



ANALYSIS

RESTORING DETERRENCE AND FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION IN THE RED SEA: THE INTERACTION OF REGIONAL AND FOREIGN ACTORS

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Introduction

On March 15, 2025, U.S. forces launched large-scale and “unrelenting” attacks against the Houthi terrorists in Yemen.¹ These attacks had as their stated aim not just punishment of the Houthis for their attacks on international and Israeli shipping in and around the Red Sea. Rather the Trump Administration made clear that these attacks also were a warning to Iran to cease providing the Houthis with weapons and to forego its ongoing efforts to acquire nuclear weapons lest it undergo similar punishment.² Specifically President Trump stated that, “Every shot fired by the Houthis will be looked upon ... as being a shot fired from the weapons and leadership of Iran.”³ Thus, these attacks represented a particularly noteworthy example of conventional deterrence by punishment with the express threat of further attacks if either of these conditions, Houthi attacks coupled with Iranian support and/or Iranian nuclearization took place.

Rhetorically the Administration has promised the threat of “unrelenting,” i.e. continuing large-scale aerial attacks on the Houthis. But while such attacks are taking place, the Houthis are now (March 18, 2025) launching regular attacks on U.S. ships, particularly the USS Harry S. Truman carrier.⁴ They also are promising more attacks on Israeli ships for allegedly breaking the truce with Hamas.⁵ It is unclear if both sides are still shooting at each other as of early April. So, this might be a protracted deterrence operation, a situation that raises the question of whether or not this continuing and possibly continuous attack is the optimal strategy for Washington in confronting the Houthi challenge.

This essay attempts to reach a conclusion to that question by examining the nature of the Houthi challenge given the fact that while they may be acting on their own, at the same time it is clear that the Houthis enjoy the patronage of Iran, China, and Russia, making this a proxy

¹ Eric Schmitt and Jonathan Swan, “Trump Orders Attacks on Militant Sites in Yemen and Issues a Warning to Iran,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2025, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/15/us/politics/us-attack-houthis.html>; Keith Johnson, “Trump Dramatically Escalates Military Strikes on Yemen’s Houthis,” *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2025, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/03/18/trump-houthi-strikes-yemen-israel/>.

² Ibid.

³ Dennis Ross, “How to Match Ends and Means in the Middle East: America Must Rediscover the Practice of Statecraft,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 19, 2025, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/how-match-ends-and-means-middle-east>.

⁴ “Caitlyn Burchett, “US Strikes Houthis For Third Day, Pentagon Says Attacks Will Continue Until Targeting Of Red Sea Ships Stops,” *Stars and Stripes*, March 17, 2025, available at https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/2025-03-17/red-sea-attacks-houthis-yemen-17177178.html; “Houthis Claim Latest Attacks On US Warships and Promise Response To Israeli Massacre In Gaza,” *Tag 24*, March 18, 2025, available at <https://www.tag24.com/world/houthis-claim-latest-attacks-on-us-warships-and-promise-response-to-israeli-massacre-in-gaza-3369273>.

⁵ Ibid.



war. Furthermore, despite their claims of Arab solidarity with terrorist attacks on Israel, the evidence suggests that the Houthis' main motive is profit and terrorism that they then use to strengthen their position in Yemen.⁶ In other words, they are simultaneously pirates and terrorists as well as other parties' proxies. Thus, this operation also partakes of the war on terrorism and that aspect, too, must be taken into account. Therefore, any extended operation against the Houthis comprises aspects of conventional deterrence, proxy warfare as seen from Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow, and the war on terrorism. For these reasons it is necessary to begin with an exploration of the Houthis' strategy and the motives if not strategy of their patrons: Iran, China, Russia. Following this is a discussion of the U.S. operation and an assessment of its chances of success.

Despite the fall of the Assad regime, the defeats of both Hezbollah and Hamas, the ensuing collapse of Iran's axis of resistance strategy, and now American attacks, the Houthi rebels in Yemen remain undeterred. Until the truce between Hamas and Israel came into being the Houthis were still targeting and sinking ships in the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean.⁷ And now, as noted above, they have started firing at U.S. ships. Moreover, the Houthis have stepped up the pace of missile attacks against Israel—from October 7, 2023 to December 2024 they struck Israel with missiles 220 times.⁸ At the same time they are running guns to the Al-Shabaab pirates in the Indian Ocean and Horn of Africa.⁹ As *The Economist* points out, the Houthis are essentially running a protection racket, demanding fees from shippers to sail through the Red Sea or risk attack.¹⁰ Although they claim to be acting on behalf of Hamas and the Palestinians and have ceased attacks as long as a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas holds, their real motive appears to be making money with which to buy new weapons and cement their control over most of Yemen. Furthermore,

⁶ Jonah Carlson, "Houthi Motivations Driving the Red Sea Crisis: Understanding: How Ansar Allah's Strategic Culture Goes Beyond Gaza and Iran," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 2, 2024, pp. 94-114, available at <https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/MCU-Journal/JAMS-vol-15-no-2/Houthi-Motivations-Driving-the-Red-Sea-Crisis/>; Fatima Abo Alasarar, "The United States' Houthi Terrorist Designation Unmasks Russia's Yemen Strategy," Atlantic Council, March 14, 2025, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/houthi-terrorist-designation-russias-yemen-strategy/>.

⁷ Adam Makary, Hatem Maher and Jaidaa Ahmad, "Houthis Target Three Ships in Red Sea and Arabian Sea," *Marine Link*, October 29, 2024, available at <https://www.marinelink.com/news/houthis-target-three-ships-red-sea-518574>; Mohammad Sameai, "Yemen's Houthis Claim Attacks On 2 Vessels In Red Sea, Indian Ocean," *AA*, October 10, 2024, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/yemen-s-houthis-claim-attacks-on-2-vessels-in-red-sea-indian-ocean/3358340>.

⁸ Philissa Cramer, "Tel Aviv Area School Hit By Houthi Missile Fired From Yemen," *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, December 19, 2024, available at <https://www.jta.org/2024/12/19/israel/tel-aviv-area-school-hit-by-houthi-missile-fired-from-yemen>; Lazar Berman, "Israel Shifts Focus To Houthis, But It Needs Partners To Defeat Distant Foe," *Times of Israel*, December 25, 2024, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-shifts-focus-to-houthis-but-it-need-partners-to-defeat-distant-foe/>.

⁹ Rear Admiral Sudarshan Shrikande, Indian Navy Retired, "Red Sea Attacks Dominated The Indian Ocean Region in 2023," *Proceedings of the U.S. Naval Institute*, May 2024, p. 69.

¹⁰ "Houthi Inc: the pirates who weaponised globalisation," *The Economist*, January 16, 2025, available at <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/01/16/houthi-inc-the-pirates-who-weaponised-globalisation>; "Shipping Shakedown: Inside the Houthis' Moneymaking Machine," *The Economist*, January 16, 2025, available at <https://www.economist.com/interactive/international/2025/01/18/inside-the-houthis-moneymaking-machine>.

they and their Iranian allies have been attacking ships in the Red Sea since well before 2023.¹¹

Not surprisingly, they enjoy Iranian, Chinese, and Russian support. Those powers have transferred weapons, funding, and ship sighting technology to the Houthis. Certainly, the members of the so-called axis of upheaval have refused to support any diplomatic efforts against them. For example, China flatly rejected U.S. overtures to cooperate in defending freedom of navigation against the Houthi attacks.¹² Instead, despite early Houthi attacks on Chinese ships, Beijing rejected American overtures to make its own deal with the Houthis and probably remind Iran that they might shift suppliers of oil if attacks continued. Since Iran sells huge amounts of oil to China and depends on that revenue, this threat was serious.¹³ Likewise, the Houthis have stated that they will freely allow Russian and Chinese ships to traverse the Red Sea unmolested presumably in return for political if not military support.¹⁴ Thus, the Houthis are quite consciously acting not only on their own behalf but also as these states' proxies. As a result, they are threatening not only Israel and other Arab states who depend on the trade through this sea but also the foundational principle of freedom of the seas.¹⁵ By the end of 2024, "using various types of weapons, the Houthis have so far conducted over one hundred attacks against commercial ships and warships since November 2023, announcing new shipping restrictions at every stage of their campaign."¹⁶ More recently *The Economist* reported that for 2024 they attacked 200 ships damaging more than 40.¹⁷

For the moment the Houthis appear to have weathered the recent crises in the Middle East. Their opponents in Yemen continue to be unable to forge a united front against them

¹¹ Seth G. Jones, Jared Thompson, Danielle Ngo, Brian McSorley, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "The Iranian and Houthi War against Saudi Arabia, *CSIS Briefs*, December 2021, pp. 6-7, available at https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/211221_Jones_IranianHouthi_SaudiArabia.pdf?VersionId=fn1d98tAhj7yOUr.IncppMueLOC4kv83.

¹² Richard Lloyd Parry, "China 'Rejected' US Pleas To Cooperate In Houthi Crisis In Yemen," *The Times*, October 3, 2024, available at https://www.thetimes.com/world/middle-east/israel-hamas-war/article/china-rejected-us-pleas-to-co-operate-in-houthi-crisis-in-yemen-3t6s69x8z?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwY2xjawHWLEpleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHadTbGTMxP4I5GLYROyWUXhfAOkgjngNl_fyqeQWLJY7y9xtoN5VX2wFBQ_aem_b50061b1ihigq7HZ29IKaw®ion=global#Echobox=1727962657; "Shipping Shakedown," op. cit.

¹³ Ibid.; Bill Gertz, "China Sought Own Deal To Avoid Houthi Rebel Ship Attacks, Rejecting U.S. Coalition, Diplomat Says," *Washington Times*, October 9, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/oct/8/china-sought-own-deal-to-avoid-houthi-rebel-ship-a/>.

¹⁴ James Farrell, "Houthis Reportedly Strike Deal With Russia, China For Safe Passage," *Forbes*, May 21, 2024, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesfarrell/2024/03/21/houthis-reportedly-strike-deal-with-russia-china-for-safe-passage/>.

¹⁵ US Central Command, "CENTCOM Forces Defeat Houthi Attacks on U.S. Navy and U.S.-Flagged Ships in the Gulf of Aden," December 10, 2024, available at <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3994115/centcom-forces-defeat-houthi-attacks-on-us-navy-and-us-flagged-ships-in-the-gul/>; Robert Wright, "Houthis Extend Attacks On Shipping To Wider Indian Ocean," *Financial Times*, May 1, 2024, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/778a80a0-1f55-4ffc-ade0-857bd5bd9b92>.

