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The Bab el-Mandeb strait:
Geopolitical considerations of the
strategic chokepoint

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The Bab el-Mandeb strait: Geopolitical considerations of the strategic chokepoint

Abstract:

Guaranteeing the security and stability of maritime routes with obligatory transit point is crucial for the global economy and it is against this scenario where the Bab el-Mandeb strait comes into play, geographical accident which separates the African and Asian continents through the Red Sea.

Bordering Yemen and Djibouti, this chokepoint is considered one of the world most instable and dangerous waterways because of the threats that challenge the regular transit to the world market, particularly in the energy sector. At present, it encompasses hot spots in the Arabian Peninsula due to the Yemen conflict and in its same coastline due to piracy and smuggling activities, together with political instability from the neighbouring governments.

Moreover, its own geography has also doomed the strait to host competing interests and has become the battleground of countries that are not ceasing in the pulse of power in the region. Consequently, the escalation of tension between U.S. and Iran, competition of the former with China to fight for the hegemony in Africa or the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia for the regional hegemony in the Middle East are some of the reasons why the strait is witnessing its own fate.

Keywords:

Bab el-Mandeb, maritime route, Red Sea, chokepoint, enclave, Djibouti, Yemen.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

Since ancient times, maritime trade routes have been considered of a particular interest by nations which by means of relative power, geographical position or both have achieved to control and access this traditional alternative to land trading. These waterways, particularly the key transit points, not only act as enclaves for the global and commercial trade circulation but have also shaped the political strategic agenda of robust nations and still today explain several behaviours in terms of nations' foreign policies. Securing these strategic enclaves and controlling *de facto* the territory near the seaway as well as its access makes the task of the countries with geographical proximity more arduous in terms of strategic vulnerabilities, as the threats may come by land as well as by sea.

From the various key transit points around the globe, there exists a little-known geographical accident which is grabbing an increasing attention. The Bab el-Mandeb strait, whose name comes from an Arab legend and means the "Gate of Tears" (for the risks of its navigation in the past) is a natural waterway that separates Asia from Africa through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. It connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal since the end of its construction in 1869 and flows into the Indic Ocean on the South.

Why is the Bab el-Mandeb strait worth arguing over?



Figure 1. Bab el-Mandeb Strait as a strategic point for maritime transit. Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration.

With barely 115 km in length, its geographical position constitutes a hot point for global market maritime transit, more specifically for oil and natural gas coming from the Gulf countries – largest oil-producing and exporting countries in the region – towards Europe and North America via the Suez Canal or the Sumed pipeline. Consequently, the waterway station is estimated to have been witnessing the transit of \$6.2 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil, condensate, and refined petroleum products towards Europe, the United States and Asia in the year 2018. This amounts to around 5 million more than in 2014, according to the United States Energy Information Administration data (EIA) ¹. Therefore, its location as a geostrategic chokepoint for the traffic of crude oil is not only advantageous but also necessary regarding distance and accessibility.

