

Deterrence and Diplomacy in the Red Sea: Recommendations for Italy

by Elio Calcagno, Giulia Daga and Farah Ahmed



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

ABSTRACT

The Houthi attacks against commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea since late 2023 have highlighted the strategic importance of the Red Sea and the disruptive potential of similar threats to freedom of navigation around choke points. Meanwhile, the regional context in which these attacks have unfolded is undoubtedly extraordinary, as a result of the conflict in Gaza and its broader ripple effects, and has made a unified response by major naval powers impossible. Given the plausibility of renewed attacks by the Houthis in the future as a result of recurring escalations in the Israel-Palestine and Israel-Iran conflicts, Italy has an opportunity to strengthen cooperation with partners in the region, with the EU where possible and without it when necessary. Italy and other interested EU countries should begin reflecting on the need to formulate a new approach to deter further attacks that goes beyond defensive navy escorts.

Red Sea | Yemen | Houthis | Maritime security | European Union | Italy

keywords

Deterrence and Diplomacy in the Red Sea: Recommendations for Italy

by Elio Calcagno, Giulia Daga and Farah Ahmed*

1. The Red Sea crisis

Since the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Red Sea has become a pivotal waterway in world sea lines of communication, accessible through two highly strategic chokepoints, the Suez Canal to its north and the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb in the south, through which normally around 15 per cent of world maritime trade volume transits.

Since the Houthis started attacking commercial vessels in December 2023, with the stated intent to target companies linked to Israel due to the ownership and/or the destination of the ships, the awareness of the strategic importance of the Red Sea has abruptly re-emerged. In the face of attacks that despite Houthi statements were largely indiscriminate in practice,¹ international navigation has been diverted. Most ship-owners have decided against passing through the Red Sea route and facing increased insurance costs, but to privilege the circumnavigation of Africa, despite longer journeys and higher transportation costs.²

¹ Noah Berman, "How Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea Threaten Global Shipping", in *CFR In Briefs*, 12 January 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/node/250371>.

² Burak Şakir Şeker, "Don't Forget About the Red Sea", in *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, No. 51 (Summer 2024), <https://www.thecairoreview.com/?p=14652>.

* Giulia Daga is Researcher in the 'Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa' programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Elio Calcagno is Researcher in IAI's 'Defence, security and space' programme. Farah Ahmed is a former intern in the IAI's 'Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa' programme. The authors are extremely grateful to Simone Murru, intern at IAI from September 2024 to December 2024, and Silvia Porrelli, intern at IAI from January 2025 to April 2025, for their contribution to the report carrying out research and data collection. Thanks also to Francesco Bini, intern at IAI from April 2025 to July 2025, for his support in the report's publication process. This report accounts for developments on the field up until 4 June 2025.

Paper produced in the framework of the project "Routes of détente: maritime security and cooperation scenarios through the Red Sea". This project has benefited from the financial support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo and Fondazione Centro Studi sul Federalismo. Views and opinions expressed are those of the authors only.

Instability has affected the Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade route at different stages in recent history and has often engendered military solutions. Since the mid-2000s, the EU has been increasingly present to safeguard the strait of Bab el-Mandeb against piracy attacks from the Horn of Africa, including the patrolling of the International Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) through the Gulf of Aden with EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta.

The fight against piracy has been central for the international community and for most littoral states in recent decades, guided by the legal principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, unlike anti-piracy tasks where cooperation has proceeded smoothly with a shared understanding of the need to guarantee freedom of navigation, the current Red Sea crisis has not led to a consensus on what the threat is, how to address it and what is the desired end state.

The crisis is entangled with delicate political dynamics – including a direct linkage with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – and is thus not easily addressable by interpretations of international law or a security lens alone. In fact, this is not the first time that maritime transit through the Red Sea has been affected by the fallout of Arab-Israeli conflicts, with shutdowns of the Suez Canal occurring in 1956 in the wake of the failed Franco-British-Israeli attempt to avert its nationalisation by Egypt and again after Israel's Six-Day War with Egypt, Syria and Jordan in 1967.

Unlike the previous crises linked to the Arab-Israeli wars involving state actors, however, the current one revolves around the Houthi group. The Houthis are a non-state actor *de facto* governing a portion of Yemen, although they are not recognised as a legitimate government by most of the international community. The Houthis still have sufficient resources to fire drones against the state of Israel and to effectively disrupt international maritime traffic by targeting commercial shipping with or without connections to Israel with drones, missiles, and speedboats.

After a fragile ceasefire was reached in Gaza in mid-January 2025, the Houthis self-declared the guarantors of it, threatening to resume attacks had Israel failed to respect it.³ In the meantime, they pledged to limit attacks only to Israeli-linked vessels, not anymore targeting US and UK ships.⁴ Houthi attacks against Israel resumed after Israel breached the ceasefire in March, provoking repeated counter strikes by Israel. After enduring a month-long heavy bombing campaign by the United States, the Houthis struck an agreement with Washington according to which they would not hit US targets. At the time of writing, that deal is still in place, though Israel-Houthi hostilities continue.

³ "Yemen's Houthis Release Crew of Seized Ship after Gaza Ceasefire Deal", in *Al Jazeera*, 22 January 2025, <https://aje.io/kxcm4v>.

⁴ "Yemen's Houthis to Only Target Israel-linked Ships Following Gaza Ceasefire", in *Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2025, <https://aje.io/vfzwu5>.

The Red Sea crisis has greatly affected world trade generally, and the seaborne trade specifically, with countries along the routes suffering disproportionately. Italy, a main destination of trade routes from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal, is amongst them. The Italian government has therefore a special interest in defusing the crisis and restoring security to shipping lanes.

Because of the Houthis' stated aims and rhetoric, and the wider regional context, it is hardly possible to separate the military dimensions of the crisis from the regional political developments. This paper takes these interlinked dynamics into account and offers specific recommendations on what Italy can do to meet its stated aim of a more maritime-oriented foreign policy. It also suggests a workable balance between an approach rooted in defensive military measures and diplomatic engagement and one prioritising military retaliation in order to pressure the Houthis into stopping targeting commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

2. Maritime trade

The Red Sea crisis has negatively affected trade by disrupting the flow of goods through trade routes, increasing economic and environmental costs and undermining the principle of freedom of navigation.

2.1 Ports and connectivity

The Houthi attacks have significantly impacted transits through the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb Strait, causing a 60 per cent decline from pre-crisis levels between February and October 2024.⁵ Given the interconnected nature of global trade, Mediterranean ports, including those in Italy, have been affected. Before the crisis, 40 per cent of Italy's maritime trade passed through the Red Sea.⁶ Freight rates for the Shanghai-Genoa route surged 25 per cent in January 2024 due to forced rerouting via the Cape of Good Hope, later stabilising above pre-crisis levels.⁷

Italy's export-oriented economy heavily relies on imports of raw goods. The six largest Italian ports of Genoa, Venice, Trieste, Gioia Tauro, Augusta and Livorno are key commercial hubs, collectively handling 54 per cent of the country's imports and 40 per cent of its exports. In the early weeks of the crisis, these ports reported a 20 per cent decline in transits.⁸ This sharp drop in traffic was felt across the Italian

⁵ Wolf-Christian Paes et al., "Navigating Troubled Waters: The Houthis' Campaign in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden", in *IISS Research Papers*, December 2024, p. 21, <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2024/12/navigating-troubled-waters-the-houthis-campaign-in-the-red-sea-and-the-gulf-of-aden>.

⁶ Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), "Mar Rosso: l'impatto della crisi – cinque grafici", in *ISPI Commentaries*, 30 April 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/it?p=171966>.

⁷ Assoport and SRM, *Port Infographics Update 2024*, June 2024, p. 5, https://www.assoport.it/media/14282/update_portinfographics-2024_v3-1.pdf.

⁸ ISPI, "I nuovi dati della crisi in Mar Rosso", in *ISPI Focus*, 26 January 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/it?p=161766>.

maritime sector, highlighting its vulnerability to global trade route disruptions.

As a result, in the first two months of 2024, compared to the same period in 2023, exports grew by only 0.6 per cent, while imports fell by 10.4 per cent.⁹ Between January and September 2024, major ports saw significant declines in container traffic, including Livorno (-11 per cent), Venice (-8 per cent), Genoa (-5.5 per cent) and Trieste (-2.3 per cent).¹⁰

Other major Red Sea ports have also been severely impacted. In Saudi Arabia, the King Abdullah and Jeddah ports saw a sharp decline in trade and port calls from January to September 2024.¹¹ However, Saudi oil exports remained unaffected, as shipments to Asia bypass the Red Sea and are directed to Asia. Jordan's, only port of Aqaba redirected trade to land routes, while in Israel, traffic through Eilat halted entirely.¹² Egypt's main concern has been the loss of revenue from the Suez Canal, with Port Said, Damietta and Sokhna also seeing a decline in container transits. By contrast, Djibouti benefited, as ships offload cargo for transfer by smaller vessels, less likely to be targeted.¹³

2.2 Economic and environmental costs

Insurance costs have raised for ships willing to enter the Red Sea. While the Suez Canal is a more time- and cost-effective route compared to the Cape of Good Hope reroute, security threats made shipping companies hesitant to resume crossing the Red Sea, including during the brief ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. The high insurance costs for ships crossing these high-risk areas contribute to uncertainty. War-risk premiums have surged up to 200 per cent,¹⁴ rising from 0.6 to 2 per cent of the cargo value.¹⁵ This has led some shipping companies, such as Maersk, to suspend operations, reducing market competition and driving up costs.