¹⁶ Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi, "Houthi Shipping Attacks: Patterns and Expectation For 2025," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 16, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-shipping-attacks-patterns-and-expectations-2025>.

¹⁷ "Shipping Shakedown," op. cit.

and they are successfully recruiting new members.¹⁸ Furthermore, their arsenal appears to be growing. Recent reports indicate that,

The Houthis' military power has expanded with significant support from Iran, which has provided them with advanced missile and drone technology. Their arsenal now includes the Hastem-2-missile, the Asif anti-ship missile, and Iranian-made drones, enabling them to strike targets at long distances, including Israel, US and UK warships, and critical maritime trade routes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The group's military doctrine has evolved beyond traditional guerrilla tactics, adopting strategies similar to Iran's other regional proxies, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. This evolution includes the use of swarm drone warfare, precision-guided missile strikes, and a growing reliance on electronic warfare tactics to counter air and missile defense systems. The Houthis have also developed sophisticated deployment strategies, utilizing mobile launch platforms, coastal areas, and deeply buried underground storage facilities.¹⁹

The Houthis' rising strike capabilities confirm Australian expert, General Mick Ryan's (Ret.) observation that,

Implication 1: Strategic strike is no longer the preserve of major powers. During the Cold War, long-range strike capabilities were largely the preserve of major powers such as America, the Soviet Union and other nuclear powers such as Britain, France and China. However, the advent of cheaper long-range drones, wider availability of ballistic missiles, better access to commercial sensing systems and cyber operations means that long-range strike is now available to a much larger number of states, as well as non-state actors.²⁰

This factor plus the extent of foreign support for the Houthis necessitates a strategic approach to dealing with the problems they represent. The extent of foreign support for them highlights the entanglement of both regional and foreign actors in Red Sea and Middle Eastern security. These facts, plus the scope of these attacks, indicate that the Houthis are a multi-purpose terrorist organization serving objectives that transcend Yemen's tangled politics. This makes them an excellent proxy for Iran, China, and Russia. Meanwhile the pattern of their attacks reflected a steady escalation of strikes throughout 2024 on international trade and Israeli targets despite the defeats suffered by Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran.²¹ This fact, in turn, suggests that Iran, despite the breakdown of its strategies and defeats suffered in 2024, remains committed to its anti-Western strategy and the destruction of Israel. Therefore, the Houthis and the powers behind them—Iran, China, and Russia—

¹⁸ Paulo Aguilar, "Houthis Emerge From Red Sea Shipping Crisis Unscathed," *Geopolitical Monitor*, February 19, 2025, available at <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/houthis-emerge-from-red-sea-shipping-crisis-unscathed/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Mick Ryan, "Ukraine Strikes Back – Hard," *Futura Doctrina*, March 28, 2025, available at <https://mickryan.substack.com/p/ukraine-strikes-back-hard>.

²¹ Raydan and Nadimi, op. cit.

represent a serious threat to local, regional, and international security that must be deterred by a credible strategic operation lest they and their supporters believe that they once again have a green light for their attacks on the West.

The Need for Strategy

Accordingly, the necessity for a more effective strategy to deter the Houthis and their patrons is clear. The Houthis announced their support for Hamas early on after the latter's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, with the open intention of reorienting and significantly enhancing maritime and naval operations against Israel.²² They also purportedly are attacking international shipping in the Red Sea to punish supporters of Israel like the United States and United Kingdom. Consequently, if they are allowed to flourish and keep getting advanced weapons and GPS or other ship sighting technology from their patrons, giving them an enhanced sea domain awareness, their targeting could become "progressively more dangerous" leading to escalation of their attacks and effective closure of the Red Sea mainly to Western traffic.²³

As of the end of 2024, and probably as of April 2025, despite the presence of the U.S., UK, and other navies who are responding to Houthi attacks on shipping and retaliatory Israeli strikes whenever they launch a missile, and more recent U.S. strikes, the Houthis have not been deterred. Thus, they have introduced a jarring note into the ever-troubled Middle East. As the Jordanian scholar, Hasan Jaber writes,

The geopolitical complexities of the Red Sea have intensified due to the Gaza conflict and the Houthis' strategic actions in Yemen. The Houthis' targeted attacks on Israeli-linked maritime routes have introduced a disruptive new dimension, linking Red Sea stability to broader Middle Eastern escalation. Their latest strategy of balancing threats (as a non-state actor) —leveraging asymmetrical tactics to create economic and security challenges—has exposed Israel's vulnerabilities and exerted indirect pressure on both Israel and its allies. This approach highlights the evolving nature of modern conflict, where non-state actors can significantly impact regional stability.²⁴

Even when individual strikes appear to increase in frequency and magnitude this has not stopped Houthi attacks.²⁵ Thus Jaber and Ryan's observations must be factored into any operational planning against them to terminate their attacks on international shipping. The U.S.-led multi-national Operation Prosperity Guardian has also hitherto failed to uproot the

²² Shrikande, op. cit., p. 69.

²³ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁴ Hasan Jaber, "Strategic Shifts in the Red Sea: Houthis' Strategies, Gaza War, and Prosperity Guardian Operation," *Jordanian Politics & Society Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2024, p. 137.

²⁵ U.S. Central Command, "CENTCOM Forces Strike Houthi Advanced Conventional Weapon Storage Facilities in Yemen," January 8, 2025, available at <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/4023812/centcom-forces-strike-houthi-advanced-conventional-weapon-storage-facilities-in/>.

Houthis. As Rear Admiral Sudarshan Shrikande (Ret.) of the Indian Navy points out, presence does not equate to deterrence.²⁶ Still worse, “At the same time, among nations that have developed navies and other instruments of power, it has been difficult to find strategic coherence and common policy outcomes aided by well-coordinated operations.”²⁷ Likewise, Jaber reports that,

The U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian underscores the challenges and limitations of international military coalitions in addressing such multifaceted threats. The absence of crucial regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Egypt from the coalition reflects their strategic priorities and questions the operation’s effectiveness. These dynamics illustrate a broader trend of regional powers focusing inward and avoiding entanglement in additional conflicts.²⁸

Clearly the United States has struggled to forge effective partnerships and partners are concerned by the potential loss of high-tech platforms and weapons to the Houthi attacks.²⁹ The recent unilateral attacks and the unwarranted and uninformed scoffing at European participation displayed in the Signalgate scandal continues this trend of failing to build effective partnerships.³⁰ A conference of experts on the Red Sea similarly concluded that,

Adversarial forces have near parity in capability in the Red Sea, a unique feature of the area. Relations between the United States and Iran offer one example. The US is stretched very thinly in the Red Sea, without enough vessels to control the area alone, making it in need of regional assets and partners. Iran, meanwhile, has essentially a ‘floating armory’ patrolling the Red Sea, at the disposal of a regime that knows how to leverage harm to the international system and its Western backers.³¹

Therefore, it is increasingly clear that the United States and its allies, including Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, must develop an effective campaign plan to forestall the Houthis and their patrons’ future attacks and negate their strategies connected to those attacks.³² Moreover, this campaign must include pressure upon if not targeting of Iran, an idea that is

²⁶ Shrikande, op. cit., p. 68.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jaber, op. cit., p. 137.

²⁹ Shrikande, op. cit., p. 68.

³⁰ Jeffrey Goldberg and Shane Harris, “Here Are the Attack Plans That Trump’s Advisers Shared On Signal,” *The Atlantic*, March 26, 2025, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/03/signal-group-chat-attack-plans-hegseth-goldberg/682176/>.

³¹ Simon Rynn and Benjamin P. Nickels, “Enhancing Security In the Red Sea Arena,” The Clock Tower Series, George C. Marshall European Center For Security Studies, 2024, p. 2, available at <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/clock-tower-security-series/enhancing-security-red-sea-arena/enhancing-security-red-sea-arena>.

³² Tamir Hayman, “The Strike In Yemen: A Justified Response-But Insufficient For Changing the Reality,” The Institute for National Security Studies, December 19, 2024, available at https://www.inss.org.il/social_media/the-strike-in-yemen-a-justified-response-but-insufficient-for-changing-the-reality/.

gaining currency in Israel and possibly in the United States.³³ This is because a direct bombing campaign will not suffice to deter or stop the Houthis unless the flow of weapons and technology from their patrons is stopped.³⁴ Since a land operation against them in Yemen is quite unlikely, any successful campaign must leverage allied air, sea, and diplomatic capabilities to strategic effect. The new U.S. strikes on the Houthis thus represent the Trump Administration's unilateral effort to cut the Gordian Knot and solve the problem by airpower and the threat of holding Iran hostage to the Houthis' behavior as a form of deterrence. Therefore, they are likely to fail to achieve a strategic resolution of this threat whatever the short-term results might be.

The danger of the Houthis and their patrons' returning to escalatory attacks if they are not deterred is a real one. Despite strong U.S. and allied counterstrikes on Houthi targets, they refuse to desist from attacking ships in these locales though they claim a willingness to sign a roadmap agreement for peace with Yemen.³⁵ In other words, they want full freedom to continue fighting and thus to obtain foreign support. It should also be remembered that they have fought an on-again off-again war with Saudi Arabia for years.³⁶ And their attacks on Israel reflect not just an abiding anti-Semitism but clear support for Iran's strategy while Sino-Russian support for the Houthis displays these powers' support for Iran, for advancing their regional agenda, and their commitment to promoting regional destabilization wherever possible. Furthermore, as many observers understand, attacking the Houthis with expensive missiles while they can use drones and cheaper weapons means they are fighting a cost-imposing strategy against the United States and its allies and that they are at least holding their own.³⁷

From the Israeli point of view the justification for a campaign against the Houthis, as Prime Minister Netanyahu is now threatening, is quite strong apart from the terror attacks by missiles upon civilians.³⁸ As Tamir Hayman of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) writes,

³³ Ibid.; James Dorsey, "Israel's Middle East War: Yemen Is Definitely Next, Maybe Iran Too," December 26, 2024, available at <https://jamesmdorsey.substack.com/p/israels-middle-east-war-yemen-is>; Alexander Ward and Laurence Norman, "Trump Team Weighs Options, Including Airstrikes, to Stop Iran's Nuclear Program," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2024, available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/trump-iran-plan-nuclear-weapons-def26f1d>.

