

The Red Sea: A Region in The Making-Is Your Wife a Hat MBS?

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the potential economic integration of the Red Sea region, focusing on the strategic role of Aqaba as a trade and logistics hub. Key research questions address the driving factors behind economic collaboration among littoral states, Aqaba's geographic leverage for enhancing trade, and the role of cultural diplomacy in building trust. Findings indicate that collaborative maritime security frameworks and improved infrastructural connectivity significantly enhance regional trade. Moreover, the involvement of diasporic communities illustrates the influence of cultural ties on economic development. The study concludes that fostering economic integration through strategic partnerships, sustainable practices, and inclusive dialogue can transform the Red Sea region into a cohesive economic community, ultimately contributing to stability and prosperity.

Keywords: Red Sea Regionalism, Governance, Critical Regionalism, Geopolitics, Maritime Regionalism.

Introduction

The Red Sea has always been more than a narrow strip of water linking Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. It is a corridor of commerce, a stage for regional rivalries, and a lifeline for global trade. In 2024, its strategic importance has become sharply pronounced. Along its shores, from the bustling ports of Djibouti and Jeddah to the crucial chokepoint of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, ships

carrying goods that fuel global economies navigate waters fraught with uncertainty. Attacks by Houthi forces in Yemen, coupled with rising maritime insecurity, have turned routine passages into high-stakes operations, underscoring the fragile security architecture that governs this vital region.

Beneath these developments lies a complex web of geopolitical calculations. Gulf states, Iran, and global powers such as China, Russia, and the United States continually maneuver to secure influence, safeguard trade routes, and protect national interests. European Union initiatives, such as Operation ASPIDES, aim to stabilize maritime traffic, while targeted military operations by the United States and the United Kingdom reflect the region's volatility. Yet, despite these interventions, the Red Sea remains a theater of overlapping authorities, contested maritime spaces, and fragmented security frameworks, where multilateral coordination often struggles to keep pace with rapidly evolving crises.

The human dimension of these dynamics cannot be overlooked. Yemen's civilian population faces profound hardships, with disruptions to essential goods and humanitarian aid exacerbating an already dire situation. Localized conflicts carry the risk of regional spillover, drawing in additional state and non-state actors, and threatening to destabilize not only the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula but also global shipping routes that underpin international trade. The Red Sea's security challenges are therefore inseparable from questions of human welfare, economic stability, and international governance.

Understanding the Red Sea in 2025 requires a framework that moves beyond maps and statistics to grasp the interwoven narratives of commerce, diplomacy, and human resilience. This study seeks to illuminate these dynamics, analyzing how conflicts, regional rivalries, and strategic interests intersect, and exploring the institutional and cooperative measures necessary to transform the Red Sea from a theater of tension into a space of relative stability. By examining maritime security, regional cooperation mechanisms, and the interplay of global and local actors, this work situates the Red Sea within the broader context of international security and regional development, offering insights for both scholarship and policy.

The Red Sea has never been a boundary. It has always been a *bridge*. A long, narrow waterway wedged between two mighty continents—Africa and the Arabian Peninsula—it has witnessed caravans and dhows, empires and pilgrims, colonial fleets and migrant boats. It is a corridor of ancient trade and modern geopolitics, a liquid artery where stories flow, along with oil, grain, and whispered intelligence.

Yet for all its motion, the Red Sea has remained an *incomplete region*—a space of intense interaction but fragmented governance. No one has truly *owned* it, and that is both its curse and its opportunity.

Subregion with a Split Identity

The Red Sea is not quite African. Nor is it fully Arab. It is *subregional*—that awkward term that belies its importance. It sits between regions, yet is part of both. The Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula look at each other across its waters: partners, rivals, and sometime reflections of each other.

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The Red Sea binds Yemen to Djibouti through migration routes and illicit trade, Sudan to Saudi Arabia through agriculture and diaspora, Eritrea to the UAE through ports and power plays, and Egypt to Ethiopia through water and war. This is a subregion defined not by shared institutions, but by shared realities of insecurity, opportunity, and ecological fragility.

Strangely, it was not politics but environment and necessity that first brought the region's players to the same table. Faced with dying fisheries, polluted coastlines, and illegal trawlers, local authorities and technocrats began to talk quietly at first, then more boldly. Maritime security patrols were organized to fend off pirates and monitor traffic, environmental stewardship pacts were created to safeguard coral reefs and marine biodiversity, and port authorities in Aden, Port Sudan, Djibouti, and Jeddah began cooperating to harmonize logistics, reduce competition, and build trust. These functional beginnings were small-scale and non-political, but meaningful. They represented the first steps in discovering whether cooperation across the sea was even possible.

Yet leaning in is never easy. Beneath every cooperative gesture lies a current of rivalry. The region is shaped by civil wars in Sudan and Yemen, border tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, proxy rivalries between Gulf powers and Iranian influence, the militarization of ports and shipping lanes, and climate stress coupled with food insecurity that drives migration and extremism. Cooperation cannot advance far without leadership, without architecture, without a shared horizon.

Amid these fractures, one country possesses both the resources and the geographic positioning to attempt leadership: Saudi Arabia. With its Red Sea coastline stretching from Jeddah to the border of Yemen, and with deepening investments in Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea, the Kingdom sits at the center of Red Sea influence. It has already founded the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, a modest but meaningful gesture toward regional structuring.

Effective leadership by Saudi Arabia, however, depends on several conditions. Inclusion is essential, bringing not just Arab states but African coastal actors such as Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan into the core of decision-making. Leadership must be exercised with humility, facilitating rather than dominating. Partnerships are indispensable, involving Egypt, the UAE, and Ethiopia, along with smaller players like Jordan and Oman, who lend balance and credibility.

Finally, consistency is crucial; leadership cannot rely on episodic summits but must be embedded in institutions with authority, coordination, and purpose.

The Prospect of All-In Regional Membership

What if the Red Sea were reimagined not as a backwater of fragmented states but as a *coherent regional project*?

Imagine a Red Sea Community—an inclusive, hybrid structure with:

- **Permanent membership** for coastal states.
- **Observer status** for key hinterland actors (Ethiopia, South Sudan).
- **Dialogue partnerships** with extra-regional stakeholders (EU, AU, China, India).
- **Functional councils** on ports, maritime security, climate adaptation, migration, and trade.

Such a body would not erase national interests—but it could manage them. It would not dissolve rivalries—but it could *channel* them into productive arenas.

The Future is Written in Layers

No single initiative will bring order to the Red Sea. But if environmental cooperation can seed trust, if ports can become shared assets, if maritime security can be deconflicted, then the Red Sea can accumulate coherence. Layer by layer. Thread by thread.

The story of the Red Sea is not yet written. It is being told in fragments—by fishers and port managers, by diplomats and smugglers, by war and weather.

The question is not whether it will be a region. The question is what kind of region it will become.

And who will have the courage—and the foresight—to steer it there.

Argument

Recent studies underscore the critical linkage between environmental sustainability and socioeconomic stability, revealing that these two dimensions are inextricably intertwined. As climate change exacerbates resource scarcity—through rising temperatures, altered precipitation patterns, and extreme weather events—the need to address this intersection becomes paramount. Ecological health directly influences the livelihoods and well-being of communities. For instance, overfishing and coral reef degradation not only threaten marine biodiversity but also jeopardize food security and economic opportunities for coastal populations reliant on fisheries. These pressures can lead to increased competition and conflict over limited resources, particularly in

regions with existing socio-political tensions.

Effective governance frameworks that integrate environmental stewardship into economic policies are essential for addressing these challenges. By adopting sustainable practices, policy-makers can foster resilience against ecological degradation while simultaneously promoting equitable growth. This is particularly crucial in vulnerable regions where the impacts of climate change are already felt more intensely. Approaches such as sustainable fisheries management, conservation-based tourism, and ecologically responsible agriculture not only protect natural resources but also create job opportunities and stimulate local economies.

Moreover, collaborative efforts at regional and international levels can amplify these impacts. For example, cross-border initiatives aimed at shared environmental goals can bolster cooperation among neighboring states, facilitating data sharing, resource management, and collective responses to environmental crises. Such collaborations promote a sense of shared responsibility and community, crucial for sustained peace and security.

However, failure to adopt an integrative approach risks exacerbating existing inequalities and conflicts. Ignoring the interconnection between ecological and human security can lead to increased tensions over dwindling resources, potentially resulting in social unrest, migration, and geopolitical instability. The implications are clear: the decline of natural systems translates into a decline in human well-being.

In summary, we argue prioritizing sustainable development is not merely an ethical imperative but a strategic necessity for ensuring long-term stability. To foster a secure and prosperous future, it is imperative that we recognize and act upon the essential relationship between environmental health and human livelihoods, thereby laying the groundwork for a resilient society that can thrive amidst the challenges posed by climate change.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the geopolitical dynamics of the Red Sea region and to examine the interplay of regional and international actors in fostering stability and cooperation. The aim is to identify effective strategies and frameworks that can enhance regional security and economic development through collaborative efforts, while considering the unique challenges posed by ongoing conflicts and divergent interests.

Research Questions

- What are the key geopolitical factors influencing the stability of the Red Sea region?
- How do regional organizations and frameworks contribute to conflict resolution and cooperation among Red Sea countries?
- What roles do external actors play in shaping the political and economic landscape of the Red Sea?
- How can institutional strategies be designed to enhance governance and collaboration in the region?

To answer these research questions, I employed a mixed-methods approach that included qualitative analysis of existing literature, case studies of regional organizations, and comparative assessments of geopolitical scenarios. I conducted interviews with experts in international relations and regional studies and analyzed data sourced from governmental and non-governmental organizations. This comprehensive methodology allowed for a holistic understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play in the Red Sea region.

This research holds significance in multiple dimensions. Firstly, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the Red Sea region by providing insights into the complex interactions among regional and global actors. Secondly, the findings can inform policymakers and regional stakeholders seeking to implement effective strategies for cooperation and conflict resolution. Finally, understanding the dynamics of the Red Sea can have broader implications for global maritime security and economic interests, given its crucial position as a trade artery connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa. This research aims to facilitate a more cohesive and resilient approach to governance in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area.

Literature review

The literature on the Red Sea situates the region at the intersection of governance complexity, environmental fragility, and transregional flows, revealing a space shaped as much by human agency as by geographic and ecological realities. Baldwin's work foregrounds hybrid sovereignty, illustrating how overlapping authorities—including states, semi-state actors, and transnational organizations—define governance and conflict management in the region. His analysis underscores the importance of understanding these layers to address maritime security, migration, and resource disputes, though it tends to privilege institutional mechanisms over socio-cultural and historical dynamics. Complementing this institutional perspective, Bhabha and Anzaldúa highlight the fluidity of identity, suggesting that regional affiliations and shared narratives significantly influence patterns of cooperation and conflict. While Bhabha emphasizes hybridity as a conceptual lens, Anzaldúa focuses on the performative and liminal aspects of identity, revealing how cultural and historical entanglements shape political behavior, albeit with limited operational applicability for policy design.

Börzel contributes a governance-centered framework, emphasizing inclusive authority-building and institutional legitimacy as prerequisites for effective regional coordination. Applied to the Red Sea, this approach stresses the creation of participatory mechanisms, such as the SRSA, to enhance legitimacy and operational effectiveness. However, her technocratic focus may underappreciate informal power relations, patronage networks, and geopolitical rivalries that define the practical constraints of regional cooperation. Environmental perspectives, as developed by Swain, Öjendal, and Selby, link climate change, water scarcity, and ecosystem degradation to regional instability, showing how environmental stress interacts with institutional capacity and governance to influence conflict dynamics. Their analyses underscore the importance of sustainable resource management in mitigating tensions, yet critics caution against a deterministic reading that may oversimplify the interplay of political, economic, and social factors in shaping outcomes.

Geographical and transregional approaches further enrich the picture. Cosgrove emphasizes the symbolic and historical significance of landscapes, including ports and maritime corridors, arguing that spatial imaginaries influence political behavior as much as functional concerns. Tawil-Souri highlights transregional flows of people, capital, and information, portraying the Red Sea as a zone of continuous interaction where economic and cultural exchanges cross national boundaries. Both approaches illuminate the interconnectedness of local, regional, and global processes, though they risk underplaying structural power imbalances, militarization, and geopolitical competition that condition these flows.

Ghosh and Johnston adopt a comparative and institutionalist approach to examine collaborative maritime security regimes, focusing on the conditions under which regional actors can overcome historical rivalries to establish functional cooperation. Their study situates the analysis within broader debates on collective security, regional governance, and the institutionalization of security frameworks. By combining empirical case studies with a theoretical lens grounded in cooperation theory, the authors illuminate the mechanisms through which coordination emerges despite asymmetries in capacity, interests, and political trust. The approach emphasizes both formal structures, such as joint naval patrols and surveillance protocols, and informal processes, including trust-building exercises and knowledge-sharing networks, highlighting the multi-layered nature of maritime security governance.

Analytically, the work identifies key factors that enable successful collaborative regimes. Ghosh and Johnston demonstrate that shared threats, such as piracy, smuggling, and trafficking, can create converging incentives for cooperation, even among historically antagonistic states. They underscore the importance of institutional design, where clearly defined roles, accountability mechanisms, and communication channels contribute to the sustainability of collaborative arrangements. The study also highlights the role of external actors, including international organizations and donor states, in providing technical expertise, funding, and legitimacy to nascent regimes. Ultimately, the authors argue that such cooperative frameworks not only enhance maritime security but also generate spillover benefits for trade facilitation, economic development, and diplomatic engagement.

Despite these contributions, the study faces certain limitations. While the empirical focus on successful cases is valuable, it may introduce a selection bias, underemphasizing the persistent failures and structural obstacles that inhibit collaboration in other contexts. Furthermore, the research tends to privilege institutional and policy dimensions over deeper socio-political and historical factors, such as domestic power struggles or regional identity dynamics, which can profoundly affect the willingness of states to cooperate. Additionally, the generalizability of the findings to complex, multi-layered environments like the Red Sea region may be constrained, given the unique combination of overlapping conflicts, transnational economic interests, and environmental pressures present there. Nevertheless, Ghosh and Johnston's work provides a crucial reference point for understanding how pragmatic, interest-driven cooperation can emerge in otherwise fragmented maritime zones, offering insights relevant for policy formulation and institutional design in the Red Sea context.

The International Politics of the Red Sea by Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Emma C. Murphy offers a comprehensive examination of the Red Sea region as a distinct sub-system within the international arena. Their scholarly approach integrates theories of regionalism and security studies to analyze the geopolitical dynamics of the area.

Ehteshami and Murphy employ a multidisciplinary framework that combines political geography, international relations theory, and historical analysis. They argue that the Red Sea region exhibits characteristics of a sub-regional system, marked by increasing economic and social interdependence, greater regional integration, and the flow of resources across its boundaries. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the interactions among regional powers and the influence of external actors.

The authors identify several key themes in the region's international politics. They examine security and militarization, highlighting the role of stronger regional powers such as Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia in asserting influence through military presence and alliances. Territorial and maritime boundaries are analyzed with attention to disputes and the strategic significance of shipping routes in the Red Sea. Economic interactions, including trade, migration, capital flows, and transport, are discussed as factors contributing to regional integration and interdependence. The book also explores regional alliances and rivalries, showing how states form partnerships to protect interests and counterbalance others, reflecting the competitive and cooperative dynamics within the region.

While the book provides a thorough analysis, certain critiques have been noted. Its state-centric focus may underrepresent the role of non-state actors, such as international organizations and transnational networks, in shaping regional politics. Some reviewers suggest that a deeper historical context, particularly regarding pre-Cold War dynamics, could enhance understanding of current geopolitical configurations. Additionally, the application of regionalism theory, although insightful, might benefit from integration with other theoretical perspectives such as constructivism or postcolonial theory to offer a more comprehensive analysis.

In summary, *The International Politics of the Red Sea* provides a foundational study of the region's political landscape, offering valuable insights into the interplay of security, economics, and regionalism. While it serves as a critical resource for understanding the Red Sea's international politics, further research incorporating diverse theoretical frameworks and broader historical perspectives could deepen the analytical richness of the work.

Understanding Red Sea Security in the International Context, published by Dimensions for Strategic Studies in 2024, offers a comprehensive exploration of the Red Sea region's complex geopolitical, economic, and security dynamics. The volume brings together ten chapters authored by experts primarily from countries bordering or closely connected to the Red Sea, aiming to promote local expertise while proposing practical policies for regional stability and development. The collection adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from international relations, political science, security studies, and regional studies. Contributors employ both theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses, utilizing methodologies such as comparative

analysis, discourse analysis, and case studies to examine maritime security, regional rivalries, the role of non-state actors, and the influence of global powers.

A central analytical point of the collection is the intensity of regional and international rivalries that define the Red Sea. The essays highlight the competing interests of global actors, including the United States and the European Union, which seek to secure trade corridors and maintain stability, alongside regional powers such as Gulf states, Israel, Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran. These overlapping agendas create a delicate balance of power, where strategic competition frequently escalates into conflict or tension. Another key focus is the role of non-state actors, particularly the Houthi movement in Yemen, whose activities—ranging from piracy to attacks on commercial shipping—exacerbate maritime insecurity and challenge regional governance frameworks. The essays also analyze individual countries' security policies, revealing how national strategies often prioritize sovereignty and immediate security concerns over regional cooperation, generating both friction and opportunities for dialogue. Amid these challenges, contributors emphasize the potential for multilateral initiatives to foster cooperation, suggesting that collective security arrangements, environmental stewardship, and economic collaboration could transform the Red Sea from a zone of rivalry into one of functional partnership.

Despite its valuable insights, the volume is not without limitations. The predominance of contributors from bordering states may introduce a regional bias, potentially overlooking perspectives from other global stakeholders that could illuminate the broader strategic significance of the Red Sea. Furthermore, while state-centric security concerns are thoroughly examined, the essays give comparatively less attention to human security issues, including displacement, humanitarian crises, and the effects of environmental degradation on local communities. Although non-state actors are acknowledged, the analysis tends to focus on state behavior, and a deeper examination of non-state influences could provide a more nuanced understanding of regional dynamics. Overall, *Understanding Red Sea Security in the International Context* offers a thorough and interdisciplinary analysis of the region, mapping the interplay between national policies, regional rivalries, and global strategic interests, and providing a strong foundation for future research and policy development in Red Sea security studies.

The literature on the Red Sea collectively portrays a region shaped by overlapping layers of governance, environmental pressures, and transregional interactions. Baldwin's work foregrounds hybrid sovereignty, emphasizing how overlapping authorities—state, semi-state, and transnational—mediate governance and conflict management, particularly in maritime security, migration, and resource disputes. While his analysis illuminates institutional mechanisms for cooperation, it may underplay socio-cultural and historical dynamics that also shape behavior. Complementing this, Bhabha and Anzaldúa explore identity fluidity, arguing that shared narratives and cultural entanglements influence patterns of cooperation and conflict. Bhabha emphasizes hybridity as a conceptual lens, whereas Anzaldúa highlights the performative and liminal aspects of identity, offering insights into political behavior though with limited direct policy applicability.