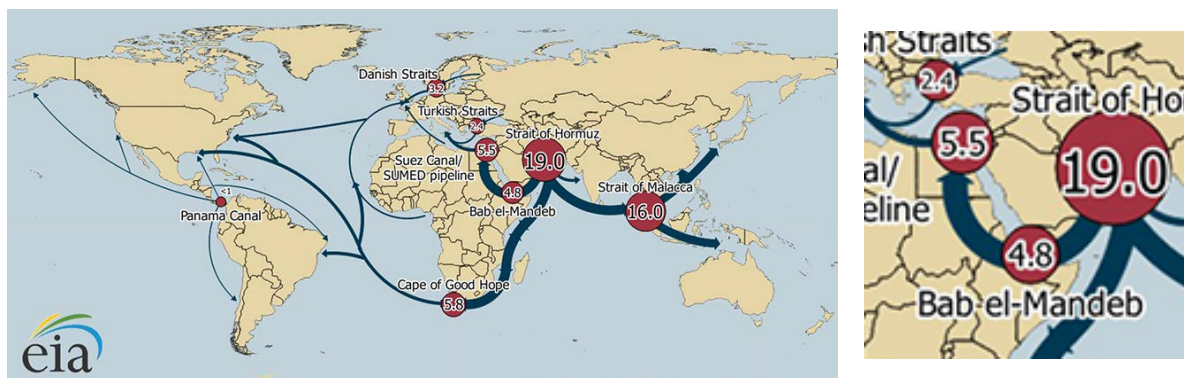


Figure 2. Daily transit volumes of crude oil and petroleum liquids through the principal maritime oil corridors. Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration. Based on 2016 data.

The strait of Bab el-Mandeb enjoys a privileged position, not because it receives more or less volume of oil maritime transit, but because it constitutes the Southern gateway to the Suez Canal to reach European and North American's oil markets and the northern entrance to the Indic Ocean to reach African or Asian markets. However, while it is commonly agreed that it is a crucial gateway for maritime trade routes, it is also deemed to constitute one of the most dangerous and unstable straits in the world, as its neighbours face several threats and regional challenges.

There are several direct sources of instability surrounding the strait of Bab el-Mandeb, some of them coming from its closest neighbouring countries. The conflict of Yemen since

¹ U.S. Energy Information Administration - EIA - Independent Statistics and Analysis. "The Bab El-Mandeb Strait Is a Strategic Route for Oil and Natural Gas Shipments". August 2019. Available at: www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073

the year 2015 and the presence of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in Yemen (especially at the beginning of the century) increases exponentially the risk of this region's disruption and the instability of the strait. The attacks² to Saudi vessels in 2015 by Houthi rebels, their threat to block³ the strait or the assault⁴ to Emirates shipments in 2016 are some of the multiple examples that have recently compromised the security of the strait's regular navigation of shipments. This has tremendous effects on global market and is frequently compared to the "Tanker Wars" between Iran and Iraq in the last century⁵.

Likewise, piracy in the neighbouring Somalia in the Horn of Africa also constitutes a direct source of instability in the region and the conflict in Yemen has given the breeding grounds for its perpetuation. The endemic corruption and political instability of the African neighbouring country of Djibouti does not help either, which by reasons of size (around 950.000 inhabitants) and domestic limitations is offered as an entrance for exploitation and profitability.

Other destabilising potential within the Bab el-Mandeb strait is the struggle for power influence in the Southwest region of the peninsula by Iran. The current bilateral tension between Washington and Tehran is leading to power-demonstration manoeuvres by Iran in the strait's zone⁶, vital ally of the Houthis in its proxy war in Yemen against Saudi Arabia.

Attacks to shipments in the Red Sea have led several times to halt the transport and to block the access of oil supply through the Suez Canal or the Sumed pipeline. This not only brings about the increase of global oil or natural gas' prices, but also impacts on the durability and costs of the vessels to reach European or American coasts.

² KNIGHTS, Michael and NADIMI, Farzin. "Curbing Houthi Attacks on Civilian Ships in the Bab al-Mandab". The Washington Institute. Policywatch 2998. July 2018. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/curbing-houthi-attacks-on-civilian-ships-in-the-bab-al-mandab>

³ DOCKX, Pieter-Jan. "Blocking the Bab el-Mandeb Strait would be a strategic disaster for the Houthis". May 2018. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180521-blocking-the-bab-el-mandeb-strait-would-be-a-strategic-disaster-for-the-houthis/>

⁴ BBC News. "Yemen conflict: UAE says Houthis attacked civilian ship". October 2016. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37561749>

⁵ SCHAUS, John. "Oil Markets, Oil Attacks, and the Strategic Straits. Center for Strategic and International Studies". July 2019. Available at: www.csis.org/analysis/oil-markets-oil-attacks-and-strategic-straits

⁶ Navy Recognition. "Iran deployed its 61st naval group in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait". March 2019. Available at: <https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2019/march/6907-iran-deployed-its-61st-naval-group-in-the-bab-el-mandeb-strait.html>

A small country with a big challenge: the case of Djibouti



Figure 3. Perim Island in the coast of Yemen. Source: Global Security.