³⁴ John Grady, "Stopping Flow Of Weapons To Houthis Key To Halting Merchant Attacks Says Fleet Forces Commander," *USNI News*, December 16, 2024, available at <https://news.usni.org/2024/12/16/stopping-flow-of-weapons-to-houthis-key-to-halting-merchant-attacks-says-fleet-forces-commander#:~:text=Daryl%20Caudle,Fleet%20Forces%20commander%20said%20Thursday>.

³⁵ Mohammad Sameai, "Houthis Express Readiness To Sign Yemen Peace Roadmap But Rejects Ceasing Red Sea Attacks," *AA*, December 17, 2024, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/houthis-express-readiness-to-sign-yemen-peace-roadmap-but-rejects-ceasing-red-sea-attacks/3427187>.

³⁶ Michael Knights, "The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. XI, No. 1, 2018, available at <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/houthi-war-machine-guerrilla-war-state-capture/>.

³⁷ Geoff Ziezulewicz, "What Red Sea Battles Have Taught the Navy About a Future China Fight," *The War Zone*, January 28, 2025, available at <https://www.twz.com/news-features/what-red-sea-battles-have-taught-the-navy-about-a-future-china-fight>.

³⁸ Dorsey, op. cit.

The reality is that from the moment the Houthis imposed a maritime blockade upon Israel, they effectively declared war. The blockade should have been lifted as quickly as possible using the IDF's capabilities, particularly the Navy. Due to the heavy burden on Israel's defense establishment and the desire to give the international coalition a chance to act against the Houthis, Israel refrained from responding for many months. Only after the murder of an Israeli citizen did the first response occur. Since then, Israel has attacked twice more, each time destroying critical infrastructure relating to energy and commerce. In contrast, the international coalition has limited itself to addressing Houthi military capabilities and, until recently, has primarily focused on removing threats and protecting shipping routes. Two critical elements have been entirely absent in the campaign against the Houthis. One is striking the sender, Iran, which funds and orchestrates the missiles from Yemen. Both the international coalition and Israel have responded directly to the proxy rather than to the hand rocking the cradle. Second, there has been no effort to destroy the Houthis command and control or significantly degrade their military power. In other words, there is no extensive or sustained campaign to weaken the Houthis in a way that intensifies the pressure, as has been done with other adversaries in the current war.³⁹

The Strategic Agenda

Clearly the Red Sea region has thus become, "a showcase of shortcomings for the regional and international security order."⁴⁰ Equally obviously, there are strategic lessons here to ponder and learn from as a guide to defeating the Houthis, their patrons, and the strategies behind them. These lessons pertain to both the challenges of proxy war and to the question of preserving and/or restoring conventional deterrence and escalation control.

Obviously, the Houthis are an organization that combines terrorism with piracy and blackmail and does so on behalf of Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow as well as for its own interests. So, whatever the degree of alleged disunity in the Houthis' ranks may be, their criminal behavior now aligns with that of the so-called axis of upheaval.⁴¹ There are also still more aggravating factors from these attacks. For example, "The Houthis could launch more frequent and sophisticated missile and drone attacks on Israeli territory, ports, or infrastructure, demonstrating their capabilities and commitment to the 'Axis of Resistance.'"⁴² Worse yet, the Houthis are extending their support network to other regional non-state armed groups, including terrorists. Therefore, their attacks could, unless checked,

³⁹ Hayman, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Rynn and Nickels, op. cit., p. 5.

⁴¹ Robert Lansing Institute, "Scenarios and Implications of Escalating Conflict Between Israel and the Houthis," January 10, 2025, available at <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/01/10/scenarios-and-implications-of-escalating-conflict-between-israel-and-the-houthis/>.

⁴² Ibid.

extend further out into the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, or Persian Gulf.⁴³ In that case this network would become far more difficult to confront.

At the same time, Houthi attacks clearly are part of the strategy of members of the anti-Western axis comprising Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. Thus, the Houthis agreed to allow Chinese and Russian ships through the Red Sea, clearly signifying support for those powers.⁴⁴ Similarly they have received a wide range of Iranian military support for years.⁴⁵ Iran and its partners like Russia provided them with weapons and logistical support, much of it running through Syria. Russia has apparently also given the Houthis the technology necessary for them to target foreign ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.⁴⁶

However, the fall of the Assad regime in Syria may undermine them as it has certainly wrecked Iran and Russia's strategy of support for Hamas and Hezbollah because Syria was the logistical lynchpin of Iran's regional strategy. As Hassan Shemshadi, an expert on Iran's proxy militant groups, has observed, "Everything that Iran sent to the region went through Syria. It is now extremely difficult to keep these channels open."⁴⁷ Therefore the signs that Russia may succeed in retaining those bases has serious negative implications for the entire Middle East.⁴⁸

Yet there is still no sign that Iran is reconsidering its position on the Houthis or in support of its other proxies despite its and their many recent defeats.⁴⁹ In fact there is evidence that Iran is seeking, if it has not already acquired, new proxies in the Horn of Africa adjacent to the Red Sea, namely Eritrea, which has attacked Azerbaijani ships in the Horn of Africa. Since Azerbaijan is closely aligned to Israel and deeply antagonistic to Iran (and vice versa), this attack may well bear Iranian fingerprints.⁵⁰ Thus, given the defeat of Iran's other proxies,

⁴³ Eleonora Ardemagni, "Beyond the Axis: Yemen's Houthis are Building their 'Network of Resistance'," *RUSI*, November 18, 2024, available at <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/beyond-axis-yemens-houthis-are-building-their-network-resistance>.

⁴⁴ "Houthis Agree to Give China and Russia Ships a Pass in Red Sea," *Bloomberg*, March 21, 2024, available at <https://gcaptain.com/houthis-give-china-and-russia-a-pass-on-red-sea-shipping/>.

⁴⁵ Defense Intelligence Agency, "Iran Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East," February 28, 2024, available at https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Iran_Houthi_Final2.pdf.

⁴⁶ Matthew Loh, "Russia Gave Yemen's Houthi Rebels Satellite Data So They Could Attack Red Sea Shipping Lanes: Report," *Business Insider*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-gave-houthis-satellite-data-hit-red-sea-shipping-report-2024-10>.

⁴⁷ Farnaz Fassihidi, "In the Syrian Regime's Hour of Need, Its Patron Iran Makes an Exit," *The New York Times*, December 8, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/07/world/middleeast/iran-syria-rebels.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁴⁸ Loveday Morris and Zakaria Zakaria, "Syria Could Allow Russia To Keep Its Bases, New Defense Minister Says," *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2025, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/02/06/syria-defense-minister-russia-bases/>.

⁴⁹ Paul Iddon, "Iran Refuses To Back Down As Its Proxies Endure Unprecedented Attacks," *Forbes*, October 4, 2024, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2024/10/04/iran-refuses-to-back-down-as-its-proxies-endure-unprecedented-attacks/>.

⁵⁰ Habtom Gherebezghiabher, "Eritrea Has Become Iran's Proxy-and a Strategic Threat To Israel and the U.S.," *Haaretz*, January 16, 2025, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2025-01-16/ty-article/.premium/eritrea-has-become-irans-proxy-and-a-strategic-threat-to-israel-and-the-u-s/00000194-6bae-ddc5-abd7-fbfb30e60000>.

the Houthis may now function as the key linchpin of this Iranian strategy.⁵¹ Meanwhile, as noted above, the Houthis show no sign of being deterred.

Consequently, the local crisis initially triggered by the Houthis' struggle for power in Yemen has visibly escalated to the regional and even great power level, demonstrating how easily the failure of conventional deterrence until now has made future deterrence more difficult, costly, and risky because sensitive if not vital regional and great power interests are now on the table. The Houthis' involvement and participation in Iran's strategy exemplify these processes for many reasons, not least due to Iranian and Russian backing for their raids on international commerce.

Worse yet, Western deterrence against both Tehran and the Houthis, including Israeli strategy, has failed. That failure, in turn, highlights the Houthis' successful strategy. They are conducting a cost-imposing strike upon the United States and its allies by using cheap drones to target vessels traversing the Red Sea while the United States and Israel, if not other allies participating in defense of freedom of navigation, have had to rely upon very expensive missiles and incur the cost of stationing navies in a war zone for extended durations. Therefore, it is necessary to find both an efficient and effective means of deterring them into the future. In other words, the operational, if not strategic challenge confronting the West is the restoration of conventional deterrence, the cessation of Iranian support, and the ensuing suppression or cessation of the Houthis' attacks on international trade and U.S. allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Houthi Attacks

The Houthis' attacks on shipping, Saudi Arabia, and Israel represent critical elements of Iran's strategy involving its own forces and these three terrorist militaries, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. These attacks have served a three-fold purpose while constituting Tehran's "axis of resistance." They were to confront Israel and exercise constant pressure upon it from multiple axes: Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, if possible, and the Red Sea. As one recent account observes, "The more the Houthis' regional influence and ambitions rise, the more difficult it will be for regional and international stakeholders to disentangle the war in Yemen from the broader Middle East crisis."⁵² Their presence in these contested areas also serves to intimidate and thus deter Arab states from either forging new ties with Israel or threatening (particularly with U.S. backing or presence) Iran.

For example, as late as October 2024, after Iran attacked Israel for the second time with missiles and was awaiting Israel's reprisal (which came on October 26), Iran covertly but clearly warned the Gulf states and other regional U.S. allies in the Middle East that if they permitted their territories or airspace to be used for that reprisal or another attack on Iran,

⁵¹ Ardemagni, op. cit.

⁵² Ibid.

Iran would retaliate against them.⁵³ The scope and extent of Iran's threats reflects as well the full range of its ambitions as expressed in its strategy combining terrorism with threats of missile attacks. As one report noted,

The Arab officials said the countries that Iran has threatened include Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, all of which host U.S. troops. These states have told the Biden administration that they don't want their military infrastructure or airspace to be used by the U.S. or Israel for any offensive operations against Iran, the officials said. While the Iranian threats are vague, they have raised concerns in energy-rich Persian Gulf states that their oil facilities—long viewed as protected by an American security umbrella—could be hit, the Arab officials said. U.S. military installations and forces in the region could also be at risk in a region with one of the highest concentrations of American troops in the world, they added.⁵⁴

These threats clearly also foreshadow Iran's potential use of its nuclear weapons as a shield behind which terrorists could strike at these Arab countries or Israel or in other words an Iranian nuclear weapon or weapons would function as an extended deterrent against any retaliatory moves by anyone, including the United States. This point underscores the necessity of holding Iran to account for Houthi behavior before Tehran gets usable nuclear weapons.

