsequently made.⁴³ Neither the full extent of the UAE's military reach in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea nor its long-term strategic ambitions have been confirmed by Abu Dhabi. However, the construction of airstrips and coastal surveillance systems in Eritrea and Somaliland will significantly increase Emirati military reach and regional influence over both the northern and southern approaches to the Bab-el-Mandeb.

While Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain important regional allies in the fight against extremism as well as efforts by Iran to extend its influence in the Middle East, there is no guarantee that the interests of the UK, Saudi Arabia and the UAE will remain aligned permanently. Although enhanced Emirati and Saudi security leadership in the region may improve burden sharing for maritime security counter-piracy missions in the short-term, the long-term implications for British interests remain less clear.

4.4 External actors

Access to and presence in the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb also remains a priority for the major powers. The PRC, France, Japan, and the US all maintain bases and supporting infrastructure in Djibouti, which has capitalised on its position just outside the Bab-el-Mandeb. An as-yet to be finalised agreement between Russia and Sudan for a Russian naval station in Port Sudan has also highlighted Moscow's ambition to establish a military presence in the Red Sea – something which is likely only to grow with the rerouting of Russian hydrocarbon exports to Asia by sea following the rupturing of its economic ties with Europe post-2022.⁴⁴

The concentration of foreign military bases underlines the strategic significance of the Red Sea trade route between Europe and Asia, a view evidently not lost on other leading maritime and economic powers. Bases operated by hostile foreign powers pose an obvious

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ See: Samy Magdy, 'Sudan military finishes review of Russian Red Sea base deal', *AP*, 11/02/2023, <https://apnews.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024) and Alaric Nightingale, Julian Lee, Sharon Cho, 'How an Ageing Armada and Mystery Traders Keep Russian Oil Afloat', *Bloomberg*, 12/05/2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



threat to the ability for British trade and communications to transit freely between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. Less obviously, however, is the risk that any outbreak of conflict in the Horn of Africa – already notorious for its political volatility – would be quickly internationalised due to the web of agreements, memoranda of understanding, and base leases between local states and the major powers there.⁴⁵ While Ethiopia and Eritrea have moved to restore ties, long-term disputes between Ethiopia and Somalia; Somalia and its breakaway provinces; Djibouti and Eritrea; and Sudan and Ethiopia remain in various states of suspended animation. Any resumption of hostilities could quickly draw outside powers in as states move to secure their vital interests in the Red Sea waterway.

On a wider level, the rush by other powers to establish military outposts in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden may also undermine the UK's influence in the Horn of Africa more generally. As noted by William Hague, then Foreign Secretary (2010–2014), the UK has vital national interests at stake in Somalia, including interrupting transnational terrorist attacks planned in the country and to prevent attacks on international shipping.⁴⁶ Somalia, Ethiopia and Yemen remain some of the top recipients of UK aid, the fourth, fifth and sixth respectively in 2022.⁴⁷ Conflicts and security trends in the region are fundamentally interlinked, and the high level of aid spending in the region by HM Government underlines the UK's commitment to the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden littoral. Without adequate diplomatic and military focus on the region, there is a distinct risk that the UK may be overshadowed by more prolific regional actors despite the country's enduring interest in the Red Sea.

⁴⁵ Sean Joyce, 'Bursting at the Seas: Red Sea Naval Bases and Regional Stability', *Brown Political Review*, 06/01/2019, <https://brownpoliticalreview.org/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁴⁶ William Hague, Speech: 'A New Effort to Help Somalia', Chatham House, 08/02/2012, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁴⁷ 'Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2022', Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (United Kingdom), 20/09/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



5.0 British policy options

Looking ahead, the UK's future posture towards the Red Sea could go in four directions:

1. **No change.** Britain would continue to maintain a similar level of engagement with local actors, engage in occasional actions such as the January 2024 strikes in Yemen, and rely on the expeditionary capability of the Littoral Response Group (South) to safeguard vital national interests. Given changes to the regional balance of power, however, the UK's ability to uphold its national interests, beyond orchestrating occasional strikes and operations against non-state actors such as the Houthis, would be reduced without a more persistent naval presence.
2. **Increase the number of transits through the Red Sea by Royal Navy surface and sub-surface combatants and the Carrier Strike Group.** Short of imposing a permanent deployment to the waterway, this option would allow the UK to display a more persistent presence in the region. It would also assist HM Government in responding more quickly to developing situations without incurring significant additional cost. If Britain intends to strengthen the Royal Navy's global footprint, more frequent passages through the Suez route would present an opportunity to 'kill two birds with one stone'.
3. **Mount regular security patrols and freedom of navigation exercises in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, while replenishing at allied bases in Djibouti.** While the threat posed by Somali piracy has abated somewhat, the risk of further attacks remains significant, particularly should international naval patrols be discontinued. Moreover, the risk of conflict in the area will also continue to pose a risk to civilian shipping, as has been highlighted by the ongoing war in Yemen. Periodic patrols by Royal Navy vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, mounted either independently or in cooperation with EU partners, would help to support British trade interests, and at reduced cost.