Administratively, the African shore of Bab el-Mandeb belongs to the small nation of Djibouti and Eritrea while the Arabian shore belongs to Yemen⁷. The enclave is separated at the same time by two channels of navigation through the Yemeni Island of Perim. The small nation of Djibouti has always acknowledged the advantages of its strategical position, not only as one of the southern gateways to the Red Sea but also as a relatively stable home for military bases in the horn of Africa. As it is geographically limited by size and natural resources, its source of economic prosperity comes from its port services as the southern gate to the Red Sea⁸. Its trading partners are the neighbouring Ethiopia and Somalia and relies highly on the international aid and investments in its country⁹. This African country is gaining relatively stability according to World Bank Governance indicators, progressively increasing since 2017 in Political Stability and Absence of Violence/terrorism estimations¹⁰. Having had only two Presidents since its independence

⁷ MONTOYA Cerio, Fernando. "Djibouti. Asentamiento estratégico internacional". Documento de Opinión IEEE 137/2015. December 2015. Available at:

http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2015/DIEEEO137-2015_Dijibouti_AsentamientoEstrategico_MontoyaCerio.pdf consulted 20/01/2019

⁸ World Bank. "Overview of Djibouti". Available at: www.worldbank.org/en/country/djibouti/overview

⁹ International Trade Centre. "Djibouti". Available at: www.intracen.org/country/djibouti/

¹⁰ World Bank Data. "Worldwide Governance Indicators". Available at: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/worldwide-governance-indicators>

by France in 1977, the ex-colony has steadily been growing in population, up to more than 950.000 people in the year 2018 and is expected to continue this trend. Besides, poverty indicators are steadily decreasing, from the information available at the World Bank Data¹¹. The country is in a prosperous stage, compared to its neighbouring countries, and this economic prosperity and relative political stability of these last years is more than welcomed by the international community not only for the sake of the Bab el-Mandeb seaway but also for other geopolitical interests, particularly for China's growing presence in the region.

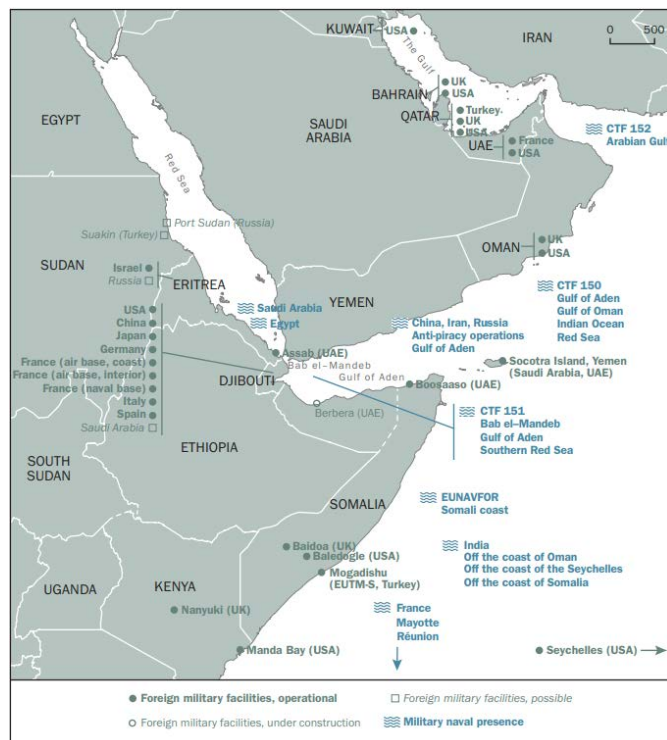


Figure 4. Permanent military bases surrounding Bab el-Mandeb.