At the same time, the losses to global trade and the global economy due to Houthi attacks are equally discernible. The Defense Intelligence Agency reported in mid-2024 the following damages to international trade from these attacks:

- As of mid-February 2024, container shipping through Red Sea had declined by approximately 90% since December 2023; shipping via the Red Sea typically accounts for approximately 10-15% of international maritime trade. Effects have been less severe in other shipping sectors carrying commodities on bulkers and tankers.
- Alternate shipping routes around Africa add about 11,000 nautical miles, 1-2 weeks of transit time, and approximately \$1 million in fuel costs for each voyage.
- For many shipping companies, the combined costs of crew bonuses, war risk insurance (roughly 1000% more than pre-war costs), and Suez transit fees make the additional time and financial costs traveling around Africa less expensive by comparison.
- Threats to Red Sea transits are compounding ongoing stress to global maritime shipping caused by interruptions at the Panama Canal due to drought. As of mid-

⁵³ Summer Said, Nancy A. Youssef, Omar-Abdel Baqui, "Iran's Secret Warning To U.S. Allies: Don't Help Israel Or You're Next," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2024, available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/irans-secret-warning-to-u-s-allies-dont-help-israel-or-youre-next-ccfa5fa0>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

February, insurance premiums for Red Sea transits have risen to 0.7-1.0% of a ship's total value, compared to less than 0.1% before December 2023.

- As of February 2024, humanitarian relief for Sudan and Yemen was also being delayed by weeks and costing aid organizations more because of longer routes around Africa.⁵⁵

Although some shippers have benefitted from the high costs imposed due to these attacks, by October 2024, transit in the Bab al-Mandab Strait is still down by over 50 percent year-over-year. The Red Sea crisis has created challenges for regional ports and key navigational routes like the Suez Canal, where the number of transits plummeted from around 2,068 in November 2023 to about 877 in October 2024, according to data from Lloyd's List Intelligence.⁵⁶

These costs apply as well to individual Middle Eastern states. For example, Egypt is incurring serious losses due to the Houthis. After record levels and a strong outlook for canal operations, reports indicate that overall traffic is down between 60 and 70 percent in the Suez Canal. The vast majority of container ships and all cruise ships have been diverted while an increasing number of bulkers, tankers, and car carriers have also rerouted. This comes despite U.S. and EU efforts to maintain navigation and suppress attacks by the Houthis. The past few months have shown a significant decline in the number of missile and drone attacks and long gaps between staging attacks. Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdel Aati, however, reported that the loss of traffic has cost the Egyptian economy around \$6 billion in the past year. He emphasized to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) the critical role the canal income plays to the country.⁵⁷

Since then, the cost has gone up to \$7 billion equal to one third of Egypt's current account deficit.⁵⁸ Likewise, Israel has incurred costs of \$3 billion to its Red Sea Port of Eilat (excluding the damage done by Houthi missiles to the country's interior). Eilat has also suffered an 85% drop in activity.⁵⁹ These attacks also threaten Israel's other ports, Ashdod and Haifa, as at least 30% of the cargoes imported to Israel at these ports also must travel through the Red Sea.⁶⁰ These large-scale losses and costs to both allies and international trade oblige Washington and its allies to deter the Houthis and their Iranian patron sooner

⁵⁵ U.S. Naval Institute Staff, "DIA Report on Houthi Attacks and Pressure on International Trade," *USNI News*, June 13, 2024, available at <https://news.usni.org/2024/06/13/dia-report-on-houthi-attacks-and-pressure-on-international-trade#:~:text=Economic%20Implications%20of%20Houthi%20Attacks,15%25%20of%20international%20maritime%20trade>.

⁵⁶ Raydan and Nazimi, op. cit.

⁵⁷ "Egyptian Officials Cite 'Severe Loss' at One Year Mark for Houthi Attacks," November 4, 2024, available at <https://maritime-executive.com/article/egyptian-officials-cite-severe-loss-at-one-year-mark-for-houthi-attacks>.

⁵⁸ "Shipping Shakedown," op. cit.

⁵⁹ "Israeli Ports Impacted By Houthi Strikes," *Africa News*, August 13, 2024, available at <https://www.africanews.com/2024/01/24/israeli-ports-impacted-by-houthi-strikes//>; Ari Rabinovich, "Israel's Eilat Port Sees 85% Drop In Activity Amid Red Sea Houthi Attacks," *Reuters*, December 21, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israels-eilat-port-sees-85-drop-activity-amid-red-sea-houthi-attacks-2023-12-21/>.

⁶⁰ "Israeli Ports Impacted By Houthi Strikes," Ibid.

rather than later to restore both allied security in the Red Sea and international trade. Moreover, the Houthis' patrons, China and Russia, are benefitting from this situation even though overall traffic in the Red Sea has declined by 50%. Despite this decline, Chinese shipping has increased and now represents about 20% of total shipping through the Red Sea while most of the crude oil traversing the Red Sea is Russian.⁶¹

Thus, the Houthis must be deterred because their activities not only imperil Red Sea shipping that accounts for about 12% of global shipping trade, but also because the longer they can act with impunity the more likely it is that other predatory actors will learn from and emulate their example with cascading effects for global trade and security.⁶² Furthermore, to the degree that they can continue to act with impunity, the danger of their becoming an autonomous force or one benefitting from Iran's extended deterrence grows by an order of magnitude. This deterrence strategy also entails countering if not also deterring Iran, China, and Russia's power projection strategy as they all have a demonstrated interest in having the Houthis continue their campaign despite the defeats of their "entente" or alignment in Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon. At the same time Jerusalem, U.S. allies, and Washington clearly have coinciding interests regarding security in the Red Sea and reopening it to free international navigation. Neither are they alone. Saudi Arabia has a long-running conflict with the Houthis and virtually every other regional government in the Middle East is at explicit risk from Iran.

Meanwhile, the Houthis' ongoing attacks not only call deterrence into question, their attacks on foreign navigation and Israel also epitomize the process by which regional conflicts become arenas for international and great power competition or possibly confrontation. Still another reason for the necessity of a more robust deterrence strategy is the failure of all previous attempts to deter the Houthis. The EU's Operation Aspides to protect Red Sea shipping has proven to be a resounding failure. It "lacks muscle" and it has escorted less than half the ships who need protection while NATO's ships take the long way home around Asia and Africa.⁶³ Other such efforts are also of limited utility.⁶⁴

Iranian Strategy

Given the Houthis' continuing attacks on both Israel and international shipping and their growing links to other non-state actors in the Horn of Africa, combined with Iran's nuclear, anti-Western, and anti-Israel strategy, the danger of not eliminating this threat is clear. Even if Hamas and Hezbollah are destroyed, Iran could reconstitute its "axis of resistance" around the Houthis and their connections in the Horn of Africa, and the Gulf, while still threatening Western, Saudi, and Israeli interests with support from Russia and China. That would

⁶¹ Shipping Shakedown," op. cit.

⁶² "Houthi Inc.," op. cit.

⁶³ "Shipping Shakedown," op. cit.

⁶⁴ Shirkande, op. cit.; Jaber, op. cit.

represent a continuation of Iran's previous asymmetric strategy.⁶⁵ Ideally, from Iran's standpoint, that could give Iran and its proxies local naval supremacy in and around the Red Sea and align it further with piracy in the Horn of Africa.⁶⁶ This is not an imaginary threat. Iran's Revolutionary Guards have just unveiled a hitherto secret underwater naval base at an undisclosed location:

Iran's unveiling of a new naval base is significant as it indicates that they are preparing for direct conflict with regional enemies, and possibly ones abroad. Moreover, the fact that the naval base is meant to house vessels capable of launching long-range missiles signifies that Tehran is planning to conduct more long-distance strikes.⁶⁷

Thus, the naval threat, whether in the Straits of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf, the Horn of Africa, or the Red Sea is now quite palpable.

At the same time, Iran has also used its terrorist proxies, along with the rising threat of nuclear capability, to enhance its own power projection capabilities in the Red Sea to the mounting concern of Israel and Egypt among others. As noted by several analysts,

In the background, Israel is concerned about Iran's attempts to establish a presence in the Red Sea region, evident in the deployment of an Iranian intelligence ship in the area, the continuous operation of Iranian warships in the Red Sea waters, and the activities of Iran's proxy in the region, the Houthi terrorist militia. Recently, Iran has renewed its interest in Sudanese ports, posing a threat to Israel and other countries in the region and further destabilizing the Red Sea area. Egypt also views the Houthi attacks as a direct and serious threat to its national security, but it seeks to end the attacks through a ceasefire in Gaza, which it claims is the root of the crisis.⁶⁸

Iran could then also function as a broker or middleman between Russia and the Houthis or these groups aligned with it since it has reportedly participated in talks to broker the shipment of Russian Yakhont (p-800 Oniks) anti-ship missiles to the Houthis.⁶⁹ And Iran's own capability to produce missiles and drones obviously plays a role here, especially in view of the new underwater base. Indeed, "Iran has also recently received a delivery of 1,000 domestically produced drones with a range of more than 1,200 miles, which are known for their 'advanced anti-

⁶⁵ Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran's Gray Zone Strategy: Cornerstone Of Its Asymmetric Way Of War," *Prism*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 77-97, 2021, available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2541911/irans-gray-zone-strategy-cornerstone-of-its-asymmetric-way-of-war/>.

⁶⁶ Seth Frantzman, "Shadow War: Houthi Attacks Paved the Way For Iran's Naval Supremacy-Analysis," *The Jerusalem Post*, September 7, 2024, available at <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-819075>.

⁶⁷ Maya Mehrara, "Iran Unveils New Underground Naval Base," *Newsweek*, January, 20, 2025, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/iran-unveils-new-underground-naval-base-2017582>.

⁶⁸ Yoel Guznansky, Yuval Eylon, Ofir Winter, "Israel In The Red Sea: From Threats To Cooperation," The Institute for National Security Studies, October 9, 2024, available at <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-in-the-red-sea/>.

