



Collision course? Workers stand as a ship unloads its shipment of grain at the Red Sea port of Hodeida, on December 24.

(Reuters)

## Why intensifying international interest in the Red Sea is driving military buildup

### Sabahat Khan

is based in Dubai and maintains a cross-disciplinary focus in international security, defence policy and strategic issues.

International interest in and around the Red Sea is intensifying, bringing increased geopolitical competition.

To the north, the Suez Canal links the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and represents a crucial maritime trade route, transporting about 2.5% of global oil shipments, Global Security.org said.

At the other end, the Bab el Mandeb Strait – one of the world's most important chokepoints, only 29km wide at its narrowest point – commands the southern entrance. It has taken on added geostrategic importance since the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen began in 2015.

Further south is the Horn of Africa, a hotbed of maritime piracy that prompted navies from around the world to form task forces to fight it.

The Red Sea's enhanced geostrategic importance is driving unprecedented development and competition. Last year, China boosted its power projection capabilities by inaugurating a nearly \$600 million naval base in Djibouti. The newest entrant is Turkey, which recently signed an agreement with Sudan to develop a port at Suakin.

China and Turkey will join the United States, which has operated its only full-fledged expeditionary military base on Africa, Camp Lemonnier, also in Djibouti, since 2002, as well as the French, Italian and Japanese forces.

Saudi Arabia has been running operations with coalition allies out of a base in Assab, Eritrea. The United Arab Emirates has a military presence in Yemeni Red Sea ports of Aden, Mokha and Mukalla as well as the island of

Perim in Assab, and in Berbera in autonomous Somaliland. Last year, Turkey opened a military base in Somalia to train Somali forces.

The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen has necessitated Arab Gulf countries locking off maritime supply routes to Houthi rebels and developing a supporting logistics network for operations. The Saudi-led coalition has been wary of providing Houthi rebels space to blockade or disrupt maritime traffic by mining and anti-ship weapons from the Yemeni coast, especially around the Bab el Mandeb.

Such burgeoning international interest in and around the Red Sea in the absence of a formal regional framework is straining the environment as a growing number of stakeholders seek to safeguard their interests by counterbalancing competitors. As such the Red Sea is becoming host to three distinct but loosely linked theatres of competition.

At the global level, the rise of China has been driving international competition. The Chinese want to safeguard freedom of navigation for key maritime trade routes and massive investments into Africa as part of its One Belt, One Road Initiative. The United States wants the regional security landscape preserved favourably, especially with Israel being in close proximity but also against terrorist threats and to counter a rising China and resurgent Russia.

The Saudi-led coalition is seeking to ease the socio-political instability that has been taking hold around Saudi Arabia's periphery in good part by counterbalancing the regional footprint of Iran,

which supports the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Finally, there is the north-east African geopolitical competition. Egypt has strained relations with Sudan, which Cairo charges with supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt opposes Sudan-backed Ethiopian plans for the Renaissance Dam under construction since 2011. When finished it will be Africa's largest hydro-electric power station and generate much-needed electricity for Ethiopia and Sudan but reduce water flows to Egypt's Nile.

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Sudan, like Ethiopia, has been the subject of investments and support from Qatar. Egypt views a potential emerging pro-Muslim Brotherhood alliance between Turkey, Qatar and Sudan as an incubating threat. Sudan recalled its ambassador to Egypt following reports Egypt had dispatched troops to Eritrea, which borders Sudan, in response to the announcement of Turkey's Suakin agreement.

Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia all border the Red Sea or its entry points but a growing number of extra-regional powers are moving in swiftly to safeguard their interests.

Some analysts say the Red Sea basin was previously overlooked for its strategic value. Being part Middle East and part Africa, it was approached in a segmented way. The absence of a multilateral regional framework to manage affairs or disputes in the Red Sea is probably a key reason why outside powers have been able to formalise their own presence and, ironically, may be making its emergence even less likely.



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