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Djibouti aspires to gain a major role as a maritime hub in the upcoming years, as demonstrated in its initiative of *Djibouti Vision 2035*. The goal is to become the “Singapore of Africa” in a \$5 bn plan of infrastructure development like its Singaporean counterpart, which holds also a geographical value bordering one of the world most important shipping lanes, namely the strait of Malacca¹². It will need of an institutional deep cleaning though,

¹¹ World Bank Data. “Djibouti”. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/djibouti>

¹² MCCABE, Robert. “Djibouti: Lift for Maritime Sector in Kenya and Djibouti After Fall in Piracy”. allAfrica.com. December 2019. Available at: <https://allafrica.com/stories/201912160008.html>

as the endemic corruption in Djibouti's domestic institutions is in the public domain: the lack of transparency of the political institutions scores 124 out of 180 in the transparency ranking¹³.

Even so, the privileged position of this country regarding the access to the Red Sea is unrivalled, and it also involves a huge responsibility. Djibouti is from recent years witnessing a struggle for influence by powerful countries in a scenario in which it has needed to tiptoe. For several years, it hosts the permanent military bases of certain foreign powers, with the recent incorporation of China as a nation with a permanent military muscle in the African country.

The first Western military forces in Djibouti's territory of Camp Lemmonier brought about security and protection by the French army to its former protectorate, which in turn allowed Paris to stop over its nuclear-powered submarines in its ex-colony¹⁴. In fact, since last year some political voices have unsuccessfully attempted to increase the military presence in the country in regards of the recent Chinese incorporation¹⁵. Other countries later joined France and constituted Djibouti as the unique point of permanent military camps in Africa due to its relative political stability in comparison to that of its neighbours'. United States, China or Japan maintain their reserves in the country's west side of the strait, while Saudi Arabia and Egypt maintain military naval presence within the waterway. The first, as the largest exporter of crude oil in the peninsula, to protect and secure its shipments and the latter to permit the transit of cargoes to reach the Suez Canal and the Sumed Pipeline. This is how the West side of the strait is being secured by the different actors involved, while the hot spot remains on the other side of the Yemen's coasts.

¹³ Transparency International. "Djibouti". Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/country/DJI>

¹⁴ MICHAUD, Quentin and DELAPORTE, Murielle. "Spécial Djibouti – La Marine Nationale Soutient Les Forces Navales à Djibouti". Opérationnels – Soutien, Logistique, Défense, Sécurité. November 2014 Available at: <https://operationnels.com/2014/11/16/special-djibouti-la-marine-nationale-soutient-les-forces-navales-a-djibouti/>

¹⁵ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. "The Foreign military presence in the Horn of African region". SIPRI Background Paper. Pp. 7. April 2019. Available at: <https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/sipribp1904.pdf>

The main driving force of instability in Bab el-Mandeb: the case of Yemen

Bab el-Mandeb is in the southwest part of Yemen coastline, and extends its ports until the northern port of Midi. These ports are a strong naval force asset for the rebels since the outbreak of the civil war in 2015 and have been a source of danger for the shipments' transit, particularly through the Red Sea enclave. With a hundred thousand people killed and other thousand injured, the country has been experiencing what is still today the world's worst humanitarian crisis¹⁶. Its political incapability to maintain the *de facto* control of the territory has opened the door for foreign intervention by a Saudi Arabian-led coalition to defeat the Houthis rebel faction threatening the government, which in turn is backed by Iran in its proxy war against Riyadh. But Sana'a is not only shaken by insurgent groups, as it also bears the burden of terrorism groups entrenched within its territory. The military bases positioned in the strait have also allowed the United States and Saudi Arabia to fight terrorism in Yemen but terrorist attacks against the government and Yemeni territories have been the order of the day¹⁷ and the strait has not been an exception, constituting the main source of geopolitical concerns in the region.

