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Issue Brief

The Indian Navy and Maritime Security in the Red Sea

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S*ummary*

The Indian Navy has played a vital role in securing maritime trade routes in the Red Sea amid the targeting of commercial vessels by the Houthi rebels. Protecting India's interests in its extended neighbourhood and ensuring the safety of marine traffic are the main goals of the Indian Navy's active participation in anti-piracy operations and rescue missions.

Introduction

Following the outbreak of the Israel-Palestine conflict triggered by the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, the Houthi rebels initiated a series of assaults on merchant ships in the southern Red Sea region. Since these incidents, a considerable portion of cargo ships engaged in international trade and commerce, transiting through the Suez Canal and the Bab-El-Mandeb strait – a critical chokepoint measuring 29 kilometres at its narrowest point – have been affected by missile strikes and long-range drone attacks. Given the significance of this trade route for Indian imports and exports, safeguarding it has become a top priority for the Indian Navy.

The strategic significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has been steadily increasing in recent times and the Indian Navy is working towards ensuring the safety of merchant shipping and providing aid to mariners at sea, and establishing itself as a ‘first responder’ in the region. Sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are vulnerable to actions like blockades and sabotage, posing a threat to trade disruptions that can extend for several days. Recognising the potential long-term repercussions on the global economy, the Indian Navy is actively safeguarding its interests in the Red Sea.

Houthi Attacks and Global Impact

The Houthis are a Shia-Islamist group from the Saada region of Yemen, who control the north-western part of the country, including the capital Sanaa. They are seen as part of the Iranian-led ‘axis of resistance’, which also includes Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Merchant traffic like the Norwegian-owned Strinda, enroute to Italy on 12 December 2023, and the Danish-owned A.P. Moller Maersk’s Swan Atlantic have been targeted.

As a response, numerous commercial shipping companies are altering their routes, redirecting their container ships from the Red Sea to the Cape of Good Hope route in the southern part of Africa.¹ On 15 December 2023, Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd announced their decision to reroute ships.² Yang Ming of China, MSC of Switzerland, and CMA CGM of France have also expressed their intention to adopt a similar course of action. Notably, Maersk, MSC, and Hapag-Lloyd together represent approximately 40 percent of ocean shipping.

While the Suez Canal alone accounted for 12 percent of global trade area and 30 percent of container shipping, the shift to rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope entails an additional 3,000-3,500 nautical miles (6,000km) for journeys connecting

¹ Elisabeth Braw, “[The Red Sea Crisis Is About to Ruin Christmas Gifts](#)”, *The Guardian*, 18 December 2023.

² “[Maersk Reroutes Vessels Around Africa from Red Sea](#)”, *Marine Link*, 9 December 2023.

Europe with Asia, thereby extending the trip duration by around 10 days.³ The prolonged turn-around time at European ports for container ships has led to a surge in container and shipping rates as well as insurance fees. This route holds particular significance for delivering LPG and oil in tankers to Europe, and it plays a crucial role in transporting gas to replace the once-vital Russian pipeline gas.⁴

In the case of India, the main items travelling through the particular route constitute steel, engineering products, textiles, chemicals, vehicles, and agricultural products, which are shipped from India to Europe and Western destinations through the Red Sea route.⁵ The increase in cost has also affected the demand for long-grain Basmati rice and tea from India to West Asia, Europe and the Americas. Likewise, the movement of fertilisers, sunflower oil, machinery components, and electronic goods into India experienced delays, translating into a potential increase in costs for consumers.⁶ The Ministry of Commerce requested the Export Credit Guarantee Corporation (ECGC) to refrain from raising the premium on credit insurance and associated services. The Indian government established an Inter-ministerial Services Improvement Group (SIG) anchored with the Commerce ministry to oversee the crisis and its impact on the EXIM trade of India.⁷

According to a study conducted by the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) in 2023

‘As the threats to cargo vessels on the Red Sea spikes after recent incidents, India can potentially see a drop in exports by around \$30 billion, as exporters hold back on shipments due to rising fears.’⁸

Consequently, the ambitious India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which was announced earlier during the 2023 G20 summit in Delhi, has been affected. The IMEC aimed to reduce both freight costs and transit time between India and Europe. The rail freight corridors were intended to connect to two IMEC ports on the Indian coast, namely Mundra and the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT).⁹ However, IMEC faces a significant bottleneck, as Haifa cannot serve as India’s

³ Richard Partington, [“What is the Red Sea crisis, and what does it mean for global trade?”](#), *The Guardian*, 3 January 2024.