The Red Sea Crisis has benefited the shipping companies, which, rerouting around Africa, gain greater profits from the longer sailing times and the soaring freight rates. Maersk is among the companies who most profited in 2024, saw global container market volume growth by 6 per cent and expects 4 per cent growth in 2025.¹⁶ Maersk reported a 65 per cent increase in earnings before interest and taxes

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Assoporti and SRM, *Port Infographics Update 2024*, cit., p. 17-19.

¹¹ Wolf-Christian Paes et al., "Navigating Troubled Waters", cit., p. 24.

¹² Ibid., p. 26.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "High Stakes, Higher Costs: The Surge in Insurance Premiums for High-Risk Shipping Routes", in *ShipUniverse*, 13 January 2025, <https://www.shipuniverse.com/?p=4052>.

¹⁵ Anoop Govindan, "The Red Sea Crisis and Impact on Maritime Economy", in *Defence Research and Studies*, 26 November 2024, <https://dras.in/?p=20211>.

¹⁶ Stine Jacobsen, "Maersk Eyes 4% Market Growth in 2025, Uncertainty over Tariffs and Red Sea", in *Reuters*, 6 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/maersk-q4-profit-beats-forecast-expects-softer-2025-earnings-2025-02-06>.

(EBIT) for 2024, amounting to 6.5 billion US dollars, compared to 3.94 billion in 2023.¹⁷ Other companies like Hapag-Lloyd and Vespucci Maritime have reported solid profit levels too.¹⁸

Final costs of goods have increased due to higher transportation costs. As of November 2024, the Drewry World Container Index reported that global shipping costs remained 141 per cent higher than pre-crisis levels.¹⁹ The impact is more pronounced on routes passing through the Red Sea, with Shanghai-Rotterdam and Shanghai-Genoa rates soaring 230 per cent compared to the end of 2023.²⁰ However, the World Bank notes that consumer prices remain unchanged, as inflationary effects are contained. This is because maritime trade costs represent a small share of total input costs and are often locked into long-term contracts, shielding consumers from market volatility.

The environmental costs of a much longer route bypassing the Red Sea (and therefore the Mediterranean) altogether have been significant. For instance, Houthi attacks on ships have caused oil spills that the Yemeni government estimates put 500,000 coastal residents at risk.²¹ Additionally, as 80 per cent of marine cargo vessels have been rerouted via the Cape of Good Hope, a route 53 per cent longer than crossing the Suez Canal, fuel consumption has increased considerably.²² Given that maritime transport is already a major polluter, accounting for 3 per cent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and cargo ships emit 10 to 40 grams of CO₂ per kilometre,²³ the extended routes have resulted in an estimated 35.7 million additional tons of CO₂ emissions.²⁴

¹⁷ Marcus Hand, "Red Sea Crisis Drives Maersk to 3rd Most Profitable Ever Year", in *Seatrade Maritime News*, 6 February 2025, <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/containers/red-sea-crisis-drives-maersk-to-3rd-most-profitable-ever-year>.

¹⁸ Joshua Minchin, "Hapag-Lloyd Fourth-Quarter Operating Profits up \$900m", in *Lloyd's List*, 30 January 2025, <https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1152406>.

¹⁹ Hind Chitty, "World Container Index - 10 Jul", in *Drewry Supply Chain Advisors*, 10 July 2025, <https://www.drewry.co.uk/supply-chain-advisors/world-container-index-weekly-update/world-container-index-assessed-by-drewry>.

²⁰ Željko Bogetić et al., "The Deepening Red Sea Shipping Crisis: Impacts and Outlook", in *MENA FCV Economic Series Briefs*, No. 2 (February 2025), p. 11, <https://hdl.handle.net/10986/42787>.

²¹ Ibid., p. 7.

²² UK Office for National Statistics, *Ship Crossings through Global Maritime Passages: January 2022 to April 2024*, 24 April 2024, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/internationaltrade/bulletins/shipcrossingsthroughglobalmaritimepassages/january2022toapril2024>.

²³ Freightos website: *Freightos CO2 Emissions Sea & Air Freight Calculator*, <https://www.freightos.com/freight-resources/air-sea-freight-co2-emissions-calculator>.

²⁴ James Darley, "Could the Gaza Ceasefire Reduce Global Shipping Emissions?", in *Sustainability Magazine*, 22 January 2025, <https://sustainabilitymag.com/articles/will-ceasefire-end-red-sea-shipping-crisis>.

3. Freedom of navigation disrupted

Freedom of navigation, and therefore the free and unhindered flow of trade goods across the seas, is a pillar of global trade and lays at the very foundation of the world economy. Indeed, freedom of navigation stands out as one of the oldest widely recognised principles in the legal *acquis* relating to the use of the sea.²⁵ Even as far back as the early 17th century, Dutch jurist and philosopher Hugo Grotius described the sea as common property of all and instrumental to uphold the principle of freedom of trade.²⁶ Historically, navies have not only been a state's instrument to wage war on the sea, including against an adversary's trade, but also a deterrent against rival countries' attempts to block access to seaborne trade. Indeed, for millennia naval power has been strictly interlinked with economic prosperity.²⁷

If free and safe maritime trade is a *conditio sine qua non* for a truly globalised and interconnected economy, and if a country's freedom to communicate with other countries and trade according to its needs is in itself a vital interest, freedom of navigation automatically becomes a key strategic goal to be upheld and restored – when necessary by military means.

By their very nature, choke points are frequently the arenas where maritime disputes play out. Their narrow scope gives state and non-state actors alike the ability to generate outsized effects simply by threatening the security of military and civilian shipping – even with relatively rudimentary tools, as Somali pirates demonstrated at the peak of their activities in 2011. With small boats and old light weaponry, they were able to wreak havoc on the shipping lanes around the Horn of Africa, requiring large scale international naval deployments like EUNAVFOR Atalanta and the multinational Combined Task Force (CTF) 151,²⁸ operated by the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF).²⁹ To a much smaller scale, the Gulf of Guinea has witnessed similar dynamics and still sees the deployment of Western naval assets, including regularly by the Italian Navy. Generally, this type of piracy has been dealt with, or at least managed, by employing a combination of instruments including increased naval patrols, heightened situational awareness, better information sharing and armed personnel aboard civilian ships.³⁰ While some of these tools

²⁵ International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, *Freedom of Navigation: New Challenges*, Statement by Rüdiger Wolfrum at the 32nd Annual Conference sponsored by the Center for Oceans Law and Policy (COLP), University of Virginia School of Law, held in Singapore on 9-10 January 2008, https://www.itlos.org/fileadmin/itlos/documents/statements_of_president/wolfrum/freedom_navigation_080108_eng.pdf.

²⁶ Hugo Grotius, *The Freedom of the Seas*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1916, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/scott-the-freedom-of-the-seas-latin-and-english-version-magoffin-trans>.

²⁷ Robert C. Rubel, "Navies and Economic Prosperity – the New Logic of Sea Power", in *Corbett Papers*, No. 11 (October 2012), <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/dsd/assets/corbettpaper11.pdf>.

²⁸ Combined Maritime Force (CMF) website: *CTF 151: Counter-piracy*, <https://wp.me/P1248M-g>.

²⁹ CMF website: *About CMF*, <https://wp.me/P1248M-2>.

³⁰ Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Troels Burchall Henningsen, "Success Defying All Expectations: How

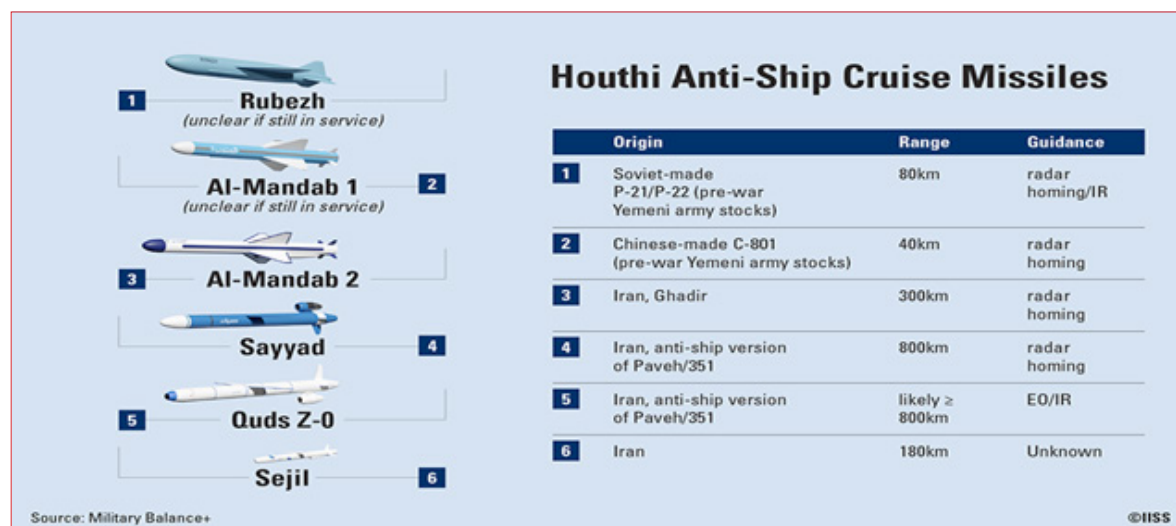
(with the exception of the latter) may help better react against the Houthi threats, they do not represent a credible solution.