Additional danger in the South: the continuous risk of piracy and smuggling activities

Piracy assaults imply an additional source of threat to the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint. The Yemeni conflict makes nothing but worsening the stability of the corridor and feeds the grounds for piracy actions in the waterway. Even so, the volume of piracy attacks have been dramatically decreasing during the last years in the strait (with only 9 incidents in the year 2018) according to The State of Maritime Piracy Report of 2018¹⁸, mostly due to the international coalitions and organizations that have performed special missions with

¹⁶ BEAUMONT, Peter. "Death toll in Yemen war reaches 100,000". October 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/31/death-toll-in-yemen-war-reaches-100000>

¹⁷ SALEM Masshour, Hani. "The turning point of the Houthi attack in Bab el Mandeb Strait". The Arab Weekly. July 2018. Available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/turning-point-houthi-attack-bab-el-mandeb-strait>

¹⁸ JOUBERT, Lydelle. "The State of Maritime Piracy 2018 - Assessing The Human Cost". One Earth Future, Broomfield CO, USA 2018. Pp. 3. Available at: <https://stableseas.org/file/350/download?token=qlukapqz>

the aim of reducing these source of criminal activities, such as the Operation Atalanta¹⁹. U.S-led NATO and the European Union have also played their role in counterterrorism and counter-piracy operations in the southeast zone of the strait, such as the regional operation Ocean Shield²⁰. Similarly, countries such as Egypt are suffering directly the threat posed in the Bab el-Mandeb strait, as the instability challenges the traffic reaching its Suez Canal and the Sumed pipeline. Therefore, el Cairo together with other seven regional countries, led by Saudi Arabia, are working on a new regional alliance in the Red Sea to combat piracy and smuggling activities in the region²¹.

Is it possible to bypass the strait and find an alternative route?

After understanding the importance of this natural chokepoint in the world maritime networks, the impact of its closure or blockade would be highly disadvantageous, especially for the oil-export countries in the peninsula. Arab countries' trade flows would in this scenario not be able to reach Mediterranean markets through the shorter route and would need to surround African continent by Cape of Good Hope in order to reach their European and American counterparts. In the case of travel exports from Saudi Arabia to the United States, this would mean an increase of around 4,300 kilometres²². This increase in travel time and costs would thus bring about a substantial increase of prices in the global market.

The second alternative for bypassing the cargo transport through the strait of Bab el-Mandeb and reach Asian markets would imply the use of the strait of Hormuz as transit point, through which still circulates around 20% of volume of crude oil and petroleum

¹⁹ ECHEVARRÍA JESÚS, Carlos. "El estrecho de Bab el Mandeb como escenario potencial de desestabilización ante el creciente activismo terrorista en Yemen y Somalia". Documento Opinión IEEE 11/2010. Pp. 7. September 2010. Available at: http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2010/DIEEEO11-2010Somalia_Yemen.pdf

²⁰ MONTOYA Cerio, Fernando. "Djibouti. Asentamiento estratégico internacional". Documento de Opinión IEEE 137/2015. December, 2015. Pp. 15. Available at: http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2015/DIEEEO137-2015_Djibouti_AsentamientoEstrategico_MontoyaCerio.pdf

²¹ KALIN, Stephen. "Saudi Arabia Seeks New Political Bloc in Strategic Red Sea Region". Reuters. December 2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-diplomacy/saudi-arabia-seeks-new-political-bloc-in-strategic-red-sea-region-idUSKBN1OB1Z9>

