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POLICY NOTES FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

The Case for a Holistic U.S. Policy Toward the Emerging Red Sea Region

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In recent years, the Red Sea neighborhood has demonstrated fast-rising economic potential, attracting a global scramble for influence. This emerging region, situated on the western edge of the Middle East, has seen embassies opened, investment deals made, aid increased, and ports and vacation sites built. Many states regard the Red Sea as a key node for future global trade—one that has large populations, high GDP growth, and the infrastructure investment interest needed to eventually create access to large consumer markets. The area is also a source of food and water security for the region's big players and a critical link in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Yet the neighborhood faces many difficulties, including political fragility, massive migration, illicit smuggling, war, and even famine. As U.S. partners, competitors, and adversaries alike seek influence in and access to the Red Sea, Washington must focus more intently on this increasingly complex staging ground for global competition.



In addition to the nine littoral states—Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen—the Red Sea neighborhood affects landlocked players such as Ethiopia, and it has attracted regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, as well as external powers such as Russia, China, the European Union, and Britain. The Gulf states, in particular Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have increasingly sought to assume responsibility for protecting the western flank of the Arabian Peninsula in response to what they perceive as a U.S. pullback from the broader Middle East. In Yemen, the Houthi rebel group has struck ships in the Red Sea with projectiles in recent years, further focusing attention there. Meanwhile, Turkey is increasingly interested in broader Africa, including the Red Sea states; Europe is paying close attention due to migration issues; China has cast the Red Sea as a central waterway in the BRI; and Russia appears keen to augment its influence in this neighborhood. The populous, underdeveloped Horn of Africa states offer clear economic opportunities for regional and global players and have cautiously welcomed the investment and interest.

Despite these trends, the United States has not yet internalized the Red Sea neighborhood as an emerging region of its own and thus has not formulated a holistic policy toward it. Washington does not have a Red Sea office anywhere in its bureaucracy. The U.S. approach remains demarcated by the diplomatic and military seams that run down the Red Sea, defining Africa issues to the west and Near East issues to the north and east. The United States must recast its thinking about the Red Sea, especially since developments in this neighborhood have implications for the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Asia all in one.

The Red Sea is both part of and adjacent to the Middle East, and events that occur in this new center of activity can have an outsize or unexpected impact on the broader region. With regional and global powers increasingly turning an economic

and military eye to the Red Sea, one African official described rising interest in the neighborhood this way: “We have all five vetoes at our doorstep,”¹ the reference being to the five members of the UN Security Council. This explains why the United States must develop a comprehensive approach toward the Red Sea. Partner countries in the region can be helpful, but the United States cannot entirely outsource its Red Sea policy because the policies of certain partners, especially Gulf countries, do not always align with U.S. goals, priorities, threat perceptions, or credibility. For example, the Gulf states do not share the American view of China or Russia; their perceptions of Turkey diverge from Washington’s; and their pursuit of stability in the Horn of Africa may include a preference for “strongman” governance models at odds with the American preference for democratic models. More often, the United States will be aligned with Europe. A U.S. policy approach, therefore, could include becoming a multiplier for EU efforts and preferences, particularly in the Horn.

To take a holistic approach to this emerging Red Sea region, the Biden administration will have to adapt the U.S. diplomatic, military, and economic apparatus accordingly. In particular, it has a security interest in getting its partners to align their approach and definition of stability with its own.

The Economic Engine That Could

The Red Sea region is squeezed between the African coast to the east and the Arabian coast to the west, and bounded to the south by the Bab al-Mandab Strait and to the north by the Suez Canal and Straits of Tiran. The region has long served as a major conduit for trade between U.S. and European markets on one side, and Asian markets on the other. In 2016, 9 percent of global energy trade

Map of the Red Sea States



passed through the Red Sea²—including petroleum and liquefied natural gas primarily from Arab states but also from Russia, which alone accounted for about one quarter of that year’s southbound petroleum traffic through the Suez Canal. But the Red Sea’s African and Arabian shorelines have long suffered from poverty, a lack of infrastructure investment to build out ports or military bases, or disinterest in tourism (particularly along the Saudi and Sinai coastal areas). In something of a perfect storm, those three dynamics appear to be changing. In the past decade or so, various

aspirants have increasingly noted the Red Sea’s growing consumer market, tourism potential, and central position in China’s BRI and begun investing in infrastructure accordingly.

The area has extraordinary economic potential. High population growth and high GDP growth in the Horn of Africa are creating a burgeoning consumer market; Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia have some of the highest GDP growth in the world—clocking in at over 8 percent each in 2018. Egypt is over 5 percent. Ethiopia and Egypt’s populations, combined, top

210 million—a massive potential market. Meanwhile, if the future of trade is along China’s emerging BRI, a more-or-less circular global route over land and water in which the Red Sea figures prominently, it will spotlight these new market opportunities. The coronavirus pandemic, as elsewhere across the world, has stalled some of this potential, with mobility restrictions, quarantine rules, and border closures. The area’s countries, with the exception of Israel and Saudi Arabia, have also been slow to receive sufficient vaccine supplies, which may delay their ability to return to normal relative to other places.

To take advantage of new markets in the post-coronavirus era, the Red Sea states require an infrastructure upgrade in ports, rail, and roadways—areas in which countries such as China, the UAE, Turkey, and Qatar are potential investors. The UAE and Turkey have significant experience in large-scale infrastructure projects, logistics supply chains, and port management, and both have thus expanded their access to local ports in anticipation of future preferred trade routes. China has focused on transport and telecommunications infrastructure. Meanwhile, U.S. companies, including tech giants, engineering firms such as GE and Bechtel, and consumer-facing multinationals such as Coca-Cola, continue to invest in Africa to build market share—a strategy that will pay off handsomely if Red Sea consumer markets become more accessible.³

If the Horn of Africa in particular sees infrastructure upgrades, its improved connection to global markets could allow it to become an export market as well as a target consumer market—much like the existing situation in other Red Sea states. Moreover, across the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia is shifting attention toward its coasts: the kingdom recently increased

its port tariffs, directing them to fund development upgrades, among other efforts. Once the effects of the pandemic subside, the building of coastal resorts could eventually lead to a development boom and a tourism corridor. The kingdom has an ambitious resort plan for its NEOM city in the northwest along the Red Sea coast, as well as other resort islands and development projects—although these plans have been scaled back, as has much of Riyadh’s Vision 2030 initiative. Egypt has plans to build resorts as well. Yet another source of potential involves hydrocarbon finds on the African coast, although the future of these remains uncertain. The UAE’s Mubadala Petroleum company has recently signed a deal with Egypt to carry out oil and gas exploration in the Red Sea. If such economic growth came to pass in the next few decades, East Africans might begin to see their incomes generated more from local business than remittances—a welcome change—and Saudi Arabia would potentially see income from an industry other than oil.