Börzel introduces a governance-centered framework, focusing on inclusive authority-building and institutional legitimacy as prerequisites for effective coordination. Applied to the Red Sea, this

perspective underscores the importance of participatory mechanisms, such as the SRSA, yet may insufficiently account for informal power relations, patronage networks, and geopolitical rivalries that constrain practical cooperation. Environmental perspectives, developed by Swain, Öjendal, and Selby, link climate change, water scarcity, and ecosystem degradation to instability, emphasizing the need for sustainable resource management. Critics caution, however, against overly deterministic readings that risk simplifying the complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors.

Geographical and transregional approaches further enrich understanding. Cosgrove emphasizes the symbolic and historical significance of landscapes, arguing that ports, maritime corridors, and spatial imaginaries influence political behavior as much as functional concerns. Tawil-Souri examines transregional flows of people, capital, and information, portraying the Red Sea as a zone of continuous interaction where cultural and economic exchanges cross national boundaries. Both approaches illuminate the interconnectedness of local, regional, and global processes, though they may underplay structural power imbalances, militarization, and geopolitical competition.

Ghosh and Johnston adopt a comparative and institutionalist approach to collaborative maritime security regimes, highlighting conditions under which historical rivalries can transform into functional cooperation. Their analysis demonstrates that shared threats, such as piracy or illicit trafficking, create convergent incentives, while effective institutional design—clear roles, accountability, and communication channels—sustains collaboration. External actors provide technical support, funding, and legitimacy, and successful regimes generate spillover benefits for trade, economic development, and diplomatic engagement. The critique of this work lies in its focus on successful cases, potentially underrepresenting persistent structural obstacles, domestic power struggles, and the complexities of regional identity, which can limit generalizability in multifaceted environments like the Red Sea.

Ehteshami and Murphy offer a sub-regional analysis, treating the Red Sea as a distinct system characterized by economic interdependence, regional integration, and the flow of resources. Their multidisciplinary framework—combining political geography, international relations, and historical analysis—addresses militarization, territorial disputes, trade, migration, and alliances. While state-centric in approach, the work could benefit from greater attention to non-state actors, broader historical context, and integration with theoretical perspectives such as constructivism or postcolonial studies.

The 2024 collection, *Understanding Red Sea Security in the International Context*, provides an interdisciplinary exploration of geopolitical, economic, and security dynamics. Contributors examine the role of global and regional powers, overlapping strategic agendas, non-state actors such as the Houthis, and the tension between sovereignty-focused national strategies and potential regional cooperation. While offering practical policy insights, the volume may exhibit regional bias and gives comparatively limited attention to human security concerns, displacement, and environmental impacts on local communities.

Across these works, a recurring theme emerges: the Red Sea's complexity necessitates adaptive, multi-layered approaches. Accumulation of insights from institutional design, hybrid governance, identity studies, environmental analysis, and transregional flows demonstrates that cooperation in the Red Sea is rarely linear or uniform. Instead, it is incremental, iterative, and context-sensitive. While accumulation of knowledge and institutional experience may appear slow or fragmented, it is arguably a strength. Each layer of understanding—from governance and identity to environmental stewardship and security collaboration—builds a foundation for functional cooperation, gradually transforming rivalries into mutually beneficial arrangements. In this sense, accumulation is not a flaw but a pragmatic pathway, recognizing that the Red Sea's intricate socio-political and ecological realities cannot be addressed through single, rapid interventions but through sustained, adaptive engagement that integrates multiple dimensions of the region's complexity.

Based on the literature, several research gaps emerge in the study of the Red Sea's geopolitical, security, and environmental dynamics:

First, there is a notable underrepresentation of non-state actors and informal networks. While state-centric analyses examine militaries, governments, and regional organizations, the roles of transnational networks, private maritime operators, NGOs, and local communities in shaping governance, trade, and security remain insufficiently explored. These actors often mediate conflict, facilitate cooperation, or generate tensions in ways that formal institutional analyses may overlook.

Second, human security and socio-environmental impacts are underexamined. Environmental studies (Swain & Öjendal, Selby et al.) focus on climate stress, water scarcity, and ecosystem degradation, but there is limited integration of humanitarian consequences, such as displacement, livelihoods, health, and migration, into the geopolitical or security frameworks. How local populations experience and respond to these stresses, and how this feedback shapes state and regional behavior, remains poorly understood.

Third, there is a gap in historically grounded analyses that link contemporary dynamics to long-term social, cultural, and economic processes. Works like Bhabha and Anzaldúa provide theoretical insight into identity and hybridity, but historical trajectories of trade, migration, and conflict, especially pre-Cold War and colonial patterns, are insufficiently connected to contemporary governance and security challenges.

Fourth, multi-scalar integration is limited. Existing studies often examine local, regional, or global processes separately, but there is a need for integrated approaches that link local ecological and social conditions with regional rivalries and global strategic interests, including the role of external powers like China, the EU, or the US.

Fifth, the literature largely focuses on successful cooperative mechanisms or state strategies, potentially introducing selection bias. Failures, stalemates, and the persistence of rivalries receive less attention, leaving a partial view of the conditions under which cooperation breaks down.

Finally, policy and operational applicability is uneven. Conceptual and institutional insights are abundant, but few studies rigorously test how these frameworks translate into practical governance, port management, environmental protection, or joint security operations on the ground, especially under conditions of conflict, piracy, or climate stress.

In sum, research gaps center on the roles of non-state actors, human security, historical contextualization, multi-scalar integration, negative cases, and operationalization. Addressing these gaps could produce more holistic, nuanced, and actionable insights into the Red Sea's complex geopolitical and environmental landscape.

Scholarly contribution

This research advances the field of geopolitical studies by articulating a distinct scholarly contribution that synthesizes critical regionalism with interregionalism, addressing the complexities inherent in regional identities and power structures. Critical regionalism challenges traditional narratives of regionalism that often prioritize external perspectives or hegemonic frameworks. It positions local histories, cultural contexts, and the agency of regional actors as central to understanding territorial dynamics. By employing critical regionalism, this research underscores the significance of localized identities, disaggregating the Red Sea region into its functional components, thereby recognizing the diverse actors and interests at play.

Interregionalism complements this perspective by acknowledging the interconnectedness between distinct regions, allowing for a broader analytical lens that transcends traditional geopolitical boundaries. This dual framework permits an exploration of how cooperative frameworks can evolve through continuous dialogue and engagement among diverse regional actors, fostering interdependencies that mitigate conflict and enhance collective agency.

By blending these theoretical frameworks, this research critically interrogates the mechanisms of sovereignty, identity, and cooperation within the Red Sea context. It identifies how regional actors can navigate historical rivalries and contemporary geopolitical challenges through an understanding of their intersubjective relationships. Furthermore, it proposes a conceptual shift from a focus on competition to a paradigm of coexistence, wherein actors leverage soft power dynamics to forge partnerships based on mutual interests. Simultaneously, the study articulates a theoretical framework for the application of soft power strategies within interregional contexts. This encompasses the promotion of soft mechanisms such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and collaborative environmental governance. The research argues that leveraging soft power not only builds trust but also reinforces the agency of regional actors, positioning them as pivotal players within the broader geopolitical landscape.

In summary, this scholarly contribution elucidates the interplay between critical regionalism and interregionalism, providing a robust theoretical foundation that enhances our understanding of

regional dynamics. It proposes a reframing of geopolitical cooperation through soft power strategies, emphasizing the necessity of a win-win approach that fosters stability and integration across the Red Sea and beyond. This research thus contributes to ongoing academic debates concerning regionalism, agency, and the potential for cooperative governance in complex geopolitical environments.

This research contributes to the scholarly discourse by integrating critical regionalism and interregionalism to formulate a cohesive strategy that emphasizes soft power and win-win outcomes in the complex geopolitical landscape of the Red Sea region. Critical regionalism offers a nuanced understanding of how regional identities, histories, and power dynamics shape interactions among states. It emphasizes the importance of local context and the agency of regional actors, rather than imposing external models of governance.

Interregionalism, on the other hand, focuses on the interconnectedness between regions, allowing for the exploration of cooperative frameworks that transcend traditional borders and rivalries. By synthesizing these two frameworks, this research reveals how local identities and interests can be harmonized with broader interregional strategies, fostering a more collaborative approach to regional governance.

The proposed strategy leverages soft power to build trust and mutual understanding among Red Sea states. This entails promoting cultural exchanges, enhancing people-to-people diplomacy, and supporting regional organizations that facilitate dialogue. By prioritizing soft power, regional actors can address narratives of conflict and suspicion, transforming zero-sum perceptions into collaborative frameworks that advance shared interests.

Incorporating win-win strategies into the geopolitical landscape entails designing cooperative initiatives that provide tangible benefits to all parties involved. This could include joint development projects focused on sustainable resource management, equitable trade agreements, and shared infrastructure initiatives that enhance connectivity. By demonstrating the mutual advantages of collaboration, this approach encourages stakeholders to commit to collective efforts, fostering regional stability and resilience.

Ultimately, establishing a coherent strategy that combines critical regionalism, interregionalism, and soft power methodologies can minimize disorder in the Red Sea region. By prioritizing inclusive governance frameworks and fostering collaborative initiatives, this research argues that regional actors can move beyond historical grievances and entrenched rivalries. This integrated approach not only enhances security and cooperation within the Red Sea but also facilitates broader engagement with neighboring regions, contributing to a more stable and prosperous geopolitical environment.

In conclusion, the scholarly contribution of this research lies in its innovative integration of theoretical frameworks with practical strategies, emphasizing the cultivation of collaboration over competition. By examining the interplay of security, economic development, environmental stewardship, and multilateral governance, the study highlights pathways for transforming the Red

Sea region from a historically fragmented space into a model of cooperative governance and regional integration, demonstrating how coordinated action among littoral states and global partners can generate stability, prosperity, and sustainable maritime management.

Methodology

This research employs a comprehensive and multi-faceted methodological framework that integrates qualitative and quantitative analyses to investigate the geopolitical dynamics of the Red Sea region.

The study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining case studies and comparative analyses to reveal the intricacies of regional interactions. This design allows for a nuanced exploration of soft power strategies and interregional cooperation, facilitating a deeper understanding of local identities and their implications for geopolitical frameworks.

Data is collected through various means, including in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, policy analysts, and regional experts, as well as a systematic review of relevant literature.

Focused discussions and open-ended interviews facilitate the collection of rich, qualitative insights that illuminate the perspectives of local actors involved in the geopolitical processes.

Specific case studies of existing regional organizations and initiatives are conducted to highlight successful examples of soft power integration and win-win strategies. These case studies serve as empirical evidence to support theoretical propositions and provide practical recommendations for enhancing regional cooperation.

The comparative analysis involves a systematic examination of different regional frameworks within the Red Sea context and beyond. By comparing the dynamics and outcomes of these frameworks, the research identifies best practices and lessons learned that can inform future cooperation efforts.

A thematic analysis of qualitative data is conducted to extract key patterns and themes related to identity, agency, and cooperation. This analytical approach allows for the identification of recurring motifs that shape the narratives surrounding regional cooperation and the implementation of soft power strategies.

Explorative research, also called **exploratory research**, is a methodological approach used when a topic or phenomenon is **not well understood**, or when existing knowledge is limited. Its main purpose is to **investigate, observe, and uncover patterns, relationships, or insights**, rather than to test hypotheses or generate formal theories. It is often the first step in research, helping scholars and practitioners **clarify concepts, identify variables, and develop directions for further study**.

Key characteristics of exploratory research include:

- **Open-ended inquiry:** The researcher does not start with a fixed hypothesis; instead, they explore the phenomenon to discover relevant aspects.

- **Flexible and adaptive design:** Methods can evolve as new insights emerge during the research process.
- **Qualitative focus:** Often relies on interviews, case studies, observations, document analysis, or other qualitative data, though quantitative data can also be used.
- **Insight-oriented:** The goal is to **gain understanding, highlight patterns, and generate questions** for subsequent research, rather than confirm causal relationships.
- **Emphasis on context and complexity:** It helps to uncover factors that might influence outcomes in complex or dynamic environments.

In practice, exploratory research might involve, for example, **mapping economic and security interactions in a border region, observing how policy changes affect trade flows, or identifying new trends in port modernization.** Researchers use the findings to **inform future studies, develop hypotheses, or design more structured research projects.**

Essentially, it's about **discovering “what is happening” and “how things are connected”** before attempting to explain “why” or predict outcomes.

In the context of the Red Sea, an explorative research approach is particularly well suited to understanding its **conflictual nature and cacophonous interactions.** The region is characterized by overlapping territorial claims, contested maritime routes, and a dense mix of economic, political, and security actors, including littoral states, global shipping powers, and non-state armed groups. Rather than beginning with rigid hypotheses about causation or strategic behavior, exploratory research allows the analyst to **observe patterns of interaction, trace the transmission of shocks, and document emergent alignments or frictions.** It accommodates the complexity and unpredictability of incidents such as Houthi attacks, smuggling operations, naval posturing, and shifting alliances among Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors.

By employing qualitative methods—such as case studies of port operations, analysis of trade flow disruptions, or observation of diplomatic and military signaling—researchers can **capture the multiplicity of influences and the ripple effects of localized events across the Red Sea corridor.** This approach emphasizes **mapping the dynamic interplay of economic, security, and political factors,** highlighting interdependencies and vulnerabilities without the constraints of formal theory, and thereby provides a grounded understanding of a maritime environment defined as much by its **cacophony of actors and incidents** as by its strategic significance.

Structure

In this research, the exploration of the Red Sea region is structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of its complex dynamics and the interplay of various actors. The order of study is organized as follows: Section two lays the theoretical foundation by exploring critical regionalism, emphasizing the significance of local contexts, identities, and the agency of regional actors in shaping geopolitical interactions. The focus shifts to defining the maritime subregion of the Red Sea, highlighting its geographical importance and the socio-political dynamics that characterize its waters. The next section examines the infrastructure of ports and pipelines in the region,

elucidating their strategic relevance and how they shape power relations among regional and global actors. An analysis of how the militarization trends in the Red Sea impact regional security and stability will be provided, considering the influence of military assets and naval policies of various states is next. Forthcoming is a section examines the intertwined challenges of climate change, ecological degradation, and resource competition, elucidating how these factors influence regional dynamics and cooperation. The study will explore the role of diasporic communities and cultural exchanges in shaping regional identities and fostering connections across the Red Sea basin. The latter section investigates the interests and strategies of external powers, examining their influence on the governance and security of the Red Sea region.

We proceed to an exploration of existing and proposed institutional strategies aimed at enhancing cooperation and governance in the Red Sea will be featured, highlighting mechanisms for conflict resolution and collaboration. The proceeding segment identifies and analyzes the key players in the region, detailing their strategic interests, alliances, and rivalries that inform their actions. Not to be disregarded is a focused discussion on Israel's position within the Red Sea dynamics will be conducted, emphasizing its geopolitical interests and relations with surrounding states. Next, we compare and evaluate the Red Sea from the perspective of maritime regionalism, allowing a revision of our approach towards a theoretically and empirical combi-solution. The rigorous analysis gives us confidence to outline an EU Action Plan for corrective actions in the Red Sea short of a strategy proper to partner-up once Club Med has been sorted out under our leadership.

The conclusion summarise my findings final section encapsulates the study and by outlining areas for further research, counter-arguments to strengthening of governance and policy recommendations addressing potential futures for the Red Sea region, articulating the implications of current trends and strategies for regional stability and cooperation. This ordered framework provides a structured approach to understanding the multifaceted aspects of the Red Sea's geopolitical landscape, culminating in a thorough analysis of its future trajectories.

2. Conceptual Framework

Framing the Region Beyond the Westphalian Order

Traditional analyses of the Red Sea region often rely on *Westphalian assumptions*—seeing the region as a mosaic of sovereign states with fixed borders and exclusive authority. Critical regionalism, in contrast, starts by *deconstructing the rigidity of national borders*, focusing instead on *transboundary flows*, *shared geographies*, and *non-state actors*. In the Red Sea context, this means recognizing that power, identity, and security are shaped by networks of interaction, not merely lines on a map.

Fluid Maritime Regionalism: The Red Sea as a Sea of Connectivity and Contention

The Red Sea is not a boundary—it is a connector. Maritime regionalism in this context is historically contingent, shaped by the legacies of Ottoman-Habesha trade, British colonial corridors, and

today's global shipping routes. It is influenced by hybrid sovereignties, where sea power, such as naval bases and port control, intersects continuously with land power, including border militarization and hinterland politics. Strategic chokepoints like Bab el-Mandeb, the Suez Canal, and key ports such as Assab, Port Sudan, and Hodeidah create a multi-nodal geography of influence. Regionalism in the Red Sea is therefore fluid and spatially dynamic, less a "region of states" and more a "region of networks and flows."

The Red Sea cannot be understood in isolation. The Horn of Africa–Arabian Peninsula interface represents one of the most interlocked geopolitical spaces, marked by economic interdependence through Gulf investment in infrastructure, agriculture, and security sectors, as well as enduring religious and cultural ties rooted in centuries-old migration and kinship networks. Conflicts in Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia reverberate across the water, creating security spillovers. This interregionalism defies neat territorial boundaries and demands analytical frameworks that account for cross-regional actors, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran, who operate simultaneously across both shores and often create overlapping spheres of influence.

A critical regionalist perspective incorporates political ecology, recognizing that environmental factors are deeply political and spatially uneven. Climate stress, such as rising sea levels, droughts, and desertification, affects both coasts disproportionately, generating shared vulnerability but unequal capacity to respond. Fisheries and marine resource competition, including overfishing, illegal trawling, and coral reef degradation, threatens food security and local economies. Water politics, exemplified by the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute, involves control over life-sustaining resources across borders. Environmental stressors therefore act as both conflict multipliers and catalysts for cooperation, linking ecology and geopolitics in profound ways.

Critical geopolitics interrogates the narratives that define the region, challenging dominant framings of threat, order, and influence. Militarization is often justified as a stabilizing force, yet it can entrench rivalries and reduce local agency. Discourses framing states like Somalia or Sudan as inherently fragile legitimize foreign intervention while obscuring local governance capacities. The securitization of Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal prioritizes global trade over the welfare of coastal communities. This lens emphasizes the need to deconstruct who defines security, instability, and development, and whose interests these narratives ultimately serve.

Finally, a critical regionalist approach insists on multi-scalarity, understanding the Red Sea as shaped from below, within, and above. Local actors, including coastal communities, fisherfolk, urban port cities, and municipal authorities, are central to regional dynamics. States remain powerful but fragmented, with internal conflicts in Sudan, Yemen, and elsewhere producing consequences across the region. Above this, global trade systems, foreign naval presence, and energy corridors link the Red Sea to the broader international order, demonstrating the complex layering of local, national, and international forces that define regionalism in this strategic maritime space.

Schematic Summary

Dimension	Analytical Focus
Anti-Westphalian Lens	Moves beyond state-centric analysis to include informal, non-state, and cross-border actors
Fluid Maritime Space	Red Sea as a dynamic zone shaped by sea-land interactions, not fixed boundaries
Interregionalism	Interwoven Gulf–Horn–Nile relationships, transcending traditional regional blocs
Political Ecology	Environmental conflict and cooperation as central to regional politics
Critical Geopolitics	Challenges dominant narratives of security, intervention, and “regional order”

Summary: A Normative and Analytical Shift

Using critical regionalism to analyze the Red Sea enables a *normative shift* away from securitized, externally imposed frameworks toward *inclusive, historically grounded, and environmentally aware* regional governance. This approach emphasizes agency from within the region, while still acknowledging its embeddedness in global systems. This analytical lens is a useful departure point for a novice in this area of the world.