⁴ Paul Wallace and Alex Longley, [“How Red Sea Crisis Raises, Inflation, Supply Chain Worries Anew”](#), *Bloomberg*, 24 January 2024.

⁵ [“Tripling transportation costs’: Red Sea attacks are spiralling and India is feeling the heat”](#), ET Online, *The Economic Times*, 13 January 2023.

⁶ Bibhudatta Pradhan, [“How escalating Red Sea crisis poses billions of dollars of risk for India”](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 31 January 2023.

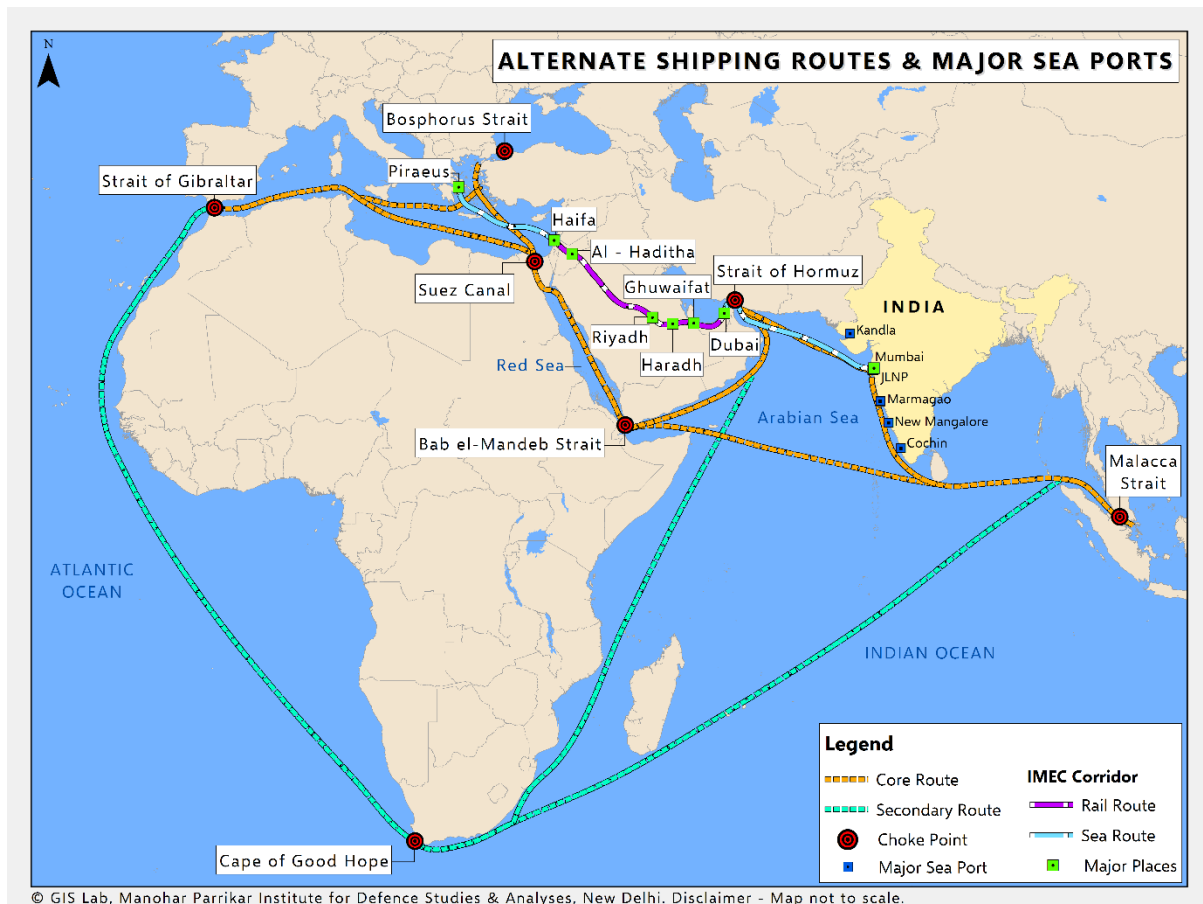
⁷ ANI, [“Inter-ministerial meeting convened to address trade impact of Red Sea crisis”](#), 12 January 2024.