3.1 The Houthis' new threat

The Houthis' hostile actions, beginning in October 2023, are quite revolutionary both in scope and scale, and have proved difficult to stop. Firstly, while the Houthis do not constitute a state *de jure*, they operate as a *de facto* government with crucial support from Iran in terms of money, weaponry and technical expertise.³¹ Indeed, in large part thanks to their Iranian ally, and lacking anything resembling a navy in the conventional sense, Houthi forces have been able to target civilian and military ships from standoff distances thanks to cruise and ballistic missiles as well as drones.

A key success in the Houthis' strategy rests in how the group's leadership has from the start connected the attacks to the ongoing conflict in Gaza.³² This has helped the Houthis to foster a climate of uncertainty, especially among a number of European governments who have since been mindful of not appearing to escalate or take sides in the regional conflicts, especially in the eyes of their domestic constituencies.

Figure 1 | Houthi anti-ship cruise missiles

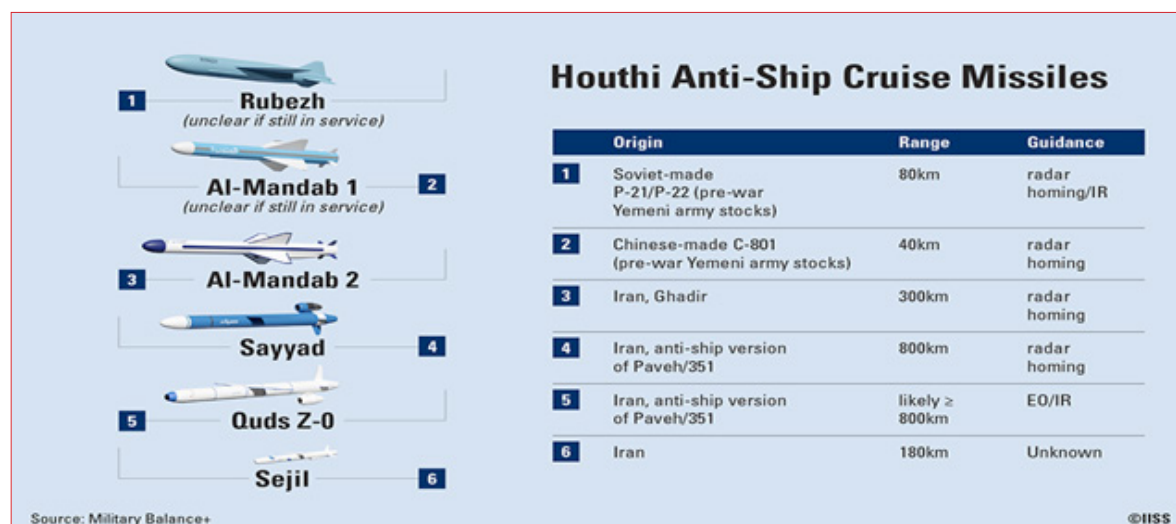


Source: Fabian Hinz, "Houthi Anti-Ship Missile Systems: Getting Better All the Time", in *Military Balance Blog*, 8 January 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/01/houthi-anti-ship-missile-systems-getting-better-all-the-time>.

and Why Limited Use of Force Helped to End Somali Piracy", in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2024), p. 263-287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.2227356>.

³¹ Murad Al-Arefi et al., "The Red Sea Front", special issue of *The Yemen Review*, November-December 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/nov-dec-2023>.

³² "War on Gaza: Houthis Promise More Attacks on British Ships", in *Middle East Eye*, 3 March 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/346846>.

Figure 2 | Houthi anti-ship ballistic missiles

Source: Fabian Hinz, "Houthi Anti-Ship Missile Systems: Getting Better All the Time", cit.

The Houthis' military means, combined with the will to use them against commercial shipping, are a far cry from the small boats and light weaponry employed opportunistically by Somali pirates around the Horn of Africa and require a very different set of responses. Yet the Red Sea crisis has exposed the uncomfortable truth that, while there is a shared understanding of how damaging these attacks are to global shipping and trade, there is a significant amount of disagreement in terms of how to deal with them.³³

3.2 A fragmented response

This was best exemplified by the differing approaches of Western-led military operations. Despite the obvious threat to vital economic interests to much of NATO's allies, including of course Italy, a NATO-level response was never discussed. Indeed, from an Italian perspective, this crisis should be seen as another hint that NATO is not currently a forum in which its interests in the Southern Neighbourhood can be properly addressed. The resulting operations, run in parallel with little or no coordination, have been suboptimal solutions to a problem affecting most of NATO member states.

The first operation, led by the United States, is Prosperity Guardian: a defensive operation focusing on escorting civilian ships and patrolling the affected areas. The second, conducted by the United States and United Kingdom, is Poseidon Archer: an offensive operation consisting of strikes against land-based military installations and launch sites in order to degrade Houthi capabilities and deter

³³ Elio Calcagno, "Un ruolo guida per l'Italia nel Mar Rosso", in *AffarInternazionali*, 26 March 2025, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=112157>.

further attacks. The third is the EU-led operation EUNAVFOR Aspides, mostly with Italian, French and Greek participation, which similarly to Prosperity Guardian was strictly defensive and focused on escorting civilian shipping, ensuring maritime awareness and protecting vessels from Houthi attacks.³⁴

The co-existence of Prosperity Guardian and Aspides as separate operations is in itself an interesting development given that the former's leader, the United States, and Aspides' participants are close allies already. The Houthis' successful construction of a narrative linking of their own interests to the context in Gaza (at least until May 2025) likely made EU countries cautious about military operations alongside Israel's closest ally. Aspides is also a rare opportunity to rally EU interests behind an urgent threat perceived or recognised by most member states, despite there being no substantial difference in the goals and scope of the two operations. Nevertheless, some internal divisions at the EU level were still visible in the lead-up to Aspides. Spain opposed the re-purposing of EUNAVFOR Atalanta, asking for a newly-forged naval operation which it then did not join.³⁵ Besides, few countries joined Aspides, and even fewer did so for longer than a few months.

Figure 3 | EUNAVFOR Aspides: military ship contributions by EU member state

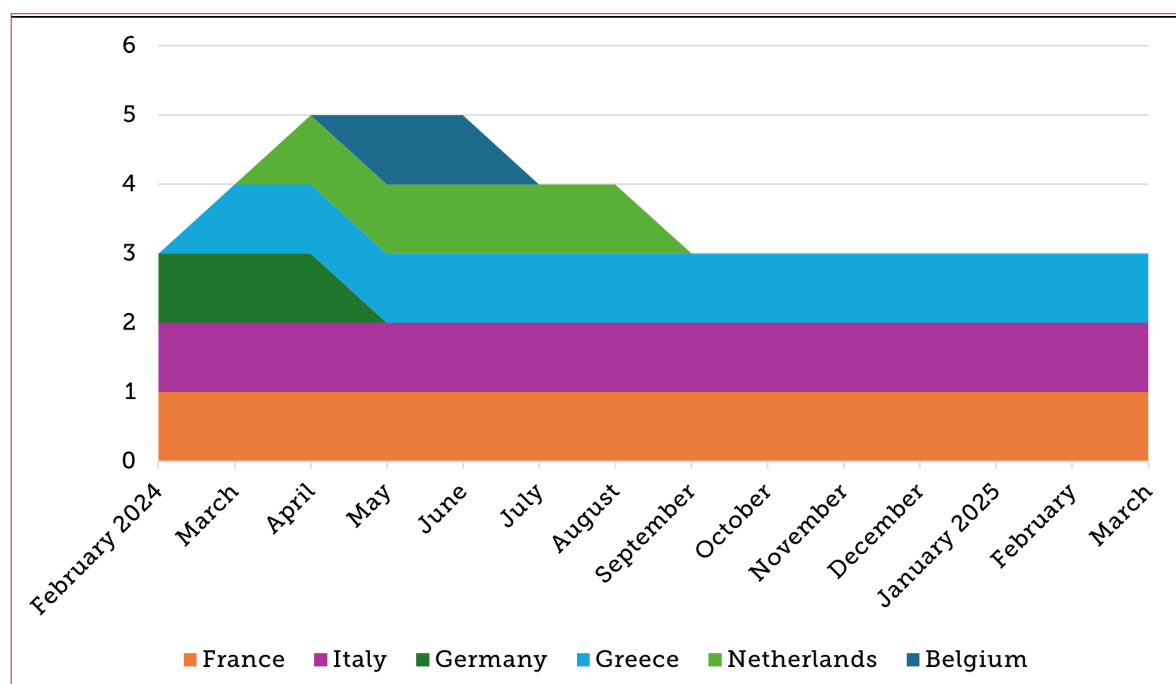


Figure 3 shows clearly that out of six navies contributing ships to the operation, only Italy, France and Greece have deployed assets continuously since February

³⁴ European External Action Service (EEAS) website: *About the Operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES*, 20 February 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/438503_en.