Further, if current economic indicators hold in the post-coronavirus economy, the African coast will see continued economic growth while Arabian Peninsula states may see a slowdown amid the shift away from oil. In short, the extreme economic asymmetry that exists today between the coasts could narrow somewhat with time. Nevertheless, all such predictions are at the mercy of a fragile region, where security risks are many and political machinations may suffocate economic potential. Here, the United States can play a facilitating role by continuing to promote private-sector investment and staying engaged diplomatically in the Red Sea region, even as it generally seeks to lighten its Middle East footprint. Low-cost involvement can bring outsized benefits, helping deliver stability to a historically marginalized region while also advancing U.S. interests.



These four graphics collectively paint a picture of the nine littoral states during the pre-Covid 19 period. The first shows the amount of shoreline each state claims along the Red Sea and adjacent Gulf of Aden. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen dominate, while the coastlines of Israel and Jordan are exceptionally short. By population, however (second graphic)—an important indicator of potential consumer markets—Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen dwarf their neighbors. If Ethiopia were situated directly along the Red Sea, it would join this club. Looking at trade value (third graphic)—the value of exports and imports combined—Saudi Arabia clearly leads, although Israel is in the mix. These proportions may change in time, as reflected in figures showing that some of the states with the lowest trade values have the highest GDP growth (fourth graphic). Djibouti and Eritrea—but also Egypt—are growing their economies at some of the world’s highest rates. It will take years to catch up to the trade value of a country like Saudi Arabia, but the asymmetry seen in these graphics will likely narrow somewhat with time.

Source: Data is drawn from WolframAlpha databases and Google Earth, with the most up-to-date figures used. Some countries, such as Eritrea, do not have fully updated information; in these cases, the author consulted multiple sources and made the best relative estimates.

Keeping Up the Neighborhood Watch

Given the many players taking an interest in the Red Sea region, a scenario could emerge based on wide multilateral cooperation to mitigate security risks, as occurred in the fight against piracy. Alternatively, the threat of confrontation could rise. The coastal states and their landlocked neighbors alike rely on three chokepoints on the Red Sea perimeter—the Suez Canal, Straits of Tiran, and Bab al-Mandab—for access to global markets; for some, this is their only access. Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt have access to other bodies of water, although those too have chokepoints. Only Yemen and Somalia have direct access to the open seas. The Red Sea also affects the United States and other world players directly: U.S. and European trade, for instance, crosses the Mediterranean and transits the Suez Canal before moving south into the Red Sea and east to Asia. The disruption to global trade caused by the ship grounded in the Suez Canal in late March 2021 underlines how critical these trade routes are.

The presence of critical chokepoints has long heightened the security focus on the region. Notoriously, Egypt's closure of the Straits of Tiran in the northern Red Sea helped spark the Six Day War in 1967. Today, threats are related to piracy, conflicts in Yemen and Ethiopia, smuggling, and even Internet access. Seeking to wield influence, global and regional powers have set up camp along the sea. Tiny Djibouti hosts military bases for the United States (including British forces), France (including German and Spanish forces), Italy, Japan, and China (which has also established a trade port there). Saudi Arabia, too, has engaged in talks about a potential base in the East African country. Sudan will soon host a Russian base, and it has signed deals with both Turkey and Qatar to develop a port, although Saudi and Emirati influence has put those deals on hold. Turkey, for its part, runs a military

training facility, airport, and port in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, and the UAE has varying degrees of access to a half-dozen or more ports or bases along the Red Sea.⁴ At the same time, the perceived removal of a U.S. security umbrella means some regional states increasingly see Red Sea security as their responsibility.

Security issues in the Red Sea neighborhood fall into several broad categories:

THREATS TO SHIPPING LANES. The collapse of Somalia's government in 1991 and subsequent years of war and instability led, among other things, to illegal fishing and dumping off the coast, depleting fish stocks and creating the economic conditions that turned some toward piracy. Noting this could be a successful enterprise, others joined in, and by 2008 piracy was on the rise around the Gulf of Aden. Between 2009 and 2016, NATO regularly carried out antipiracy missions in the Red Sea. Shortly after the piracy threat began to wind down, the Iran-supplied Houthi rebel group in Yemen demonstrated sophisticated coastal defense and sea-denial capabilities, including through the use of antishipping missiles, sea mines, and self-guiding explosive boats. Since 2015, several Houthi-fired projectiles have struck ships, and in mid-2018 an attack on a Saudi oil tanker led the kingdom to temporarily halt its shipments in the Red Sea. As maritime shipment routes currently stand, a closure of Red Sea access could lengthen shipping times threefold by requiring transit around South Africa.⁵ Moreover, the Gulf states recognize that most of their domestic food imports travel through the Red Sea chokepoints. Underlining the seriousness of this issue, insurers are reportedly raising the cost for merchant ships transiting the Red Sea in response to the attacks on maritime traffic.⁶

RIVALRY AND WAR. Potential troubles are not limited to the shipping lanes. In May 2019, drone strikes claimed by the Houthis in Yemen but likely originating from Iraq struck a Saudi pipeline

carrying oil to the Red Sea, forcing the kingdom to divert its supply through redundant pipes.⁷ Since then, strikes from Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Yemen—and possibly from Iran itself—have continued to threaten oil facilities in Saudi Arabia. Conflicts in one part of the Red Sea can also reverberate in others. For example, the involvement of Sudanese mercenaries in the Yemen war could create instability back home as these fighters return with their newly acquired war-making skills. Meanwhile, recent violent hostilities in Ethiopia spurred Eritrea’s involvement, with spillover occurring across the Sudanese border. Moreover, external rivalries played out in politically fragile states could destabilize the region—as the Gulf rift has done in Somalia since 2017. Some Red Sea states worry in particular about becoming collateral victims of Gulf rivalries with Iran or Turkey.

ACCESS TO WATERWAYS. The Houthis in Yemen have long sought water and port access, and this quest shows more broadly how access to waterways can cause conflict. A 2014 regional plan that denied the Houthis their desired access helped catalyze their march on Sanaa. Desired access to additional ports, moreover, has spurred Ethiopia’s leadership to make nice with Eritrea and Somalia as well, but such needs could just as easily cause confrontation. Elsewhere, Egypt’s controversial decision to grant Tiran and Sanafir Islands to the Saudis could, if conditions change, stir nationalist feelings in Egypt and create friction. Eritrea and Yemen, meanwhile, both claim the Hanish Islands, which are uninhabitable but rich in resources. The latest armed conflict over this issue occurred in 1995, with international arbitrators siding with Yemen, but occasional tensions over fishing jurisdictions still occur.

ILLICIT ACTIVITY. Along the Red Sea, illicit activity includes trafficking in drugs, goods, and weapons, as well as human beings. In recent years, more heroin than ever before has arrived from Afghanistan due to stricter enforcement along other preferred trade routes. The permissive

Horn environment has also allowed Iran to use the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to send weapons to armed groups, as it previously did in Sudan—before Khartoum flipped to become a Gulf partner—and does now with the Houthis in Yemen. In addition to direct shipments, Iran apparently feeds weapons to arms markets where bad actors can purchase them, rather than feeding the bad actors directly—a clever tactic that allows plausible deniability. A September 2020 report on the illicit weapons trade across the Gulf of Aden identified Puntland, in northern Somalia, as a key node in illicit smuggling.⁸ As for human trafficking, this persists at high levels because of the desperation experienced in fragile states such as Ethiopia, Somalia, and Yemen.