²² CORDESMAN, Anthony H. "The Strategic Threat from Iranian Hybrid Warfare in the Gulf". Center for Strategic and International Studies. June 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/strategic-threat-iranian-hybrid-warfare-gulf>

products²³. However, this option is not the alternative the Gulf powers would rather choose considering the already dependence by these powers on this maritime corridor on Iranian coasts. Within this bigger picture, Saudi Arabia has the capacity to bypass the strait of Bab el-Mandeb, using its East-West Pipeline (mostly known as Petroline) which distributes the crude through the Saudi city of Yanbu, north to the strait. The same happens to the natural gas liquids pipeline of the Riyadh, with capacity of 290,000 bpd to transport from Yanbu with destination to the Mediterranean²⁴. This, however, remains as a partial alternative possibility as the capacity of oil volume is substantially reduced compared to the volume that now flows by the strait. Besides, the East-West pipeline has already witnessed its temporary closure due to terrorist attacks²⁵.

How it has been evolving so far?

The Bab el-Mandeb strait is a critical chokepoint for the global oil market and has become the battlefield for conflicting interests and the seed for international alliances to protect the corridor. On one hand, the Saudi-led coalition intervening in Yemen is not only seeking to win the pulse against Iran in its proxy war (emerging thus as the sole regional superpower in the Middle East) but is also one of the most interested parties in the stability of the maritime route, as it is estimated that more than half a million bpd of its oil are currently flowing through this chokepoint²⁶. Riyadh, as the world largest oil exporter, is backed up by its Abu Dhabi counterpart, as another important oil producer and traditional ally of Riyadh. However, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has another front open in the region due to its diplomatic war against Djibouti, when the Dubai company DP World and the kingdom acquisition of a container terminal in the Djiboutian port of Doraleh suffered from the negotiations ending in legal confrontations due to a clash of interests at the London Court of Arbitration in 2014²⁷. This situation is highly serious for Abu Dhabi, as it

²³ U.S. Energy Information Administration Independent Statistics and Analysis. "World Oil Transit Chokepoints". October 2019. Available at: <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/regions-topics.php?RegionTopicID=WOTC>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ El Gamal, Rania. "Factbox: Risks to Middle East oil and gas shipping routes". July 2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi-oil-factbox/factbox-risks-to-middle-east-oil-and-gas-shipping-routes-idUSKBN1KG2IA>

²⁷ Osler, David. "Djibouti Rejects Court Ruling over Doraleh Terminal". Lloyd's List Maritime Intelligence. January 2020. Available at: <https://lloydslist.maritimeintelligence.informa.com/LL1130675/Djibouti-rejects->

could witness the loss of its advantageous position in the strait in light of a contract conclusion. The Gulf monarchy's presence has been thus steadily decreasing in the Yemen conflict while buck-passing Riyadh with all the burden, as its economic interests would still be met and is geographically more distant than its monarchical peer. In the case of Turkey, its role is more secondary, presumably due to the fact that instability in the Bab el-Mandeb strait could divert the flow in its entirety through its Kirkuk–Ceyhan Oil Pipeline for countries such as Iraq, which holds the second position in oil exports ranking in the Arab peninsula²⁸. That explains, for example, why Turkey is prioritizing the further development of infrastructures with Baghdad²⁹. The last actor to enrol in this geopolitical landscape is Russia, which has already been working on a logistic base in the Red Sea littoral country of Eritrea to pursue also its interests in the Red Sea³⁰.

On the other hand, never let it be forgotten the other side of the Atlantic. The United States have been present at the international Saudi-led coalition against terrorism in Yemen and now is already strengthening its efforts to secure the navigation of ships, as the Japan-led diplomatic mission to the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb strait, where Tokyo has deployed military troops³¹. However, its foreign policy interests are not only targeting this essential chokepoint safeguarding, as they are also pursuing the war on terror that is brewing from a long time with Iran and its proxy war in Yemen. Washington claims, together with Israel and other western allies, that Iran is behind of the attacks against shipments near the waterway and administering military supplies to the Houthi rebels³², contributing to the escalation of US-Iran bilateral tension and the convergence of more geopolitical interests in the Red Sea corridor.