³⁵ Pablo R. Suanzes, "La UE, sin España, lanza la misión Aspides para proteger a los mercantes del Mar Rojo", in *El Mundo*, 19 February 2024, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2024/02/19/65d36b9c21efa0123a8b459f.htm>.

2024, when the operation was activated. Germany deployed one frigate for just over two months (*FGS Hessen*) at the start of the operation until April 2024, and never replaced it with another (despite earlier commitments) once it rotated out of the Red Sea.³⁶ Belgian and Dutch navy ships joined *Aspides*, albeit a few months after February 2024, but withdrew by August. In February 2025, after a full year of operations, only French, Italian and Greek ships remained assigned to *Aspides*, despite the Houthi threat still being tied to continuing instability in the Middle East and civilian shipping still mostly preferring circumnavigating Africa over crossing the Red Sea with western escorts as a result.³⁷

Furthermore, from a military perspective, the absence of any operational contribution by regional actors – despite very significant investments in national navies in recent years – stands out as a remarkable development for a region full of countries seeking to acquire a more prominent role in regional dynamics. This reality is even more surprising considering that many regional ports were indeed affected by the crisis, especially in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.³⁸ The former in particular has suffered significant economic damages due to a fall in Suez Canal transit revenues (estimated to amount 7 billion US dollars in December 2024).³⁹ While Middle-Eastern countries have undoubtedly been facing a difficult situation, given the sensitivity of the Palestinian question and the effort not to appear to antagonise an actor (i.e., the Houthis) portraying its attacks as retaliation against the Israeli campaign in Gaza, their passive approach is somewhat at odds with the ambition of becoming more active players in regional security and re-balancing relations with Western partners.

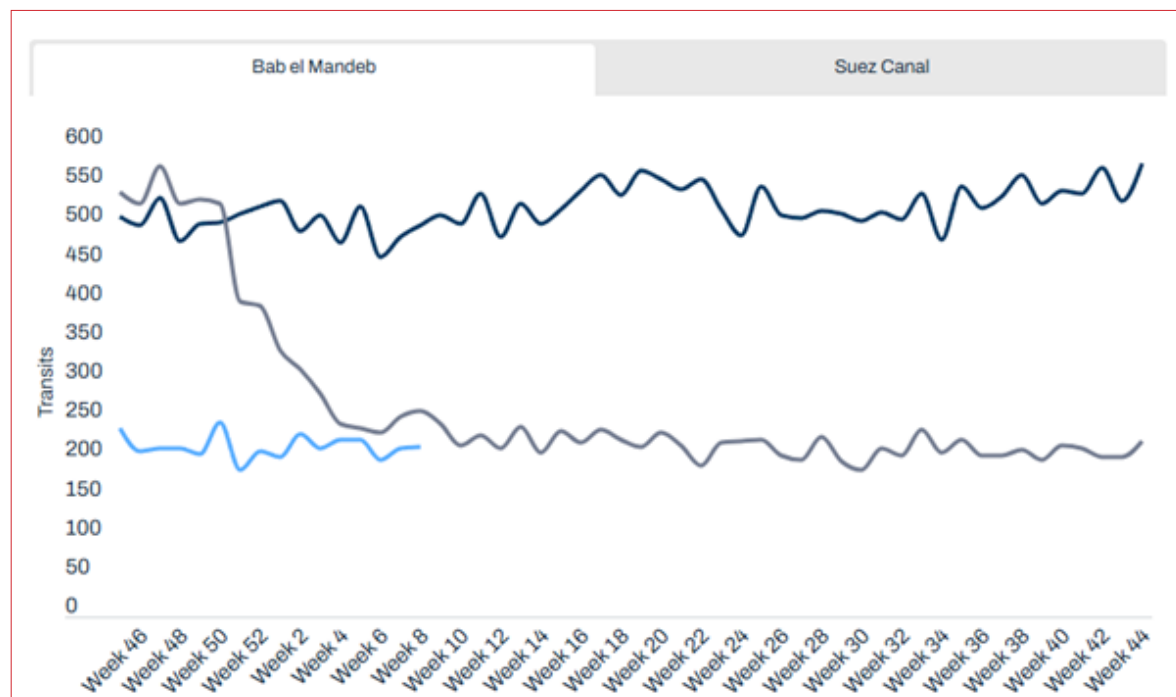
Other than the means utilised themselves, the approach of the United States and United Kingdom has been based on applying pressure on the group and push them to stop attacks and tone down their rhetoric. On the contrary, the EU's approach – exemplified by *Aspides*' defensive posture – has been to outlast the Houthis' will to antagonise the international community while providing naval escorts in order to encourage a return by commercial shipping to the Red Sea route. Well over a year after the start of the attacks, neither method has engendered a shift in the shipping companies' policy to avoid the Red Sea lanes, as Figure 4 clearly shows.

³⁶ German Armed Forces website: *Red Sea – EUNAVFOR Aspides*, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/operations/red-sea-eunavfor-aspidess>.

³⁷ Emanuele Rossi, "Red Sea Shipping Stalls Despite Houthi Ceasefire", in *Decode39*, 19 February 2025, <https://decode39.com/9968>.

³⁸ Wolf-Christian Paes et al., "Navigating Troubled Waters", cit.

³⁹ "Suez Canal Revenues Plunge by 60 percent as Egypt faces Economic and Political Turmoil", in *Middle East Eye*, 27 December 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/416195>.

Figure 4 | Transits through Bab el-Mandeb between late 2022 and spring 2025

Source: Bridget Diakun, "No Recovery for Red Sea Traffic", in *Lloyd's List*, 26 February 2025, <https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1152695>.

In late April 2025, the United States carried out another round of strikes over eight hundred Houthi targets,⁴⁰ followed by a new round of UK strikes⁴¹ and by a bout of Israeli strikes in early May (in response to missiles launched against Israel).⁴² US President Donald Trump's 6 May announcement that the United States and the Houthi leadership had reached an agreement for a ceasefire, with Omani mediation, have been followed by vague and in part contrasting statements by the two sides as to the exact scope of the deal.⁴³ As the scope of it seems limited, in other words if it only covers US ships, it is unlikely that commercial shipping through the Red Sea can resume. Indeed, any risk of collateral damages or being misidentified as an Israeli ship is guaranteed to keep shipping insurance prices high and shipping companies unwilling to take the risk of making a dangerous crossing. In fact, even a ceasefire deal covering all civilian and commercial shipping traversing the Red Sea may take weeks or months to translate into significant uptick in traffic. Nevertheless, the timing of the deal may suggest that,

⁴⁰ David Gritten and Jaroslav Lukiv, "Dozens of African Migrants Killed in US Strike on Yemen, Houthis Say", in *BBC News*, 28 April 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9qw274w72vo>.

⁴¹ Jonathan Beale and Adam Durbin, "First UK Strikes on Houthis in Yemen under Trump", in *BBC News*, 30 April 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1k41z4g3pzo>.

⁴² "Israel Strikes Houthi Targets in Yemen a Day after Missile Attack near Airport", in *BBC News*, 5 May 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g9njrek2o>.

⁴³ Barak Ravid, "U.S. Will Stop Bombing Yemen after Houthis 'Capitulated,' Trump Says", in *Axios*, 6 May 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/05/06/houthi-ceasefire-trump-yemen-attacks>.

among Western responses to the crisis, the US-UK approach based on putting considerable pressure on Houthi military infrastructure has at least contributed to the group's willingness to relent their attacks. This does not necessarily mean that the EU's more cautious and defensive approach has been inconsequential, but it could indicate that without retaliatory strikes the Houthis could have continued their attacks. A thorough analysis in Brussels and other EU capitals is necessary in order to start formulating an effective approach to thwart Houthi attempts to impede safe commercial transits through the Red Sea. An approach exclusively relying on external factors on which EU countries have little-to-no control is detrimental in two respects. Firstly, it relegates the EU to a mostly reactive role in an area of utmost strategic relevance and deprive it of any credible deterrence vis-à-vis similar acts. Secondly, it reinforces the Trump Administration's narrative, painfully on display in the Signal exchanges between Vice-President JD Vance and other senior cabinet members, that Europe is unable and unwilling to defend its own interests without US help.⁴⁴

4. Regional politics and the role of Italy

4.1 *The Red Sea and the conflict in Yemen*

The first important lesson to draw from the Red Sea crisis, beyond its short-term military and economic implications, is the need to re-focus on the unsolved conflict in Yemen and its ramifications. The central problem regards the need to restart the national dialogue process in Yemen, ideally under United Nations auspices, ensuring the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders – from the internationally recognised government to the Southern separatist movement and the Houthis.

This topic has been widely discussed among experts since 2011, and especially since 2014, when the Houthis seized control of the capital Sanaa.⁴⁵ Only through an inclusive reconciliation process can the Houthis be stripped of their revolutionary momentum, which they have leveraged by aligning with broader regional conflicts to present themselves as defenders of the oppressed – thus avoiding scrutiny over their actual governance capabilities.