Red Sea Regionalism: Conceptualizing a Maritime Subregion

Maritime regionalism is a theoretical and policy framework that analyzes how states, regional organizations, and non-state actors cooperate—or fail to cooperate—in managing shared maritime spaces. It draws on ideas from regionalism in general but adapts them to the unique challenges of the maritime domain. Maritime regionalism assumes that states bordering the same sea are interconnected through trade, security, and environmental linkages, and that no single state can fully manage maritime space without affecting others. Security threats such as piracy, illegal fishing, and territorial disputes are transboundary, making cooperation through regional institutions more beneficial than unilateral action. Economic interdependence through maritime trade, port connectivity, and shared resource management is assumed to reinforce stability and promote regional integration. Formal and informal institutions provide platforms for dialogue, norm-setting, and dispute resolution, with their effectiveness depending on member commitment, capacity, and legitimacy. Cooperation is also normatively driven, framed around rules such as UNCLOS, environmental protection, and freedom of navigation, which reduce uncertainty in contested waters. Geography shapes political and institutional realities, as narrow straits, chokepoints, and continental shelves drive the need for coordination. External actors, including global powers and multinational organizations, influence regional dynamics, sometimes facilitating and sometimes complicating cooperation. Finally, while overlapping organizations and mandates are natural,

effective coordination can mitigate duplication and inefficiency. Overall, maritime regionalism frames the maritime domain as a multi-layered space where collective governance is both necessary and feasible. It is biased towards governance issues, however, something that critical regionalism can provide plug-ins for.

Maritime regionalism in the Red Sea is not a theoretical abstraction—it is a lived reality shaped by geography, commerce, and conflict. Unlike landlocked regional frameworks that rely heavily on fixed borders and state-centric structures, the Red Sea region's defining logic is maritime: ports, sea lanes, coastal cities, and maritime chokepoints determine patterns of interaction. The Red Sea acts less as a dividing line and more as a connective corridor, linking Northeast Africa to the Arabian Peninsula through overlapping flows of trade, migration, and security dynamics.

This maritime regionalism has intensified in recent decades due to real-world developments. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, for instance, is now one of the most strategically sensitive points in global trade, with roughly 10% of global oil shipments passing through it. Regional powers like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt have responded by expanding port infrastructure, investing in logistics corridors, and asserting naval presence. Gulf states have established strategic footholds across the African coast—from the UAE's military base in Assab, Eritrea to Saudi infrastructure projects in Sudan—blurring the line between economic investment and geopolitical positioning.



At the same time, challenges such as piracy off Somalia's coast, maritime pollution, illegal fishing, and the militarization of shipping lanes have made maritime cooperation not only desirable but essential. Port authorities in Djibouti, Port Sudan, and Jeddah are increasingly aware of their shared vulnerabilities, prompting nascent forms of cross-border coordination.

Efforts like Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Council aim to institutionalize such maritime interdependence, even if the political architecture remains embryonic.

3.The Historical Roots of Red Sea Maritime Connectivity

The Red Sea's maritime character is deeply rooted in history. For thousands of years, its waters were the highways of the ancient world. Historical trade routes connected the ports of East Africa, Arabia, and South Asia, facilitating not only the exchange of goods such as spices, incense, and textiles but also ideas, religions, and cultural practices. Maritime trade was central to the rise of ancient kingdoms like the Kingdom of Aksum in present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia, and South Arabian polities that controlled lucrative sea lanes. This historical interconnectedness created overlapping identities and economic interdependence that defy modern political boundaries.

Today, the legacies of this maritime past still resonate. Many coastal communities maintain cross-border social and commercial ties that span the Red Sea. Understanding maritime regionalism in the Red Sea thus requires an appreciation of these enduring linkages, which form the social and economic substrate beneath formal political relations.

Interaction Pattern in the Red Sea

The Red Sea region, encompassing littoral states such as Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, alongside the globally strategic Suez Canal, has long exhibited a complex and fragmented pattern of political, economic, and social interactions. Rather than functioning as a cohesive subregion, the Red Sea demonstrates an absence of consistent bilateral and multilateral cooperation among its states. Its political landscape is often defined by fragmentation, with national priorities frequently overriding collective interests. Institutional frameworks for coordinated action remain weak, which contributes to instability and inconsistent policy approaches. Strategic rivalries and historical conflicts, compounded by the involvement of external powers pursuing competing agendas, further hinder collaboration. Tensions such as the Saudi-Yemeni border disputes, the protracted Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict, and Egypt's longstanding concerns over the Ethiopian Nile dam exemplify the region's intricate web of competing interests. Economic integration within the Red Sea remains underdeveloped; while intra-regional trade occurs, it is constrained by limited trade agreements, tariffs, and non-tariff barriers. Regional ports and logistics hubs are overwhelmingly oriented toward global trade, particularly through the Suez Canal, rather than facilitating local connectivity.

Infrastructure deficits continue to impede meaningful integration. Transportation networks connecting littoral states are underdeveloped, port systems and shipping routes often lack coordination, and customs and regulatory procedures remain cumbersome. Security cooperation is fragmented, with military and naval arrangements addressing threats such as piracy in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, but lacking comprehensive regional coordination. External actors, including the United States, China, and Russia, frequently pursue strategic interests that deepen divisions and complicate cooperative efforts. Environmental and climate pressures—ranging from marine pollution and declining biodiversity to rising sea levels and water scarcity—affect all states along

the Red Sea, yet responses remain largely isolated due to the absence of an integrated regional framework.

Despite these challenges, the Red Sea possesses significant untapped potential for intra-regional trade and economic collaboration. Investment in modern infrastructure, including ports, transportation corridors, and streamlined customs procedures, could dramatically reduce trade barriers and facilitate smoother flows of goods. Cross-border trade corridors and the establishment of regional trade agreements or free trade zones could provide a structural basis for deeper economic integration. Coordinated security initiatives addressing piracy, terrorism, and broader maritime threats would create a more predictable and secure trading environment. Shared interests in energy and marine resources, including both fossil fuels and renewable energy projects, could foster interdependencies that reinforce economic cooperation and political stability. Political stabilization, particularly in conflict-affected areas such as Yemen and Sudan, alongside diplomatic efforts to reduce longstanding rivalries, would enhance the conditions for sustained collaboration. The Suez Canal and surrounding ports, if better integrated into regional trade networks, could serve as anchors for intra-regional commerce, while the region's rich potential for tourism and eco-tourism—rooted in its unique marine biodiversity and cultural heritage—offers an avenue for diversifying and strengthening economic linkages across the Red Sea littoral states.

This framing underscores that the Red Sea is not merely a corridor for global trade but a space of latent regional connectivity, where strategic, economic, and ecological interdependence could, if properly harnessed, transform historical fragmentation into a platform for collaboration, resilience, and shared prosperity.

Share of Intra-Regional Trade Within the Red Sea region

Currently, intra-regional trade among the littoral states of the Red Sea is minimal compared to the overall trade of each country, with Egypt and Saudi Arabia being the major trading players. Below is a hypothetical table showing the share of intra-regional trade and the potential for growth.

Country	Total Trade (Billion USD)	Intra-Regional Trade (Billion USD)	Share of Intra- Regional Trade (%)	Potential for Growth
Egypt	70	5	7.14%	High
Saudi Arabia	100	8	8.00%	High
Sudan	10	1	10.00%	Moderate
Eritrea	3	0.3	10.00%	Low
Djibouti	3	0.5	16.67%	Moderate
Yemen	8	0.6	7.50%	Low
Somalia	6	0.4	6.67%	Moderate

Observations:

- **Egypt and Saudi Arabia** are dominant players in the regional economy, but their intra-

regional trade remains relatively low compared to their total trade. This indicates untapped potential for increased collaboration.

- **Yemen, Eritrea, and Sudan** have very limited intra-regional trade, which could be due to ongoing conflicts, instability, and logistical challenges. However, with political stabilization, these countries could significantly increase trade with their neighbors.
- **Djibouti**, due to its strategic location and well-developed port infrastructure, has a slightly higher share of intra-regional trade. This positions it well as a potential trade hub for the region.

The Red Sea region has a great potential for increasing intra-regional trade, but it faces several barriers including political instability, poor infrastructure, and a lack of cooperation. Establishing regional trade agreements, improving transport networks, and resolving political tensions would help increase intra-regional trade and foster economic cooperation.

By addressing these issues and tapping into the shared resources and economic opportunities, the littoral states could see significant improvements in their mutual trade flows in the coming decades.

Contemporary Institutional Efforts and the Limits of Sovereignty

Modern nation-states bordering the Red Sea have sought to harness maritime regionalism for strategic and economic gain. Saudi Arabia's establishment of the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden represents an effort to formalize cooperation in areas such as maritime security, environmental protection, and economic development.

Similarly, Egypt's vision of the Red Sea as a vital economic corridor complements its control over the Suez Canal and ambition to be a regional logistics hub.

However, these institutional efforts often confront the challenge of reconciling state sovereignty with the inherently fluid and transnational nature of maritime spaces. Unlike land borders, maritime boundaries can be ambiguous and contested, making enforcement and cooperation complex. Furthermore, external actors—such as China's naval base in Djibouti and the US's strategic interests—add layers of geopolitical competition that complicate purely regional solutions.

The result is a delicate balance where formal institutions must coexist with informal networks and hybrid governance models. The growing involvement of private port operators, multinational corporations, and local communities in maritime affairs underscores the multiplicity of actors shaping the Red Sea's regionalism.

Towards a Critical Maritime Regionalism

Applying a critical regionalism lens to the Red Sea maritime space highlights the limitations of conventional, securitized approaches that prioritize military alliances or zero-sum competition. Instead, it urges recognition of the region's socio-environmental interconnectedness and historical contingency.

Climate change, for example, disproportionately impacts Red Sea coastal states through rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and shifts in marine biodiversity. These environmental challenges transcend national jurisdictions and necessitate cooperative frameworks rooted in shared stewardship rather than unilateral control.

Moreover, the narratives that frame the Red Sea primarily as a zone of conflict or threat—focusing on piracy, migration crises, or proxy wars—obscure the everyday realities of cooperation and coexistence among diverse actors. By centering the voices of coastal communities, fisherfolk, and regional institutions, critical maritime regionalism opens space for more inclusive governance models.

Such an approach encourages policies that integrate economic development, environmental sustainability, and security in mutually reinforcing ways, moving beyond simplistic binaries of friend and foe. It suggests that sustainable stability in the Red Sea can only emerge through layered cooperation that respects historical ties, ecological limits, and the complexity of maritime spaces.

Ports, Pipelines, and Power: Infrastructural Geopolitics in the Red Sea

Infrastructural development along the Red Sea coast has emerged as a pivotal geopolitical practice, shaping the balance of power, economic integration, and security calculations in one of the world's most strategically vital maritime spaces. Far from being purely economic endeavors, port expansions, logistics hubs, and transport corridors are deeply entangled with regional ambitions, global power competition, and the securitization of space.

China and Gulf states, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, have become the primary drivers of infrastructural investments in the Red Sea, each pursuing overlapping but distinct strategic objectives. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has turned ports like Djibouti into critical nodes of global maritime trade and military projection. Djibouti hosts China's first overseas military base, co-located with commercial port facilities developed with significant Chinese funding. This integration of commercial and military infrastructure exemplifies how infrastructural investments extend beyond economic rationales to embody a dual-use strategy—facilitating not only trade but also naval power projection and regional influence.

Similarly, Gulf countries have invested heavily in ports such as Port Sudan and Berbera in Somaliland, leveraging infrastructural projects as tools for geopolitical outreach. The UAE, through companies like DP World, has secured long-term leases and operational control over key ports, turning them into hubs that serve both commercial and strategic purposes. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 blueprint includes the development of the Red Sea coastal corridor, integrating maritime infrastructure with road networks and industrial zones, aiming to diversify the economy while cementing the Kingdom's regional leadership.

These infrastructural projects are often embedded within broader economic corridors designed to facilitate the movement of goods, services, and people across land and sea. For example, the Port Sudan-Berbera corridor links Red Sea ports to the hinterlands of Sudan, Ethiopia, and beyond, enabling export routes that bypass traditional chokepoints and reduce dependency on more contested corridors. Such corridors function not merely as economic lifelines but also as strategic

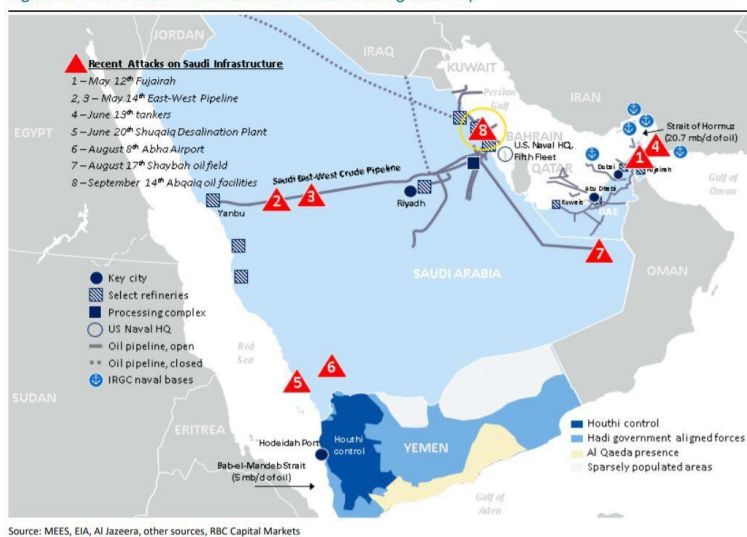
assets that can reconfigure regional alliances and dependencies.

Jeddah Islamic Port, as the Kingdom's principal gateway to the Red Sea and the largest seaport in Saudi Arabia, plays a pivotal role in both commercial throughput and religious tourism.

Handling over 60% of the country's imports by sea, it sits at the crossroads of Europe–Asia maritime routes via the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb. Jeddah's deep-water infrastructure supports containerized and bulk cargo, oil derivatives, and pilgrim traffic during the Hajj season. Symbolically, it is the hinge upon which Mecca and Medina open to the wider world— functioning not just as a port but as a geo-religious fulcrum in Saudi Arabia's soft power.

Yanbu Commercial Port, located farther north on the Red Sea coast, is tightly coupled with the Kingdom's petro-industrial backbone. As the maritime extension of the Yanbu Industrial City and the terminal of the East–West Crude Oil Pipeline, it facilitates the export of refined petroleum products and petrochemicals, thereby diversifying export routes away from the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. Its utility is both economic and strategic: Yanbu ensures redundancy in energy logistics, allowing Riyadh to project reliability as a global energy supplier regardless of disruptions in the Persian Gulf. It is, in effect, a manifestation of Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy against regional chokepoints.

Figure 1: Recent attacks on Saudi infrastructure & regional map



Jazan Port, in the far southwest, close to the Yemeni border, has emerged as a key site in Riyadh's attempt to integrate the underdeveloped southern regions into the national and regional economy. Adjacent to the Jazan Economic City, which is being positioned as a future logistics and industrial hub, the port supports trade and transshipment with East Africa and Yemen. Jazan also serves a soft security function: by accelerating development in a historically marginalized border region, the Kingdom seeks to counter instability, manage cross-border flows, and assert infrastructural sovereignty in a volatile area. It is both a security valve and a bridgehead for Saudi

economic diplomacy with Africa.

Together, these ports form a triptych of Saudi Arabia's strategic geography in the Red Sea: Jeddah as the commercial and cultural capital, Yanbu as the industrial lifeline, and Jazan as the developmental frontier. In geopolitical terms, they enable Riyadh to pivot from being a Gulf-centric power to a dual maritime actor straddling both the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea. In doing so, they align with Saudi Arabia's ambitions to lead regional integration initiatives such as the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Council and to position itself as the architect of new maritime corridors linking the Arabian Peninsula to Africa, Europe, and Asia.

This port architecture also supports Riyadh's broader regional narrative—of a stable, economically vibrant, and diplomatically assertive Saudi Arabia acting as a hub of connectivity in a fractured geopolitical landscape. The ports are not just infrastructure; they are infrastructures of influence, carrying oil, goods, and ideas across waters that have historically divided and now promise to unite.

Pipeline politics in the Red Sea region deeply shapes Saudi Arabia's strategic calculations and sense of security, both in terms of external vulnerabilities and internal resilience-building. Here's an analytical outline that explains how this unfolds:

The East–West Pipeline (Petroline) and Strategic Redundancy

The East–West Crude Oil Pipeline—spanning from the oil fields in the Eastern Province to Yanbu on the Red Sea—represents a critical component of Saudi Arabia's energy security architecture. Built during the Iran–Iraq War as a contingency against potential blockades in the Strait of Hormuz, the pipeline allows Saudi Arabia to export oil independently of Gulf chokepoints. This infrastructural redundancy enhances Riyadh's strategic depth, allowing it to bypass maritime vulnerabilities in the Persian Gulf.

Thus, pipeline politics, in this case, reinforces Saudi Arabia's sense of autonomy from threats posed by Iran, particularly in scenarios involving maritime escalation or conflict in the Hormuz Strait.

Win-Win Scenarios

To avoid zero-sum rivalries and extractive investment patterns, win-win models must emphasize: Co-developing infrastructure that benefits both littoral and hinterland states—such as Ethiopia and Djibouti, or South Sudan and Port Sudan—enhances mutual dependency and economic rationality. Port deals that allow multi-country access promote peace and interdependence.

Ports should be anchors for special economic zones that include light manufacturing, agro-processing, and logistics, ensuring African states retain value onshore, not just transit revenues.

Using African Development Bank (AfDB) or regional trade blocs (e.g., COMESA, IGAD) to co-finance port-related projects can mitigate debt risks and empower local actors, rather than depending entirely on bilateral Gulf or Chinese loans.

Gulf States and other investors should support local capacity building—training coast guards, customs authorities, and infrastructure regulators—ensuring long-term stability and reduced reliance on foreign military presence.

The African diaspora in Gulf countries (notably Ethiopians, Sudanese, and Somalis in Saudi and UAE) could be mobilized for trade facilitation, remittances-driven investment, and soft power linkages between Red Sea shores.

In summary, African states in the Red Sea region are no longer infrastructure supplicants— they are strategic negotiators. Their interests lie in connectivity, sovereignty, and economic inclusion. For genuine win-win outcomes, external actors must respect these priorities and co- create infrastructure ecosystems that serve both regional ambitions and shared prosperity.

Local Agency and Contestation

It is crucial to recognize the role of local actors and communities in shaping—and contesting—these infrastructural projects. While foreign and regional powers often drive port development, local governments, civil society, and affected populations influence project outcomes in significant ways. In Somaliland, for instance, Berbera port has been a key source of revenue and employment, yet concerns about transparency, labor rights, and environmental impact have sparked debates about who truly benefits from such investments. Similarly, in Sudan, Port Sudan’s development is entangled with broader political struggles and economic instability, affecting the ability of infrastructure to deliver inclusive growth.

Local agency can also manifest in forms of resistance or negotiation, pushing back against perceived external domination or environmental degradation. These dynamics illustrate that infrastructural geopolitics is not solely top-down but involves complex multi-scalar interactions, where local realities and global ambitions collide.