[court-ruling-over-Doraleh-terminal](#)

²⁸ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. "The World Factbook- Country comparison crude oil exports". Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2242rank.html>

²⁹ Daily Sabah. "Operation Peace Spring to secure regional energy infrastructure". October 2019. Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2019/10/22/operation-peace-spring-to-secure-regional-energy-infrastructure>

³⁰ SOLOMON, Salem. "Russia-Eritrea Relations Grow with Planned Logistics Center". Voa News. September 2018. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/africa/russia-eritrea-relations-grow-planned-logistics-center>

³¹ YAMAGUCHI, Mari. "Japan OKs divisive plan to send naval troops to Mideast". CityNews 1130. December 2019. Available at: <https://www.citynews1130.com/2019/12/26/japan-oks-divisive-plan-to-send-naval-troops-to-mideast/>

³² COATS, Daniel R. "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community". Office of the Director of National Intelligence of the United States of America. pp. 30. January 2019. Available at: <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>

Iran is another main character with interests in the region. According to Tehran, they have been settling military shipments near the strait for piracy-fighting, while the underlying causes imply the pursue of Tehran geostrategic hybrid warfare³³. This type of warfare strategy is useful as any country can act elsewhere without taking the blame while at the same time is undermining the influence of other countries in the Red Sea. The focal turmoil on Bab el-Mandeb area favours the capacity of isolated attacks of unknown authorship, using proxies such as the Iran-backed Houthi rebels while preventing anyone responsible from assuming the political accountability or acknowledgement of the operations. Then, while Tehran administers military ammunition and equipment, it lacks responsibility in the attacks which have been shaking the region bordering the strait, such as the Gulf of Aden, with the trade blockade consequences that these actions entail. This is representing a direct threat to the Saudi Arabia's influence in its backyard.

Finally, the new international actor recently joining this geopolitical game is China, strongly aware of what is at stake for its commercial interests, as the seaway is a chokepoint for its Middle East and African markets as well. Even if its crude imports come mainly from Russia, almost one third part of Beijing's crude imports in 2018 came from Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Oman, Gulf countries and members of the OPEC³⁴. It means that any considerable turmoil near the strategic chokepoints in the enclave's region by which its imports circulate daily would thus represent a negative impact for Chinese oil markets as well.

China, in the meantime, challenges the *statu quo* of the USA in the Horn of Africa

However, China is not only acting for purely geo-economic or security purposes in the Bab el-Mandeb strait region. The critical region of the Red Sea in which Djibouti is located overlaps precisely with the Beijing political strategy of soft power enlargement in Africa and responds to the geo-economic interests and investments of a country which is expanding its influence overseas, implying also a high level of geopolitical position of the

³³ CORDESMAN, Anthony H. "The Strategic Threat from Iranian Hybrid Warfare in the Gulf". Center for Strategic and International Studies. June 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/strategic-threat-iranian-hybrid-warfare-gulf>

³⁴ WORKMAN, Daniel. "Top 15 Crude Oil Suppliers to China". World's Top Exports. December 2019. Available at: <http://www.worldstopexports.com/top-15-crude-oil-suppliers-to-china/>

Asian giant in this small country. Thus, while the US is distracted with Iran and its war on terror, China is taking advantage of the gap left by Washington in the pulse that both countries are taking regarding their presence and influence power in Africa.

The infrastructure gap that China has filled in Djibouti encompasses its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road development initiative, aiming at serving as a bridge that will connect several countries and will provide them with economic development on a global scale. To this end, China has substantially invested in its Horn of Africa's counterpart and has been continuously handling aid packages for the country's economic improvement³⁵.

Together with the permanent military bases, Beijing is following not only its ambitious project of the Maritime Silk Road with a strong strategic asset in the Red Sea, but also owns the equivalent of 71% of Djibouti's GDP in debt³⁶. The diplomatic relations between both countries is now more friendly than ever before and, while Djibouti is eagerly waiting for the growing role of China in the future security of the region, some analysts already warn about this form of *sharp power*³⁷.