The ongoing cycle of the United States designating and then removing the group from the list of terrorist organisations complicates the issue further. Italy could play an active role in facilitating dialogue, leveraging its self-proclaimed position as a bridge between the Trump Administration, Europe and the broader Mediterranean region as well as on its consolidated relationship with Gulf powers that have had a role in mediating the conflict, such as Oman. However, for this strategy to be

⁴⁴ Andrew Roth, "Stunning Signal Leak Reveals Depths of Trump Administration's Loathing of Europe", in *The Guardian*, 25 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xp9cj>.

⁴⁵ Giulia Daga, "Yemen: una riflessione critica sul ruolo dell'occidente", in *AffarInternazionali*, 17 April 2023, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=5459>.

effective, Italy must move beyond an approach predominantly rooted in achieving and safeguarding maritime security and fully grasp the political dimensions of the crisis rooted within Yemen's unresolved conflict.

In this potential role of dialogue that connects maritime security with broader regional dossiers, Italy should again consider engaging with Iran, as it did in an E4/EU (with France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the EU High Representative) during 2018-19. While not a littoral country, Iran's role as the backer and – in the context of the Red Sea attacks – enabler of the Houthi group makes it a key interlocutor.

The Iranian regional role and in particular its role in Yemen has shifted greatly in the past few years. At the beginning of 2025, Iran is perceived as a weaker regional actor compared to when the Houthi attacks started. The death of the former President Ebrahim Raisi, the weakening of the so-called 'Axis of Resistance' in Lebanon, Palestine and Syria, and the Israeli-US bombing campaign against it all contribute to making the Islamic Republic more prone to dialogue with both regional, European and even US actors.⁴⁶ This offers Italy room of manoeuvre in its dialogue with Iran, especially if it can link the question of maritime security (both in the Red Sea and the Gulf) with other potential issues of cooperation, including the nuclear file and post-Assad Syria. Rome has already invested in dialogue and diplomacy by hosting two rounds of negotiations between Iran and the United States on the nuclear issue.⁴⁷ A similar approach could be applied to address Iran's regional behaviour. By engaging Tehran and offering targeted incentives – such as proposing itself as a facilitator in a potential return at the negotiation table with the United States on nuclear-related issues – Italy could help encourage a shift away from aggressive actions. This strategy should include clearly defined redlines, particularly concerning Iran's support for the Houthis and their destabilising activities in the Red Sea.

4.2 The Red Sea and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The second political lesson derived from the Red Sea crisis regards the practical, as well as symbolic, relevance that the Palestinian question has for regional actors, and how it can be exploited by state and non-state actors as a justification for their local objectives. On one side, it is important to be aware of these instrumentalization attempts, especially when Italy and the EU engage in public media communication about military operations that can be perceived or misconstrued as pro-Israel. A more careful communication is needed to keep a semblance of impartiality

⁴⁶ John Haltiwanger, "How Weakened Is Iran, Actually?", in *Foreign Policy*, 22 January 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/?p=1184636>.

⁴⁷ Jerry Fisayo-Bambi, "Next Round of Iran-US Nuclear Talks to Be Held in Rome, Diplomatic Sources Say", in *Euronews*, 14 April 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/04/14/next-round-of-iran-us-nuclear-talks-to-be-held-in-rome-diplomatic-sources-say>; "Italy Says Ready to Host Iran-US Talks in Rome", in *Iran International*, 20 May 2025, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202505205829>.

in the eyes of regional actors, combined with a pragmatic approach to common or complementary interests. On the other side, it is important to acknowledge that without a long-term solution to the question of Palestinian statehood, it is impossible to discuss stability in the region. Discussing the question should however not be limited to only re-activate the peace process *per se* but actively engaging in finding a solution that puts sustainable peace at the centre.

In line with this, Italian decision-makers should not forget that security and economic partnerships are not neutral. This is especially the case for connectivity projects that seek to bypass the Red Sea altogether, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) project, which relies on the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Israel as the key countries in Southwest Asia. Italy has been an integral part in the development of this initiative, which is intended as a diversification effort to not over-rely on the Suez Canal as the main line of communication with Asia.⁴⁸ In April 2025 Italy named its first special envoy for the IMEC corridor, highlighting the positive process established with the Abraham Accords and interrupted by the war on Gaza.⁴⁹ However, the IMEC project is politically fragile as it is based on the normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. While economically advantageous, Italy should be careful to put its diplomatic chips in this basket only without balancing it with a strong engagement towards a political settlement in Palestine. Indeed, without a clear linkage to a resumption of talks between Israelis and Palestinian, Italy's actions risk contributing to fuelling further instability by joining a project with a strong media resonance that implicitly recognises the *fait accompli* of the occupation rather than conditioning its implementation to Israel's compliance with international law.

4.3 The other Red Sea littoral countries

The third lesson that can be drawn regards the need to overcome a crisis-response approach to the area. The current partial disruption shipping traffic is only one example of the international effects that a political crisis along the Red Sea shores can trigger across and beyond the region. Beyond Yemen and Israel, there are many littoral countries very different from each other, whose diverging interests might cause similar disruptions in the future. This is why continuous monitoring of the situation and engagement with all actors is necessary to anticipate future problems around this vital chokepoint.

In 2020, Saudi Arabia supported the creation of the Council of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Countries, or 'Red Sea Council', composed of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan,

⁴⁸ Kaush Arha, Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata and Francesco Maria Talò, "India e Medio Oriente pronti, l'Europa (a guida italiana) può fare la differenza. Un anno di Imec", in *Formiche*, 10 September 2024, <https://formiche.net/?p=1646621>.

⁴⁹ Emanuele Rossi, "Italy Names IMEC Envoy ahead of FM Tajani's India Trip", in *Decode39*, 2 April 2025, <https://decode39.com/?p=10345>.

Eritrea, Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia with the intent to coordinate their security approaches.⁵⁰ However, the initiative has been interpreted as a way for the Kingdom to project influence by excluding other non-littoral countries with high stakes and interests in the Red Sea.⁵¹ The United Arab Emirates, for example, has for a decade expanded its presence in the area⁵² through infrastructural investment via DP World in many littoral countries; through an increased military presence in the Gulf of Aden, especially in the island of Socotra; and through the backing of different political factions in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Moreover, during the 'Qatar Blockade' of 2017-2021, the African shore of the Red Sea became an additional field of dispute between the so-called 'Arab Quartet' and the Qatar-Turkey axis.⁵³

In the meantime, China has nurtured relations with several littoral countries and most prominently through the establishment of a military basis in Djibouti in 2017, fully acknowledging the importance of the sea passage for the implementation of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁵⁴ Russia has also played a role in the regional political dynamics, especially in the relations with Eritrea and by meddling in the conflict in Sudan.⁵⁵

The ferment around the Red Sea is thus not a recent process that has erupted around the crisis with the Houthis. It underscores evolving dynamics that have been triggered at least since 2013, in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and with the contextual launch of the Chinese BRI. In this context, Italy needs to carefully assess the overlapping dynamics between areas often considered as separate entities, i.e., the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula; North Africa and the Mediterranean; the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. Especially considering the foreign policy activism that Italy has been showing in its relations with Africa countries under the so-called Mattei Plan, which includes (in the case of Egypt) or considers to include (in the case of Eritrea)⁵⁶ some of the Red Sea countries, the approach towards the Red Sea cannot

⁵⁰ "Foreign Minister: The Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden Is a Joint Action System for Coordination and Cooperation", in *Saudi Press Agency*, 6 January 2020, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/2019804>.

⁵¹ Desirée Custers, "Red Sea Multilateralism: Power Politics or Unlocked Potential", in *Stimson Commentaries*, 7 April 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/?p=39546>.

⁵² Magnus Taylor, "Horn of Africa States Follow Gulf into the Yemen War", in *International Crisis Group Op-ed*, 25 January 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/469>.

⁵³ Stasa Salacanian, "The Qatar Crisis Hits the African Continent", in *The New Arab*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.newarab.com/node/226591>.

⁵⁴ Zach Vertin, "Great Power Rivalry in the Red Sea", in *Brookings Global China*, June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/?p=814284>.

⁵⁵ Johnnie Carson et al., "The Red Sea Crisis Goes beyond the Houthis", in *Foreign Affairs*, 19 July 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1131925>.

⁵⁶ Italian Embassy in Asmara, *La cooperazione italiana e il MAECI in missione in Eritrea*, 7 October 2024, <https://ambasmara.esteri.it/it/?p=1033>; Italian Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy, *Piano Mattei: da presidente eritreo Afwerki proposta di partenariato strategico Italia-Eritrea per lo sviluppo del Paese*, 25 June 2024, <https://www.mimit.gov.it/it/notizie-stampa/piano-mattei-da-presidente-eritreo-afwerki-proposta-di-partenariato-strategico-italia-eritrea-per-lo-sviluppo-del-paese>.

be a crisis-response one but needs to have clear long-term objectives – as outlined by the Mattei Plan.