Environmental and Climatic Dimensions of Infrastructure

Infrastructural development in the Red Sea region must also be understood within the context of environmental vulnerability and climate change. The Red Sea’s unique marine ecosystems, including coral reefs and fisheries, face threats from port expansions, increased shipping traffic, and coastal urbanization. Rising sea levels and extreme weather events compound these pressures, raising risks for coastal infrastructure and adjacent communities.

The political economy of infrastructure thus intersects with environmental stewardship, highlighting the need for sustainable planning and regional cooperation. Integrating climate resilience into infrastructural projects is essential to ensure long-term viability and to mitigate conflicts that may arise from resource depletion or ecological degradation.

4.The Role of External Powers and Global Competition

Finally, the infrastructural geopolitics of the Red Sea cannot be disentangled from the broader global competition among great powers. China's infrastructural investments through the BRI are often perceived by Western and regional actors as a challenge to their traditional spheres of influence. In response, the United States, France, and Gulf states have increased their military and economic engagement, underscoring the strategic importance of infrastructure as a component of power projection.

This multipolar contestation turns ports and economic corridors into arenas of rivalry where infrastructure serves as both prize and tool. Investments in port facilities, free trade zones, and transport networks carry implications for alliance-building, access to resources, and control over maritime trade routes.

In this contested landscape, infrastructural development reflects broader geopolitical narratives about security, sovereignty, and economic modernization, reinforcing the idea that material infrastructure is inseparable from the politics of power.

Security Assemblages and Maritime Militarization in the Red Sea

The Red Sea region has become a focal point of intensified militarization and security governance, where maritime space is transformed into a complex assemblage of actors, infrastructures, discourses, and geopolitical ambitions. This transformation goes beyond simple reactions to piracy, terrorism, or migration; it must be understood through assemblage theory, which conceptualizes security as emerging from heterogeneous and dynamic interactions between state and non-state actors, material infrastructures, and competing narratives of security and influence.

Table Comparison of Export-Import transiting through the Red Sea

Polity	% of Imports via Red Sea	% of Exports via Red Sea	Key Commodities Affected	Notes
India	30%	50%	Agricultural goods, marine products	Approximately 80% of India's exports pass through the Red Sea (acuitykp.com)
China	20%	40%	Electronics, machinery, textiles	Significant portion of trade with Europe and Africa transits via Red Sea.
Japan	15%	35%	Automobiles, electronics, machinery	Relies on Red Sea for trade routes to Europe and Africa.
European Union (EU)	25%	30%	Machinery, chemicals, vehicles	EU collectively relies on Red Sea corridors for trade with Asia and Africa.

United States	10%	20%	Oil, machinery, agricultural products	Utilizes Red Sea routes for trade with Asia and Africa.
Russia	5%	25%	Oil, gas, metals	Increased shipments around Africa due to Red Sea disruptions (reuters.com)
Saudi Arabia	40%	50%	Oil, petrochemicals, metals	Major exporter and importer via Red Sea; heavily impacted by regional instability.
Egypt	50%	50%	Oil, natural gas, agricultural products	Suez Canal is a critical artery; disruptions significantly affect economy.
Israel	30%	30%	Electronics, chemicals, military equipment	Port of Eilat severely impacted by Houthi attacks (washingtonpost.com)
UAE	25%	35%	Oil, electronics, machinery	Major transshipment hub; affected by regional shipping disruptions.

Key Observations

Strategic Importance: The Red Sea serves as a vital corridor connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa, facilitating the movement of goods such as oil, machinery, and agricultural products.

Impact of Disruptions: Ongoing conflicts and security concerns in the region have led to significant rerouting of shipping traffic, with many vessels opting for longer routes around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transit times and costs.

Economic Consequences: Disruptions in Red Sea shipping corridors have resulted in increased shipping costs, delays, and potential shortages of goods, affecting global supply chains and economies.

The disruption drives competition and militarisation, but apparently the share of intra-regional trade in the Red Sea keep on growing.

On the one hand, security disruptions—ranging from conflicts, piracy, and Houthi attacks to the heavy militarisation of ports and shipping lanes—create a climate of strategic competition. Regional and extra-regional powers mobilize naval assets, deploy private security, and establish control points along key maritime chokepoints, signaling the Red Sea as both a theatre of confrontation and a contested corridor. On the other hand, economic activity persists and even intensifies. Intra-regional trade continues to grow despite—or perhaps because of—the heightened attention to the corridor.

How do we account for this paradox?

Dimension	Disruption / Militarisation Factors	Adaptive / Trade-Preserving Responses	Theoretical Interpretation
Security Threats	Piracy, Houthi attacks, regional conflicts, naval deployments	Private security services, convoy systems, insurance coverage	Resilience Theory: systems adapt to maintain function despite shocks
Strategic Competition	Extra-regional naval presence (US, China, EU, Gulf states)	Investment in ports, logistics hubs, and alternative routes	Paradox of Security and Commerce: militarisation increases corridor value and trade incentives
Trade Continuity	Delays, threats to cargo, increased operational costs	Diversified shipping schedules, risk pooling, coordinated regional trade agreements	Path Dependency: entrenched trade networks resist complete rerouting despite risks
Economic Incentives	High costs of disruption for national economies	Private-public cooperation to secure trade flows	Dual Logic of Deterrence and Opportunity: risk motivates protective adaptations that preserve commerce
Infrastructure Adaptation	Threats to key chokepoints (Suez Canal, Bab el-Mandeb)	Redundant ports, upgraded logistics, enhanced monitoring	Systemic Resilience: redundancy and adaptation sustain trade despite insecurity
Intra-Regional Trade Growth	Potential slowdown from conflict	Continues to expand due to regional interdependence	Complex Interdependence: security risks coexist with and even reinforce economic interconnectivity

The table highlights the paradox: disruption stimulates militarisation and risk, yet adaptive strategies allow intra-regional trade to persist and even grow. Theoretical frameworks such as resilience theory, path dependency, and the paradox of security and commerce explain why trade continues despite systemic insecurity. This dynamic underscores the Red Sea's dual role as both a contested corridor and an indispensable economic artery, where conflict and commerce are mutually constitutive.

The proliferation of naval bases along the Red Sea littoral exemplifies this assemblage in action. The United Arab Emirates' military base in Assab, Eritrea, is not simply a standalone outpost but

part of a larger network connecting Gulf ambitions with Horn of Africa geopolitics and wider global maritime strategies. Similarly, Djibouti has evolved into a multi-sited assemblage hosting French, American, Chinese, Japanese, and other foreign military forces. These bases collectively create a dense security environment shaped by overlapping sovereignties and interests.

Security rationales—counterterrorism, piracy suppression, and migration control—are central discourses that legitimize the material and institutional components of this assemblage.

International naval coalitions emerged in response to Somali piracy, creating coordinated patrols and surveillance systems that integrate technological, human, and diplomatic elements. Meanwhile, counterterrorism efforts involve a network of intelligence sharing, military operations, and legal frameworks that assemble across regional and international scales. Migration control adds another layer, connecting maritime patrols with border management technologies and narratives that securitize human mobility.

However, critical security studies urge us to interrogate these assemblages critically—understanding that the designation of threats and the deployment of militarized infrastructures are shaped by political agendas and power relations. For instance, naval deployments around the Bab el-Mandeb Strait cannot be separated from geopolitical rivalries and economic interests in controlling global energy supply chains. The assemblage here is both material—naval vessels, bases, radar—and discursive—security narratives that produce specific understandings of threat and legitimacy.

Assemblage theory further reveals how these security practices connect multiple scales—from local host communities negotiating sovereignty and economic benefits, to regional organizations like IGAD promoting African-led security cooperation, to global powers projecting naval presence. The resulting security governance is thus a relational and contingent network rather than a fixed hierarchy, constantly negotiated and reconfigured.

African agency plays a crucial role within this assemblage. States like Eritrea and Djibouti strategically manage foreign military presence, balancing economic incentives with sovereignty concerns, effectively becoming assemblage nodes themselves that broker relations between local and global actors. Regional bodies, including IGAD and the African Union, further seek to institutionalize cooperative security measures, embedding African priorities within a broader assemblage dominated by external powers.

Yet, this assemblage is not unchallenged. Civil society groups and local populations contest the militarization of their coastal spaces, raising environmental and human rights concerns that disrupt the smooth functioning of the security assemblage. These contestations underscore that assemblages are always open to reconfiguration, highlighting the fluid and contested nature of security governance in the Red Sea.

To ground this theoretical framework, three case studies illuminate how the assemblage operates in practice:

The UAE military base in Assab functions as a strategic node that links Gulf state military ambitions with Horn of Africa politics and maritime security efforts around Yemen. This base integrates physical infrastructure, military personnel, logistical support, and diplomatic ties into an assemblage that extends influence far beyond Eritrea's borders. Yet, local resistance and concerns about sovereignty reveal the fragile and contested character of this assemblage.

Djibouti's role as a multi-basing hub exemplifies a complex assemblage of foreign military powers embedded within local governance structures and global geopolitical competition. The co-location of multiple navies creates overlapping security rationales and coordination challenges, producing a densely networked maritime security environment. Djibouti's agency in managing these relationships demonstrates the mutual constitution of local and global assemblage components.

Finally, IGAD's maritime security initiatives represent a formalized regional assemblage that seeks to harmonize state efforts against piracy, terrorism, and illicit trafficking. This institutional network weaves together intelligence-sharing platforms, joint patrols, legal instruments, and capacity-building programs, foregrounding African agency amid external militarization. The IGAD assemblage offers an alternative security logic that challenges predominant militarized paradigms.

Assemblage theory enriches this analysis by highlighting the emergent and relational character of environmental governance. The Red Sea's ecology and politics are not static but are continuously reconfigured through the interplay of actors, infrastructures, discourses, and environmental factors. For example, conservation initiatives may connect international NGOs, state agencies, scientific networks, and local fishers into collaborative assemblages that negotiate environmental stewardship while simultaneously being influenced by geopolitical rivalries and economic interests. Conversely, environmental degradation can fracture these assemblages, intensifying mistrust and contestation.

In conclusion, the militarization and security governance of the Red Sea maritime space should be understood as an emergent assemblage—a dynamic constellation of diverse elements spanning material, political, and discursive domains. This approach reveals the complex layering of local, regional, and global forces shaping security practices and highlights the contested, negotiated nature of maritime security in this vital corridor. Future policy and academic work must attend to these relational dynamics to foster more inclusive and adaptive security frameworks.

5. Climate, Ecology, and Resource Competition in the Red Sea

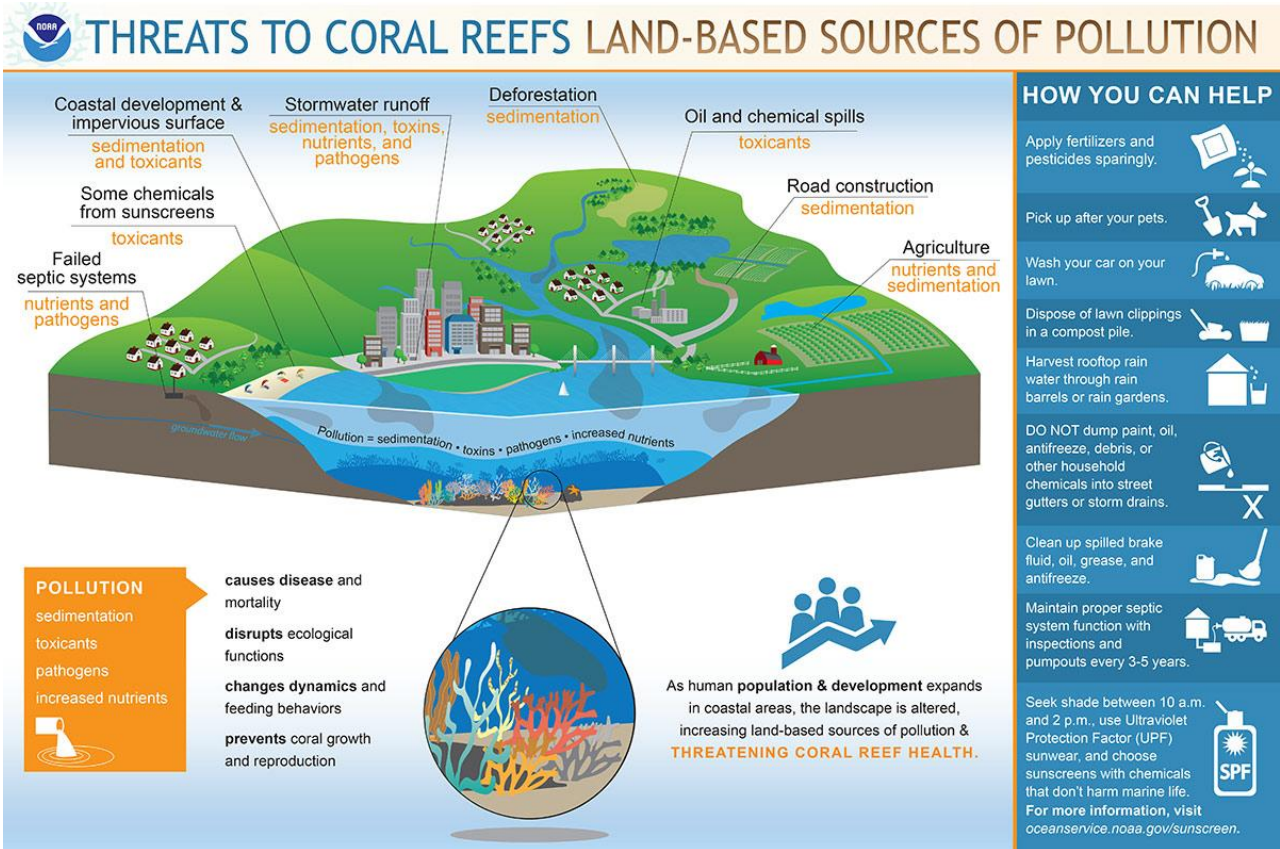
The Red Sea's ecological landscape is a critical yet often underappreciated dimension of regional dynamics, where environmental pressures exert profound political consequences that reverberate through social, economic, and security assemblages. To fully grasp these impacts, it is necessary to situate environmental phenomena within the conceptual frame of political ecology and environmental security, which emphasizes the entanglement of ecological systems with power

relations, human livelihoods, and state practices.

At the heart of these pressures is the competition over fisheries, coral reef degradation, and the expanding use of desalination technologies. Fisheries in the Red Sea are vital to coastal communities, providing livelihoods and nutrition, yet overfishing and unregulated extraction have intensified, fueled by growing populations and commercial interests from both littoral states and transnational actors. This competition is not merely economic; it constitutes a material node within the broader assemblage of maritime governance, where resource scarcity can inflame local tensions and challenge state authority, especially in zones of overlapping jurisdiction or weak governance.

Coral reefs, often referred to as the “rainforests of the sea,” are essential for biodiversity, coastal protection, and fisheries productivity in the Red Sea. However, they face acute threats from rising sea temperatures, pollution, and destructive fishing practices. The degradation of reefs undermines the ecological foundation of coastal economies and exacerbates vulnerabilities of populations reliant on these ecosystems. This ecological degradation forms a critical component of the assemblage, linking environmental change to socio-political instability and prompting transnational cooperation initiatives aimed at reef conservation.

Globally, coral reef ecosystems play a critical role in supporting human livelihoods and food security. It is estimated that over six million individuals directly depend on coral reefs for their income, primarily through small-scale fisheries and tourism-related activities. Furthermore, more than 600 million people rely on reef-associated marine species—such as fish, crustaceans, and elasmobranchs (e.g., sharks)—as a primary source of dietary protein and essential micronutrients. These ecosystems not only sustain subsistence and commercial fisheries but also contribute significantly to the nutritional well-being of coastal populations, particularly in developing regions. The degradation of coral reefs due to climate change, overexploitation, and pollution poses a substantial threat to these socio-economic and ecological functions, underscoring the urgent need for integrated conservation and management strategies.



Source: <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/coral-pollution.html>

These ecosystems are particularly significant in the Red Sea, where they exhibit exceptional resilience to thermal stress and host a unique assemblage of marine species adapted to high salinity and temperature conditions. The Red Sea's coral reefs contribute to regional food security, economic development, and coastal protection, especially for nations such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan.

The interaction between coral reefs and ocean formation processes is multifaceted. Coral reefs influence local hydrodynamics by modifying wave energy and sediment transport, and they play a role in biogeochemical cycling through calcium carbonate deposition and nutrient exchange. In the Red Sea, these processes are shaped by the basin's semi-enclosed geography, limited freshwater input, and high evaporation rates, which create distinct oceanographic conditions that affect coral growth and distribution.

Climate change poses a significant threat to coral reef ecosystems globally, including those in the Red Sea. Rising sea surface temperatures, ocean acidification, and altered current patterns disrupt coral physiology, reproduction, and symbiotic relationships with zooxanthellae. However, Red Sea corals have demonstrated a degree of thermal tolerance that offers valuable insights into adaptive mechanisms under climate stress. Studying these reefs can inform broader conservation strategies and enhance predictive models of coral resilience in the face of global warming.

In sum, coral reefs are integral to marine ecosystem functioning, oceanographic processes, and

socio-economic stability. Their preservation, particularly in climate-resilient regions like the Red Sea, is essential for sustaining biodiversity and supporting human communities in an era of rapid environmental change.

Desalination, increasingly employed by Gulf states to address freshwater scarcity, presents a paradoxical environmental challenge. While it alleviates water shortages critical to urban and industrial growth, desalination plants discharge brine and chemicals that threaten marine ecosystems, adding another layer of ecological stress and potential conflict over coastal environmental management. The placement and operation of desalination facilities intersect with geopolitical interests and local community concerns, further entrenching environmental issues within political assemblages.

Overlaying these specific ecological pressures is the broader specter of climate change, which profoundly influences migration and conflict dynamics in the Red Sea region. Increased temperatures, sea-level rise, and altered precipitation patterns exacerbate water scarcity, degrade arable land, and intensify extreme weather events. Such environmental stressors heighten competition over natural resources, contribute to displacement, and act as “threat multipliers” in already fragile contexts, feeding into patterns of localized conflict and regional instability. This dynamic underscores the need to understand the Red Sea not only as a maritime corridor but as an ecological and political assemblage where environmental security is inseparable from human security.

Political ecology’s emphasis on the uneven distribution of environmental benefits and burdens reveals how ecological processes are deeply embedded within power relations, governance structures, and socio-economic inequalities. In the Red Sea context, this means recognizing how coastal states, diasporic communities, and external actors each participate in, and are affected by, environmental change and its governance. These interactions configure an assemblage where ecological and political elements co-produce each other, shaping the possibilities for cooperation or contestation.

Looking forward, diasporas and cultural circulations around the Red Sea represent significant yet underexplored components of this assemblage. Migrant communities, many originating from the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula, maintain transnational ties that circulate not only capital and labor but also knowledge, cultural practices, and political ideas. These circulations influence perceptions and responses to environmental change, conflict, and governance. Diasporic actors often serve as conduits for environmental information, remittances for sustainable livelihoods, and advocacy for regional cooperation, thus linking environmental and political assemblages across borders.