Conclusions

The region bordering the Bab el-Mandeb strait is far from being a stable region in the short-term future. This geostrategic enclave is the gateway to the European and North American markets, particularly in energy consumption of crude oil and natural gas reserves, representing one of the most important maritime transit points of the Middle East region and the Horn of Africa.

However, it is outflanked with diverse threats that endanger its normal navigation of shipments, being geographically located in one of the most unstable areas of the world. The political incapability by Yemen to control *de facto* its southwest borders, piracy activities which were formerly declining recurring from the danger on the littoral sea

³⁵ BEARAK, Max. "In Strategic Djibouti, a Microcosm of China's Growing Foothold in Africa". The Washington Post. December 2019. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/in-strategic-djibouti-a-microcosm-of-chinas-growing-foothold-in-africa/2019/12/29/a6e664ea-beab-11e9-a8b0-7ed8a0d5dc5d_story.html

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ The Economist. "How China's 'Sharp Power' Is Muting Criticism Abroad". The Economist Newspaper. December 2017. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2017/12/14/how-chinas-sharp-power-is-muting-criticism-abroad>.

borders of the strait and endemic corruption from neighbouring countries are some of the current conditions that have posed a serious risk to the regular circulation of shipments through Bab el-Mandeb, with the economic impact that this disturbance causes to global trade.

The securitization of the strait is not only a priority of the importing countries from the energy shipments reaching the Suez Canal or the Sumed pipeline, as any blockade or delay of oil supplies directly impact on the global market. The energy dependence is then unrivalled regardless the import-dependence level any country holds to the oil-exporting Gulf countries whatsoever. From Washington to Beijing, El Cairo or Moscow, all countries are inter-dependent players in the global economy and suffer direct or indirectly the consequences of sieged supplies, substantially increasing in global prices if an alternative maritime route must be sought. Therefore, it is important to highlight that the alleged independence from the Arabian Peninsula does not mean the independence from the impact, if not more than today all countries are economically connected to a greater or a lesser extent.

Consequently, the chokepoint has witnessed the irruption of foreign powers which try to recover the security in the essential stopover spot while try to foster their own particular geopolitical interests and power influence. In this context, this relatively unknown focal point for maritime transit has become the battleground of geostrategic pulses and a huge variety of heterogeneous interests.

Whereas the Gulf kingdoms, particularly Saudi Arabia, struggle to maintain the regular circulation of its shipments, Iran challenge the regional hegemony of Riyadh through its proxy war in Yemen, puncturing the strait in numerous occasions. Besides, the recent incorporation of China to the geopolitical landscape of the Red Sea region is colliding with the regional hegemony of Washington in the African Eastern side of the continent. The current events on the US-Iran escalation of tension (such as the Soleimani killing by U.S. military troops) can imply a Chinese favourable opportunity in the region, because while Beijing and Washington may expect retaliatory measures from Tehran, the former continues chasing its growing security and economic priorities in the region and overcoming the latter as the African regional hegemon.

Djibouti is balancing the power and avoiding open commitments to one side or another regarding international powers' presence. This relatively young State knows and acknowledges its unique privileged position in the Horn of Africa as the gateway to Asia and the Mediterranean, position that is seeking to maintain, strength and secure, and will likely continue to use this strategy as home of permanent military bases of the United States, France or China. Being such a tiny country makes not much room to manoeuvre, so it is expected to continue playing the bandwagoning strategy with Beijing, regarding the recent events and current diplomatic ties. The strategic miscalculation of the United States towards China in Africa is neither desired nor expected by the rest of the African countries and, for now, Washington and Beijing are likely to continue cooperating and supporting the security on the Bab el-Mandeb strait, competing at the same time for the geopolitical influence and domination in the African region. For now, the safeguarding of such a sensitive chokepoint to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indic Ocean is the common denominator for most of the powers involved.

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