5. Balancing deterrence and diplomacy

The Red Sea crisis has provided an excellent, if complex, case study on the fragility of the principle of freedom of navigation in the face of increasing pressure by state and non-state actors. While state disregard or misinterpretation of the law of the sea and UNCLOS is nothing new, non-state groups' ability to threaten it (albeit with strong state support) to the extent seen in the Red Sea is a recent phenomenon. The Houthis' extensive use of drones and anti-ship missiles has elevated their military capabilities to those of a state while falling outside the purview of international law, which primarily relates to states as signatories. The regional context in which these attacks have unfolded is undoubtedly extraordinary, as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and has made a unified response by major naval powers impossible. While Somali piracy had in fact helped a wide range of states put their differences aside and work together (or at least in parallel) toward the common interest of re-establishing free and safe navigation through Bab el-Mandeb, the Houthi attacks have failed to do so. Indeed, regional states like Saudi Arabia and Egypt have not intervened, even with a more defensive approach similar to EUNAVFOR Aspides. Even East Asian economic powers like China and Japan, despite having large and capable navies, have not committed naval assets to the threat, in contrast to their approach to Somali piracy over a decade prior.

The Houthis' linking of their attacks to the war in Gaza has been successful in this regard, but raises a significant question: absent the prospect of a resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Yemeni civil war in the foreseeable future, how to deter recurring attempts by the Houthi to leverage freedom of navigation in the Red Sea for their own objectives? This narrative, reinforced by events in Gaza, has successfully deterred countries in the region with an evident stake in resumed freedom of navigation in the Red Sea from taking an active role, even when they could arguably have played a more active and cautious role similar to the EU approach through Aspides. Given the plausibility of renewed attacks by the Houthis in the future as a result of recurring escalations in the Israel-Palestine conflict, Italy has an opportunity to strengthen cooperation with partners in the region, with the EU where possible and without when necessary. Maritime security is historically a useful starting point for international cooperation, as Atalanta and other instances of anti-piracy cooperation have demonstrated, but Italy has the potential to go further in building and maintaining solid relations based on mutual interest, trust and respect – as it has done successfully elsewhere. Bringing regional navies on side will be key going forward in making sure not just European countries, but also regional partners with the means to do so, finally have a real stake in protecting freedom of navigation where diplomacy fails. At the same time, Italy and other interested EU countries should begin reflecting on the need to formulate an approach that does not exclude military retaliation a priori in order to

deter further attacks. With the looming prospect of further US disengagement from the region, a credible deterrence strategy must be established in order to reinforce diplomatic efforts in the future.

Recommendations

- Italy should assess the cost-benefit implications of Aspides' and its participants' defensive approach compared to a strategy seeking to exert pressure on a threat to freedom of navigation. Should an approach based on commensurate military retaliation combined with diplomatic engagement be deemed more effective, ensure it can be put in practice in case of further Houthi attempts to hinder the flow trade through the Red Sea.
- Italy should take note of NATO's failure to even discuss a response to a threat to Europe's trade as a sign that, in the Mediterranean region, military problems will require Mediterranean solutions, preferably with strong Italian leadership and outside of NATO, if a multilateral approach is deemed necessary.
- Italy should take the limited interest by other EU countries in contributing meaningfully to Aspides (except Greece and France) as a sign that unilateral or minilateral military operations to safeguard stability in the Enlarged Mediterranean are more and more necessary looking forward.
- Italy and France should leverage their vital role in Aspides and readiness (and willingness) to quickly deploy capable naval forces to the Red Sea, in contrast with other EU naval powers.
- Italy should not focus only on maritime security as an entry point for cooperation with regional partners, but consider the root causes and long-term impacts of the Red Sea crisis as a ramification of the conflict in Yemen.
- Italy should strengthen its role in reactivating talks between Israel and Palestine and especially condition Italy's participation in multilateral projects involving Israel to the resumption of the peace talks in line with international law.
- Italy should develop a clear awareness of the interests of all actors in the Red Sea – and their reciprocal patterns of amity and enmity.
- Italy should nurture bilateral relations with Gulf players, Oman, Saudi Arabia in particular on a regular basis beyond a limited crisis-response approach and support the continuation of Gulf-Iran dialogue.

Updated 23 July 2025

References

Murad Al-Arefi et al., "The Red Sea Front", special issue of *The Yemen Review*, November-December 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/nov-dec-2023>

Kaush Arha, Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata and Francesco Maria Talò, "India e Medio Oriente pronti, l'Europa (a guida italiana) può fare la differenza. Un anno di Imec", in *Formiche*, 10 September 2024, <https://formiche.net/?p=1646621>

Assoporti and SRM, *Port Infographics Update 2024*, June 2024, https://www.assoporti.it/media/14282/update_portinfographics-2024_v3-1.pdf

Jonathan Beale and Adam Durbin, "First UK Strikes on Houthis in Yemen under Trump", in BBC News, 30 April 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1k41z4g3pzo>

Noah Berman, "How Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea Threaten Global Shipping", in *CFR In Briefs*, 12 January 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/node/250371>

Željko Bogetić et al., "The Deepening Red Sea Shipping Crisis: Impacts and Outlook", in *MENA FCV Economic Series Briefs*, No. 2 (February 2025), p. 11, <https://hdl.handle.net/10986/42787>

Elio Calcagno, "Un ruolo guida per l'Italia nel Mar Rosso", in *AffarInternazionali*, 26 March 2025, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=112157>

Johnnie Carson et al., "The Red Sea Crisis Goes beyond the Houthis", in *Foreign Affairs*, 19 July 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1131925>

Hind Chitty, "World Container Index - 10 Jul", in *Drewry Supply Chain Advisors*, 10 July 2025, <https://www.drewry.co.uk/supply-chain-advisors/world-container-index-weekly-update/world-container-index-assessed-by-drewry>

Desirée Custers, "Red Sea Multilateralism: Power Politics or Unlocked Potential", in *Stimson Commentaries*, 7 April 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/?p=39546>

Giulia Daga, "Yemen: una riflessione critica sul ruolo dell'occidente", in *AffarInternazionali*, 17 April 2023, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=5459>

James Darley, "Could the Gaza Ceasefire Reduce Global Shipping Emissions?", in *Sustainability Magazine*, 22 January 2025, <https://sustainabilitymag.com/articles/will-ceasefire-end-red-sea-shipping-crisis>

Jerry Fisayo-Bambi, "Next Round of Iran-US Nuclear Talks to Be Held in Rome, Diplomatic Sources Say", in *Euronews*, 14 April 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/04/14/next-round-of-iran-us-nuclear-talks-to-be-held-in-rome-diplomatic-sources-say>

Anoop Govindan, "The Red Sea Crisis and Impact on Maritime Economy", in *Defence Research and Studies*, 26 November 2024, <https://dras.in/?p=20211>

David Gritten and Jaroslav Lukiv, "Dozens of African Migrants Killed in US Strike on Yemen, Houthis Say", in *BBC News*, 28 April, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9qw274w72vo>

Hugo Grotius, *The Freedom of the Seas*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1916, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/scott-the-freedom-of-the-seas-latin-and-english-version-magoffin-trans>

John Haltiwanger, "How Weakened Is Iran, Actually?", in *Foreign Policy*, 22 January 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/?p=1184636>

Marcus Hand, "Red Sea Crisis Drives Maersk to 3rd Most Profitable Ever Year", in *Seatrade Maritime News*, 6 February 2025, <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/containers/red-sea-crisis-drives-maersk-to-3rd-most-profitable-ever-year>

International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, *Freedom of Navigation: New Challenges*, Statement by Rüdiger Wolfrum at the 32nd Annual Conference sponsored by the Center for Oceans Law and Policy (COLP), University of Virginia School of Law, held in Singapore on 9-10 January 2008, https://www.itlos.org/fileadmin/itlos/documents/statements_of_president/wolfrum/freedom_navigation_080108_eng.pdf

Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), "I nuovi dati della crisi in Mar Rosso", in *ISPI Focus*, 26 January 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/it?p=161766>

ISPI, "Mar Rosso: l'impatto della crisi – cinque grafici", in *ISPI Commentaries*, 30 April 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/it?p=171966>

Italian Embassy in Asmara, *La cooperazione italiana e il MAECI in missione in Eritrea*, 7 October 2024, <https://ambasmara.esteri.it/it/?p=1033>

Italian Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy, *Piano Mattei: da presidente eritreo Afwerki proposta di partenariato strategico Italia-Eritrea per lo sviluppo del Paese*, 25 June 2024, <https://www.mimit.gov.it/it/notizie-stampa/piano-mattei-da-presidente-eritreo-afwerki-proposta-di-partenariato-strategico-italia-eritrea-per-lo-sviluppo-del-paese>

Stine Jacobsen, "Maersk Eyes 4% Market Growth in 2025, Uncertainty over Tariffs and Red Sea", in *Reuters*, 6 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/maersk-q4-profit-beats-forecast-expects-softer-2025-earnings-2025-02-06>

Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Troels Burchall Henningsen, "Success Defying All Expectations: How and Why Limited Use of Force Helped to End Somali Piracy", in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2024), p. 263-287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.2227356>

Joshua Minchin, "Hapag-Lloyd Fourth-Quarter Operating Profits up \$900m", in *Lloyd's List*, 30 January 2025, <https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1152406>