⁶⁹ John Irish Pariza Hafezi, and Jonathan Landay, "Exclusive: Iran Brokering Talks To Send Advanced Russian Missiles To Yemen's Houthi," *Reuters*, September 24, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-brokering-talks-send-advanced-russian-missiles-yemens-houthis-sources-say-2024-09-24/>.

fortification and stealth capabilities.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, Iran’s overall strategy of arming and then deploying Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis to deter Arab, Israeli, and Western pressure on Iran apparently remains intact.⁷¹ Iran believes that its proxies’ constant pressure was weakening Israel in preparation for what Iranian strategists believed and hoped would be a final struggle with it.⁷² Iran has also used these assets, along with the rising threat of nuclear capability, to enhance its own power projection capabilities in the Red Sea to the mounting concern of Israel, Egypt, and others.⁷³

This move appears to be part of a broader Iranian ambition to acquire bases and permanent influence in Africa. For example, Iran is supporting the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) of General Abd Al-Fatah al-Burhan with weapons against the rebel forces led by General Handan Daglo Hemedti. This support has triggered reports that Iran might be eyeing a naval base in Sudan. Iran may even have asked for such a base in exchange for advanced weapons, drones and a seagoing helicopter. While such reports remain unconfirmed and trigger strong denials, it makes sense for Iran to have sought such a base as it already operates naval vessels in the Red Sea. Therefore, this base would give it more ability to help the Houthis and to threaten international shipping in the Red Sea.⁷⁴ Since it appears that the Russo-Sudanese agreement on a naval base for Russia in Sudan is once again on, though some think an Iranian base would rival that of Russia, the most recent trends in Russo-Iranian relations suggests otherwise.⁷⁵ This is especially true in regard to the recent Russo-Iranian treaty.

Iran has already created its own naval forces capable of blocking the Straits of Hormuz using mines, drones, missiles, small boat swarms, and submarines to deploy anti-access weapons that can target U.S. commercial vessels and capital ships. It aims to deter U.S. presence there and in the Gulf more generally. Having a base in the Horn of Africa and combining its Persian Gulf assets with that base, the Houthis could create a very formidable naval threat in those waters for the United States, Israel, and commercial shipping.⁷⁶

At the same time, however, the most disturbing recent action in this region is the recent Russo-Iranian treaty of January 2025.⁷⁷ This treaty proclaims the parties’ mutual desire to strengthen regional security in the former Soviet space and Middle East. It proclaims enhanced defense cooperation that suggests more mutual arms and technology transfers. Thus military-technical cooperation is expressly included here as a mutual commitment.

⁷⁰ Mehrara, op. cit.

⁷¹ Arash Reisinezhad, “Iran’s Israel Strategy Has Already Changed,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/11/irans-israel-strategy-has-already-changed/>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Guznansky, Eylon, and Winter, op. cit.

⁷⁴ Andrew McGregor, “Iran’s Red Sea Strategy Amid the RSF-SAF Fratricidal War In Sudan,” The Jamestown Foundation, December 11, 2024, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/irans-red-sea-strategy-amid-the-rsf-saf-fratricidal-war-in-sudan/>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Eisenstadt, op. cit., p. 79.

⁷⁷ Government Of the Islamic Republic Of Iran, “Full Text Of Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement,” January 17, 2025, available at <https://irangov.ir/detail/456479>.

Given Iran's missile and drone transfers to Russia and oft-expressed interest in advanced fighters like the Su-35 and air defenses, this could also include support for exchanges of nuclear, missile, and space technology. Indeed, there already are Iranian reports that claim Iran has received the Su-35.⁷⁸ The treaty further states that both sides will expand intelligence cooperation and anti-terrorist cooperation, suggesting cooperation with Iranian efforts to subvert Azerbaijan on the alleged grounds of terrorism there as well as support for Iranian proxies in the Middle East. The treaty also openly advocates excluding American and European influence in the Middle East and the Caspian basin i.e., it proposes a Russian hegemony over Central Asia and the Caucasus. In economics, it emphasizes creating a North-South transport corridor from Iran and presumably beyond to Russia that would block independent Central Asian trade and transport routes while tying Azerbaijan to a Russian dominated economic scheme. Thus, this accord, though not a formal defense alliance, nonetheless represents a treaty for increased subversion, terrorism against both Israel and Arab governments, war in Ukraine, weapons, and possibly nuclear technology trade between the parties.⁷⁹

Beyond all the preceding examples of Iran's aggressive policies, Iran's reported closeness to acquiring a functioning nuclear weapon shows that its nuclear program is closer to fruition than ever before. Iran has already exceeded the level of 60% enriched uranium that has served as a benchmark for proliferators with every other state that has enriched uranium to that level acquiring nuclear weapons.⁸⁰ It also is true that Iran's extensive suite of drones and missiles, plus help from China and Russia, ensure that Iran's overall arsenal and its policies remain profoundly destabilizing factors across the entire Middle East. Should Iran successfully create its own nuclear weapons, a goal to which Iran has now come very close, that would allow it to extend nuclear and conventional deterrence to its proxies and other members of this "axis of resistance" in order to move forward with its goal of destroying Israel and establishing an Iranian-sponsored Shiite hegemony in the Middle East.⁸¹ At the same time, these proxies, backed up by Iran's increasing missile and drone arsenal and ultimately its nuclear potential, constitute an equally wide range of threats to every other Middle Eastern state. Indeed, Iran or these proxies have frequently threatened or struck at those states.

This strategy lies in ruins for the moment. Nevertheless, that does not mean Iran will renounce its nuclear strategy. Indeed, defeat may lead Iran to accelerate its nuclear program,

⁷⁸ "Iran's Revolutionary Guards Commander Says Iran Purchased Russian-Made Sukhoi 35 Fighter Jets," *U.S. News*, January 27, 2025, available at <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2025-01-27/irans-revolutionary-guards-commander-says-iran-purchased-russian-made-sukhoi-35-fighter-jets>.

⁷⁹ "Full Text Of Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement," op. cit.

⁸⁰ Ross, op. cit.

⁸¹ "Iran's Nuclear Timetable: The Weapon Potential," *Iran Watch*, September 18, 2024, available at <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/articles-reports/irans-nuclear-timetable-weapon-potential>; David E. Sanger, "Iran Makes 'Dramatic' Leap to Produce Near-Bomb-Grade Fuel, But To What End?," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/06/us/politics/iran-nuclear-fuel.html?searchResultPosition=4>.

as appears to have been the case.⁸² The Houthis may have stopped their attacks on Israel and others because of the earlier cease-fires in Gaza, although they are now resuming them given the renewed fighting.⁸³ Thus the cease-fire in Gaza as virtually every observer expected, proved to be a fragile and temporary makeshift.⁸⁴ Consequently nothing except a campaign that either destroys the Houthis' capability or completely deters Iran and others from supporting them will stop them from resuming these attacks against Israel, international commerce, freedom of navigation, and the West, since their access to missiles and drones, presumably through Iran is still functioning. To be sure, many analyses of the Houthis posit them as a somewhat independent group where the degree of Iranian influence upon them may be less than that possessed over Hamas and Hezbollah. Indeed, the degree of Iranian influence eludes precise definition. Nevertheless, the linkages to Tehran exist and continue as does the supply of weapons. As one analysis noted,

Over the past decade, Iran has emerged as a key regional player in Yemen supporting Ansar Allah (commonly known as the Houthis). In research and policy circles, there are three primary analyses of this relationship. The first exaggerates the extent of Iranian influence in Yemen, considering the Houthis as a regional proxy—a perspective supported by the internationally recognized government and its allies, namely the United States (U.S.) and Saudi Arabia. The second view, representing Iran and its supporters, regards the Houthis as an autonomous entity representing the Yemeni Republic—merely aligned with Iran on certain aims and ideological positions. The third view recognizes a complex relationship between Iran and the Houthis. The group has used Iranian missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and other weapons “of Iranian origin.” Still, it is not clear whether the relationship is one of subordination or a partnership. Though similar interests do bring them together, other factors clarify the nature of the relationship, which began before the Houthi takeover of Sanaa and escalated after the Saudi-led Arab coalition launched Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015. Nevertheless, the extent of Iran's influence over the war in Yemen remains a subject of debate.⁸⁵

Even so, Iran continues to maintain its support for the members of the axis of resistance and remains the primary source of weapons for the Houthis.⁸⁶

⁸² Carol E.B. Choksy and Jamsheed K. Choksy, “Iran's Nuclear Tipping Point,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 14, 2024, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/irans-nuclear-tipping-point>.

⁸³ “Houthi Missile Triggers Sirens in Central Israel, Is Downed En Route,” *The Times of Israel*, March 30, 2025, available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/war-and-conflicts/military/houthi-missile-triggers-sirens-in-central-israel-is-downed-en-route/ar-AA1BVPdX>.

⁸⁴ “Fragile Ceasefire Deal Between Israel and Hamas Still Holding,” *NBC News*, January 27, 2025, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/now/video/fragile-ceasefire-deal-between-israel-and-hamas-holds-230349381976>.

⁸⁵ “Iran's Role In the Yemen War: Real Influence and Regional Gains,” Middle East Council on Global Affairs, April 2024, available at https://mecouncil.org/publication_chapters/irans-role-in-the-yemen-war-real-influence-and-regional-gains/.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, and update, December 17, 2024.

Chinese Strategy

Although China is not as visible as Russia or Iran as a supporter of the Houthis, its support is very important to them and to Iran. In fact, the arrangement that has come to pass is quite simple. First, China, by being the largest importer of Iranian oil, is providing Iran with an enormous amount of money:

Over the past four years, Iran exported a total of nearly 1.98 billion barrels of oil, and its annual oil exports have quadrupled during the Biden administration. China is Iran's biggest customer, with more than 90 percent of Iran's exports going to China in 2024. As a result of these exports, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) reportedly received as much as half of the fifty billion dollars in oil revenue that Iran earned last year. In turn, the IRGC uses its funds to support its proxies, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis.⁸⁷

The second element in Chinese support for the Houthis arises from the fact that they are able to curtail Chinese shipping in the Red Sea and possibly beyond. Therefore Beijing, placing the safety of its shipping and the opportunity to threaten the West above international solidarity on freedom of the seas, succumbed to blackmail and agreed to provide weapons and necessary technologies to the Houthis directly or through Iran. This episode obviously raises larger questions about China's overall maritime policies in other contested waters. Consequently, "US intelligence sources recently told Israeli media that since November 2023, the Houthis have used Chinese-made components to target Red Sea vessels in exchange for immunity for Chinese-flagged ships."⁸⁸

Worse yet, China has established a complex supply chain allowing the Houthis to receive advanced components and guidance equipment for their ballistic and cruise missiles.⁸⁹ This program also applies to Chinese support for Iranian missiles. For example, China is supplying chemical propellants for Iran's mid-range ballistic missiles that it can use on its own to target American allies in the Middle East or that it can disburse to the Houthis for targeting of international shipping.⁹⁰ In like manner China is apparently supplying the guidance system for Iran's new Arash-2 kamikaze drones, which again could be used by Iran or its proxies against foreign targets.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Tuvia Gering and Jason M. Brodsky, "China Is Supporting the Houthis: Here's How the Administration Can Respond," Atlantic Council, January 14, 2025, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/china-is-supporting-the-houthis-heres-how-the-trump-administration-can-respond/>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Guy Azriel, "China Helping Houthis Obtain Weapons For Unmolested Red Sea Passage," *i24news*, January 2, 2025, available at <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/artc-china-helping-houthis-obtain-advanced-weapons-for-free-passage>.