4. **Enhance the Royal Navy's standing deployment at Duqm.**
Permanently attaching a frigate or destroyer to the Littoral Response Group (South) would generate significant opportunities for cooperation with the UK's most important allies, France and the US, regional partners, and boost British regional warfighting capabilities and operational independence. As discussed, both France and the US maintain bases in Djibouti, permitting both allies to assist in policing the waterway while also supporting their own national interests in the wider region. With distant support from the Juffair Naval Support Facility in Bahrain, a permanent major surface combatant at Duqm would allow British forces to participate in joint operations with their American and French counterparts on a more regular basis in and around the southern Red Sea, including both anti-piracy patrols and counter-terrorism missions. It would also offer opportunities for greater cooperation with Commonwealth partners, notably Australia and India, in carrying out exercises and joint patrols in the western Indian Ocean.

It should be noted that much of HM Government's own understanding of the Joint Logistics Support Base in Duqm appears to be couched in terms of counter-terrorism and security in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.⁴⁸ However, as this Policy Paper has sought to demonstrate, the Red Sea waterway is significant in its own right and Britain's ability to transit and operate in it unimpeded should be considered as a strategic objective in and of itself. The Red Sea link between the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific will remain central in any attempt to interlink the UK's global strategic interests. The Royal Navy's new support facility at Duqm in Oman can support a more frequent British presence in the Red Sea, in addition to providing access to US, European and Indian vessels as well.⁴⁹ With a 49% stake in the port owned by Babcock International, the Royal Navy's primary

⁴⁸ 'Defence Secretary strengthens ties between UK and Oman', Ministry of Defence (United Kingdom), 28/08/2017, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁴⁹ Phil Stewart, 'With an eye on Iran, US clinches strategic port deal with Oman,' *Reuters*, 24/03/2019, <https://www.reuters.com/> (checked: 01/02/2024) and Dipanjan Chaudhury, 'PM Modi's Oman visit: Indian Navy can now access Duqm port,' *Economic Times*, 13/02/2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



industry contractors, Duqm is expected to become a key feature in Britain's future maritime strategy.⁵⁰

Undoubtedly, this will very much depend on the number of naval vessels committed to Duqm. While the facility can accommodate the Royal Navy's new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers, larger questions remain over the size of the Royal Navy relative to the worldwide responsibilities it is required to undertake.⁵¹ The concentration of security challenges in the Red Sea makes it one of the most strategically significant segments in Britain's interconnected network of global interests, and the restoration of an autonomous, permanent naval presence in the Red Sea from Duqm is worthy of consideration.

⁵⁰ 'DUQM Naval Dockyard', Babcock, No date, <https://www.babcockinternational.com/> (checked: 07/02/2024).

⁵¹ William Freer and James Rogers, 'Why Britain needs a larger navy', Council on Geostrategy, 16/01/2024, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 07/02/2024).



6.0 Conclusion

Concerns over freedom of navigation through the Red Sea via the Suez Canal may seem like a bygone issue of the imperial past, and an alternative around the Cape of Good Hope does exist. However, the UK's fundamental interests in the Red Sea remain unaltered. Indeed, ongoing challenges to the open international order and increasing geopolitical tensions suggests that the UK should take a more proactive approach to ensure its national interests in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific remain geographically interlinked.

The ability of British trade and communications to pass unhindered between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean is by no means guaranteed, although it is vital for the country's national interests. Since the end of the Cold War, the region surrounding the waterway has suffered from chronic instability and state failure, with security threats including both immediate maritime risks as well as wider issues such as transnational crime and terrorism. Moreover, other powers have taken an increasing interest in the Red Sea, with the PRC, France, India, Japan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE all bolstering their own regional security footprints. Not only does this suggest that great and regional powers alike view the waterway as a potential flashpoint, but also indicates that any outbreak of conflict would carry the increased risk of internationalisation.



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