Wolf-Christian Paes et al., "Navigating Troubled Waters: The Houthis' Campaign in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden", in *IISS Research Papers*, December 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2024/12/navigating-troubled-waters-the-houthis-campaign-in-the-red-sea-and-the-gulf-of-aden>

Barak Ravid, "U.S. Will Stop Bombing Yemen after Houthis 'Capitulated,' Trump Says", in *Axios*, 6 May 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/05/06/houthi-ceasefire-trump-yemen-attacks>

Emanuele Rossi, "Italy Names IMEC Envoy ahead of FM Tajani's India Trip", in *Decode39*, 2 April 2025, <https://decode39.com/?p=10345>

Emanuele Rossi, "Red Sea Shipping Stalls Despite Houthi Ceasefire", in *Decode39*, 19 February 2025, <https://decode39.com/9968>

Andrew Roth, "Stunning Signal Leak Reveals Depths of Trump Administration's Loathing of Europe", in *The Guardian*, 25 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xxp9cj>

Robert C. Rubel, "Navies and Economic Prosperity – the New Logic of Sea Power", in *Corbett Papers*, No. 11 (October 2012), <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/dsd/assets/corbettpaper11.pdf>

Stasa Salacanian, "The Qatar Crisis Hits the African Continent", in *The New Arab*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.newarab.com/node/226591>

Burak Şakir Şeker, "Don't Forget About the Red Sea", in *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, No. 51 (Summer 2024), <https://www.thecaireview.com/?p=14652>

Pablo R. Suanzes, "La UE, sin España, lanza la misión Aspides para proteger a los mercantes del Mar Rojo", in *El Mundo*, 19 February 2024, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2024/02/19/65d36b9c21efa0123a8b459f.htm>

Magnus Taylor, "Horn of Africa States Follow Gulf into the Yemen War", in *International Crisis Group Op-ed*, 25 January 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/469>

UK Office for National Statistics, *Ship Crossings through Global Maritime Passages: January 2022 to April 2024*, 24 April 2024, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/internationaltrade/bulletins/shipcrossingsthroughglobalmaritimepassages/january2022toapril2024>

Zach Vertin, "Great Power Rivalry in the Red Sea", in *Brookings Global China*, June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/?p=814284>

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 6976831

www.iai.it

Latest IAI PAPERS

Director: Riccardo Alcaro (r.alcaro@iai.it)

- 25 | 19 Elio Calcagno, Giulia Daga and Farah Ahmed, *Deterrence and Diplomacy in the Red Sea: Recommendations for Italy*
- 25 | 18 Andrew Whitworth and Nicola Bilotta, *Cryptoassets and the Lack of International Regulatory Coordination*
- 25 | 17 Darlington Tshuma and Marianna Lunardini, *Italy-Africa Digital Partnership under the Mattei Plan*
- 25 | 16 Arnab Das and Jennifer Johnson-Calari, *The Canary in the Gold Mine: What the Price of Gold Reveals about the International Monetary System and the Role of the US Dollar*
- 25 | 15 Michele Gaietta, *Iran's Nuclear Programme after the 12-Day War: Options and Challenges*
- 25 | 14 Antonia Wunnerlich and Penelope Naas, with contribution from Julia Tréhu, *Aligning US-EU Energy Grid Strategies: From Risk to Resilience*
- 25 | 13 Polina Sinovets and Adérito Vicente, *Europe's Nuclear Alternatives: A Time of Reckoning*
- 25 | 12 Barath Harithas, *Wired for Resilience: Transatlantic Approaches to Semiconductor Supply Chain Security*
- 25 | 11 Fabian Villalobos, *Trans-Atlantic Critical Mineral Supply Chain Cooperation: How to Secure Critical Minerals, Battery and Military Supply Chains in the European Theatre*
- 25 | 10 Francesca Maremonti, *Reality Check: The Regulatory Dimension of the EU De-risking Strategy for Critical Raw Materials and Semiconductors*

Il Mar Rosso e il conflitto in Yemen: andare oltre la sicurezza marittima

27 Marzo 2025
Giulia Daga

ANALISI MEDIO ORIENTE

Il 23 gennaio 2025 gli Houthi hanno liberato i venticinque membri della ciurma della nave mercantile MV Galaxy Leader, sequestrati nel novembre 2023 a seguito delle dichiarazioni di guerra da parte del gruppo non statale nei confronti di Israele e di tutte le navi in qualche modo legate ad esso. L'equipaggio della nave, [sequestrata per la nazionalità israeliana](#) del comproprietario della società madre associata ad essa, è stato rilasciato come diretta conseguenza dell'accordo per un cessate-il-fuoco a Gaza, raggiunto il 15 gennaio 2025 e reso operativo nei giorni seguenti. Gli Houthi hanno liberato la ciurma con il caveat di ritenersi garanti dell'accordo, e di limitare, ma non terminare completamente, gli attacchi, con un occhio fisso sul rispetto dei termini della tregua. Il rilascio è stato percepito con prudenza dal mondo mercantile europeo, [che ancora non ha ripreso](#) a pieno ritmo la rotta per il Mar Rosso, abbandonata dall'inizio degli attacchi in favore della più lunga ma sicura rotta intorno al Capo di Buona Speranza. Una nuova escalation tra Houthi, Stati Uniti ed Israele, a seguito della ripresa delle operazioni militari israeliane su Gaza a metà marzo 2025, ha reso ancora più lontana la prospettiva di un ritorno ad un utilizzo pre-crisi della rotta per il Mar Rosso.

Non confondere gli attacchi degli Houthi con attacchi di pirateria

Nell'ultimo anno, la parziale inagibilità del Mar Rosso ha creato forti reazioni nel mondo mercantile, diplomatico, e della difesa italiano, che ha serrato i ranghi per mostrarsi tra i più ferventi sostenitori dei principi di libertà di navigazione e sicurezza della navigazione, in linea con il diritto internazionale garantito dalla convenzione UNCLOS.

Dal punto di vista sia operativo che mediatico, l'approccio nei confronti degli attacchi Houthi nel Mar Rosso è stato affrontato in maniera simile a come sono stati affrontati gli attacchi di pirateria a largo del Corno d'Africa, attraverso l'Operazione EUNAVFOR Atalanta. Eppure, la situazione è molto diversa. Un atto di pirateria si caratterizza principalmente per il suo obiettivo, cioè il profitto privato ricavato dall'attacco. In questo caso, il fatto che gli attacchi siano stati lanciati da un attore non statale non deve distrarre dalla valenza prettamente politica e bellica di queste azioni. Pur trattandosi di un attore non-statale non riconosciuto dalla comunità internazionale, il gruppo Houthi controlla da oltre dieci anni la parte nord-occidentale del paese, inclusa la capitale Sanaa. Come attore politico con il potere *de facto* di governo su un territorio, gli Houthi hanno agito come uno stato dichiarando guerra contro Israele—includingo [attacchi missilistici direttamente su territorio israeliano](#)—ed hanno esplicitamente condizionato la fine dei loro attacchi nel Mar Rosso al raggiungimento di una tregua a Gaza. Il fatto che il gruppo sia [sospettato](#) di aver tratto comunque profitto da parte di quelle navi mercantili disposte a pagare per la propria sicurezza non riduce le operazioni a quelle di bande criminali, e il considerarle tali non lascia comprendere la natura della situazione così come la sua potenziale soluzione.

Andare oltre la sicurezza marittima

In questo contesto, è stato politicamente scivoloso da parte degli attori europei il far riferimento unicamente alla questione della sicurezza marittima e protezione della libertà di navigazione, trattandoli come principi oggettivi e 'neutrali' di diritto internazionale, senza soffermarsi abbastanza sul versante politico della questione. A poco è valso agli occhi dell'audience regionale cercare di distinguere l'operazione a guida europea Aspides dalla più offensiva Poseidon Archer a guida anglo-statunitense, sottolineando come nel caso europeo si tratti di una semplice operazione difensiva a garanzia della libertà di navigazione, non includendo attacchi su territorio yemenita contro le postazioni Houthi.

Infatti, le azioni a supporto della sicurezza marittima hanno generato frustrazione tra gli attori regionali verso quelli che sono spesso percepiti come doppi standard attuati dall'Occidente, ma anche tra quei partner, come le monarchie del Golfo, da tempo impegnati a gestire gli effetti della guerra in Yemen con poco supporto internazionale.

Il messaggio che è arrivato sulle sponde del Mar Rosso e fino al Golfo Persico è stato che l'Unione Europea ha cominciato a mostrare interesse per risolvere le cause che hanno portato agli attacchi Houthi solo nel momento in cui i propri interessi commerciali sono stati messi in pericolo, quando per anni—dal fallimento della conferenza per il dialogo nazionale in poi—il conflitto in Yemen è passato in secondo piano, senza un attivo impegno internazionale nei confronti di una soluzione di lungo periodo.


