

Houthi attacks : a threat to global shipping?

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Paper - II
(IR)

On December 23, the crisis in the Red Sea reached Indian waters as Liberian-flagged merchant vessel Chem Pluto heading to Mangalore port was hit by a projectile about 271 miles from Porbandar in Gujarat, just outside the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This comes in the backdrop of a sharp rise in missile and drone attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea by Houthi rebels in Yemen in the last couple of weeks following Israel's offensive against Hamas in Gaza.

What is the latest on m.v. Chem Pluto?

The vessel with 21 Indians and one Vietnamese crew managed to sail on its power after the attack and reached Mumbai on Monday escorted by the Indian Coast Guard Ship (INGS) Vikram. Upon arrival, a Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal team carried out a preliminary assessment of Chem Pluto and analysis of the area of attack and debris found on the ship points towards a drone attack, the Navy said. "However, further forensic and technical analysis will be required to establish the vector of attack, including type and amount of explosive used," it stated. A joint investigation by various agencies is also underway.

In another instance, on December 23, Gabon-flagged, Indian crewed vessel m. v. Sai Baba reported a drone attack in the Southern Red Sea and is now on its way to India. The twin attacks on m.v. Sai Baba and Norwegian-flagged m. v. BLAAMANEN, represent the 14th and 15th attacks on commercial shipping by Houthi militants since October 17, according to the U.S. Central Command.

How do these events impact India and the world?

Threats to shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the region are not new as seen with episodes of Somalian pirates and the global anti-piracy efforts by several countries. However, the recent events represent a serious escalation that can potentially disrupt supply chains and impact economics. The Red Sea is a key shipping artery

Bab-el-Mandeb Strait: Trade route between East and West narrows amid Houthi threat

Concerns grow as major maritime transportation companies alter their ship routes in response to the increasing Houthi threats in the Red Sea. This has raised concerns that other companies may also suspend sailings through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait

CURRENT INCIDENTS AT THE BAB-EL MANDEB STRAIT

- NOV. 19**
Reports in the Israeli media claim that the Houthis had seized a cargo ship belonging to the UK
- DEC. 3**
Houthis target two Israeli ships in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait
- DEC. 12**
Houthis claim an attack on a Norwegian ship heading to Israel
- DEC. 15**
Houthis claim missile attacks on 2 Israel-bound cargo ships
- DEC. 16**
CENTCOM reports shooting down 14 UAVs in the Red Sea

Maersk, the world's second-largest container shipping company, stopped Red Sea routes

Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), Hapag-Lloyd and CMA CGM, suspended all sailings in the region

BAB-EL MANDEB STRAIT

- Approximately 32 km in length
- Links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean
- Transits about 10% of global seaborne oil flows
- Shortens maritime journeys by an average of 14 days



for global commerce and the Bab el-Mandeb is a critical choke point.

Following the October 7 terror attacks on Israel by Hamas and the subsequent offensive by Israeli Defence Forces, the Houthi rebels have declared they would target all maritime commerce linked to Israel. What is especially worrying is their sophisticated arsenal of ballistic missiles and long range drones that are threatening maritime traffic far from the shores. The U.S. Navy has been shooting down missiles and drones in the region almost daily.

“About 12% of global trade passes through the Red Sea, which accounts for billions of dollars of goods and about 30% of the world’s container shipping. Access to the Red Sea requires passage through the Bab el-Mandeb — a narrow strait about 20 miles wide with Djibouti to the west and Yemen to the east,” Susan Stigant, Director of Africa Programs with the U.S. Institute of Peace wrote in a commentary.

Following the attacks, several global shipping majors have announced their decision to avoid the route and take a longer route through the Southern Indian Ocean adding to both fuel and operating costs in addition to the time. For instance, shipping industry giant Maersk had begun re-routing vessels around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope.

Recent data indicates a notable shift in transit passage in the Suez and Red Sea as Israel-flagged and owned ships increasingly avoid transiting the Red Sea due to heightened security concerns, one official monitoring the situation said.

“The avoidance of the Red Sea route has substantial implications, potentially adding one to two weeks to voyages, disrupting shipping schedules, and subsequently elevating fuel and insurance costs,” the official said adding this strategic shift has implications for the revenue generated by the Suez Canal, as well as the operational dynamics of ports in Djibouti and the Gulf of Aden.

What is being done to address this?

To counter the attacks and protect the free flow of commerce in the Red Sea, on December 18, U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin announced the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPS), an “important new multinational security initiative under the umbrella of the Combined Maritime Forces and the leadership of its Task Force 153, which focuses on security in the Red Sea.” Since the announcement of OPS, several companies in the last few days announced their decisions to review the re-routing.

From the Indian side, both the Navy and Coast Guard have increased their presence and surveillance in the region. Navy Chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar said, on December 26, that the Navy presently has four destroyers of Project 15B and 15A class deployed to counter piracy and drone attacks on merchant shipping. Further, P8I long range patrol aircraft, Dorniers, Sea Guardian Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, helicopters and Coast Guard ships are all deployed jointly to counter these threats, he stated.

Since October 2008, the Indian Navy has continuously deployed at least one ship on anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Aden and since 2017 under Mission Based Deployments has deployed one capital warship each at all the critical maritime choke points into the IOR.

Indian Navy’s Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) located in Gurugram is actively monitoring the region and coordination in the back end to facilitate communication where required, like between the Navy and the company when m. v. Ruen was hijacked recently in the Gulf of Aden.

We coordinate operational responses and assistance to vessels in the Indian Ocean Region, Captain Rohit Bajpai, Director IFC-IOR said last week. “The international organisation had removed the high risk area that was there in the Gulf of Aden on January 1 this year and this is the first instance of actual piracy where a vessel has been hijacked.”

However, several questions remain.

For instance, Indians constitute close to 15% of commercial sailors while Indian owned vessels are very few and a lot of Indian crude and cargo is carried by foreign ships. So how would India and other countries react to a major attack resulting in loss of life or precious cargo? “Where do we draw the line?” another official questioned.

The fact remains that a shock to global economies in terms of delays and price rises due to the regional crisis is looming on the horizon.

Expected Question for Prelims

Que. Consider the following statements with reference to the Red Sea:

1. About 12% of global trade passes through the Red Sea.
2. To reach the Red Sea one has to pass through Bab el-Mandeb.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1
- (b) Only 2
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1, nor 2

Answer : C

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: How have drone attacks on merchant vessels in the Red Sea by Yemen-based Houthi rebels affected global shipping? In what ways might rerouting vessels affect specific industries? Discuss.

Answer's Approach:

- ❖ In the first part of the answer, discuss the effects on global shipping of drone attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea by Houthi rebels.
- ❖ In the second part, discuss the effects of re- routing ships on specific industries.
- ❖ Finally give a conclusion giving suggestions.

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.