⁹⁰ Laurence Norman and Benoit Faucon, "China Is Supplying Chemicals For Iran's Ballistic Missile Program," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2025, available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/china-is-helping-supply-chemicals-for-irans-ballistic-missile-program-ab272ad7>.

⁹¹ Marco Gianniangeli, "China Is 'Guiding' Iran's Deadly New Drones, MoD Scientists Say," *Express*, May 5, 2024, available at <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1895692/China-is-guiding-iran-s-deadly-new-drones-MoD-scientists-say>.

Even more worrisome is the fact that over the course of 2024 and on the basis of sustained Houthi-Chinese deliberations,

Houthi leaders are reportedly planning to manufacture hundreds of cruise missiles capable of striking Persian Gulf states, using these same Chinese components. Washington has repeatedly passed on this information to Beijing since September, including detailed lists of Chinese companies involved in this arms mechanism.⁹²

Considering the combined implications of Iranian strategy, Chinese support for Iran and its proxies, and Russian support that is deeply imbricated with its overall power projection strategy and goals, it becomes clear that there does not need to be a formal Sino-Russian or Sino-Russian-Iranian alliance in place for coordinated attempts to undermine Western interests.

Russian Strategy

Russia, unlike China, is Iran's and the Houthis' principal ally and armorer while it and China are using both Iran and the Houthis as a proxy for their ultimate strategic goals. While China's goal appears to be a permanent commercial-political influence in the Gulf with a possible future military position there, Russia's power projection activities here require a deeper assessment.⁹³ First, the current (March, 2025) Sino-Russian-Iranian naval exercises have now become a matter of routine, suggesting a continuing effort for all three navies not only to cooperate but to augment domain and situational awareness and try out weapons. Thus, these ostensibly and ironically counter-piracy drills that, aim to "enhance military trust and strengthen practical cooperation," will include simulated strikes on maritime targets, visit-board-search-seizure operations and search and rescue drills.⁹⁴ Obviously such exercises provide perfect cover for training in what amounts to piracy operations.

The routinization and ensuing growing sophistication of these drills, coupled with the diplomatic and economic support provided by Russia and China for Iran and its proxies, plus the military assistance given to the Houthis by Iran and China strongly suggests the practical manifestation of an anti-Western and anti-Israeli (the two are for all purposes indistinguishable) alliance in action. In this context, and as stated above, the most disturbing recent action in this region is the Russo-Iranian treaty of January 2025.⁹⁵ Not least this treaty, apart from all of its elements described above, provides a permanent legal and political basis for Russian power projection in the Middle East and beyond through Iran.

⁹² Azriel, op. cit.

⁹³ Blake Herzinger and Ben Lefkowitz, "China's Growing Naval Influence In the Middle East," Washington Institute, February 17, 2023, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-growing-naval-influence-middle-east>.

⁹⁴ Nectar Gan, "Iran, China and Russia Launch Annual Joint Naval Drills As Trump Upends Western Alliances," *CNN*, March 10, 2025, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/10/asia/iran-china-russia-joint-navy-drills-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁹⁵ Government Of the Islamic Republic Of Iran, "Full Text Of Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement," January 17, 2025, available at <https://irangov.ir/detail/456479>.

The fall of Assad in Syria, the defeat of Iran's proxies in Gaza and Lebanon, and this treaty require a greater discussion of Russia's motives for supporting the Houthis. There is no doubt that Russia's motives tie into even grander strategic objectives. As Marlene Laruelle has pointed out, power projection beyond Russia's current boundaries and arguably beyond the old Soviet borders is intrinsic to Russia's spatial and political self-representation as an imperial and global great power.⁹⁶ In addition, there is a belief among many states that if Russia expands its territory, it will gain domestic support or at least quell domestic criticism and the abiding Russian belief that since Russia is permanently under attack from the West, it, as Catherine the Great said, "I had no way to defend its frontiers other than by expanding them."⁹⁷ There is formidable historical, intellectual, ideological, and institutional support for Russia's territorial expansion and global power projection. This drive, as a nineteenth century statesman observed was, in no small measure motivated by "the lure of something erotic in the borderlands."⁹⁸

Consequently, projecting power far beyond its borders is almost literally encoded in the Russian leadership's political DNA. Russian support for Iranian-backed terrorists goes back at least twenty years notwithstanding Russia's previously solid working relationship with Israel.⁹⁹ This includes Yakhont anti-ship missiles sent to Hezbollah through Iran and/or Syria to threaten Israel's Navy in the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁰ More recently, there are reports that Moscow was offering Hezbollah UAV's.¹⁰¹ Russia's ongoing efforts to work with Iran likewise go back decades and the current Iranian provision of thousands of missiles and construction of a factory in Russia, along with ongoing discussions of a partnership agreement, reflect the increasingly intimate Russo-Iran relationship.¹⁰²

More recently, Russia has directly joined with Iran to offer the Houthis arms and intelligence for tracking ships in the Red Sea as part of the Iran-Russia entente that has been strengthened by Iranian support for Russia in its aggression against Ukraine.¹⁰³ Concurrently, as the Houthis advanced in Yemen, they were able to obtain the assistance of

⁹⁶ Marlene Laruelle, *Ideology and Meaning-Making Under the Putin Regime* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2025), pp. 211-216.

⁹⁷ *Wisdomly*, available at <https://www.wisdomly.net/catherine-the-great-3707.php>.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Stephen Blank, "Putin's Twelve-Step Program," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2002, pp. 147-160, available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/36662/summary>.

⁹⁹ "Israel: Hezbollah Used Russian-Made Missiles," *NBC News*, August 18, 2006, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna14410480>.

¹⁰⁰ "Russia To Sell Syria Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles," *BBC*, September 17, 2010, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11347495>.

¹⁰¹ Seth J. Frantzman, "Iran's Multi-Front Battle: How Teheran Is Feeding An Octopus War Against Israel-Analysis," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 10, 2024, available at https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_ed/2024/10/10/irans-multi-front-battle-how-tehran-is-feeding-an-octopus-war-against-israel/.

¹⁰² Emil Avadliani, "Iran and Russia Seek to Reshape Global Hegemony with New Bilateral Agreement," Jamestown Foundation, November 4, 2024, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/iran-and-russia-seek-to-reshape-global-hegemony-with-new-bilateral-agreement/>.

¹⁰³ Benoit Faucon and Thomas Grove, "Russia Provided Targeting Data For Houthi Assault On Global Shipping," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 2024, available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-provided-targeting-data-for-houthi-assault-on-global-shipping-eabc2c2b>.

Hezbollah (obviously with Tehran's blessing) and an arsenal of Soviet and Russian weapons before 2020.¹⁰⁴ Iran has also clearly been transferring Russian weapons to the Houthis for at least a decade and integrated the Houthis into its axis of resistance even though it appears that they do not fully control them.¹⁰⁵ Beyond arms sales, GRU operatives posing as humanitarian aid workers have been reported to be working with the Houthis in Sanaa, Yemen's capital.¹⁰⁶

While Moscow's arms sales gambit reflects a departure from its previous efforts to mediate the Yemeni civil war, it is consonant not only with the imperatives of support for Iran and anti-Westernism that the war in Ukraine has intensified but also with ongoing regional strategic goals dating back at least to the 1970s.¹⁰⁷ Moscow's heightened interest in supporting the Houthis is tied to larger strategic imperatives of Russian policy beyond Ukraine. Russia, for instance, is not content merely to have acquired (or more accurately re-acquired) a naval base in Sudan, but has spent over a decade seeking naval bases elsewhere around the Red Sea, Mediterranean, and the Horn of Africa.¹⁰⁸ Now its most recent naval doctrine proclaims the Indian Ocean as a strategic priority.¹⁰⁹ So despite the navy's likely straitened future circumstances, Russia is likely to build on efforts already undertaken to gain bases in and around the Indian Ocean, including the Red Sea.¹¹⁰

Undoubtedly Moscow also will want air bases in or around these waters too. Such bases will enable Russia to exercise much greater leverage—over all shipping, not just the energy-related trade—in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean, and to project firepower deep into the Middle East and even the Mediterranean. But beyond these motives it is clear that another reason for Russia's power projection dreams is the lure of exploiting (and that is too anodyne a word) the immense natural resources of this region. Thus, Russia has smuggled billions of dollars of Sudan's gold out of the country in 16 flights since February 2020 to enrich its elites, strengthen its economy and continue to pay for its aggression against Ukraine.¹¹¹ It is doing so in collusion with Sudan's "beleaguered military leadership" to accomplish this mission and create thereby an enduring leverage in Sudan replete with

¹⁰⁴ Knights, op. cit.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.; DIA Report, op. cit.

¹⁰⁶ Sean Matthews, "Exclusive: US Intelligence Suggests Russian Military Is Advising Houthis Inside Yemen," *Middle East Eye*, August 2, 2024, available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-russian-military-advising-houthis-inside-yemen-us-intelligence-suggests>.

¹⁰⁷ Ruslan Suleymanov, "Why the Kremlin Is Drifting Closer to Houthi Rebels in Yemen," Carnegie Endowment, September 12, 2024, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/09/yemen-russia-middle-east-cooperation?lang=en>.

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Blank, "Gunboat Diplomacy à la Russe: Russia's Naval Base in Sudan and Its Implications" *Defence and Security Analysis*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 2, 2022, pp. 470-489.

¹⁰⁹ "Об утверждении Морской доктрины Российской Федерации" ("On approval of the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation"), July 31, 2022, available at <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202207310001?index=1&rangeSize=1>.

¹¹⁰ Stephen Blank, "Russia's Efforts to Play in the Indian Ocean Basin," New Lines Institute, June 17, 2021, available at newlinesinstitute.org/united-states/russias-efforts-to-play-in-the-indian-ocean-basin/.

¹¹¹ Nima Elbagir et al, "Russia Is Plundering Gold In Sudan To Boost Putin's War Effort In Ukraine," *CNN*, July 29, 2022, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/29/africa/sudan-russia-gold-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html>.

efforts to gain a naval base there.¹¹² Obviously naval presence, with all that such presence connotes in the way of supporting infrastructure in and around the Horn of Africa, is essential to this and other previous similar operations.