MIGRATION AND REFUGEES. Paths used for trafficking, smuggling, and migrant and refugee transit go both ways in the Red Sea area. This is a rare situation: Yemeni refugees flee the war westward across the Red Sea to Djiboutian camps, while East African migrants cross eastward toward Yemen en route to seeking work in the Gulf. In the port town of Obock, Djibouti, the refugee and migrant camps are literally across the road from each other.⁹ As the Gulf states move toward more self-reliant economies, their immigration policies are also changing. Saudi Arabia has deported hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians since 2017.¹⁰ Migration has long been a release valve for poor states, and hundreds of millions of remittance dollars have flowed into Ethiopia, Sudan, and elsewhere. The precipitous decline of remittances in any African state could have destabilizing effects in the short term, especially politically. Moreover, war in Ethiopia—and a potential implosion there—may create new migrants and drive them in new directions, a major EU concern and a key driver of its engagement with the Red Sea.

TERRORISM. Terrorism remains a threat in multiple Red Sea states. The terrorist group al-Shabab has operated since the mid-2000s in Somalia and surrounding states, and it remains a credible, violent threat. Meanwhile, an affiliate

of the Islamic State (IS) operating in the Sinai Peninsula escalated its activity in early 2021, leading to a higher Egyptian military presence in the area, which could raise concerns with Israel.¹¹ At present, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and IS in Yemen are lesser threats due to an active Gulf and U.S. counterterrorism policy, but they have not been expunged entirely.

ENVIRONMENT. Researchers have concluded that environmental issues such as illegal dumping and overfishing contributed to the rise of piracy more than a decade ago by curtailing the ability of local fishermen to earn a living. Food insecurity still prevails in Horn of Africa countries as well as Yemen, a situation that could worsen if these countries began exporting food to Gulf states that have invested in arable land as part of their own food security policies. Environmental concerns also play into fears over water access. Desalination plants are cropping up along the Red Sea coast, including in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Illegal dumping and potential oil spills—caused, for example, by a Houthi strike on an oil tanker or the continued degradation of the Houthi-controlled *Safer* floating oil tanker—could contaminate the water used by desalination plants, leading to a major humanitarian crisis. Water concerns are also at the center of Egypt-Sudan-Ethiopia tensions relating to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Such destabilizing risks will remain as long as Red Sea shipping lanes—and the states lining them—are insecure and fragile.

INTERNET CABLES. An underappreciated vulnerability lies under the sea.¹² Together, the region's coastal states—especially Egypt and Djibouti—have dozens of submarine cable landings on their shores, supplying regional and global Internet connectivity. In January 2020, a badly dropped anchor was suspected when a cut cable knocked out 80 percent of Yemen's Internet access and that of several other countries. Years earlier, in 2008, a cable issue affected access for

parts of the Middle East, Europe, and Asia.¹³ Some cables are nearing the end of their service lives. Although redundancy is improving, these cables remain as susceptible to interference by bad actors as to accidents, and they must be secured and protected.

Owing to a combination of threat and opportunity, regional actors are moving in and ramping up militarily. In addition to the many countries that base their forces in Djibouti, the UAE temporarily set up military bases along the Red Sea, including in Eritrea, to counter Houthi threats emanating from Yemen. In addition, Egypt is building out its navy, and Iran has for years stationed a cargo ship off Yemen's coast that observers believe is for intelligence purposes. More recently, the Islamic Republic has unveiled an expeditionary sea base vessel that may be forward-deployed to the Red Sea and surrounding areas. Such militarization may itself create tensions in the region. Israel, for example, may deploy its own assets to counter a perceived Iranian military threat in the Red Sea. For this reason alone, the United States must stay focused on the area.

Moreover, the United States itself appears to be considering new possible bases, especially in western Saudi Arabia, to both lessen its vulnerability to Iranian retaliatory attacks in the Arabian Gulf and increase its presence along the Red Sea, where Houthi attacks are more common. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the commander of U.S. Central Command, recently explained, “The Arabian Gulf would be contested waters under any scenario of armed conflict with Iran, so you look at the places where you would move your forces as they enter the theater from being in a contested area. Certainly the Red Sea, the western [part] of the Arabian peninsula presents those opportunities.”¹⁴ This contingency planning will focus minds on the Red Sea and require more attention to this neighborhood's own substantial security risks.

Planting Flags in Politically Fragile Foundations

The Red Sea future contains both economic potential and an array of risks, given the influx of regional and global players planting their flags in the area. The results of political change are still pending in the Horn particularly, where long-serving leaders in Sudan and Ethiopia have been ousted in recent years. Further, a 2018 peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea appears to have turned into a cooperation arrangement pitting the two states violently against the Tigray region, which sits inside Ethiopia but on Eritrea's border. Meanwhile, Somalia suffers from a weak government and the scourge of al-Shabab. Yemen has been engulfed in war since 2015. Eritrea may also undergo a leadership succession in coming years given that its current leader—in power since 1991—is seventy-five, potentially creating unease or instability. Such a politically fragile area could be a magnet for malign influence, especially in light of its economic potential.

The analyst Karen Young, who created a Gulf Financial Aid and Direct Investment tracker that includes several Red Sea states, writes:

Gulf Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have increasingly embraced an aggressive growth, investment, and development model for the broader Middle East and an expanding sphere of influence north to Jordan and Egypt, south to Yemen, and southwest to the vital trade corridor around the Arabian Sea toward the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. Like the People's Republic of China, the Gulf states are seeking political influence through economic statecraft.¹⁵

The asymmetry here is apparent: wealthy Gulf states, China, and Turkey are providing investment

in and hoping for influence over still relatively underdeveloped African states. African officials—no strangers to influence attempts from big powers—appear to be staying cautious. In recent regional conferences, they have expressed concerns about Beijing's so-called debt diplomacy but also the Gulf's "ATM diplomacy." Their concerns have only been deepened by the experience since 2017 of being drawn into the Gulf rift between Qatar on one side and the quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain on the other. Sudan's former leadership often tried to play the parties to the rift off each other, but the post-revolution leadership has gravitated toward the UAE and Saudi Arabia at the expense of Qatar and Turkey. The effects of the rift have been particularly noticeable and destabilizing in Somalia, with Qatar (and Turkey) supporting the Somali central government, and the UAE supporting the autonomous regions in the north, Puntland and Somaliland. Regional officials will be playing close attention to whether the patching of the rift will have any observable impact in the Horn, but recent moves will make them wary. In March 2021, the UAE dispatched a trade representative to Somaliland, whom Somaliland newspapers called an "ambassador," likely ruffling feathers in Mogadishu.