Moreover, diasporic cultural practices shape environmental imaginaries and ethical commitments, potentially fostering new forms of environmental stewardship that transcend state boundaries. For instance, religious and customary beliefs embedded within these communities may promote conservation ethics that align with broader ecological objectives, contributing to a more inclusive and culturally resonant environmental governance framework.

In sum, the environmental pressures in the Red Sea must be understood as intricately linked to political, social, and economic assemblages that cut across local, regional, and global scales. Political ecology provides a critical lens to interrogate these interconnections and to foreground issues of power and inequality, while assemblage theory offers a conceptual tool to trace how diverse elements—human and non-human, material and discursive—come together to produce specific configurations of environmental security and conflict. Recognizing the active role of diasporas and cultural circulations enriches this understanding, opening pathways for more adaptive and culturally grounded regional cooperation strategies that can address the complex challenges of environmental change in the Red Sea subregion.

Diasporas and Cultural Circulations Across the Red Sea

To call the Red Sea a mere body of water would be to commit a monumental litotes—an understatement so severe it borders on denial. It is less a sea than an ever-flowing vein pulsating with the lifeblood of millennia of human movement, commerce, and cultural mingling. Across this restless expanse, the currents carry far more than ships; they ferry stories, tongues, faiths, and identities, each wave a whispered testament to centuries of shared destiny. The sea itself becomes an allegory of connection—an aqueous loom weaving the disparate threads of African and Arabian lives into a single, sprawling tapestry that no modern border can fully unravel. It is a liquid metaphor for transregionalism itself, embodying flux, hybridity, and the constant remaking of place and identity.

Diasporas as “Living Bridges” Across Shifting Sands

Diasporic communities straddle the shifting sands and swelling tides as living bridges, embodying the spatial and temporal complexities of cultural geography in motion. These communities are neither static monuments nor passive relics but dynamic assemblages—fluid constellations of memory, commerce, and kinship. They act as walking archives, carrying fragmented histories stitched together by resilience and adaptation. The Yemeni diaspora in the Horn, and the African diasporas in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, stand as living symbols, embodying the fluidity of human connection that transcends the arbitrary confines of national borders. These diasporas resist the reductive logic of nationalism, which insists on drawing rigid lines around identity, as if to claim exclusive ownership over the stories they tell, the lives they live. In their very existence, these communities are a defiant counterpoint to the notion that identity can be bound by political geography, challenging the catachresis—the misuse—of borders that seek to define, restrict, and fragment their shared histories.

The term diaspora serves as a metonym for not just the individuals involved but also for the larger global phenomenon of migration and human interconnection. The Yemeni diaspora in the Horn, for example, is not merely a collection of people; it symbolizes the broader movement of individuals and ideas across borders. In this way, it acts as a representative of the global human condition, one that is not confined to national lines but instead woven into a vast, interconnected web of shared experiences. Similarly, when we speak of the African diasporas in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, we are referring not just to those people in these countries but to a more profound story of African migration that stretches across continents, shaping and reshaping identities. Here, the diaspora is

more than a group—it is a living metaphor for the passage of culture, the migration of ideas, and the continual reinvention of self in spaces far from home.

This resistance to nationalism plays out allegorically, as these diasporas become the protagonists in a moral narrative about the struggle to transcend the arbitrary limits placed on human connection by borders. They embody the resilience of the human spirit, which, despite attempts to confine it, flows freely across the geopolitical landscape. Their very existence challenges the assertion that identity can ever be neatly tied to a map, a border, or a state. In the allegory, these diasporas are the heroes, defying the restrictive, prescriptive nature of nationalism, asserting that the human experience is one of movement and transformation, not stagnation or division.

The borders themselves are not just passive lines; they are agents of division, as the passage through them is often framed in human terms. Nationalism, in this context, is not a mere concept but a force that insists on drawing lines around human identity, on claiming that these individuals belong to one nation and not another. The borders “insist” on boundaries that fragment lives, acting as if they have the power to dictate the very essence of who someone is. This anthropomorphization of borders transforms them into active agents of division, which, in their hypallactic function, misapply the role of geographic boundaries to that of identity boundaries—an unnatural leap of logic that treats people as if they are to be defined by the places they were born rather than the lives they lead.

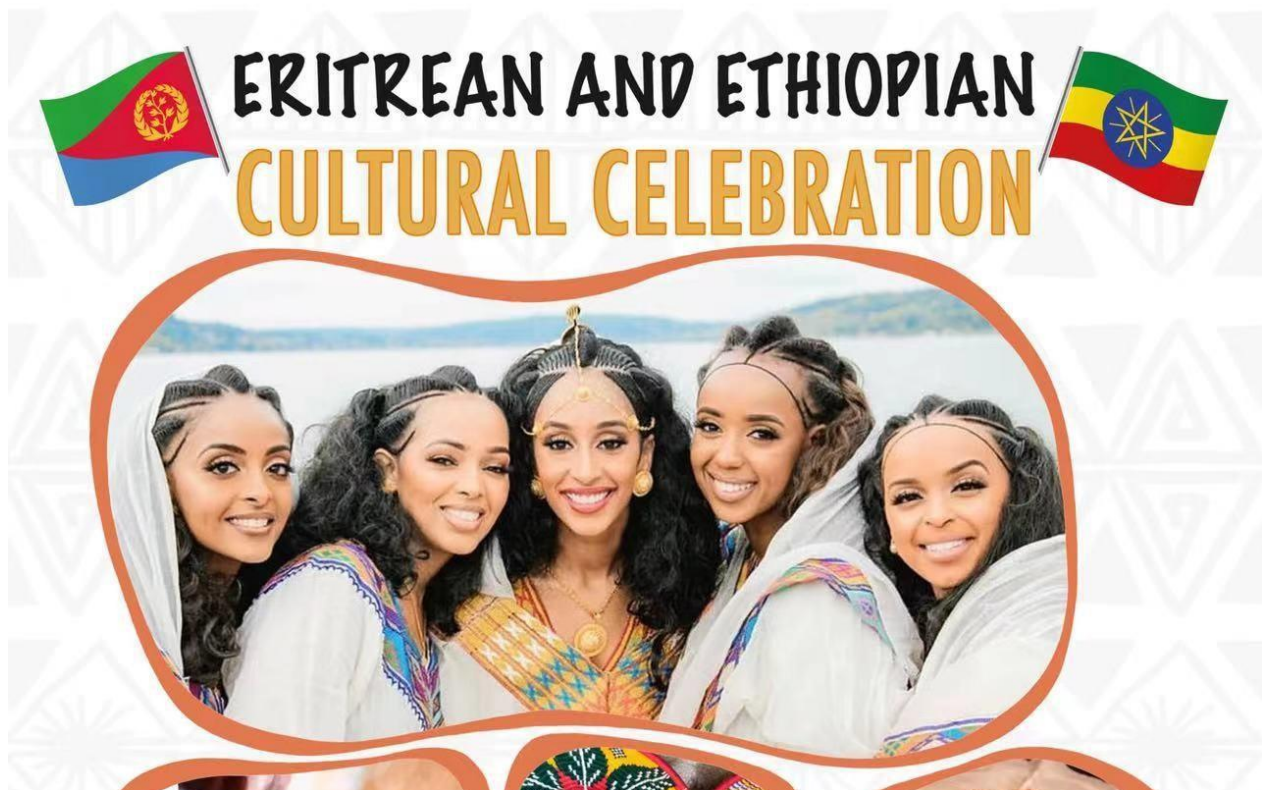
This misapplication of borders is the heart of the misuse in the strait. Borders, which should only serve to demarcate physical space, are instead used to fragment human identity. The phrase “misuse of borders” becomes a catachresis in itself, as the borders are not simply used incorrectly—they are applied to something they were never meant to encompass. Human identity, shaped by family, culture, and history, cannot be bound by lines drawn on a map. The borders themselves are critiqued for their illegitimate function: not only defining physical territory but also restricting movement and, ultimately, fragmenting shared histories. This catachresis critiques a world where borders are not just lines on the map but forces that attempt to redefine who we are and where we belong.

In challenging the use of borders in this way, the passage invites us to rethink the meaning of identity and to recognize that the true essence of human connection cannot be constrained by political geography. Instead, the diasporas, living beyond these rigid confines, act as both symbols and agents of a more fluid, interconnected world, where identity is shaped not by borders but by shared stories, histories, and experiences that transcend them.

In their very existence, they challenge the neat categories of belonging, illustrating that culture is not a fixed territory but a flowing river, continually reshaped by currents of displacement and return.

6.The Sacred Cartography of Pilgrimage and Spiritual Networks

The spiritual pathways crisscrossing the Red Sea function as sacred cartographies—maps not of land, but of faith and communal belonging. These routes are hyperboles of devotion, where millions undertake pilgrimages that stretch the limits of human endurance, crossing deserts and seas to converge on Mecca's sanctified precincts. The Hajj routes and the networks of Sufi brotherhoods are assemblages of spirituality and sociality, spaces where faith transcends the rigid geometries of modern geopolitics. Here, cultural geography becomes an allegory for transcendence: boundaries dissolve, identities merge, and shared sacredness reinscribes the region as a living, breathing organism of collective memory and practice (Ernst, 1997).



Decentralization in Ethiopia

Decentralization in Ethiopia, particularly under the ethnic federalism model established by the 1995 constitution, has had profound effects on governance, state cohesion, and political stability. While intended to empower local communities, promote self-determination, and manage Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic diversity, it has also contributed to fragmentation in several interrelated ways.

First, the federal system is organized along ethnolinguistic lines, with each ethnic group granted its own regional state, or "*nation-state*", possessing extensive autonomy. This includes control over local governance, education, language policy, and crucially, security forces. While this system was meant to provide ethnic groups with self-rule and prevent centralized domination, it has also incentivized parochialism and competition among groups. Regional governments often prioritize ethnic interests over national priorities, fostering rivalries and undermining a shared national identity.

Second, decentralization has facilitated the proliferation of ethnically based militias and regional security forces. Many regions maintain their own armed forces, which can act independently of the federal government, creating the potential for localized conflicts and undermining the monopoly of legitimate force. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its associated forces, for instance, demonstrated how a highly autonomous regional entity could challenge federal authority, ultimately contributing to the outbreak of the Tigray conflict in 2020.

Third, the system has led to legal and administrative fragmentation. Each ethnic state can enact its own laws, policies, and development strategies, resulting in inconsistent governance across the country. Disputes over borders, resource control, and jurisdiction are common, as local elites assert their authority, sometimes in direct opposition to federal directives. Such fragmentation complicates national policy implementation, reduces coordination, and exacerbates local grievances.

Fourth, decentralization has heightened secessionist tendencies. The constitutional provision granting "the right to secession" to ethnic regions has emboldened movements seeking independence, fueling political instability. This creates a climate where ethnic identity is prioritized over civic or national cohesion, weakening state capacity and contributing to cycles of conflict.

Finally, the decentralization model intersects with Ethiopia's demographic and economic disparities. Wealthier regions, such as Oromia or Tigray, often compete with less-resourced regions for federal funding, infrastructure, and investment. Combined with ethnicized politics, these disparities exacerbate tensions and reinforce divisions between regions.

In summary, while Ethiopia's decentralization framework was designed to accommodate diversity and prevent authoritarian centralization, in practice it has facilitated fragmentation by empowering regional authorities, enabling ethnic militias, legalizing secessionist claims, and creating institutional inconsistencies. The result is a highly decentralized state where ethnic identity often supersedes national cohesion, creating both governance challenges and periodic violent conflict.

Afro-Arab Identities: Palimpsests of Memory and Power

In the cultural geography of the Red Sea, Afro-Arab identities emerge as palimpsests—texts repeatedly overwritten yet never erased. They are sites where histories of enslavement, migration, and intermarriage have created complex social tapestries that defy simplistic racial or ethnic categorizations. These identities embody a *katachresis* when they are forced into rigid national or ethnic molds, for their reality is inherently fluid, hybrid, and contested. As living allegories of transregional cultural exchange, Afro-Arabs reflect the layered politics of memory and power,

where belonging is negotiated through social practice, oral histories, and shared cultural rituals. Their existence compels us to rethink the spatial imaginaries imposed by modern statehood and to appreciate the multifaceted human geographies that the Red Sea nurtures.

The Red Sea as a Palimpsest of Hybrid Sovereignty

To approach the Red Sea region purely through the lens of traditional sovereignty is to gaze upon a palimpsest with only the latest inscription in view—an act of profound katachresis that blinds us to the multiple layers of authority and belonging etched beneath. Here, sovereignty itself is hybrid, a fluid and contested assemblage rather than a fixed, impermeable fortress. Along these shores, power is not merely wielded by centralized states but is diffused through tribal confederacies, diasporic networks, religious authorities, and external powers. The Red Sea, then, functions as a living allegory of hybrid sovereignty, where jurisdictional lines overlap, contradict, and sometimes dissolve like morning mist on the water's surface. This hybridity reflects the region's historical realities, where Ottoman, colonial, and local sovereignties mingled and clashed, and where today's geopolitical contestations echo those layered pasts.

Borderlands as Sites of Both Friction and Fertility

If hybrid sovereignty paints the region in shades of fluid authority, borderlands theory brings into focus the dynamic spaces where these sovereignties meet and interact. The Red Sea's coastlines and adjacent hinterlands are more than boundaries; they are borderlands—zones of friction, but also of extraordinary cultural and economic fertility. These borderlands are liminal territories where identities blur and merge, where the “us” and “them” of nationalist discourse unravel into “we” and “us-all.” Within these contested spaces, communities have historically negotiated complex relationships with states and one another, using the ambiguity of borders to their advantage. In this way, borderlands are not peripheries but crucibles of innovation and resilience, rich with cultural hybridity that defies simplistic spatial or political classifications. The Red Sea's port cities and nomadic routes serve as perfect microcosms of this phenomenon, their vibrant markets and fluid social orders reflecting centuries of borderland dynamism.

Transregionalism as a Counterpoint to Territorial Fixity

Where hybrid sovereignty and borderlands theory uncover the complex politics of space and power, transregionalism invites us to transcend spatial fixity altogether. It insists on understanding the Red Sea not as a fragmented patchwork of discrete states, but as a continuous, interconnected arena of flows—flows of people, goods, ideas, and cultural practices that defy or circumvent state borders. This framework reveals how diasporas, religious networks, and trade routes function as circulatory systems, knitting together otherwise disparate places into a cohesive social and cultural whole. Transregionalism, then, is a conceptual lighthouse illuminating the deep and abiding interdependencies that sustain the Red Sea region, revealing a geography of becoming rather than being. In this light, sovereignty and borders are but temporary waves on a sea of enduring human connection.

Cultural Geography and the “Spatial Stories” of the Red Sea

Cultural geography adds an interpretive richness to these spatial and political frameworks by

attending to the “spatial stories” inscribed on the Red Sea’s landscapes—both natural and human-made. This discipline reveals how place is experienced, imagined, and contested by the region’s inhabitants. Ports like Jeddah, Massawa, and Aden become metonyms for broader social and cultural processes, where colonial histories intersect with contemporary geopolitics and local identities. The physical geography—the arid coastlines, coral reefs, and shifting sands—serves as both stage and actor in this ongoing drama, shaped and shaping by human activity. These spatial narratives expose how environmental factors such as water scarcity, fisheries depletion, and climate change intensify existing social tensions but also stimulate new forms of cooperation and collective identity. In this way, cultural geography frames the Red Sea as a palimpsest of meaning, continuously rewritten by nature and culture alike.

The Red Sea Diaspora and the Assemblage of Transregional Identities

Finally, the lived experiences of the Red Sea diaspora crystallize these theoretical threads into embodied realities. Diasporic communities—whether Yemeni in Djibouti, Eritrean in Jeddah, or Somali along the Arabian coast—are living assemblages, sites where transregionalism, hybrid sovereignty, and borderlands overlap and coalesce. These communities navigate multiple identities and allegiances, often forging new hybrid cultural forms that challenge rigid notions of nationhood. Their movements and networks act as conduits for economic exchange, political activism, and cultural transmission, making them pivotal actors in the ongoing remaking of the Red Sea region. Through their stories, the abstract becomes tangible, and theory breathes as lived experience, demonstrating that the Red Sea is less a line on a map and more a vibrant, pulsating web of human connection.

7. Leveraging the dyads for multi-bilateral engagement

Ethiopia-Yemen

Ethiopia's historical control of parts of Yemen, particularly in the 6th century under the Aksumite Empire, left a significant legacy on the region's political and cultural landscape. The Aksumites, led by King Kaleb, initially sought to control Yemen to secure trade routes and expand Christian influence. Their occupation of Yemen, particularly during the reign of the Himyarite Kingdom, introduced Christianity to the Arabian Peninsula, leaving traces of Ethiopian religious and cultural practices. Ethiopian rule also established a long-lasting presence of trade relations, connecting the Red Sea region with sub-Saharan Africa, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and people. The Aksumite Empire's influence in Yemen led to the construction of fortresses and Christian churches, some of which remain as archaeological remnants today. The eventual fall of the Aksumite presence in Yemen left behind a complex blend of religious and cultural influences, shaping the region's future interactions with both African and Arabian civilizations. Finally, this historical connection between Ethiopia and Yemen provided a foundation for future diplomatic and cultural ties, which continue to resonate in modern times through shared heritage and cross-border relationships.

The relationship between Ethiopia and Yemen, and its subsequent impact on the dynamics between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the region, is quite layered, spanning historical, geopolitical, and economic contexts. The situation is also deeply intertwined with Ethiopia's access to ports, which plays a critical role in its foreign relations, particularly with Eritrea.

The relationship between Ethiopia and Yemen dates back to ancient times, long before modern political structures were established. The Red Sea has always been a significant point of contact for these two countries. Ethiopia, especially the regions of Tigray and the highlands of the north, had direct maritime access to the Red Sea via the port city of Massawa (before Eritrea's independence) and later the port of Assab.

Yemen, historically known for its strategic location on the Arabian Peninsula, served as an important trading hub and an intermediary between the Arabian world and East Africa. The two regions shared cultural, linguistic, and religious connections, particularly with the spread of Islam. Yemeni merchants had close ties with the Ethiopian highlands, and there was significant exchange of goods, people, and ideas.

As the 20th century progressed, the Ethiopian-Yemeni relationship continued but was overshadowed by larger regional dynamics, particularly the establishment of Eritrea as a contested territory. Yemen, which was undergoing its own periods of instability (including the civil war in the 1960s), played a secondary role in Ethiopia's political landscape until the mid- 20th century.

The Eritrean independence movement in the 1960s, following World War II and the Federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia (which ended in 1962), led to a long period of armed struggle. The significance of ports in Eritrea became a focal point of Ethiopia's national security and its relationship with Yemen, which began to see the importance of controlling strategic maritime access points in the region.

Yemen's role during this period, particularly during the Cold War, was more about navigating alliances rather than direct intervention. Yemen was allied with countries like the Soviet Union, while Ethiopia (under Emperor Haile Selassie) sought support from the United States and the West. This division helped shape the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa and Yemen's relationship with both Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The most significant rupture between Ethiopia and Eritrea occurred in 1998 when the two nations entered a bloody conflict over territorial disputes, notably over the town of Badme. The war resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and left the region divided for decades. Yemen's position, as a neighbor across the Red Sea, became crucial during this time.