Risolvere i nodi del conflitto in Yemen

Ci sono alcuni nodi fondamentali che rendono la situazione nel Mar Rosso ancora precaria e che hanno contribuito ad esacerbare quella che per anni è stata definita la peggiore crisi umanitaria al mondo dovuta alla mancata risoluzione del conflitto in Yemen, soprattutto negli anni dell'intervento militare a guida saudita. Il principale nodo riguarda la riattivazione del processo di dialogo nazionale in Yemen, possibilmente sotto l'egida delle Nazioni Unite, che includa tutti gli attori e portatori di interessi coinvolti, dal governo internazionalmente riconosciuto, al movimento separatista del Sud, agli Houthi.

Di questo si è parlato a lungo tra gli addetti ai lavori dal 2011 in poi, e soprattutto dal 2014, quando gli Houthi hanno preso il controllo della capitale lasciando intendere di essere lì per restare, e di non poter continuare ad essere [esclusi dai negoziati ufficiali](#). Solo attraverso un processo di riconciliazione inclusivo gli Houthi possono venire esautorati della loro portata rivoluzionaria, che facilmente può appigliarsi e sfruttare più ampi conflitti regionali per mostrarsi dal lato degli 'oppressi', ed evitare di doversi focalizzare sul rendere conto alla popolazione delle effettive capacità di governo del territorio.

Continuare il gioco ondivago della designazione/rimozione del gruppo dalla lista delle organizzazioni terroristiche, da parte degli Stati Uniti, rende ovviamente il nodo particolarmente difficile da sciogliere, ed è su questo punto che l'Italia potrebbe giocare una funzione attiva di facilitazione al dialogo, sfruttando il proprio auto-dichiarato interesse di svolgere un ruolo di ponte tra gli Stati Uniti dell'Amministrazione Trump, l'Europa, e il Mediterraneo Allargato. Per attuare questa strategia, è però necessario che l'Italia vada oltre la retorica della sicurezza marittima nell'area e prenda piena consapevolezza della dimensione politica della crisi e delle sue ramificazioni.

Questo articolo è stato scritto nell'ambito del progetto [Rotte di distensione: sicurezza marittima e scenari di cooperazione attraverso il Mar Rosso](#), con il supporto del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale e della Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo.

 Author Profile

 Related Posts

Giulia Daga

Ricercatrice nel programma Mediterraneo, Medioriente e Africa dell'Istituto Affari Internazionali. In parallelo, collabora come docente a contratto con la John Cabot University. I suoi interessi di ricerca includono la storia politica del Golfo Persico, storia diplomatica e coloniale, strategia marittima, politiche identitarie e teorie sul non allineamento.

Un ruolo guida per l'Italia nel Mar Rosso

26 Marzo 2025
Elio Calcagno

ANALISI ITALIA

Il 14 febbraio 2025, a un anno dall'avvio dell'operazione EUNAVFOR Aspides, il Consiglio dell'Unione Europea ha deciso di rinnovarne il mandato fino al 28 febbraio del 2026. Una buona notizia per l'Italia, che fin dai primi giorni degli attacchi Houthi contro navi commerciali nel Mar Rosso ha cercato di mobilitare una risposta dell'UE ad una minaccia che colpisce le economie di tutto il continente. Per Roma, la salvaguardia del principio di libertà di navigazione è infatti un **obiettivo strategico fondamentale** considerando che oltre il 60% delle importazioni e il 50% delle esportazioni nazionali passano dal mare. Non a caso il Mediterraneo allargato è ad oggi il punto focale della proiezione operativa delle Forze Armate, con gli stretti di Suez e Bab-el-Mandeb come sorvegliati speciali.

Con poche eccezioni negli ultimi decenni, l'Italia ha voluto **agire all'interno di coalizioni** preferibilmente inquadrata in strutture di comando NATO o UE. In tale contesto, che la libera navigazione sulle rotte tra Mar Rosso e Golfo Persico sia un interesse fondamentale per l'Italia e la sua economia è ben evidenziato dal fatto che oltre al ruolo guida in Aspides, la Marina Militare fornisce spesso e volentieri un contributo abilitante ad altre operazioni di sicurezza marittima nel Mediterraneo allargato. In primis EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Atalanta, attualmente a **guida Italiana**, che dal 2008 contrasta la pirateria al largo del Corno d'Africa, e l'ora conclusa operazione AGENOR – componente militare della European-led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH).

Insicurezza marittima

Tuttavia, l'attuale scenario geopolitico, caratterizzato dalla competizione tra stati e crescente instabilità, è foriero di un contesto dove la libertà di navigazione diventa sempre meno un aspetto inviolabile del diritto internazionale. Dal Mar Rosso fino al Mar Cinese Meridionale assistiamo a un marcato processo di territorializzazione dei mari e in generale al ritorno del mare come punto di incontro (e potenziale scontro) tra grandi potenze. Di fronte ad un proliferare di crisi e minacce non è scontato che NATO e UE riescano sempre a garantire l'unità e tempestività necessarie per mobilitare i rispettivi strumenti.

In tale contesto, gli attacchi a navi commerciali per mano degli Houthi, e la frammentata risposta occidentale, rappresentano una svolta preoccupante per due motivi. Prima di tutto, gli Houthi si sono dimostrati capaci di adoperare sistemi d'arma relativamente avanzati in grado di minacciare e, in alcuni casi, colpire navi anche a centinaia di chilometri di distanza. Missili da crociera, missili balistici e droni sono infatti strumenti ben diversi dalle armi tipiche dei pirati somali che pur hanno messo a soqquadro la libera navigazione intorno al Corno d'Africa nello scorso decennio. In secondo luogo, è apparso evidente come, di fronte ad una minaccia tale da richiedere un intervento militare, dai Paesi occidentali non sia scaturito un approccio unitario. Gli Stati Uniti, seguiti dal Regno Unito, hanno infatti prediletto una strategia più aggressiva con la missione Poseidon Archer (in parallelo all'operazione Prosperity Guardian) per di colpire obiettivi Houthi sulla terraferma. Nel fondare Aspides i Paesi partecipanti, Italia e Francia in primis, hanno invece preferito mantenere una postura più difensiva, con regole di ingaggio più restrittive e che permettevano fondamentalmente soltanto di intercettare missili e droni già in volo.


Se da una parte l'operazione anglo-americana non è realmente riuscita a dissuadere gli attacchi degli Houthi, dall'altra l'approccio ostentatamente difensivo imposto ad Aspides non può rappresentare un'idea di deterrenza a lungo termine contro nuovi attacchi da Houthi o altri attori statuali o non statuali. Anche a diversi mesi dall'inizio di entrambe le operazioni il traffico di navi portacontainer nel Mar Rosso ha continuato a calare, arrivando a dicembre 2024 a superare il **meno 80% rispetto all'anno precedente**. Aspides, che nel suo primo anno di operazioni ha scortato da vicino più di 370 navi, in diversi casi neutralizzando fisicamente missili e droni Houthi, non è evidentemente bastata a riportare fiducia nel settore dello shipping, che nella maggior parte dei casi ha continuato a preferire la rotta alternativa intorno all'Africa, che resta però più dispendiosa in termini di tempo e costi – nonché di emissioni di CO2. Se è vero che non è possibile analizzare questa crisi rimuovendola dal più ampio contesto dell'escalation in Medio Oriente, evocata ripetutamente dalla leadership degli Houthi, è comunque importante riflettere sul segnale che una risposta occidentale eterogenea e – dati alla mano – poco efficace in entrambe le sue declinazioni possa aver lanciato a livello regionale e globale.

L'importanza di una leadership italiana

Il lavoro della Marina italiana e di Aspides in generale è di assoluto valore, e anzi ha dimostrato la capacità dei Paesi dell'Unione di operare in teatri complessi come lo è stato il Mar Rosso nell'ultimo anno, proteggendo con successo tutte le navi mercantili scortate anche sotto il tiro degli Houthi. L'operazione stessa, a ben vedere, simboleggia un enorme passo avanti per l'avanzamento dell'ideale di una difesa europea in quanto rappresenta la prima volta che forze UE sono state dispiegate in un teatro operativo ostile fin da subito. Anche il processo decisionale per la **creazione di Aspides è stato relativamente veloce** rispetto al passato.

Per l'Italia si delinea dunque un futuro più incerto per ciò che riguarda la sicurezza delle rotte marittime, ma al contempo l'opportunità di costruirsi un ruolo di leadership nella salvaguardia della libera navigazione dei punti caldi del Mediterraneo Allargato, forte della sua Marina e del carattere expeditionary di tutta la Difesa. Un'Italia più decisa e decisiva sarebbe sicuramente un asset importante per l'Europa, in gran parte concentrata esclusivamente sulla minaccia russa ma spesso pronta a seguire i Paesi disposti a tracciare la strada in un Mediterraneo allargato sempre più agitato.

*Questo articolo è stato scritto nell'ambito del progetto **Rotte di distensione: sicurezza marittima e scenari di cooperazione attraverso il Mar Rosso**, con il supporto del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale e della Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo.*

 Author Profile

 Related Posts



Elio Calcagno



Ricercatore nel programma “Difesa, sicurezza e spazio” dell'Istituto Affari Internazionali, dove si occupa di difesa e industria della difesa europee e di sicurezza marittima. In passato ha lavorato a Bruxelles presso l'International Crisis Group, il Servizio europeo per l'azione esterna (Seae) e le Nazioni Unite.