For their part, the Gulf states' ability to strip an adversary of influence is also well known. Following Saudi-UAE efforts in Sudan, Qatar and Turkey lost some access to the state, and Riyadh has used cash and promises of political capital to wrest countries from Iran's clutch over the last decade. For example, Sudan and Eritrea have both seen sanctions lifted, and Sudan received an influx of financial support as a result of ending its relationship with Iran. Djibouti and Somalia were also convinced to cut ties with Iran in 2016 when mobs stormed the Saudi mission in Tehran. Although the United States welcomes such moves against Iran, similar moves against partners like Qatar or Turkey may not sit well. Some Red Sea states that maintain good relations with Turkey and rely on it for logistical, humanitarian, and other support undoubtedly feel the same way.

Adding to concerns about getting drawn into Gulf disputes with Iran or Turkey, African states will suffer economically if they become involved in overt China-U.S. competition. Already, many countries, including those in the Gulf and Africa, felt the effects of the China-U.S. trade war in their GDPs, even if the contest did not take place directly on their turf. And worries abound that augmented China-U.S. competition over the next decade could have detrimental economic effects in the area.

For now, Saudi Arabia seems to be seeking cooperation at the multilateral level. In January 2020—a year late and after significant diplomatic effort—the kingdom managed to convince all the coastal Red Sea states, except an uninvited Israel, to join its new Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Red Sea Council). The council is billed as a cooperative body that can bring stability to the region, but some states fear that it will devolve into a political tool to be used against a regional actor. A senior Saudi official did not help the kingdom’s cause when he stated in December 2018 that Saudi Arabia’s goal in the Red Sea was to ensure “less negative outside influence,” which was read as a reference to Qatar, Turkey, or Iran—with which some Horn states maintain important relationships.¹⁶ Even if Saudi Arabia has patched up its relations with Qatar for now, the council members will likely remain vigilant about the future intentions of their Red Sea neighbors. The large Saudi effort at multilateralism has been accompanied by smaller ones elsewhere. Ethiopia and Eritrea made their earlier-noted peace, which contributed to the lifting of a UN arms embargo on Eritrea and opened up the possibility of future Ethiopian access to Eritrean ports. Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia have also held talks related to joint cooperation—again, with an eye on ports.

These attempts at bi- and trilateral cooperation are positive indicators that stability is possible. The gravest potential causes of instability may be internal in nature. Given positive U.S. relationships with many Red Sea actors, Washington is well

positioned to ensure America’s regional partners are not acting at cross-purposes within fragile states. Moreover, given that U.S. and Gulf state governance preferences sometimes clash vis à vis democracy versus strongman models, Washington can push to align the approach of its partner nations and their definition of security and stability with its own.

Recommendations for the Biden Administration

As the Red Sea emerges as a frontier for global power competition, it also offers an opportunity for U.S. cooperation with partners. The greatest such opportunity may be with Europe—perhaps with the Europeans in the lead on certain portfolios, given that their national interests may outweigh America’s on issues like migration. Other countries active in the area can also be helpful partners on certain issue sets, even if they cannot serve as proxies representing American policy on every issue. Given all this, the Biden administration would be wise to adopt a holistic, clearly defined policy toward this emerging Red Sea region. Such a policy would take an organizing approach to U.S. partner countries and contend with the very real challenges posed by the diplomatic and military “seams” running down the Red Sea that have traditionally split Middle East policy from Africa policy in the State and Defense Departments.

Defining the U.S. Approach to the Red Sea

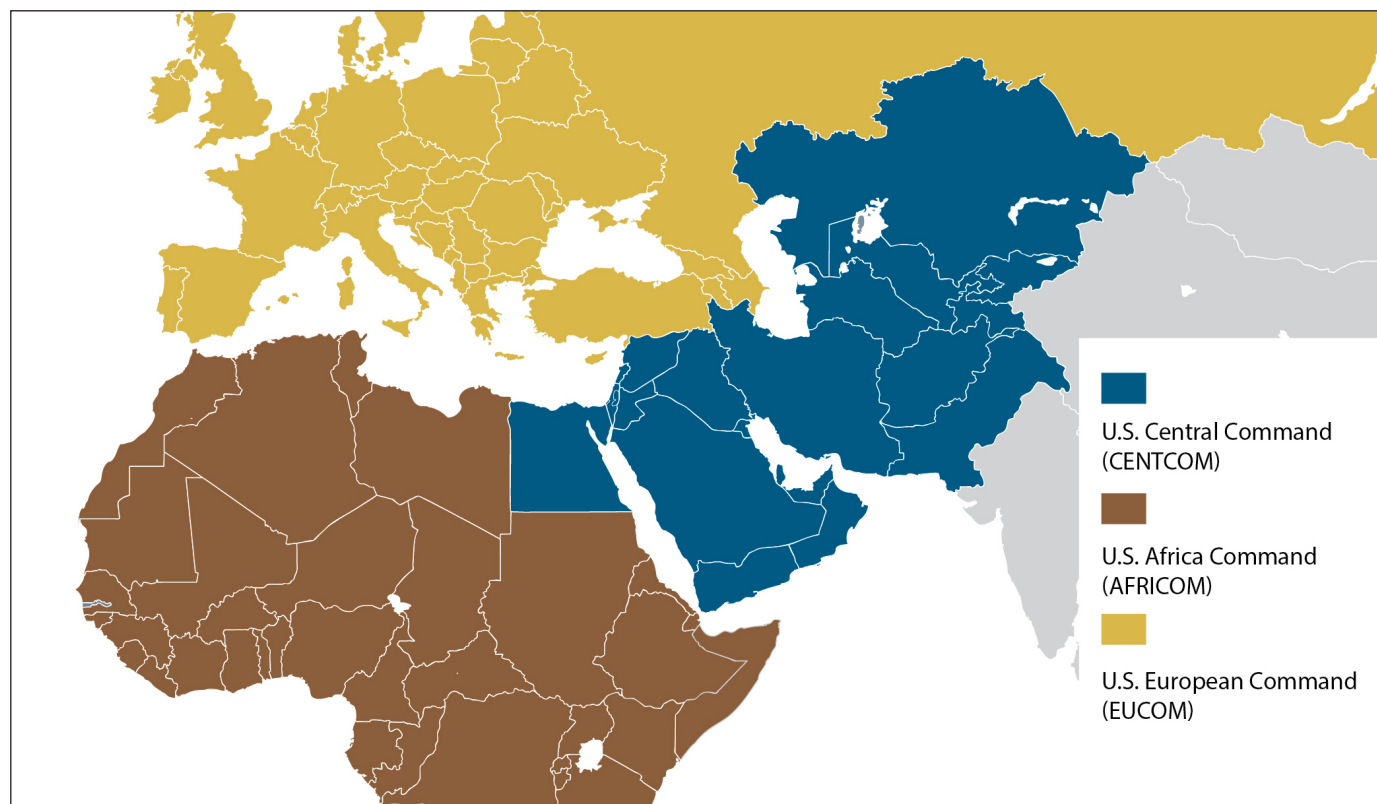
To have an effective policy approach toward the Red Sea, the U.S. military-diplomatic bureaucracy must first recognize it as a distinct emerging region. The Red Sea portfolio is immense, covering over a

dozen countries’ internal politics, economic plans, and complicated bilateral relations, as well as ports, military bases, tourism projects, and challenges such as terrorism, piracy, proxy conflict, migration, and a dozen others. American foreign service and military personnel on both sides of the seam have expressed concern that the U.S. bureaucracy has not yet adapted to meet the rising number of cross-seam issues in the Red Sea neighborhood.¹⁷ Moreover, U.S. partners in the Gulf and EU have struggled to get the United States sufficiently engaged on the sea. The United States needs to formulate a plan to remedy this blind spot.