⁸ Vaishnawi Sinha, [“Indian exports may drop by \\$30 billion amid Houthi threat on Red Sea”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 9 January 2024.

⁹ M. Kalyanraman, [“A revival of the IMEC idea amid choppy geopolitics”](#), *The Hindu*, 22 January 2024.

primary gateway to the West due to its current container traffic being severely limited because of the conflict in the region.

Fig. 1: Alternate Shipping Routes and Major Sea Ports



Global Responses

The incessant attacks by drones and missiles on military and commercial vessels in the choke point have been met by military operations by Western navies in a bid to protect the mercantile shipping transversing in the area. The US Navy deployed two aircraft-carrier task groups to the region. The US, along with the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and Spain, established Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG).

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin III stated on 18 December 2023 that the multinational naval force’s goal is to protect the freedom of commerce and navigation to facilitate international trade, and support regional security and prosperity by escorting merchant ships and oil tankers through the Red Sea.¹⁰ India is a member of Combined Task Force (CTF)-153, one of the five task forces under the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), established in April 2022 to combat piracy in the Red Sea

¹⁰ US Department of Defense, “[Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea](#)”, Government of the United States of America, 18 December 2023.

and the Gulf of Aden. Nevertheless, India has approached the invitation from the United States to join Operation Prosperity Guardian with caution. Similar to France and Italy, India opted for an independent naval presence in the region rather than aligning with the U.S.-led maritime coalition specifically aimed at countering Houthi attacks.¹¹

Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, the Commander of the US Fifth Fleet, stated that five warships from the US, France, and the UK were actively patrolling the waterways of the western Gulf of Aden and the southern Red Sea. Cooper highlighted that the alliance collaborates closely with the shipping sector to coordinate security measures and maintains regular communication with commercial ships, providing guidance on ‘manoeuvring and best practices to avoid potential attacks. As a result of this operation, on 25 December 2023, Maersk announced its decision to resume shipping through the Strait.¹²

Indian Navy Interventions

The Indian Navy’s four major roles are military, diplomatic, constabulary and benign.¹³ The then Raksha Rajya Mantri Subhash Bhamre in the Rajya Sabha on 2 January 2018 noted that the Indian Navy actively oversees Maritime Areas of Interest (MAI) and consistently dispatches ships for Presence and Surveillance Missions (PSM) around crucial chokepoints and sea lanes in the IOR. Since August 2017, the Indian Navy’s deployments in the IOR have been more systematically organised under the Mission Based Deployment (MBD) concept.¹⁴

The Red Sea is an area that falls under India’s primary maritime interest. An incident of unauthorised boarding on the Malta-flagged vessel Merchant Vessel (MV) Ruen was reported on the UK Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) portal on 14 December 2023, 700 nautical miles from the Indian coast.¹⁵ The Indian Navy’s Maritime Patrol Aircraft and INS Kochi on an anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Aden were dispatched to provide emergency medical attention for an injured crew member.¹⁶

In the following days, the Liberian-flagged MV Chem Pluto suffered a drone attack on 23 December 2023 outside the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), some 217

¹¹ Shashank Mattoo, [“US Invites India to Join Naval Coalition in Red Sea”](#), *Mint*, 4 January 2024.

¹² Rebecca Santana, [“Houthis show no sign of ending ‘reckless’ Red Sea attacks as trade traffic picks up, commander says”](#), *The Associated Press*, 31 December 2023.

¹³ Indian Navy, [“Role of Navy”](#), Government of India.

¹⁴ [“Naval Surveillance in Indian Ocean”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2 January 2018.

¹⁵ [“Indian Navy Enhances Surveillance in North/ Central Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 31 December 2023.