While Yemen itself was recovering from internal turmoil (e.g., the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 and the subsequent civil war), its geographical location gave it a pivotal role in ensuring stability in the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a critical chokepoint for global oil shipments. Yemen, like Eritrea, sought to maintain a neutral stance, but the Red Sea's strategic importance became a key factor in the shifting allegiances in the Horn of Africa.

In the early 2000s, after the Eritrean-Ethiopian War ended in a ceasefire (though no formal peace treaty was signed), the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea remained tense, especially over the issue of Ethiopia's access to ports. Eritrea had won de facto independence in 1993, and without access to the coast, Ethiopia was landlocked, which created a significant economic barrier.

Ethiopia turned to Djibouti for port access, which became its primary maritime gateway. However, Ethiopia's need for more reliable and larger ports remained a concern. Yemen, with its Red Sea ports, became increasingly important in Ethiopia's broader strategy for regional economic integration.

The Yemen conflict (particularly the war that began in 2015) further complicated the region. Ethiopia, under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, has sought to maintain good relations with the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which were heavily involved in Yemen's civil war. Ethiopia's ability to navigate this situation—while dealing with its own internal challenges, such as the war with Tigray (2020-2022)—has been a delicate balancing act.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's landmark peace agreement with Eritrea in 2018, which formally ended the two-decade-long conflict between the two countries, was a major development in the Horn of Africa. This peace deal had direct implications for Ethiopia's access to ports. In theory, it allowed Ethiopia to regain access to Eritrean ports, specifically Massawa and Assab, both of which are strategically located on the Red Sea.

However, while this restored Ethiopia's direct access to maritime trade routes via Eritrea, the relationship remains complicated. Eritrea's political landscape under President Isaias Afwerki remains authoritarian, and tensions still persist in the region, especially with the ongoing impact of the Tigray conflict, which further strained Ethiopia's diplomatic ties.

Yemen's ongoing civil war, combined with the complex dynamics between Ethiopia and Eritrea, continues to shape the geopolitics of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa region. Ethiopia's access to ports is a central element of its foreign policy, influencing its relationships with both Eritrea and Gulf states. The 2018 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea restored trade relations and port access, yet border and territorial disputes persist, reflecting broader instability in the Horn of Africa. Yemen's strategic position along the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait further complicates this environment, as any disruption in the country directly affects maritime trade routes and Ethiopia's access to international markets. Ethiopia has engaged diplomatically with multiple actors involved in the Yemeni conflict to safeguard its interests, but political instability in Yemen continues to pose risks for regional trade and security. At the same time, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf states have intensified their involvement in both the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and Ethiopia has sought to align with these powers for economic cooperation and political support.

Ethiopia's reliance on port access remains a critical determinant of its national development and security strategy. While Djibouti remains the primary gateway for Ethiopian trade, the potential of Eritrean ports has grown since the 2018 reconciliation. Yemen's Red Sea coastline, with key ports

such as Aden and Mukalla, offers an additional strategic opportunity for Ethiopia to diversify its maritime access. The development and rehabilitation of Yemeni ports, once stability is restored, could provide Ethiopia with alternative trade routes, complementing its current infrastructure and creating a logistics corridor linking Ethiopia, Yemen, and the Red Sea. Public-private partnerships could play a key role in this effort, with Gulf states and China potentially providing investment, expertise, and construction support in line with ongoing regional reconstruction and development initiatives.

The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait serves as a critical maritime chokepoint, linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. By leveraging this geographic advantage, Ethiopia and Yemen can establish direct trade routes connecting Ethiopian exports such as coffee, livestock, textiles, and agricultural goods to Yemeni ports and onward to Gulf and Asian markets. Coordinated infrastructure projects, including shipping lanes, freight operations, and potentially rail connections, could enhance trade efficiency, foster regional integration, and attract international financial support. Trade facilitation measures, including bilateral agreements, streamlined customs procedures, and digitalized trade systems, would further reduce barriers and enable smoother movement of goods. Both countries can identify complementary products for export to diversify trade and ensure sustainable economic partnerships.

Beyond bilateral cooperation, Ethiopia and Yemen must engage with regional powers and global actors to strengthen their trade corridor. Gulf states offer financial investment, technical expertise, and market access, while China's Belt and Road Initiative presents opportunities to jointly develop ports and trade routes connecting the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Joint maritime initiatives could establish shipping routes to India, Southeast Asia, and China, leveraging Yemen's Indian Ocean access to create new commercial pathways. Integrating eco-friendly shipping practices could also attract green investments and enhance competitiveness in global trade.

By fostering a closer economic partnership and developing joint infrastructure, Ethiopia and Yemen can unlock significant trade potential in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean nexus. The countries can leverage their geographic proximity to key maritime trade routes, use port revitalization as a foundation for growth, and create a strategic, secure, and diversified trade corridor that benefits both nations as well as regional and global trade networks.

Nile-Horn of Africa-Gulf

The Nile-Horn of Africa-Gulf relationship is complex, involving key geopolitical dynamics between countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Gulf States (primarily Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman). The relationship has evolved over time, with historical ties, economic interests, and strategic considerations shaping current dynamics. This relationship's impact on the Red Sea region, Horn of Africa, and broader Middle East is significant, particularly with respect to security, trade, energy flows, and water resources.

The relationship between the Nile Basin, the Horn of Africa, and the Gulf States has evolved considerably over the past few decades. Historically, Egypt has dominated the Nile Basin, with

Sudan and Ethiopia situated within its sphere of influence due to their shared reliance on the Nile waters. Prior to the 2000s, the Gulf states, despite their economic strength derived from oil wealth, had limited engagement in the Horn of Africa. The Nile waters issue was largely a bilateral concern among Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, with occasional international involvement. During the 1990s, Gulf interest in the Horn of Africa began to grow, driven by economic and strategic considerations, including access to Red Sea shipping lanes, the Indian Ocean, and the region's natural resources.

From the 2000s onwards, Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, significantly expanded their investment and diplomatic presence in the Horn of Africa. Their engagement included infrastructure, ports, energy, and agricultural projects, alongside the establishment of military bases in countries such as Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somaliland. In response, Egypt sought to protect its core interests, particularly regarding Nile water security. The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) by Ethiopia in the 2010s became a central flashpoint, with Egypt expressing concern over potential reductions in its water supply. Egypt's diplomatic efforts intensified as Ethiopian influence grew and as the Horn of Africa states deepened ties with Gulf actors. These overlapping interests sometimes created regional tensions, with Gulf states supporting Egypt's Nile concerns while simultaneously investing in Ethiopia. Somalia's engagement with Gulf actors has also expanded, particularly in security and port development, though local political dynamics and competing Gulf alliances have complicated these relationships.

Egypt's objectives in this complex landscape center on securing its Nile water supply, which accounts for approximately ninety percent of the country's freshwater needs, and maintaining its geopolitical dominance in the Nile Basin and Red Sea region. Ensuring regional stability and fostering peace initiatives in South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia are also core priorities, reflecting Cairo's interest in preventing instability that could undermine its own security. Ethiopia, meanwhile, prioritizes economic growth and energy development, with the GERD serving as a key instrument for generating hydroelectric power and positioning the country as a regional energy exporter. Ethiopia also seeks to diversify its international alliances by cultivating strategic relationships with Gulf states, thereby reducing dependence on Egypt and Western actors. Sudan occupies a strategic intermediary position, balancing its alignment with Egypt on the Nile issue against economic cooperation with Ethiopia and the Gulf States. Its interests focus on maintaining stability and securing foreign investment for development projects, including ports and agriculture.

For the Gulf states, the Horn of Africa represents both economic opportunity and strategic importance. Investments in infrastructure, energy, and agriculture support economic objectives, while military presence and security agreements protect vital shipping lanes through the Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Gulf actors navigate complex regional rivalries, simultaneously supporting Egypt's Nile concerns and fostering development in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, while managing the influence of other external powers such as Turkey and Qatar.

The evolution of these interconnections suggests several pathways for promoting stability and prosperity. Regular diplomatic channels between Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, and the Gulf states could help resolve water-sharing disputes, potentially facilitated by international mediation through the United Nations, African Union, or World Bank. Economic interdependence may be strengthened

through trade agreements and investment treaties, alongside joint infrastructure projects linking the Horn of Africa with Gulf markets, which could enhance integration and reduce tensions. Security cooperation, coordinated through regional frameworks such as IGAD, is essential to address shared threats including terrorism, piracy, and conflict, particularly in Somalia and Yemen. Inclusive governance in Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia, supported by international initiatives promoting democracy, human rights, and conflict resolution, can mitigate instability and prevent external exploitation. Establishing a regional peace and security pact involving Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Gulf states could further institutionalize collaboration, ensuring that the Nile-Horn of Africa-Gulf relationship contributes to sustainable development, regional stability, and mutual prosperity.

Turkey-Somalia

The relationship between Turkey and Somalia has evolved significantly over recent decades, particularly following the collapse of Somalia's central government in the early 1990s. This relationship is shaped by a combination of geopolitical interests, humanitarian concerns, and economic opportunities. Turkey's growing role as a regional and global actor in the Horn of Africa has directly influenced its engagement with Somalia, while both countries have benefited from increasing cooperation in trade, security, and development.

Historically, ties between Turkey and Somalia were minimal, constrained by geographic and political separations despite a shared cultural and religious heritage as majority Muslim societies. The collapse of Somalia's government in 1991 plunged the country into instability, complicating engagement with external actors. During this period, Turkey, like many other nations, had limited involvement in Somali affairs.

The early 2000s marked a turning point in Turkey-Somalia relations, as Turkish humanitarian organizations, particularly the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), began providing aid during droughts and famines. This humanitarian engagement laid the foundation for a deeper political and economic relationship. As Somalia experienced political fragmentation, Turkey sought to assert itself as a regional power in the Horn of Africa, expanding its diplomatic presence. In 2011, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Somalia—the first by a Turkish head of state in decades—symbolized a new era of cooperation. Following this, Turkey invested in development projects across infrastructure, education, and healthcare, building roads, hospitals, and schools to support Somalia's war-torn society. Security cooperation also increased, with Turkey assisting in rebuilding Somalia's security sector through training and equipment, including the establishment of a military base in Mogadishu in 2017.

Over the past decade, the relationship has deepened through trade and economic cooperation. Somalia's exports, including livestock, fish, and agricultural products, complement Turkey's demand for raw materials, while Turkish construction firms have played a key role in rebuilding Somali ports, roads, and public buildings. Turkey has also supported Somalia on the international stage, advocating for Somali sovereignty and facilitating recognition in international forums such as the United Nations and the African Union. This engagement forms part of Turkey's broader strategy to establish a presence in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, driven by both geopolitical

considerations and economic opportunities linked to the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and regional oil routes.

From Somalia's perspective, Turkey's involvement provides critical humanitarian and economic support, helping to stabilize and rebuild the country. Turkish investment in infrastructure and development is essential for promoting economic growth and addressing the long-term impacts of conflict. Security assistance is equally important, with Turkey's military support and training of Somali forces viewed as vital in countering insurgent groups such as Al-Shabaab. Strategically, Somalia benefits from Turkey's engagement by diversifying its foreign partnerships, balancing Arab and Western influences, and reinforcing its sovereignty.

For Turkey, engagement with Somalia enhances its geopolitical influence in a region central to global shipping lanes and Red Sea security. Economic opportunities are significant, encompassing trade, infrastructure investment, and market access, while Somalia's strategic location along the Red Sea and Indian Ocean expands Turkey's regional economic footprint. Humanitarian diplomacy is also a central dimension of Turkey's approach, using aid and development to bolster its soft power and international image, while strategically positioning itself relative to regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The Turkey-Somalia relationship illustrates how humanitarian engagement, economic cooperation, and strategic diplomacy can intertwine, creating a resilient partnership that advances the interests of both nations while shaping the broader geopolitical landscape of the Horn of Africa.

Impact on Stability in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa

Turkey-Somalia relations could have a positive impact on the stability of the Red Sea region and the broader Horn of Africa due to several factors:

Enhanced Security Cooperation:

Military support from Turkey to Somalia strengthens Somalia's ability to combat Al-Shabaab and other extremist groups. With a more secure and stable Somalia, there is less likelihood of spillover violence into neighboring countries, including Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti, which all border Somalia.

Turkish naval presence in the Red Sea could help contribute to maritime security in a region where piracy and smuggling are persistent problems.

Economic Development:

Infrastructure development supported by Turkey can facilitate economic growth, improve connectivity, and create jobs in Somalia, which would positively impact the regional economy. With a more developed economy, Somalia can contribute more actively to regional integration and cooperation in trade, agriculture, and industry.

Red Sea and Indian Ocean Trade:

Somalia's port development, especially in cities like Mogadishu and Berbera, could allow for greater

integration into global trade routes. Turkey's investment in these ports and infrastructure would benefit Turkey, Somalia, and the wider region by creating new, efficient trade routes in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean nexus.

Multilateral Cooperation:

Turkey's involvement in Somalia enhances its position within the African Union (AU) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and it helps Somalia strengthen its position within these multilateral frameworks. This diplomatic and multilateral alignment can help ensure stability by creating cooperative mechanisms between countries in the Horn of Africa, such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti.

The conflict in Yemen has sent shockwaves across the Horn of Africa, with Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti each absorbing distinct reverberations—economic, strategic, and humanitarian. These impacts are not isolated; they ripple outward, touching global ports like Mombasa, Hamburg, and Amsterdam, where the disruption of Red Sea shipping has become a daily reality.

Ethiopia, though landlocked, is tethered to the Red Sea through Djibouti's port infrastructure. The Yemen crisis has strained Ethiopia's access to maritime trade, increasing costs and delays for vital imports like fuel, grain, and industrial goods. With Djibouti's port under pressure from rerouted vessels and refugee inflows, Ethiopia's economic arteries are constricted. The historical ties between Ethiopia and Yemen—once a source of cultural exchange and strategic cooperation—now echo with uncertainty, as both nations navigate internal fragmentation and external interference.

Kenya, with its strategic port in Mombasa, has felt the tremors of maritime instability. The rerouting of vessels around the Cape of Good Hope due to Houthi attacks has led to congestion, longer transit times, and elevated shipping costs. Mombasa's throughput has declined, affecting Kenya's export competitiveness and its role as a regional logistics hub. The Kenyan government has responded by deepening security cooperation with Western allies and exploring alternative trade corridors, but the economic pinch remains acute.

Djibouti, perched at the mouth of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, is the frontline state in this maritime drama. The port has seen surges in traffic from diverted vessels, but also faces logistical bottlenecks and humanitarian strain. Thousands of Yemeni refugees have crossed into Djibouti, stretching its social services and refugee infrastructure. While its strategic location has attracted foreign military bases and investment, the volatility of the Red Sea threatens to overwhelm its capacity.

Globally, the disruption has reached the docks of Hamburg and Amsterdam. Container traffic through the Suez Canal has plummeted by over 66%, forcing European ports to absorb delays and rerouted cargo. Hamburg has reported congestion and equipment shortages, while Amsterdam faces longer lead times and rising freight costs. The ripple effect is clear: what begins in the Bab el-Mandeb ends in the warehouses of Europe.

This is not just a regional crisis—it is a maritime migraine with global symptoms. The Horn of

Africa stands at the crossroads of conflict and commerce, and until the Red Sea is stabilized, the pain will be felt from Addis Ababa to Amsterdam.

The war in Yemen has spilled far beyond its borders, casting a long and corrosive shadow over Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. Can a landlocked Ethiopia breathe freely when its lifeline—the Djibouti corridor—is choked by maritime chaos and refugee surges? Kenya, once the proud gatekeeper of East African trade, now watches Mombasa's harbor slow to a crawl, as ships reroute and silence replaces the hum of commerce. Djibouti, perched at the mouth of the Red Sea, finds itself both sentinel and sponge—absorbing the shockwaves of conflict while struggling to stay afloat.

Is it mere coincidence that the tremors felt in Addis Ababa echo in the warehouses of Hamburg and the docks of Amsterdam? The Bab el-Mandeb, once a passage of promise, has become a bottleneck of peril—where ideology, insurgency, and international indifference collide. Ethiopia's dreams of regional integration, Kenya's ambitions for maritime supremacy, and Djibouti's delicate balancing act all hang in the balance. And until the Red Sea is no longer a theater of proxy war, these nations will remain actors in a tragedy not of their making, yet deeply of their suffering.

How to Strengthen the Multilateral Context

The relationship between Turkey and Somalia exemplifies how bilateral cooperation can have outsized effects on regional stability and multilateral engagement in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region. Turkey, Somalia, and neighboring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti could establish regional security frameworks aimed at counterterrorism, maritime security, and peacekeeping operations. This effort would necessitate close collaboration with international actors, including the African Union, the United Nations, and key regional powers, creating a multilateral architecture for collective security. Beyond security, both nations have opportunities to deepen economic cooperation by jointly investing in transport infrastructure, energy projects, and trade agreements that link the Horn of Africa to the Red Sea. Turkey's role as a facilitator of regional integration could enhance trade corridors between Somalia, Ethiopia, and other East African countries, thereby transforming historical bilateral ties into a broader network of interdependence.

Diplomatically, Turkey and Somalia could spearhead efforts to create regional forums for conflict resolution, economic collaboration, and development, engaging Red Sea states such as Sudan, Eritrea, and the Gulf countries. This positioning allows Turkey to act as a mediator in longstanding disputes, including the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict and challenges of Somali federalism, while simultaneously advancing economic and political integration. Humanitarian collaboration offers yet another dimension for partnership. Joint initiatives in disaster relief, healthcare, and education—supported by the EU, the UN, and the Gulf Cooperation Council—could strengthen social resilience across the region and reinforce Turkey's role as a regional anchor for stability and development.

When considered alongside other regional dyads, the strategic landscape becomes even more intricate. The Ethiopia-Yemen relationship, grounded in shared history through Red Sea trade routes and Islamic heritage, illustrates the interdependence of landlocked and maritime actors.

Ethiopia's security and economic interests hinge on stable access to maritime routes, while Yemen's control of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait positions it as a pivotal actor in regional security. Collaborative initiatives in maritime safety, anti-piracy operations, and economic integration could yield mutual benefits, linking Ethiopia's landlocked economy to Yemen's coastal infrastructure.

Similarly, the Nile-Horn of Africa-Gulf dyad highlights the interplay of water, energy, and strategic investments. Egypt's focus on Nile water security intersects with Ethiopia's energy ambitions through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, while Gulf States contribute both capital and strategic influence to the Horn of Africa. Balancing these competing interests requires carefully calibrated agreements on water sharing, coordinated development financing, and security collaboration, all of which can stabilize regional trade routes and promote economic growth in the Red Sea corridor.

The Turkey-Somalia dyad, however, offers a particularly striking example of how external engagement can catalyze regional transformation. Turkey's post-civil war reconstruction efforts in Somalia—spanning humanitarian aid, infrastructure, and security assistance—have not only reinforced Somali stability but also created a platform for deeper Red Sea security initiatives. By promoting joint maritime patrols, facilitating resource development, and expanding trade linkages with Gulf states, the partnership illustrates how a single bilateral relationship, if strategically leveraged, can ripple across multiple regional and multilateral networks. In this light, Turkey and Somalia demonstrate that pragmatic cooperation, when combined with a vision for broader regional integration, can convert historically fragmented and insecure spaces into interconnected and resilient systems, underscoring both the potential and the surprise of well-executed diplomacy in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea nexus.