Because the region’s complexity transcends existing diplomatic and military seams, American policy must do so as well. Before the creation of U.S. Africa Command in 2008, the African Red Sea states plus Ethiopia were part of U.S. Central Command’s area of responsibility.¹⁸ Transferring them was

controversial even at that time given that the Horn is historically more closely engaged with the Gulf states than with West Africa or sub-Saharan Africa. The resulting military seam placed the Red Sea into CENTCOM’s area of responsibility up to the territorial waters on the African side, which are AFRICOM’s area of coverage (except Egypt, which is part of CENTCOM). Such seams create complications. For example, a piracy threat may originate on the African coast but migrate eastward into international waters, thus becoming the monitoring responsibility of a different command mid-threat. The controversy surrounding the transfer of the Horn out of CENTCOM has remained alive since 2008. In fact, senior military commanders responsible for the region have occasionally suggested that the Red Sea states, Ethiopia, or even all of East Africa be transferred to CENTCOM.¹⁹ As the Red Sea grows in importance, such calls to study the issue might need to be considered seriously.

U.S. Military Areas of Responsibility in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East



Close coordination between those working on Africa and those working on the Middle East will require an active interagency group or process, with frequent consultations among senior officials such as the assistant secretaries of state for Africa and the Near East and the combatant commanders for Africa and the Central Region. Another model could entail tasking senior-level liaison officials with interacting across bureaus. Seam issues exist in several important places around the world (e.g., Turkey), and the most successful approach is always to have close coordination and consultation between U.S. diplomatic and military officials on both sides of it. Recent reports suggest the U.S. administration is considering naming a special envoy to the Horn of Africa to deal with the issues in Tigray, among others; this official should be empowered, as necessary, to “straddle the seam” and coordinate with the Gulf states on their involvement in the Horn. In a hands-on move, the State Department could coordinate a joint tour of the Red Sea countries across the seam with assistant secretaries for the Near East and Africa. The United States could also host a Red Sea summit—perhaps jointly with Europe. At the minimum, it should engage more proactively with its European and Arab partners and ensure the various issues that cross the seam are well understood and properly prioritized jointly by Near East/CENTCOM and Africa/AFRICOM.

Compete, Don't Complain

As the Red Sea region moves, in fits and starts, toward a brighter economic future in the coming decades, the United States will need to formulate economics into its policy. Although Washington views Beijing as a rival, countries on both sides of the Red Sea are increasingly seeing both as options. They have no interest in picking sides in a political rivalry—and tune out Cold War–style “us vs. them” language; they are instead looking for the best potential economic partner. The Huawei/5G debate in the UAE is a prime example: the Emirates ultimately dismissed American complaints, based

on the perception of China as a rival, and chose, in its view, a good partner in the marketplace. This same issue has come up in the Horn of Africa, where one diplomat told this author, “The U.S. complains [about China] but doesn't compete.” In response to a speech at an October 2020 investment conference by then U.S. national security advisor Robert O'Brien, African leaders across the continent suggested that they did not want their relationships in China to be perceived as a threat and encouraged the United States to join the economic “enthusiasm” in Africa. The same messaging echoes across East Africa and the African Red Sea states.

Furthermore, whereas the United States cannot compete with China, Turkey, and others on infrastructure, it can (and does) compete on consumption. U.S. foreign direct investment flows into Africa are significant, and a few major consumer-facing American businesses retain a presence in the Horn of Africa. The United States should continue to promote and even incentivize private-sector investment in the Red Sea states. It can do so through existing mechanisms such as the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, a body modeled on the World Bank's International Finance Corporation.

As the world moves toward a new “multipolar” economic landscape—not coincidentally, a theme in the latest pre-Covid Horn and Gulf conferences—the United States will also need to find creative ways to compete in these comparatively risky spaces. American businesses could enter marketplaces directly or instead, given potential legal and regulatory hurdles or just a lack of interest, support U.S. partner countries entering these markets by—for example—supplying U.S. equipment as part of a shared bid. The United States could also help build institutional capacity, particularly in governance, in states along the Red Sea, thus breaking down barriers of entry for more risk-averse U.S. businesses. In short, America must focus on opportunity. In the Red Sea neighborhood, talk of rivalry alone will fall on deaf ears.

Support, and Possibly Broker, Bilateral and Multilateral Efforts

The Red Sea region, due to habit and other reasons, has a few countries more comfortable with bilateral relations than multilateral ones. Strong bilateral relations are indeed essential because they allow more intimate, practical discussions and can encourage confidence building between two parties not predisposed to trust each other. However, if conducted without key parties in the room, decisions made behind closed doors can fuel conflict. The United States should therefore encourage multilateral organizations in cases where decisions require the input of multiple parties. These can be led by the Red Sea littoral states if they are inclusive, fair, capable of dispute resolution, and serve as foundations for stability. Already, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, a regional trade bloc, attempted to create such an organization in 2019, and Saudi Arabia—with Egypt’s reluctant but eventual support—launched the Red Sea Council. Specifically, U.S. officials should raise with the Saudis the council’s exclusion of Israel, and here the Arab-Israel normalization trend may offer reasons for optimism. Whether these organizations will expand to include nonlittoral states, such as Ethiopia or even the UAE or Turkey, remains an open question but one on which the United States should be actively engaged.

The United States should be wary of these organizations becoming political tools against other regional players, even ones Washington dislikes. The organizations can just as easily become tools against U.S. partners, and a Red Sea

organization focused on non-Red Sea political issues will quickly lose its way, while also increasing the likelihood of additional proxy wars in the region. On this issue, the United States and Europe can agree and ensure a common platform.

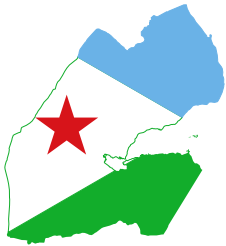
On its best days, Washington can play an active role in resolving rifts between partner nations; at a minimum, the United States can ensure these rifts do not adversely affect the security of the Red Sea and its critical chokepoints. A true resolution of the Gulf rift in time may inadvertently ameliorate some Red Sea problems, given that the rift has had destabilizing effects in Somalia and elsewhere. And while the United States may be less able to find near-term common ground between the UAE and Turkey, it can try to bracket their disputes from the Red Sea. Most important, the United States should engage proactively with Europe on Red Sea issues, particularly since Europe has concerns, such as migration, that are not national security issues for the United States. If Washington prefers a back seat-driver role, it can serve as a multiplier for EU efforts in the region, which would align, for the most part, with preferred U.S. policy. Together, Europe and the United States can mitigate and redirect some of the destructive or counterproductive energies operating in the Red Sea.