¹⁶ [“Piracy Attack Oon MV Ruen in Central Arabian Sea”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 21 December 2023.

nautical miles from Porbandar in Gujarat, on its way to the Mangalore port.¹⁷ The Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team of the Indian Navy conducted an initial inspection upon her arrival. Similarly, the Indian-manned, Gabon-flagged ship MV Sai Baba, also reported a drone strike in the Southern Red Sea on 24 December 2023.¹⁸

On 26 December 2023, Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh during the commissioning of the INS Imphal, a Project 15B stealth guided missile destroyer, addressed the unrest in the Red Sea and stated the Government of India is monitoring the issue seriously, and noted that the Indian Navy has increased its surveillance in the region.¹⁹ In an effort to maintain a deterrent posture and reinforce its commitment to maritime security in the wake of the recent attacks, the Indian Navy stationed its guided missile destroyers, INS Mormugao, INS Kochi, INS Kolkata, INS Chennai and INS Vishakhapatnam in the Arabian Sea region. According to media reports, ‘while INS Kolkata is on the mouth of Red Sea, INS Kochi is south of Yemen Socotra Island, INS Mormugao is in west Arabian sea with Chennai in Central Arabian Sea [...] INS Visakhapatnam was tasked to patrol the north Arabian sea’.²⁰ On 4 January 2024, the Indian Navy deployed a maritime patrol aircraft and redirected INS Chennai in response to an attempted hijacking on a Liberia-flagged bulk carrier named MV Lila Norfolk. The ship had alerted the UKMTO portal about the presence of unidentified armed individuals attempting to board.²¹

Amidst the ongoing crisis in the Red Sea, the Indian Navy has intensified its efforts in anti-piracy operations. The offshore patrol ship INS Sumitra successfully thwarted a piracy attempt on the FV Iman on 29 January 2024.²² Furthermore, it conducted another effective anti-piracy operation off the East Coast of Somalia, rescuing the Fishing Vessel Al Naeemi and its crew (consisting of 19 Pakistani Nationals) from 11 Somali Pirates on 28-29 January 2024. INS Sumitra, an indigenous Offshore Patrol Vessel of the Indian Navy, had been strategically deployed for Anti-Piracy and Maritime Security Operations in the East of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden.

On 18 January 2024, INS Vishakhapatnam, while on an anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Aden, responded to a distress call by Marshall Island flagged and US-owned

¹⁷ DINAKAR PERI, [“Houthi attacks: a threat to global shipping?”](#), *The Hindu*, 29 December 2023,

¹⁸ Amrita Nayak Dutta, [“Gabon-flagged vessel with Indian crew comes under drone attack in Red Sea”](#), *The Indian Express*, 24 December 2023.

¹⁹ [“Raksha Mantri commissions stealth guided missile destroyer INS Imphal in Mumbai”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 26 December 2023.

²⁰ Shishir Gupta, [“Indian Navy presses 5 destroyers for securing Arabian Sea; full details of ships”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 28 December 2023.

²¹ [“Indian Navy’s Mission Deployed Platforms Respond to Hijacking Incident in the Arabian Sea”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 5 January 2024.

²² Nisha Anand, [“Indian Navy rescues 19 Pakistanis, vessel hijacked by Somali pirates”](#), *Business Standard*, 30 January 2024.

bulk carrier MV Genco Picardy after the latter suffered a drone attack.²³ Likewise, Indian guided-missile destroyer, along with the navies of France, and the US, came together to provide assistance to the British oil tanker MV Marlin Luanda, with 22 Indian and one Bangladeshi crew, when it came under fire from anti-ship ballistic missiles from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, on 26 January 2024.²⁴

As of 18 January 2024, Randhir Jaiswal, the spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs, stated that the Indian Navy is actively engaged in efforts to safeguard shipping routes, emphasising the importance of ensuring safety and unhindered commerce and navigation in the region.²⁵ Admiral Hari Kumar, Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), further highlighted collaborative initiatives with partner nations to foster a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific environment. The Indian Navy aims to uphold a rules-based order in the region through these cooperative endeavours.²⁶