Comparing with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy: Patient and Pragmatic

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy style is typically patient, pragmatic, and long-term focused. It generally avoids confrontation while seeking to balance its interests across different alliances, particularly in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region. This approach is evidenced by its role in the Yemen conflict, where it balances its involvement with diplomatic ties, such as its role in MENA stability and its strategic relationship with both Egypt and Ethiopia.

- Saudi Arabia's patient diplomacy allows it to maintain strong ties with Egypt, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, despite competing interests over the Nile waters, Red Sea security, and water resources.
- Pragmatism shines through its military involvement in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) interventions, especially in Yemen, while also being a key mediator in regional conflicts.

Role of the Red Sea in Foreign Policies

The Red Sea plays a pivotal role in the foreign policies of Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Somalia due to its strategic importance for global trade routes, especially concerning oil and goods transport between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

- For Ethiopia and Somalia, the Red Sea is vital for maritime access, which directly impacts trade and economic development. For landlocked Ethiopia, this access is particularly critical

- for its development strategy.
- Saudi Arabia views the Red Sea as a vital maritime space to ensure the security of shipping lanes from the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and into the Suez Canal. Its policies often reflect this through investments in regional ports, military alliances, and counter- piracy efforts.

Bureaucratic Weight Among Red Sea Littorals

The bureaucratic weight of foreign policies among the **Red Sea littoral states** (Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt) is often influenced by both national interests and external partnerships.

- Ethiopia and Somalia have limited diplomatic reach relative to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but they are increasingly vocal in pushing for regional cooperation and access to Red Sea trade routes.
- Egypt, with its historic influence in the Nile Basin, plays a dominant diplomatic role in Red Sea security.
- Saudi Arabia and the UAE have robust bureaucracies that facilitate long-term investments and security partnerships, making them important regional players, though their regional priorities sometimes conflict with Ethiopia's or Somalia's needs.

The Gulf states (especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and Turkey bring significant financial resources and political influence, but the influence of Egypt remains paramount in the region due to its historical weight in Nile diplomacy and its strategic positioning at the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

The Ethiopia-Yemen, Nile-Horn of Africa-Gulf, and Turkey-Somalia dyads are central to the future stability and prosperity of the Red Sea region. These relationships can contribute to regional cooperation, security, and economic growth if managed with patient diplomacy, balanced engagement, and a focus on mutual benefits. Saudi Arabia's pragmatic foreign policy style, emphasizing long-term, peaceful coexistence, is a useful model for achieving regional stability, while ensuring strategic maritime interests in the Red Sea and beyond are safeguarded.

8.External Powers and the Red Sea: A Theatre of Multipolar Contestation

The Red Sea has long been a strategic fulcrum where continents, cultures, and ambitions converge, but in the contemporary geopolitical era, it emerges as a prime theater of great power competition and intricate diplomacy. The region's vital maritime corridors, rich natural resources, and proximity to critical chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait have made it a magnet for global and regional actors pursuing diverse and often competing interests.

The United States has historically anchored its strategic approach in securing maritime navigation routes and projecting military presence to counter perceived threats, particularly from terrorism and regional instability. U.S. naval bases in Djibouti and partnerships with Gulf and African states

emphasize counterterrorism, anti-piracy operations, and safeguarding freedom of navigation. However, Washington's influence contends with an assertive China, whose Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments span port infrastructure in Djibouti, Port Sudan, and elsewhere, extending Beijing's reach through economic corridors that double as strategic footholds. Russia, though less visibly present, increasingly pursues naval access and arms sales to regional powers, seeking to reassert influence in a region historically peripheral but increasingly vital to its global posture. The European Union, balancing between its historical colonial legacies and contemporary security interests, invests in maritime security initiatives and diplomatic engagements, aiming to stabilize the region while managing migration flows impacting Europe.

Overlaying these great power dynamics are the ambitions of Gulf States, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whose assertive foreign policies seek to shape the Red Sea as a sphere of influence. These states invest heavily in port development, military bases, and political alliances to counter Iran's regional aspirations and secure strategic maritime routes. Their engagements provoke varied responses from African states, which navigate these overtures with agency, balancing development opportunities against sovereignty concerns and local political dynamics. For instance, Ethiopia's positioning amid these dynamics is critical, as it balances relations with Gulf states while managing complex internal and regional issues, such as the GERD dispute and its border tensions.

In this geopolitical tapestry, regional organizations like the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden attempt to institutionalize cooperation, yet face challenges from overlapping memberships, diverging priorities, and external influences. These bodies symbolize interregionalism in action—a political framework that transcends continental divides to coordinate policy and security in a shared maritime space. However, the efficacy of such organizations is often undermined by the divergent interests of member states, as well as the geopolitical contestations among external powers.

Cross-tabulating these intersecting layers reveals a complex matrix of influence and interaction. The U.S. and Gulf States frequently align on countering Iranian influence and securing maritime routes, yet diverge in methods and priorities—Washington's approach tends to emphasize military presence and coalition-building, while Gulf States employ a combination of hard power and economic investments. China's BRI ambitions sometimes overlap with Gulf infrastructural investments but also complicate alliances, as African states leverage Chinese development projects for autonomy from traditional Western influence. Russia's increasing naval presence challenges Western dominance and offers alternative security partnerships for regional states.

Meanwhile, EU initiatives intersect with U.S. and Gulf efforts in areas like maritime security but often bring a more multilateral and development-focused perspective.

This geopolitical complexity underscores the necessity of adopting an interregionalism lens that appreciates the Red Sea as a fluid, interconnected space where African and Arabian actors engage with external powers in layered diplomatic, economic, and security interactions. Critical geopolitics further unpacks how competing narratives of security, sovereignty, and influence are constructed

and contested across this maritime arena. It reveals that the Red Sea is not merely a stage upon which great powers play out their ambitions but a contested space shaped by local agency, historical legacies, and the entanglements of transregional relationships.

In summary, understanding the Red Sea's geopolitics demands recognizing the intricate web of intersecting strategies—from U.S. naval posturing to Chinese economic corridors, from Gulf State ambitions to African responses—all mediated by regional organizations that strive, sometimes imperfectly, to channel these forces into cooperation rather than conflict. This multifaceted interplay reflects the Red Sea's enduring significance as a maritime crossroads and a prism through which global and regional power dynamics are refracted and negotiated.

Table Cross-Tabulation of Key Actors and Strategic Intersections in the Red Sea Region

Actors	Strategic Interests	Approaches/Tools	Interactions & Alignments	Points of Tension	Impact on Regional Stability
United States	Secure maritime navigation, counterterrorism, maintain regional influence	Military bases (Djibouti), naval patrols, security partnerships, diplomacy	Aligns with Gulf States on Iran containment; cooperates with EU on security; competes with China and Russia	Growing Sino-Russian presence; Gulf States' independent policies; African sovereignty concerns	Provides security guarantees but risks exacerbating militarization
China	Expand Belt and Road Initiative, secure economic corridors, project power	Infrastructure investment (ports in Djibouti, Sudan), loans, economic diplomacy	Sometimes collaborates with Gulf investments; competes with US and Russia for influence; partners with	Debt diplomacy accusations; strategic rivalry with US	Boosts infrastructure, but may increase dependency and regional rivalries
Russia	Reassert influence, gain naval footholds, arms sales	Naval access agreements, military aid, arms sales	Aligns tactically with Gulf States against Western dominance; competes with US and China	Limited footprint but rising presence; local mistrust.	Adds complexity to security landscape; potential for proxy conflicts

European Union	Maritime security, migration management, development	Maritime security missions, diplomatic engagement, aid programs	Partners with US on counter-piracy; offers multilateral development focus	Balances legacy issues and contemporary interests; less militarized approach	Supports stabilization but constrained by limited hard power
Saudi Arabia & UAE	Regional influence, counter Iran, control maritime routes	Port development, military bases, proxy alliances, economic investment	Aligns with US on security; overlaps and competition with China on infrastructure; competes with Iran	Proxy conflicts in Yemen; local backlash; regional rivalry	Drives regional militarization but invests in development
African States	Sovereignty, economic development, regional security	Diplomatic balancing, leveraging great power competition, regional organizations	Seek Chinese investment, partner variably with Gulf States and West; engage regional bodies	Internal conflicts; fear of external domination; divergent interests	Agents of stabilization and fragmentation depending on policies
Council of Arab and African States (Red Sea/Gulf of Aden)	Regional cooperation, conflict resolution, economic integration	Multilateral dialogue, joint security initiatives, trade facilitation	Platform where African and Arab states negotiate interests; attempts to mediate great power influences	Overlapping memberships, differing agendas, external interference	Potential for cooperation but limited by internal divisions

Narrative Integration

This matrix illustrates the Red Sea as a complex geopolitical chessboard where each player's moves reverberate through multiple layers of interaction. The United States maintains a traditional posture of military dominance and strategic alliances, particularly with Gulf States, to safeguard maritime routes crucial to global trade. Yet, this position is increasingly challenged by China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative, which blends economic investment with strategic port acquisitions, blurring the lines between commerce and geopolitics.

Russia's return to the region, though modest, further complicates this landscape by injecting an

alternative security partnership model, often appealing to Gulf States and African actors skeptical of Western influence. The European Union, while less overtly militarized, plays a vital diplomatic and developmental role, engaging on maritime security and migration—a key concern for European stability.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's assertive policies reflect a hybrid approach of hard power and economic statecraft aimed at consolidating control over the Red Sea's critical chokepoints and countering Iranian influence. African states, meanwhile, navigate these pressures with pragmatic agency, leveraging external rivalries to secure infrastructure investment and political support, but often grappling with internal conflicts and divergent national priorities.

Regional organizations such as the Council of Arab and African States strive to channel these varied ambitions into cooperative frameworks, yet their effectiveness is hindered by overlapping memberships, external interference, and the sheer complexity of aligning interests across continents and cultures.

Through the lens of interregionalism, this multi-layered interplay reveals the Red Sea as more than a zone of contestation—it is a dynamic arena where regional and global actors continuously negotiate, collaborate, and compete. Critical geopolitics further deepens this understanding by uncovering how narratives of security, sovereignty, and influence are constructed and mobilized to legitimize these geopolitical moves.

In sum, any strategy aimed at fostering stability in the Red Sea must grapple with this tangled web of intersecting ambitions and identities. It requires a nuanced approach that recognizes the agency of African and Arab states, accommodates the competing interests of great powers, and supports regional institutions capable of mediating cooperation in this vital maritime crossroads.

9. Institutional strategies

In a region as fragmented, transboundary, and strategically overdetermined as the Red Sea, institutional strategies cannot operate in isolation from wider spatial, ecological, and geopolitical realities. Critical regionalism provides a conceptual scaffolding to approach the Red Sea as a space of fluid connectivity, overlapping sovereignties, and cross-regional entanglements. Within this framework, institutional strategies must be conceived not as rigid hierarchies but as adaptive, functional, and multi-scalar mechanisms, capable of navigating complexity and uncertainty.

Rather than attempting to resolve entrenched conflicts, such as Sudan's civil war, the Yemen war, or the Ethiopia-Eritrea border tensions, through immediate grand settlements, institutional strategies should proceed incrementally and cumulatively. By layering functional cooperation, soft power engagement, and interregional trust-building, these strategies create enabling conditions for eventual political solutions while avoiding premature confrontations that could undermine fragile progress.

Institutional strategies grounded in critical regionalism should disaggregate the Red Sea region into functional zones, encompassing maritime security, environmental cooperation, port logistics, and migration corridors, thereby circumventing zero-sum geopolitical blockages. Effective governance must link land and sea, recognizing that maritime interactions—including ports, shipping lanes, piracy, and migration—cannot be separated from land-based conflicts. Strategies should operate across scales, from municipal and coastal institutions to interregional coordination bodies, and should integrate informal and hybrid actors, particularly in areas where state authority is weak or contested, such as Somalia or Sudan. By fostering interdependencies through cooperation in non-political spheres, institutions gradually extend their influence into more sensitive security domains.

Addressing deeper, entrenched conflicts requires a cumulative approach rather than reliance on top-down political compacts alone. Stabilizing functional cooperation begins with the creation of issue-specific institutions, such as a Red Sea Fisheries Authority, a Climate Adaptation Task Force, or a Maritime Safety Agency, which include both conflict and non-conflict states. These frameworks allow adversaries to coexist within shared structures, reducing isolation and normalizing interdependence. Developing shared infrastructure and economic interconnections further consolidates this approach, with joint port management bodies, such as between Eritrea and Djibouti or Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and cross-border trade corridors connecting Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and the UAE. These arrangements generate mutual interests that discourage escalation, while institutional platforms addressing shared risks, including climate stress, food insecurity, and maritime disruption, reinforce cooperative norms.

Conflict resolution is strengthened when embedded within regional mediation ecosystems. Platforms such as the Sudan Transition Dialogue Forum or the Yemen Coastal Recovery Forum can be integrated into broader institutional frameworks like the Red Sea Council or AU-IGAD joint mechanisms. This ensures that dispute resolution is connected to a network of regional actors rather than relying solely on external mediation, creating more resilient and context-sensitive pathways to stability. Finally, institutionalizing conflict sensitivity in investment and security is essential. Foreign investments, whether from Gulf states, China, or other actors, must adhere to principles of conflict sensitivity under regional oversight bodies. Complementary measures, including rules of engagement, arms restraint frameworks, and naval deconfliction protocols formalized under a Red Sea Maritime Security Compact, would help align strategic interests with the broader goal of sustainable peace and security in the region.

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Linking Functional Institutions to Conflict Transformation

Institutional Strategy	Linked Conflict Area	Mechanism of Influence
Red Sea Maritime Security Compact	Yemen, Somalia, Eritrea	Builds naval deconfliction, reduces militarization triggers
Cross-Border Trade Corridors & Port Management	Sudan-Ethiopia, Ethiopia- Eritrea	Creates mutual interests, opens economic dialogue

Climate Adaptation and Migration Task Force	Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea	Tackles root causes of displacement and instability
Regional Mediation Ecosystem	Sudan Civil War, GERD dispute	Adds redundancy and legitimacy to mediation efforts
Fisheries and Marine Resource Forum	Yemen, Somalia, Eritrea	Fosters local economic cooperation and shared resource management

PERGSA

The Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (PERSGA), headquartered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, plays a pivotal role in fostering subregional cooperation among Red Sea and Gulf of Aden countries. Established under the 1982 Jeddah Convention, PERSGA coordinates efforts to protect marine and coastal environments, enhance capacity building, and implement sustainable management practices.

PERSGA as a Subregional Cooperation Scheme

PERSGA serves as a central platform for regional collaboration, focusing on:

- **Environmental Protection:** Implementing protocols to combat pollution and conserve biodiversity.
- **Capacity Building:** Organizing workshops and training sessions on marine pollution response and fisheries management.
- **Data Sharing:** Developing regional databases for environmental monitoring and fisheries statistics.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain in achieving full regional integration and addressing geopolitical tensions among member states.

Strengthening PERSGA's Authority

To enhance PERSGA's effectiveness, the following strategies are recommended:

- **Inclusive Governance:** Engaging all Red Sea littoral states, including Ethiopia and Somaliland, to ensure comprehensive regional representation.
- **Enhanced Funding:** Securing sustainable financial support from member states and international donors to implement long-term projects.
- **Institutional Capacity Building:** Providing technical assistance and training to strengthen the operational capabilities of PERSGA and its member institutions.

Table Proposals to Strengthen Governance and Enhance SRSA's Capacity and Impact

Area	Strategic Proposals
Institutional Development	Establish a permanent secretariat with technocratic capacity- Adopt clear legal frameworks, terms of reference, and a charter- Institutionalize regular ministerial summits and technical working groups
Political Buy-In	- Build elite and public legitimacy through high-level diplomacy- Ensure inclusive participation (Horn of Africa and Arab countries alike)- Promote neutral mediation role in regional conflicts
Operational Capacity	- Develop early warning and conflict prevention tools- Coordinate joint maritime security and counter- piracy patrols- Share intelligence and data among member states
Comparative Advantage	- Focus on maritime governance, trade corridors, and climate resilience- Avoid duplication with IGAD or AU, instead collaborate complementarily
Resource Mobilization	- Create a regional fund with seed money from KSA, UAE, Egypt- Attract donor support (EU, UN, World Bank) for institutional strengthening

EU Partnership in Capacity Building and Comparative Regionalism

The European Union can support PERSGA's initiatives through:

- Capacity Building: Providing technical assistance and training programs to enhance institutional capabilities.
- Best Practices: Sharing successful models of regional cooperation and environmental management.
- Comparative Regionalism: Applying frameworks like Tobias Lenz's comparative regionalism to analyze and improve regional integration efforts.
- Strengthening Authority: Implementing strategies from Tanja A. Börzel's work on authority-building in regional organizations to enhance PERSGA's legitimacy and effectiveness.

By leveraging these approaches, the EU can contribute to a more cohesive and resilient Red Sea region.

Summary

While PERSGA has made significant strides in promoting subregional cooperation, addressing the existing conflicts and disparities requires sustained efforts, inclusive governance, and strategic partnerships. The EU's involvement can play a crucial role in strengthening PERSGA's capacity and authority, fostering a more stable and prosperous Red Sea region.



Red Sea Council

The Red Sea Council (RSC) emerged as a regional cooperation mechanism for the littoral states, primarily aimed at addressing security concerns, economic integration, and environmental challenges. Although formally established only in recent years, the idea of a collaborative approach to managing the complex issues of the Red Sea dates back several decades. Prior to the 2010s, cooperation among the littoral states—Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen—was minimal, occurring largely through bilateral channels or under broader Arab or African frameworks such as the Arab League or African Union. Maritime security threats, piracy, and regional disputes, including the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict and instability in Sudan, kept the region in a state of tension, and institutionalized mechanisms to manage port traffic, environmental concerns, or trade flows were largely absent.

The Red Sea Council was officially established in 2018 as a multilateral platform for the littoral states and the Gulf of Aden. Its creation was motivated by the growing need to foster regional cooperation in security, port infrastructure, trade facilitation, and environmental protection, particularly in the face of increasing external interests from powers such as the UAE, China, and the United States. The initial members included Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Yemen. From 2019 to 2023, the Council sought to bring together Arab and African stakeholders under a unified framework, with the Saudi-led coalition playing a key role in its formation, and the UAE contributing to the enhancement of regional security architecture and trade infrastructure.

The main objectives of the Red Sea Council were designed to address both security concerns and economic development. In the realm of maritime security, the Council coordinates naval cooperation to combat piracy, smuggling, and other maritime threats, focusing on joint patrols, anti-piracy operations, and counterterrorism efforts in critical waterways such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden. Environmental sustainability constitutes another priority, with the Council establishing common frameworks for conserving marine biodiversity, managing overfishing, mitigating oil spills, and addressing the impacts of marine traffic on fragile ecosystems.

In terms of trade and economic integration, the Council promotes trade facilitation, port modernization, and regional connectivity, supporting infrastructure projects aimed at increasing port capacities in Djibouti, Jeddah, Port Sudan, and Eritrea, streamlining customs procedures, and enhancing logistical networks. Climate change adaptation is also central, with coordinated efforts to respond to rising sea levels, coral bleaching, and droughts that threaten Horn of Africa countries. Finally, the Council serves as a platform for regional diplomacy and conflict resolution, mediating disputes such as the Eritrea-Djibouti conflict and promoting stability across the Red Sea littoral.