The Red Sea’s economic potential is impressive in a post-Covid environment, but only if the fragile neighborhood can withstand a series of security threats, the inherent risks of too much attention too fast, and the political machinations occurring among global and regional powers. The United States can play an important role in bolstering the potential of this up-and-coming region. ❖



Annex A: The Nine Littoral States

The nine Red Sea littoral states are Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia (and the autonomous territories Somaliland and Puntland), Sudan, and Yemen.



DJIBOUTI

Along with Yemen across the water, Djibouti controls the Bab al-Mandab gateway to the Red Sea. Attractive for its location and deepwater port, Djibouti hosts military bases for the United States, China, Japan, Italy, and France. Having famously served as a base for counterpiracy operations for much of the last decade-plus, it is also the busiest economic port on the East African coast, especially given fast-growing demand from its neighbors, such as Ethiopia, for access to open seas. Other ports in the region are hoping to add capacity.

Djibouti has high economic growth but also high debt, particularly to China, which has financed infrastructure projects. China Merchants Port (aka CM Port), a state-owned conglomerate, was granted a 23.5 percent stake in Djibouti's Port of Doraleh in 2013, with the UAE's DP World holding a 33.34 percent stake. After a yearslong dispute between Djibouti and DP World over port management, the government seized the port from the Emirati company in 2018.²⁰ Djiboutian authorities have ignored or sought to dismiss the resulting court rulings, which have called for hundreds of millions of dollars in restitution payments to DP World. China meanwhile continues to work closely with Djibouti on port development.



EGYPT

Egypt's location, specifically along the Suez Canal, makes U.S. maintenance of basing and air rights critically important so as to ensure its access through the chokepoint. In the future, other countries seeking

a dominant role in the Red Sea may be looking for similar preapproved diplomatic and military clearance.

Egypt's Berenice base, established in 2020, is the largest military base on the Red Sea. It will augment Egypt's naval and air capabilities to help facilitate security for maritime traffic. Egypt has also made efforts recently to modernize its naval fleet, and it is building a new high-speed rail link between the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea. In 2015, the New Suez Canal opened, allowing vessels to significantly decrease their transit time and taking pressure off the Sumed pipeline that bypasses the canal. Along the Red Sea, the Egyptians have more than a dozen ports, many of which are commercial, as well as desalination plants. Plans to develop the Sinai Peninsula are regularly touted. Egypt also recently signed a deal with an Emirati company to explore for oil and gas in the Red Sea.

Egypt has been the recipient of significant Gulf aid, particularly from Saudi Arabia and the UAE;²¹ moreover, Gulf political backing helped install Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in power in 2013. Yet given its historic role as a regional power broker, Egypt is reluctant to publicly back Saudi or UAE leadership in the region and has frequently pushed back, including on involvement in the Yemen war, about which it remains wary, and the Saudi-led Red Sea Council, which it ultimately joined. The Gulf states (and the United States) may also find themselves occasionally and reluctantly quelling conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia over the contentious Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

In a controversial decision, Sisi transferred the northern Red Sea islands Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia in 2016. These islands were strategically important during the regional conflicts of 1956 and 1967. For its part, Saudi Arabia agreed to honor commitments related to the islands made by Egypt to Israel in the 1979 peace deal.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia have also discussed a bridge between their two countries, although no construction has begun, and China has opportunistically messaged on social media that it could take on such a project.²²



ERITREA

In 2018, the United Nations lifted an arms embargo, asset freeze, and travel ban imposed on Eritrea in 2009 over its border conflict the previous year with Djibouti and for

supporting al-Shabab. Eritrea denied the allegations regarding al-Shabab. This came on the back of better Eritrean relations with Ethiopia, its former adversary. In 2015, as part of its efforts to counter Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia had negotiated a basing agreement in Eritrea for Gulf Cooperation Council states; the UAE used the Assab military base for its operations in Yemen. Eritrea has joined the Saudi-led Red Sea Council despite its preference for smaller associations. Its main port, Massawa, may benefit from these cooperative relations, and Assab may benefit from an eventual Chinese-constructed road from Ethiopia. In addition to building relations with China, Eritrea engages in some cooperation with Russia. Eritrea has an aging leader, raising concerns about succession fragility.



ISRAEL

Although Israel’s Gulf of Aqaba shoreline is less than ten miles long, it includes a port, a naval base, and the resort town of Eilat. It also hosts one end of an oil pipeline between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. The crises of 1956 and 1967, when Israel’s access to the Red Sea was blocked, feature prominently in Israeli strategic thinking. Eilat offers the country’s only non-Mediterranean maritime route,

allowing easier access to Africa and Asia.

Israel also keeps an eye turned south toward Yemen, where the Houthi slogan includes “Death to Israel.” Bilaterally, Israel has focused on developing good relations with other Red Sea states, including Egypt, Eritrea (on occasion), Jordan, and most recently Sudan. It has thus far been excluded from the Saudi-led Red Sea Council, but normalization efforts in the region may eventually reverse that reality.



JORDAN

Like Israel, Jordan’s short coastline features a port, a naval base, and a resort town. Aqaba is a critical node in Jordan’s tourism market and features a tax-free special economic zone that has brought billions in investment over two decades. Jordan also imports small volumes of Qatari liquefied natural gas through the Port of Aqaba. Jordan’s access to global markets depends on the Gulf of Aqaba remaining open, but as a hedge, it has negotiated access to the Mediterranean Sea through Israel.



SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia has a collection of ports and military bases lining the Red Sea coast, including King Faisal Naval Base and several main commercial ports, some of which are run by UAE port operators. The kingdom is new to

resort culture. Its first major resort project, NEOM, was initially presented as a futuristic \$100 billion city but has since been scaled back.

Given its fears about Iran blocking the Strait of Hormuz, Saudi Arabia relies on the 746-mile East-West Pipeline

from Abqaiq to Yanbu on the Red Sea coast to transport up to five million barrels per day of oil. S&P Global claims the kingdom has a parallel, reserve network of pipes as well, used in the aftermath of a drone attack on the pipeline in May 2019.²³ The original pipeline was built in the 1980s during the Tanker War phase of the Iran-Iraq War; the September 2019 attack on Aramco oil infrastructure at Abqaiq has apparently accelerated Saudi plans to expand the East-West Pipeline.

In 2016, the kingdom controversially acquired from Egypt Tiran and Sanafir Islands, at the entrance of the Gulf of Aqaba, thus giving it control over Red Sea access for Jordan and Israel. Its first overseas basing agreement was with Djibouti in 2017.²⁴ Saudi Arabia has led the Red Sea Council effort, spending a year coaxing other coastal countries (except Israel, which was not invited) to join.