As Candace Rondeaux has written, “The Russian naval hub will likely be a critical node for Sudanese gold exports, which have proven a boon not only for several mining companies linked to (Yevgeny) Prigozhin (leader of the Wagner PMC-Russia’s ostensibly private military firm-author) but this time for Russian state coffers. Russia has invested heavily in building up its gold reserves to help stabilize the ruble and future proof its economy against harsher Western sanctions.”¹¹³ Moreover, Russia’s Wagner PMC, ostensibly a proxy force but actually an extension of the Kremlin (and now controlled directly by it through the GRU, which has renamed it “Afrika Korps”) is not above using force to obtain control over these resources, e.g., attacking artisanal mines in the lawless border zones between Sudan and the Central African Republic.¹¹⁴

Meanwhile in return for the base, Sudan will receive arms. However, while Sudan will not receive any rent for the base, Sudanese companies received contracts and jobs for protecting the base and gained the experience of working with Russians. These terms reveal the interpenetration of economic motives and covert, influence, and information operations—often conducted by the same people and organizations—to achieve military and strategic goals.¹¹⁵ Consequently, Rondeaux has observed that “one of the most important takeaways is that Russia appears to have built a durable method for conducting war on the cheap in a strategically significant part of North Africa.”¹¹⁶ But this entire process of arms sales, large-scale corruption of elites, and colonialist exploitation is also a mechanism for conducting a contemporary version of old-fashioned gunboat diplomacy with the objective of permanently projecting power, e.g., through naval and arms bases.

This opening of a country or region to large-scale economic-political penetration through foreign naval presence reflects a particularly naked colonialism and gives the lie to Moscow’s pretensions that it has no colonialist history in general or in Africa.¹¹⁷ Neither will Russia’s activities in this region change when the war ends, assuming no change in the present governmental structure, for corruption is arguably one of the powerful adhesive factors that

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Candace Rondeaux, “How a Man Linked to Prigozhin, ‘Putin’s Chef,’ Infiltrated the United Nations,” *The Daily Beast*, November 27, 2020, available at <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-a-man-linked-to-prigozhin-putins-chef-infiltrated-the-united-nations/>.

¹¹⁴ Jason Burke and Zeinab Mohammad Salih, “Russian Mercenaries Accused Of Deadly Attacks On Mines On Sudan-CAR Border,” *The Guardian*, June 21, 2022, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/21/russian-mercenaries-accused-of-deadly-attacks-on-mines-on-sudan-car-border>.

¹¹⁵ Amy McKinnon, Robbie Gramer, Jack Detch, “Russia’s Dreams Of a Red Sea Naval Base Are Scuttled—For Now,” *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2022, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/15/russia-sudan-putin-east-africa-port-red-sea-naval-base-scuttled/>.

¹¹⁶ Rondeaux, op. cit.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.; Casey Michel, “Russia’s Crimes Of Colonialism,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 9, 2022, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-crimes-of-colonialism-putin-ukraine-war-empire-eurasia-lavrov-africa-soviet-union-11660076835>.

holds this regime together, especially in view of the inveterate rapacity of the Russian elite as described by Russian writers.¹¹⁸

Thus, apart from consolidating a global presence that allows it to represent itself at home and abroad as a great power, Moscow seeks permanent bases and influence in and around the Indian Ocean with which to loot vulnerable African polities and place pro-Western allies and navies under permanent pressure either from Russian strikes or those of its proxies. And the West, with its vulnerable global commerce and allies like Israel, represent targets that are too tempting not to attack provided it can be done asymmetrically at minimal risk to Russia and/or its proxies.

How Should the United States Respond?

The principle of freedom of the seas has been a cornerstone of American policy since the establishment of the republic in 1775 and the United States went to war in 1812 and 1917 to defend it. Hence, it is no surprise that once again it has fallen to the United States and its navy to take the lead in defending this principle by attacking the Houthis, namely with naval-based air and/or missile strikes like those that occurred on March 15. Nevertheless, this internationally recognized principle should be enforced not by Washington alone but by a coalition of like-minded states acting under U.S. leadership. And that means both diplomatic and military actions synchronized together to stop the Houthis and their patrons while restoring conventional deterrence.

To be sure, Israel has also sometimes retaliated against Houthi missile strikes on Israeli targets. But none of the attempts to defend freedom of the seas or strike at these rebels seem to have deterred them. Moreover, since the Houthis and their patrons in Tehran seem not to have assimilated the full import of the message that their strategy has collapsed everywhere else, it is necessary to find both an efficient and effective means of deterring them in the future. And for that, a coalition is absolutely necessary.

Iranian strategy, involving its own forces and these three terrorist militaries, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, served multiple purposes while constituting Tehran's axis of resistance. They were to confront Israel and exercise constant pressure upon it from multiple axes: Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, and the Red Sea. Their presence in these contested areas also served to deter Arab states from either forging new relations with Israel or threatening (particularly with U.S. backing or presence) Iran. In other words, Iranian strategy aimed to keep the Middle East in a permanently destabilized position. That strategy is in ruins, not least due to the fall of Assad which complicates both Iranian and Russian policies. Iran and its partners provided these groups with weapons and logistical support, much of it running through Syria, the real logistical lynchpin of this strategy. As Hassan Shemshadi, an expert

¹¹⁸ Oleg Kashin, "Who Will Get Rid Of Putin? The Answer Is Grim," *The New York Times*, August 18, 2022, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/18/opinion/russia-putin-corruption.html>; Alexander Golts, "Why Russia Smuggles US Electronics," *Moscow Times*, October 9, 2012, available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/archive/why-russia-smuggles-us-electronics>.

on Iran's proxy militant groups has observed, "Everything that Iran sent to the region went through Syria. It is now extremely difficult to keep these channels open."¹¹⁹

Ultimately however, the purpose of arming these groups and deploying them to deter both Arab and Israeli, as well as Western, pressure on Iran, went beyond regional destabilization to weaken Israel in preparation for what Iranian strategists believed and hoped would be a final struggle.¹²⁰ In this strategic perspective, Iran's accession to the status of nuclear power with a functioning nuclear arsenal, a goal to which Iran has now come very close, would allow it to extend nuclear and conventional deterrence to the members of the axis of resistance in order to move forward with its ultimate goal of destroying Israel.¹²¹

Deterring the Houthis: The U.S. Dilemma

Obviously, there are no grounds for complacency here. Iran has defied President Trump's maximum pressure campaign and threats of military action against Iran that it (probably correctly) interpreted as an ultimatum.¹²² At the same time, Iran recently held a Deputy Foreign Ministerial meeting with Russia and China in Beijing to discuss nuclear energy and removal of sanctions, i.e. its nuclear program. This meeting also comes in the wake of Russia's typically self-serving declaration of its willingness to play a mediating role between Washington and Tehran.¹²³ Predictably it ended in a show of support for Iran arguing for a U.S. return to nuclear diplomacy with Iran.¹²⁴ Worse yet,

China and Russia welcomed Iran's reiteration that its nuclear programme is exclusively for peaceful purposes and not for development of nuclear weapons, and also welcomed Iran's commitment to full compliance with its obligations under the NPT and Comprehensive Safeguard Agreement, supported Iran's policy to continue cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and stressed the need to fully respect Iran's right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy as a State Party to the NPT. The three countries stressed the necessity for all States to refrain from

¹¹⁹ Farnaz Fassihidi, "In the Syrian Regime's Hour of Need, Its Patron Iran Makes an Exit," *The New York Times*, December 8, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/07/world/middleeast/iran-syria-rebels.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹²⁰ Bernard Haykel, "The Implications Of Iran's Failed Proxy Strategy," The Hoover Institution, December 10, 2024, available at <https://www.hoover.org/research/implications-irans-failed-proxy-strategy>.

¹²¹ "Iran's Nuclear Timetable: The Weapon Potential," *Iran Watch*, September 18, 2024, available at <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/articles-reports/irans-nuclear-timetable-weapon-potential>; Sanger, op. cit.

¹²² "Iran Pezeshkian Bashes Trump Threat: 'Do Whatever the Hell You Want,'" *Iran International*, March 12, 2025, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202503119046>.

¹²³ Seth J. Frantzman, "Iran, Russia, China Set To Discuss Iran's Nuclear Program In Meeting," *The Jerusalem Post*, March 12, 2025, available at <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-845749>.

¹²⁴ "Joint Statement of the Beijing Meeting between China, Russia and Iran," March 14, 2025, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202503/t20250314_11575903.html#:~:text=China%20and%20Russia%20welcomed%20Iran's,supported%20Iran's%20policy%20to%20continue.

any action that undermines the technical, objective and impartial work of the IAEA.¹²⁵

Since the right-wingers in Iran have clawed their way back into dominating the government, it is unlikely that these talks will lead to Iran's willingness to negotiate an end to its nuclear program which is what the White House is demanding. Furthermore, the convening of this meeting, whatever its outcome, confirms the "triple entente" among these powers and their willingness to countenance the Iranian nuclear program that hitherto they have opposed for it is quite unlikely that Iran will enter into sincere negotiations with the United States. And just as Iran continues to insist on going forward with its nuclear program, it is equally likely to persist in rebuilding its terrorist proxies. Senior level Iranian officials claimed victory for Hamas because it "forced" Israel to accept a ceasefire when it "preemptively defend itself against the West and Israel" in 2023.¹²⁶ Furthermore the Houthis' leader has now announced that they will immediately resume attacks on Israeli ships traversing the Red Sea and the Bab-El-Mandab because Israel has cut off aid to Hamas due to Hamas' stalling on cease-fire terms.¹²⁷ It is quite likely that this statement precipitated Trump's decision to strike the Houthis unilaterally.

Obviously, it appears that there is no longer any room for diplomacy with the Houthis and quite possibly with Iran as well. And since Iran, not to mention China and Russia stand behind them both, the Houthis' and Iran's intransigence poses considerable strategic and operational problems for Israel, the West, and the United States. The Houthis are both pirates and terrorists. Whatever their motives may be, they are unquestionably Iranian and more indirectly Russian and Chinese pirates. Together these actors represent a threat to Israel, Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, overall security in and around the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Gulf, and to the hallowed principle of freedom of navigation and of the seas, principles for which the United States went to war in 1812 and 1917.