Table 1: Incidents at Sea and Indian Navy Response

Date	Vessel Name	Indian Navy Response Team
15 December 2023	Merchant Vessel Ruen	Indian Navy’s Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA), and INS Kochi
23 December 2023	MV Chem Pluto	INS Mormugao, INS Kochi and INS Kolkata (Guided Missile Destroyers)
24 December 2023	MV Sai baba	- do -
4 January 2024	MV Lila Norfolk	MPA and INS Chennai
28 January 2024	FV Iman	INS Sumitra
29 January 2024	FV Al Naeemi	INS Sumitra
18 January 2024	MV Genco Picardy	INS Vishakhapatnam
26 January 2024	MV Marlin Launda	INS Vishakhapatnam

Source: Media reports

INS Sumedha and INS Tarakash participated in the Indian Navy’s deployment to the anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG), with the INS Tarkash having participated in the first GoG patrol in October 2022.²⁷ INS Sumedha has previously

²³ [“Indian Navy’s Mission Deployed Platform Responds To A Maritime Incident In The Gulf Of Aden”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 18 January 2024.

²⁴ Kalyan Ray, [“INS Visakhapatnam assists British oil tanker on fire in Gulf of Aden amid Houthi attack”](#), Deccan Herald, 27 January 2024.

²⁵ [“Navy Trying To Secure The Area”: India On Red Sea Attacks](#)”, NDTV, 18 January 2024.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ [“Indian Navy Completes Second Gulf of Guinea Anti-Piracy Patrol INS Sumedha Furthers India’s National Interests”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 16 November 2023.

carried out a number of fleet support operations, communication drills, tactical manoeuvres, flying operations, maritime surveillance, offshore and coastal patrolling, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief HADR missions.²⁸ Most recently, it carried out Operation Kaveri, which was designed to evacuate Indian diaspora members from war-torn Sudan in April 2023.²⁹

Likewise, INS Sunayana participated in the multinational initiative known as Operation Southern Readiness 2023, organised by the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). This collaborative effort was designed to enhance maritime security and counter piracy, ensuring the continued safety and freedom of navigation in the region. India presently has two frontline warships stationed in the Gulf of Aden and at least 10 warships in the northern and western Arabian Sea, accompanied by surveillance aircraft.³⁰

The Indian Naval Task Groups deployed in the region have conducted investigations on over 250 vessels and small boats in the last two months, boarding more than 40.³¹ Indian naval maritime patrol aircraft and RPAs (Remotely Piloted Aircraft) are persistently conducting surveillance over the designated area. The Indian Maritime Analysis Centre (IMAC) and IFC-IOR are closely overseeing white shipping activities, with a particular focus on Indian Flagged Merchant Vessels operating in the region. Additionally, the Indian Navy is collaborating with the Coast Guard to ensure enhanced surveillance within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).³²

Maritime security was a priority issue on the agenda during the recent visit of Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar to Iran. In his meeting with Iran’s Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian, the EAM noted that the ‘threats to the safety of maritime commercial traffic ... is a matter of great concern to the international community’ and stated that it has a ‘direct bearing on India's energy and economic interests’.³³

The Indian government and the Navy specifically, have, therefore, taken various steps to address maritime security challenges in its extended neighbourhood, including diplomatic outreach, enhanced Coordinated Patrols (CORPATs), maintaining a consistent presence, conducting anti-piracy operations, and promptly responding to distress calls from impacted vessels.

²⁸ The Hindu Bureau, [“INS Sumedha returns after visiting 12 countries”](#), 29 December 2023.

²⁹ Indian Navy, [“INS Sumedha at Lagos, Nigeria”](#), 13 October 2023.

³⁰ Press Trust of India (PTI), [“India’s greater capability, own interest warrant helping in difficult situations: EAM S Jaishankar”](#), *Deccan Herald*, 30 January 2024.

³¹ Krishn Kaushik, [“India deploys unprecedented naval might near Red Sea to rein in piracy”](#), *Reuters*, 31 January 2024.

³² [“Indian Naval Platforms Remain Mission Deployed in North/ Central Arabian Sea”](#), Press information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 3 January 2024.

³³ Ministry of External Affairs, [“Joint Press Statement by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, 15 January 2024.

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