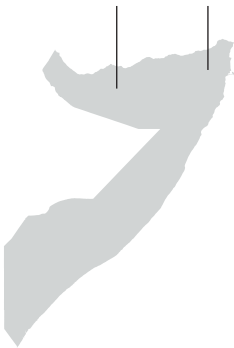
SOMALIA

Like Yemen and Djibouti, Somalia is a gatekeeper to the Red Sea, positioned along the Gulf of Aden at the base of the Bab al-Mandab. Its government remains fragile yet has immense goodwill toward Turkey and Qatar for their humanitarian aid, military training, and hundreds of millions of dollars in recent investment. The Gulf rift had an outsize impact in Somalia, especially after a 2018 incident wherein Somali officials seized \$9.6 million in cash sent to the country by the UAE. The Somali government said the money was unauthorized and nefarious; the UAE claimed it was approved for Somali salaries.²⁵ The UAE continues to support Somaliland and Puntland, despite Somali federal government reservations. Somalia's relationship with Saudi Arabia is slightly better; it has joined the Red Sea Council, led by the kingdom, although it worries the group could

be used as an anti-Turkey bloc.

Somalia was the original source of piracy issues that began in the late 2000s and continues to be a source of smaller-scale piracy. The country is also awash in illegal arms and serves as a waypoint for illicit smuggling and trafficking.

Somaliland & Puntland



Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991, although it is not internationally recognized, while Puntland seeks autonomy but wants to remain part of a federal Somali state. Both have good relations with the UAE, and each has a port: Berbera in Somaliland and Bosaso in Puntland. DP World and P&O Ports, the UAE's port logistics companies,

have thirty-year concessions for both ports, although the P&O effort in Puntland appears to be stalled. Somaliland may also build out or lease the Zaila port. The UAE has earmarked hundreds of millions of dollars in investment in both regions. As East African consumer markets grow beyond the capacity of Djibouti's port, Somaliland ports are positioned to get excess trade, especially from Ethiopia, which has a 19 percent stake in the Berbera port.

Somaliland may use the increased focus on the Red Sea to collect political points toward eventual recognition. It has already developed a bond with Taiwan, to the chagrin of China, over the desire for recognized sovereignty. In March 2021, the UAE may have boosted Somaliland's efforts by appointing a trade representative to the "Republic of Somaliland."²⁶

On the security front, both Somali regions had a front seat to the piracy that burgeoned about a decade ago but struggled to manage with small coast guards and insufficient legal codes. The UAE has since provided training for Puntland's police force, yet in 2017 the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea called Puntland "the primary entry point for illicit flows of weapons into Somalia." A 2020 report on illicit weapons trading across the Gulf of Aden called Puntland's port city of Bosaso "the financial epicentre of the illicit trade."²⁷



SUDAN

Sudan, like Egypt, could serve as a cultural bridge across the Red Sea since it is both African and Arab. Sudan, however, is undergoing a major political transformation. Its fragility

is compounded by tensions between the military elite and popular movement. Although it enjoys an enviable geostrategic position, Sudan's GDP is significantly lower than similarly sized countries and its financial strain opens it up to outside influence. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have offered controversial support to former leader

Omar al-Bashir and the current military elite, generating distrust among some Sudanese. Meanwhile, Gulf leaders are keenly aware of and watchful for Sudan's prior tendency to play adversaries in the region off each other.

In 2017, Turkey signed a ninety-nine-year lease to develop an old Ottoman commercial port in Suakin for tourism, with Qatar planning to finance it. These plans now appear to be on hold given Saudi-UAE influence with the new leadership in Sudan. Whether patching the Gulf rift will have an effect on Suakin remains to be seen. Meanwhile, on the Red Sea, Russia signed a deal with Sudan to establish a naval base at Port Sudan.



YEMEN

Yemen has long served as a transit country between the Horn of Africa and the Gulf, in addition to being a trading partner. In a rarity, the migration routes between Yemen and the Horn go in both directions—with migrants traveling to Yemen in hopes of finding work in the Gulf and Yemenis traveling to the Horn to flee the war. Yemen, like Somalia, also serves as a primary illicit trade destination. The war in Yemen has allowed the Houthis, an Iran-supplied rebel group, to launch rockets into the Red Sea and plant mines, which have occasionally damaged ships. Yemen singularly embodies many of the security threats that U.S. and other nations’ officials worry about in the Red Sea.

Annex B: Aspirant Powers

The eight aspirant powers in the Red Sea are China, Ethiopia, the European Union, Iran, Qatar, Russia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.



CHINA

China is establishing relations in the Middle East and Red Sea primarily through economic engagement as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. African

worries about Chinese debt bondage and often lower-quality projects are often superseded by the need for investment. China's policy of political noninterference is also attractive, and it has been reciprocated: seven of the nine Red Sea littoral states (excluding Jordan and Israel) signed a letter to the UN Human Rights Council rejecting the international outcry over China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.²⁸

Moreover, China has managed to build positive relationships across traditional enemies' lines in the Middle East—it has high-level partnerships with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, and Iran. Chinese soft power is increasingly on display: area schools are offering Chinese language, students are being offered funding to study in China, and Confucius Institute branches promoting Chinese culture are open in Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, and soon in Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, China opened its first-ever overseas naval base in Djibouti in 2017, then financed infrastructure projects, including a port, a rail link from Djibouti city to Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), and an international free trade zone. China has also funded major infrastructure projects, including a rapid transit network in Ethiopia. And it is building a relationship with Eritrea. China's infrastructure investments along the Red Sea will ultimately benefit any countries seeking access to emerging East African consumer markets.

China's adversaries, such as India and Japan, are watching with concern, with Indian commentators often framing Chinese intentions as a threat to their national security. Despite opening the base in Djibouti, China counts on—and arguably free-loads off—the U.S. security umbrella protecting global chokepoints.



ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia has been landlocked since Eritrea's independence in the 1990s, relying on Djibouti's waterway access to ship and receive about 95 percent of its goods. With high GDP growth, topping

8 percent in recent years, and a population of over 100 million, Ethiopia is looking to expand its access to ports with an eye on those in Somalia, including in Somaliland and Puntland. As part of this effort, Ethiopia spearheaded a joint plan for cooperation with Somalia and Eritrea in early 2020. Despite lacking a coastline, Ethiopia is apparently investing in naval capabilities with French help, and it aspires to join the Saudi-led Red Sea Council. Egypt may oppose such a move given its contentions with Ethiopia over Nile water access, but the Gulf states and the United States could potentially help resolve this set of issues. The Gulf states, particularly the UAE, have recently increased their investment in Ethiopia. China remains the most consistent investor. Finally, Ethiopia is contending with a migration crisis: Saudi deportations of illegal migrants from Ethiopia are causing masses of young men to return to Addis Ababa and a resulting drop in remittances, a potential complicating issue across the Red Sea.



EUROPEAN UNION

The EU has taken a keen interest in the Red Sea due to its high trade volume transiting the waterway and its concerns about migration. Its close engagement was reflected in the 2011 appointment of a Special Representative to the Horn of Africa, who regularly meets with

officials in the Red Sea littoral—and not only in the Horn. The EU welcomed Saudi and UAE efforts toward the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement in 2018 and the Saudi-led Red Sea Council in 2020, but it has concerns about the Gulf's leadership preferences in the region and its meddling, particularly in Somalia. In particular, France and Italy have military bases in Djibouti; France's base hosts Spanish and German troops. European companies are also looking to get more involved in the region. In January 2021, Saudi Arabia chose an Irish firm to operate its Red Sea airport, and the Egyptians have signed a production-sharing agreement with Dutch Shell and a memorandum of understanding with Germany to build a high-speed rail network.