In addition, as recent reporting on the Sino-Houthi connection has revealed, the Houthis aim to build an autonomous chain starting in China that will allow them to conduct terrorism and piracy at will throughout these waters.¹²⁸ Lastly, their strategy until now has been a quintessentially cost-imposing strategy where they use cheap drones and anti-ship missiles to terrorize and loot international shipping in and around the Red Sea while Israel and other powers have to use expensive sea or air-based missiles against them and keep a long-term

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ A. Savyon, "senior-iranian-regime-officials-claim-victory," *MEMRI*, March 12, 2025, available at <https://www.memri.org/reports/senior-iranian-regime-officials-claim-victory-iran-led-resistance-axis-saying-palestinian>.

¹²⁷ "Houthis To Resume Attacks On Israeli Ships After Gaza Aid Deadline Ended," *The Jerusalem Post*, March 12, 2025, available at https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-845682?utm_campaign=6710194-Press%20Releases&utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--INjgQTakATwgrlBBKkaQZLG8YWwyR7KzTUzmao0b0Q7oRi3aoIwLww7Df1y4MBI70nvAURTeQl-nHUpnOe9urclg8Mg&_hsmi=351561873&utm_content=351561873&utm_source=hs_email.

¹²⁸ Azriel, op. cit.

flotilla on deployment against them.¹²⁹ Should they achieve the autonomous supply chain being set up with China and simultaneously come under the protection of potential extended Iranian deterrence, the problems this will present to Washington and its allies will grow by an order of magnitude. So, time is of the essence in dealing with the Houthis if not Iran, especially as the Trump Administration is taking a much stronger line on terrorism, and anti-Semitism.

Operationally, therefore, the problem is one of reestablishing a lasting conventional deterrence of both the Houthis and their Iranian patrons. But strategically, the problems are bigger—linking termination of Iran’s nuclear and proxy strategies by the credible threat of military power and thereby restoring deterrence to the region. Moreover, that deterrence must be consolidated before Iran obtains a usable nuclear weapon. In other words, it needs to be done soon. A recent study argues that the only reliable way to ensure that Iran does not get such a weapon is a U.S. policy of regime change but that seems problematic.¹³⁰ Moreover, such a policy is inherently escalatory and open-ended, and as past experience shows, likely to lead to prolonged conflict. Therefore, the use of American military force must be coordinated with a political strategy to maximize pressure on Iran and the Houthis by virtue of a genuine coalition that is willing to assume both a political and military role towards these objectives.¹³¹ Unilateralism may feel good or provide immediate relief but it cannot eliminate either problem for the long term, which is the real payoff. Neither does adding Israeli forces alone to the mix suffice strategically despite Israel’s formidable capabilities because this does not suffice to create the necessary political scaffolding for achieving a lasting result.

So, while it is advisable to terminate Iran’s nuclear forces sooner rather than later; doing so must be done as part of a legitimate strategic and policy initiative. Thus, this paper recommends that, following the advice of Ariel Sharon that “terrorism has an address” to which the mail should be sent, the United States should undertake the following steps consistent with the policy of maximum pressure, especially as it is clear from past experience that Iran will not negotiate about its nuclear weapons in good faith.¹³² First, the United States must build a lasting coalition that should, if possible, unite regional actors like Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia as well as foreign powers like the United States and UK.

Second, Washington and its partners should stand up a multi-national fleet under American command, i.e., with a U.S. flagship, combining both Israeli and Arab naval assets, as part of an effort to expand the Abraham Accords to patrol the Red Sea and Straits of Hormuz as well as the waters between them to forestall and counter-strike any Houthi attacks. Given the importance of the area and regional trade to Israel, Egypt, and Saudi

¹²⁹ Ziezulewicz, op. cit.

¹³⁰ Masoud Kazemzadeh, “U.S.-Iran Confrontation After the Hamas-Israel War: Proxy Wars, Nuclear Strategy, and Eschatology,” *Journal Of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2025), pp. 41-55, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Analysis-Kazemzadeh-5.1.pdf>.

¹³¹ Ross, op. cit.

¹³² William Safire, “Essay: Terrorism Has An Address,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1983, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/10/opinion/essay-terror-has-an-address.html>.

Arabia this diplomatic task may require tough bargaining, but it will make the coalition stronger and more credible as well as more enduring. This also means providing this maritime force with the requisite capabilities to conduct a sustained air attack if necessary. Sustained drone attacks that are cheaper and less susceptible to a cost-imposing strategy are preferred because the costs of prolonged air strikes are large and ultimately unsustainable, a fact that plays to the Houthis' and Iran's strategy. The weapons used by these forces must aim to destroy, not just strike at, the Houthi command, control, communications and forces as well as its logistics. If necessary, added air capabilities could be brought in from neighboring countries or their air bases that host U.S. aerial assets, preferably cheap drones, for this purpose. It also is important to deny the Houthis the chance to strike or destroy an American ship.

To achieve these objectives, the entire coalition must now issue a public as well as private warning to Iran (which its patrons and proxies will both understand) that it will be held accountable for any hostile actions by the Houthis, Hezbollah, or Hamas. Therefore, should such actions occur, the coalition will strike at and destroy as much as possible of Iran's conventional and nuclear capability. Thus, Iran will be held permanently hostage for its behavior towards its allies and will suffer a cost-imposing strategy in line with Sharon's maxim. This approach will cut off the head of the snake, i.e., the Houthis' foreign logistical and thus economic-political support, because for China and Russia the costs of supporting Iran and its proxies will now also go up by a very large order of magnitude.

While the Trump Administration has adopted some of these points by striking hard at the Houthis in a sustained manner and by tying the Houthis' behavior to that of Iran in regard to both terrorism and nuclear acquisition, absent the requisite political dimension it could likely fail to effect a lasting strategic change. Middle Eastern history and Clausewitz suggest strongly that not correlating force and politics is a guarantee of failure, something that has bedeviled too many prior instances of American unilateralism.¹³³

Arguably this strategy reverses the unfavorable cost ratios that now exist and places the onus of retaliation upon Iran in the face of a vastly superior conventional deterrent. This will bring home to Iran, as few other threats have, the real cost of going nuclear to threaten Israel, its neighbors and other states while also extending deterrence to large-scale, foreign armed terrorist formations like Hamas and the Houthis. As many have suggested, the answer to the Houthis is cutting off their weapons and other supplies from abroad, as that is their sole source of advanced weaponry.¹³⁴ This posture does so, and it also aims to thwart Iran's nuclear program by making it a hostage of the Houthis' and other Iranian proxies, as well as Iran's good behavior. This program accords with President Trump's maximum pressure campaign but leaves open the prospect of a genuine negotiation that eliminates Iran's nuclear program for good and returns it to careful IAEA supervision and monitoring while also forestalling renewed outbreaks of terrorism across the Middle East. Most of all, it

¹³³ Ross, *op. cit.*

¹³⁴ Jake Epstein, "The Houthis Couldn't Have Built Their Most Dangerous Weapons Without Help From Iran and Others, UN Experts Find," *Yahoo!News*, November 5, 2024, available at <https://www.yahoo.com/news/houthis-couldnt-built-most-dangerous-194150230.html>.

creates a strong and enduring coalition led by Washington to achieve all these objectives and thus a lasting strategic success.

The strikes that began on March 15 already indicate a partial implementation of this strategy. By redesignating the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, the State Department will therefore pay up to \$15 million for information leading to the disruption of Houthi financing. This, like the air strikes, puts Iran on notice that it will be held accountable for the Houthis' actions and disrupt the Houthis' access to global financial networks. It also strengthens the legal basis under which Washington and its allies could undertake military operations against the Houthis while also targeting Houthi leaders and suppliers. It thus justifies military operations in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and helps protect international trade in these waters.¹³⁵ However, these strikes cannot be continued forever, especially if they are unilateral and absent any political support from within the region. While it is easy and temporarily satisfying to order air strikes, if they are not backed up by the forging of a lasting and strong coalition to enforce deterrence upon Iran and its proxies this, like too many past American operations in the Islamic world, will be a destructive but passing sandstorm, not the path to a new order. And nobody will benefit from that except the West's enemies.

Conclusion

As of late April 2025, when this article is being completed, the strikes against the Houthis continue.¹³⁶ Moreover, Washington has had to send a second carrier group to the Indian Ocean to reinforce its attacks.¹³⁷ These facts do more than underscore the tenacity of the Houthis, they also show that its cost-imposing strategy is still effective despite suffering considerable damage. This point, conversely, shows the inadequacy of the Administration's strategy. It failed to outline a discernible or attainable political outcome in the Red Sea that would deter the Houthis in the future. It also failed to bring about a genuine regional alliance of stakeholders to sustain that deterrence. Thus, these attacks merely amount to a prolonged tactical tantrum that cannot be sustained in the long term absent formation of an effective regional coalition.

This operation represented a test of regional conventional deterrence. But if this deterrence is attempted in the absence of any clear political objective, i.e., if it violates Clausewitz's most famous imperative that war is the continuation of policy by military means and that the nature of the policy objective should govern the conduct of military operations,

¹³⁵ Dalia Al-Aqidi, "The Houthis' Four-Year Honeymoon Is Over," *Arab News*, March 13, 2025, available at <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2593434>.

¹³⁶ "Houthi Say Group Downed US Drone In Northwest Yemen As US Strikes Continue," *Al Jazeera*, April 22, 2025, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/22/houthi-say-group-downed-us-drone-in-northwest-yemen-as-us-strikes-continue>.

¹³⁷ Riley Ceder, "Second Aircraft Carrier On the Way To Join Fight Against Houthis," *Navy Times*, March 27, 2025, available at <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2025/03/27/second-aircraft-carrier-on-the-way-to-join-fight-against-houthis/>.

then those operations are foredoomed. There may still be time to retrieve these errors, particularly if the current negotiations with Iran oblige it to cease promoting regional terrorists. But that is frankly unlikely as Iran now enjoys strong Russo-Chinese support and they clearly want the Houthis to succeed. Moreover, Iran's neighbors now want the United States to make a deal with Iran.¹³⁸ Finally a deal with Washington will enhance the beleaguered Iranian regime's domestic standing and reduce if not eliminate the need to stop its strategy of employing terrorist proxies abroad given its foreign support and Washington's reluctance to become further involved. If this is indeed the case, and it certainly appears to be so, then this operation will indeed become a lesson for future students. But it will not be a happy lesson for us or for those students.

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¹³⁸ Mona Hojat Ansari, "Where Do Arabs Stand On Iran-US Talks," *Tehran Times*, April 21, 2025, available at <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/512138/Where-do-Arabs-stand-on-Iran-US-talks>.