IRAN

Iran has regularly deployed naval forces to the Red Sea since 2011 as part of its Syrian war effort. Previously, it had long used the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea as a shipping route for illicit

weapons, often porting in Sudan, where the weapons would make their way up the African coast and across the Sinai to Iran’s proxies in the Levant. Although its relationship with Sudan has changed—and a past flirtation with Eritrea appears to have reversed as well—Iran continues to use the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea to transport weapons to the Houthis in Yemen, and a recent report suggests that some Iranian arms intended for Yemen end up in Somalia, probably due to a transshipment to Somalia before arriving in Yemen via dhows. Of additional concern to the Gulf states and Washington, an Iranian ship called the *Saviz* has been anchored off the Yemeni coast in international waters since mid-2017. Officially, it is a commercial ship, but officials suspect it is operated by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and is meant to aid efforts in Yemen. It is subject to U.S. secondary sanctions.²⁹ Iran declared in January 2021 that it will resume naval patrols in the Red Sea.



QATAR

Qatar’s toolbox in the Red Sea has consisted primarily of media penetration, air links, humanitarian aid, and investment. It also exports liquefied natural gas through the Red Sea, mainly to European markets. The Qatari media network Al Jazeera, which is widely available across Africa, has

put Doha’s viewpoint in many people’s living rooms. On the political front, in 2011, Qatar helped mediate the Darfur conflict, and it deployed troops to enforce a border agreement it negotiated between Eritrea and Djibouti. In 2017, when Qatar’s Gulf neighbors imposed a blockade and Eritrea and Djibouti downgraded relations with it, Qatar removed its troops from that border. Since then, it has been actively opening embassies in East Africa with a particularly keen focus on ensuring food security and alternative supply chains. Specifically, its financial resources have been critical for Somalia’s government. Qatar has also tried to build a relationship in Sudan, even offering a \$4 billion deal to develop the Suakin port—a deal now at risk because Sudan relies more on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The recent end of the Gulf rift, if it lasts, may help heal the wounds in both Sudan and Somalia, where the rift has had destabilizing effects (see the Sudan and Somalia sections for details).



RUSSIA

Russia, which has long had a presence in the eastern Mediterranean, has always wanted more Red Sea access. The Soviet Union had a presence in Aden (Yemen), Nakura Island (now part of Eritrea), and Berbera (Somaliland), and Russian president Vladimir Putin is attempting to reestablish and augment this historical footprint. A high-profile tour by Russian officials on both sides of the Red Sea in 2019 further suggested this renewed interest.³⁰ In summer 2020, moreover, Russia offered to mediate the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam conflict affecting Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia.

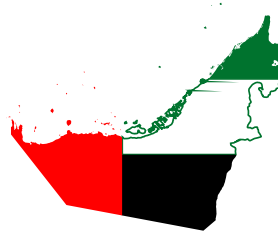
The Red Sea states do not see Russia through the same threat lens as does the United States. Although Russia has free entry agreements for ships in Sudan, Eritrea, and Egypt, it has desired a more permanent presence, perhaps owing to its significant trade through the Red Sea. U.S. data from 2019 suggests that “Russia accounted for the largest share (24%) of Suez southbound petroleum traffic.”³¹ After Russian talks fell through with Yemen, Djibouti, and Eritrea in the last decade, Russia negotiated an agreement for a naval logistics base in Sudan that recently came to fruition. In exchange, Sudan—already one of Africa’s largest buyers of Russian weapons—will receive more such weapons. Ethiopia also imports Russian weapons, and Russia reportedly entered the Eritrean market as soon as the UN arms embargo was lifted in 2018. A naval base in Sudan will raise concerns in the United States, the EU, and most particularly Turkey. Beijing, on the other hand, has welcomed the deal.



TURKEY

Turkey perceives the Red Sea area as part of its historic sphere of influence—dating back to centuries of Ottoman rule, at various points, along both sides of the waterway. Playing off its historic links, Turkey has led with a focus on markets, infrastructure development, and business ties, as well as humanitarian aid. Today, it has an embassy in every littoral state except Yemen—and it only lacks a Yemen embassy because of the war. Turkey has its supporters in the Horn: some see its governance system as a model, others appreciate its religious leadership model, particularly in contrast to Saudi Arabia, and still others note that Turkey hires more local workers than does China.

Turkey was an early participant in counterpiracy and counterterrorism missions beginning around 2009 and has maintained military access in the region as a result. Turkey's closest Red Sea relationship is with Somalia, where it has its largest overseas military facility, helping establish a Somali coast guard and training the Somali National Army. It also runs a massive assistance program in the country and has even agreed to pay off some Somali debt; Turkish companies have likewise run Mogadishu airport since 2013 and the port since 2014. The relationship has an added personal component: Somalis remember fondly when Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Mogadishu in August 2011 when no other world leader would.



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

In response to a perceived U.S. withdrawal from the region and the war in Yemen, the UAE has expanded its access to Red Sea countries and ports in recent years. The additional value it offers is most often in security training (e.g., in Puntland) and port management. According to a

Brookings Institution report, the UAE has some form of access to at least eight ports or bases along the Red Sea, although recent reports claim it is pulling out of Assab in Eritrea, which it leased as a military base for operations in Yemen.³² In 2016 and 2017, the UAE negotiated agreements to spend \$442 million to develop the Berbera port in Somaliland and \$336 million to develop the Bosaso port in Puntland, respectively.³³ In 2017, a report from the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea raised concerns that UAE military basing in the two Horn of Africa countries might violate arms embargoes.³⁴ The UAE apparently canceled plans for a military base in Berbera in 2020, the plans in Bosaso have been stalled since 2017, and Emirati officials claim they are pulling out of Assab and will have a lighter Red Sea footprint now that their Yemen involvement has declined.

The Emiratis are nevertheless investing in infrastructure in Ethiopia and developing relationships with Eritrea and Sudan. They are also contenders to reconstruct ports in Yemen when the war ends. Today, Dubai serves as a global trade middleman, but the Horn of Africa may eventually take on this role in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The UAE has offered to partner with China on Horn of Africa projects, serving as a third country investor.³⁵ It has also partnered with Egypt to explore oil and gas in the Red Sea.

African states appreciate the UAE's investment, interest, and some of its past diplomatic success with Eritrea and Ethiopia, but they worry about the lingering effects of the Gulf rift, especially in Somalia. Somalia is concerned particularly about a UAE proclivity to support competent adversaries of internationally legitimate states, as it has done in Somaliland, Libya, and Yemen. Furthermore, locals worry about potential blowback from the Emiratis recruiting young men in the Horn of Africa to fight as mercenaries in Yemen and Libya. Outside the Horn, the UAE's choice to normalize ties with Israel may enhance its interest in the Red Sea region. Abu Dhabi has been in talks with Israel on the possible use of a pipeline from Eilat to the Mediterranean coast.

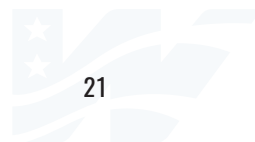
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