The RSC has received strong support from both regional and international powers. Saudi Arabia has been a primary backer, leveraging the Council to advance its influence over security, trade, and infrastructure projects in line with Vision 2030. The UAE has contributed through investments in ports, military facilities, and other infrastructure projects, emphasizing economic development and maritime security. Egypt, as custodian of the Suez Canal, has a vested interest in maritime stability and economic cooperation and has been instrumental in shaping the Council's agenda. China has provided significant backing through its Belt and Road Initiative, funding port development in Djibouti and Eritrea. The United States and the European Union, while not directly part of the RSC, remain crucial stakeholders, focusing on maritime security, counterterrorism, and humanitarian support in the Horn of Africa.

To address the multifaceted challenges of trade, migration, climate change, port development, and maritime security, the Red Sea Council could evolve into a Council of Ministers with a comprehensive mandate for regional governance. Institutional expansion would involve creating dedicated ministries or working groups in trade and economic development, migration and labor, climate change and environmental sustainability, and ports and infrastructure development. Bureaucratic strengthening would require professionalizing the administration, hiring experts in international trade, climate policy, migration law, and maritime security, and establishing a centralized database to improve coordination and decision-making. Multi-stakeholder collaboration, incorporating local governments, NGOs, private sector actors, and international donors, would enhance policy formulation and project execution. Regular summits could bring ministers together to address pressing issues such as climate change, security, trade, and migration.

Transforming the RSC into a Council of Ministers would significantly elevate the quality of diplomacy in the region. More structured and efficient diplomatic processes would allow ministers to focus on specific issues without overlapping responsibilities, making negotiations more productive. Enhanced conflict resolution mechanisms would facilitate direct dialogue between governments, enabling faster responses to regional disputes where multiple countries share resources and maritime routes. Perhaps most importantly, this evolution could cultivate a stronger regional identity, with shared goals such as sustainable trade, climate resilience, and maritime security superseding narrow national interests, fostering deeper cooperation and a more stable Red Sea region.

Summary

By evolving into a Council of Ministers, the Red Sea Council would have the potential to become a powerful regional body addressing a wide range of issues—trade, migration, ports, climate change, and maritime security. This transformation would not only streamline diplomatic efforts but also enhance regional economic integration, security, and sustainability, positioning the Red Sea as a pivotal zone for cooperation in the Horn of Africa and the Greater Middle East.

Main Backers and Sponsors

Saudi Arabia has emerged as a primary sponsor of regional maritime cooperation, leveraging its Vision 2030 agenda to promote port development and assert leadership in maritime affairs. The Kingdom has financed significant infrastructure projects across Eritrea, Sudan, and Djibouti. The UAE similarly exerts influence through investments in ports such as Berbera in Somaliland and Assab in Eritrea, alongside military installations in Djibouti and Somaliland. Egypt, as the custodian of the Suez Canal, plays a central role in regional maritime governance, with the Red Sea integral to its economic and strategic interests. China, driven by the BRI, has become an increasingly important investor in port development and infrastructure, aiming both to secure maritime trade routes and enhance its naval presence. Other external powers, including the United States, France, and the European Union, maintain strategic interests focused on security, counterterrorism, and the safe passage of goods through the Red Sea.

Proposed Action Plans for China and the EU

China's strategy emphasizes infrastructure development and port modernization to enhance throughput, leveraging BRI investments to expand ports in Djibouti, Assab, and Port Sudan. This includes improving connectivity through integrated railways, road networks, and storage facilities that link ports to broader trade corridors in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Trade facilitation agreements aim to streamline customs and tariff processes, with proposals for free trade zones and digitalized logistics management using blockchain technologies to reduce delays. Security and risk mitigation are also central, as China could increase naval presence and coordinate with regional powers and the EU to safeguard shipping lanes and deter piracy.

The EU's strategy complements these efforts through sustainable port development, promoting green infrastructure and energy-efficient operations while integrating smart technologies such as AI, IoT, and big data for real-time traffic optimization. Enhancing regional trade integration and standardization remains a priority, with support for harmonized customs procedures, logistics operations, and initiatives like the Global Gateway to strengthen connectivity. Capacity building and governance support are equally emphasized, with programs designed to improve port management, trade policy, and maritime regulatory frameworks. Through collaboration with the Red Sea Authority, the EU can facilitate shared regulatory systems, encourage multilateral cooperation, and strengthen institutional capacity to manage the Red Sea as a secure, efficient, and sustainable maritime space.

Approach for China and the EU

- China should focus on infrastructure development, ensuring that port expansion is followed by improved trade logistics, while leveraging its BRI strategy to create integrated networks connecting the Red Sea ports to inland trade corridors.
- The EU, on the other hand, should leverage its technical expertise to make these ports sustainable, introducing green technologies, while promoting regional integration through common customs and trade standards.

By aligning these actions, China and the EU can significantly increase throughput at Red Sea ports, improving global connectivity and regional prosperity, while supporting security and sustainable development.

The throughput at Red Sea ports is a critical metric for understanding the economic dynamics and growth potential in the region. While detailed, up-to-date figures for port throughput across all Red Sea littoral states are not readily available in real-time, I can provide general figures based on the most recent publicly available data and future projections. Here is an overview of the current throughput at key Red Sea ports, as well as future growth expectations.

Port of Jeddah (Saudi Arabia)

Current Throughput (2023):

- **Container throughput:** Approximately 4.8 million TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units) in 2023.
- The Port of Jeddah is one of the busiest ports in the Red Sea and is a major gateway for trade between the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. It serves as Saudi Arabia's main port for containerized cargo, and its capacity is expected to grow as new infrastructure projects are completed.

Future Projections:

- By 2030, throughput at Jeddah Islamic Port could increase by over 50%, with expectations to handle up to 7 million TEUs as part of ongoing expansion projects and infrastructure investments aligned with Saudi Vision 2030.

Port of Djibouti (Djibouti)

Current Throughput (2023):

- **Container throughput:** Around 1.2 million TEUs annually.
- The Port of Djibouti is crucial for trade in the Horn of Africa, with a prime strategic location at the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, through which shipping traffic from the Red Sea passes.

Future Projections:

- Expansion efforts are underway to increase capacity to 3 million TEUs by 2030, mainly driven by the growth in East African trade and regional investments from China, the UAE, and other international partners.

Port Sudan (Sudan)

Current Throughput (2023):

- **Container throughput:** Approximately 500,000 TEUs annually.
- Port Sudan is Sudan's primary gateway for international trade, handling bulk goods and containers. The port has faced challenges in terms of infrastructure, but ongoing upgrades are expected to increase throughput.

Future Projections:

- Sudan plans to increase its port capacity significantly, aiming for 1 million TEUs by 2030, supported by investments in port automation and infrastructure improvements from international partners such as China and the UAE.

Port of Massawa (Eritrea)

Current Throughput (2023):

- **Container throughput:** Approximately 200,000 TEUs annually.
- Massawa is one of Eritrea's most significant ports. However, it has been underutilized for many years due to regional instability and infrastructure constraints.

Future Projections:

- With investment from **Gulf countries**, especially the UAE, and the development of **port expansion projects**, **Massawa** could see its throughput rise to **500,000 TEUs** by 2030.

Port of Assab (Eritrea)

Current Throughput (2023):

- **Container throughput:** Around 50,000–100,000 TEUs annually.
- Assab is a small but important port, particularly for Eritrea and Ethiopia (prior to the Ethiopia-Eritrea border conflict). While its role has diminished, it has the potential to grow with the right investments.

Future Projections:

- It is projected that Assab could increase throughput to around 250,000 TEUs by 2030, depending on regional stability and improvements in port infrastructure.

Port of Berbera (Somaliland)

Current Throughput (2023):

- **Container throughput:** Approximately 300,000 TEUs annually.
- Berbera has been a key focus for the UAE, which has invested heavily in expanding and modernizing the port to serve as a key trade hub for the Horn of Africa.

Future Projections:

- With the ongoing expansion projects backed by UAE investments, Berbera could see throughput rise to 1 million TEUs by 2030, positioning it as a regional transshipment hub.

Port of Hodeidah (Yemen)

Current Throughput (2023):

- **Container throughput:** Approximately 350,000 TEUs annually.
- The port of Hodeidah has struggled due to the ongoing civil war in Yemen, but it still

handles significant volumes of cargo, including humanitarian aid, food, and fuel.

Future Projections:

- If Yemen's political situation stabilizes, Hodeidah could see throughput return to pre-war levels of 600,000–700,000 TEUs by 2030, with possible future growth to 1 million TEUs if infrastructure is modernized.

Port of Aqaba (Jordan)

Current Throughput (2023):

- **Container throughput:** Around 1 million TEUs annually.
- Aqaba is a major port for Jordan and also serves southern Israel and Palestine. Aqaba's strategic position at the northern tip of the Red Sea makes it important for regional trade.

Future Projections:

- With investments in port automation and shipping logistics, Aqaba could increase throughput by 30-40% over the next decade, potentially reaching 1.5 million TEUs by 2030.

Current and Future Regional Capacity in the Red Sea

Based on current data, the throughput at major Red Sea ports stands at around 9–12 million TEUs per year. However, many of the littoral states, particularly those in the Horn of Africa, are ramping up investments to expand port capacities significantly. The Gulf States, notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as China, are expected to continue driving growth in regional trade infrastructure.

Future Projections for Total Throughput (2030)

- With major expansion projects and investments, it is projected that the Red Sea could handle upwards of 20 million TEUs annually by 2030, driven primarily by the Port of Jeddah, Port of Djibouti, Port of Berbera, and Port of Massawa.

Action Plan for China and the EU to Increase Throughput

China's Role:

Infrastructure Investment:

- Continue investments in port automation, container handling technology, and logistics systems. In particular, focus on Djibouti, Sudan, and Eritrea where port development is key to future throughput increases.
- China can help expand rail and road networks connecting ports to inland markets, facilitating smoother trade flows.

Port Management:

- Provide technical assistance for the modernization and digitalization of port operations to improve throughput efficiency.

Expansion of Maritime Connectivity:

- Strengthen shipping routes between China and Red Sea ports, boosting global trade connections and increasing container traffic.

EU's Role:

Sustainable Port Development:

- Promote **green port technologies**, focusing on energy efficiency and waste management systems. **EU-led environmental standards** for port infrastructure will position **Red Sea ports** as global leaders in **eco-friendly logistics**.

Trade Facilitation:

- Work with **regional governments** to **harmonize trade regulations** and implement **cross-border trade agreements** for smoother customs operations and faster goods clearance.

Capacity Building:

- Provide expertise in **port management** and **logistics operations** for **Horn of Africa** countries and the **Red Sea** littoral states to improve port throughput and reduce delays.

The Red Sea is set to become an even more vital hub for global trade in the coming years, driven by growing investment in port infrastructure, strategic location, and improved regional cooperation. China and the EU both have pivotal roles to play in enhancing port throughput, with China focusing on infrastructure and logistics, while the EU brings its expertise in sustainability, digital technologies, and regional governance. Together, these powers can help unlock the region's full potential, ensuring increased trade and economic prosperity for the entire Red Sea basin.

10.Key Regional Actors and Their Interests in the Red Sea

Introduction and Strategic Framing

In this piece, we have placed emphasis on *bottom-up*, *win-win*, and *soft power* strategies, with a particular focus on addressing the deepening interlinkages between regions and regional schemes. The goal is to introduce a measure of *strategic order* into the Red Sea region—an increasingly complex and congested space shaped by a mosaic of local rivalries, transregional interests, and shifting alliances.

This strategic approach accumulates meaningfully in the context of *subregional rivalries*. By foregrounding cooperative, bottom-up mechanisms and soft-power influence, we aim to de-escalate regional contests that have long been driven by securitized, top-down interventions. However, rather than eliminating rivalry, these frameworks can serve to channel competition into more constructive arenas—such as economic infrastructure, connectivity, and maritime security cooperation.

Iran and the Bab el-Mandeb Threat

Iran's grand strategy is a tapestry woven from millennia of imperial ambition, civilizational pride, and geopolitical calculation. It is not merely reactive—it is historical, ideological, and deeply

strategic. From the Achaemenids to the Sassanids, and now to the Islamic Republic, Iran has consistently sought to project influence across its periphery, secure its borders through depth rather than distance, and shape the regional order in its image.

The Red Sea, though not geographically adjacent to Iran, has long held symbolic and strategic weight in this vision. During the Sassanid Empire (224–651 CE), Persian fleets and merchants reached the Red Sea via the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, engaging in trade with Axum, Byzantium, and India. The Sassanids understood the Red Sea as a maritime hinge—connecting the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean—and sought to control its arteries to counter Roman influence and secure their own commercial lifelines.

Fast forward to today, and the Islamic Republic of Iran has revived this strategic imagination. The Red Sea is now framed as part of Iran’s “strategic depth,” a concept that extends its influence through ideological allies, asymmetric warfare, and maritime disruption. Iran’s support for the Houthis in Yemen, its naval deployments near Bab el-Mandeb, and its calls for a permanent base in Sudan all echo the Sassanid impulse: to dominate the chokepoints, shape the trade routes, and challenge rival empires.

Iran’s grand strategy hinges on three pillars: deterrence through asymmetry, ideological expansion through resistance networks, and strategic autonomy through regional alliances. The Red Sea fits all three. It offers a platform for proxy engagement, a corridor for influence stretching from the Gulf to the Horn of Africa, and a pressure point against Western and Israeli interests.

In essence, the Red Sea is not peripheral to Iran—it is a mirror of its imperial memory and a lever of its modern ambition. From the Sassanid fleets to Houthi drones, the waters may have changed, but the strategy remains: to turn geography into power, and history into leverage.

Iran’s reasoning on Red Sea security architecture is rooted in a blend of strategic ambition, ideological alignment, and asymmetric deterrence. Tehran views the Red Sea not merely as a maritime corridor but as a geopolitical fulcrum—one that connects its regional influence from the Gulf to the Mediterranean. Its posture is shaped by a desire to counter Western naval dominance, support allied non-state actors, and secure leverage over global trade routes.

Iran sees the Red Sea as part of its strategic depth, a concept articulated by senior military advisor General Yahya Rahim Safavi, who emphasized expanding Iran’s reach by 5,000 kilometers. This depth includes the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb, which Iran treats as a second Strait of Hormuz—a chokepoint through which it can exert pressure on adversaries and global commerce alike. Iran’s naval deployments, intelligence support to the Houthis, and calls for a permanent base in Sudan all reflect its intent to institutionalize its presence. Tehran argues that forces from outside the region—namely the U.S. and its allies—have no legitimate role in Red Sea security, framing its own involvement as regional stewardship.

The Houthis, formally known as Ansar Allah, emerged from Zaydi Shiite revivalism in northern Yemen. Initially a local political movement, they militarized in the 2000s and overthrew Yemen’s

government in 2014. Their ideology—anti-Western, anti-Israel, and anti-Saudi—resonates with Iran’s revolutionary narrative. Iran’s support began as early as 2009 and escalated after Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Yemen. Tehran provided weapons, training, and advanced drones, enabling the Houthis to strike targets far beyond Yemen, including Israeli-linked vessels and U.S. warships in the Red Sea. While some analysts label the Houthis as proxies, others argue they are autonomous actors aligned with Iran’s goals.

Ending the conflict requires more than military containment. A genuine resolution would involve political recognition and inclusion, as the Houthis control a third of Yemen’s territory and two-thirds of its population. Any peace must acknowledge their governance role. Regional guarantees are essential, with Iran and Saudi Arabia committing to non-interference and supporting a neutral security framework. Yemen’s fractured economy must be rebuilt, with Red Sea ports reopened under international oversight. Iran must be offered strategic alternatives to maritime disruption—such as regional trade partnerships or diplomatic normalization.

Iran treats Bab el-Mandeb as a strategic lever, its second Strait of Hormuz. The UCUG wager—Unconventional Coalition Under Guerrilla—is Tehran’s asymmetric strategy: empowering non-state actors like the Houthis to disrupt global shipping while avoiding direct confrontation. This approach allows Iran to project power, retaliate against adversaries, and shape maritime narratives—all without deploying conventional forces.

In essence, Iran’s Red Sea strategy is a chess game played with proxies, ideology, and strategic ambiguity. Resolving the conflict genuinely means rewriting the rules of that game—toward diplomacy, inclusion, and shared security.

What African States Are Asking For

African littoral and hinterland states are no longer passive recipients of foreign infrastructure investment. Their current asks center around:

They increasingly demand greater national ownership or co-ownership of port assets and related infrastructure. Many are revising or challenging earlier concessionary agreements that granted foreign actors (e.g., the UAE, China) exclusive control over strategic assets.

Rather than stand-alone ports, African states seek integrated development, including road, rail, and energy infrastructure that connects ports to inland economic zones and neighboring countries. Ethiopia, a landlocked regional power, is particularly focused on ensuring reliable and diversified access to Red Sea ports.



There is a growing insistence on job creation, technology transfer, and industrial spillovers. Governments want port zones to catalyze wider economic activity—free trade zones, logistics hubs, manufacturing enclaves—not just act as extraction corridors.

Many states seek to balance Gulf, Chinese, Turkish, and Western interests—avoiding overdependence on any single actor. This reflects lessons learned from debt distress, security dilemmas, and politicized port deals in the past decade.

African states pursue different strategies depending on geography, domestic politics, and economic leverage:

Djibouti has mastered port diplomacy, hosting multiple foreign military bases (US, China, France, Japan) while positioning its ports as regional transit hubs for Ethiopia. It uses its geopolitical location to extract rents and investments while retaining substantial state control over the infrastructure.

Sudan has oscillated between seeking Gulf and Russian support for port development, notably around Port Sudan and Suakin. Its political instability has hampered progress, but also allowed competing powers to bid for influence.

Eritrea, after years of isolation, has selectively opened its Assab and Massawa ports to UAE military and logistical use during the Yemen war but remains cautious, prioritizing sovereignty and minimal foreign entanglement.

Ethiopia, as a landlocked economic powerhouse, is assertively pursuing access to multiple ports—in Djibouti, Berbera (Somaliland), and more recently hinted deals with Eritrea and Somalia. Its approach is transactional, offering equity or security cooperation in return for long-term access.

Somalia and Somaliland represent a complex case: while Somalia seeks unified control over maritime infrastructure, Somaliland has independently partnered with the UAE (DP World) for the Berbera Port, sparking tensions over legitimacy and sovereignty.

KSA's Red Sea Strategy

In the early Islamic period, the Red Sea became a focal point for state-building efforts by the Caliphs. As explored in Timothy Power's *the Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate: AD 500–1000*, the region witnessed the establishment of key Islamic ports such as 'Aydhab and Bâdi '. These ports were instrumental in facilitating the hajj pilgrimage and trade with regions like Yemen, India, and the Far East, thereby consolidating Islamic influence and governance in the area.

In a significant development, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have formalized a mutual defense agreement, pledging that any attack on one nation will be considered an attack on both. This pact encompasses various aspects, including military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and joint training exercises. While the agreement does not explicitly mention nuclear capabilities, Pakistan's nuclear deterrent is implicitly extended to Saudi Arabia, enhancing the latter's security posture in the region.

This strategic alignment is particularly noteworthy given the evolving security dynamics in the Middle East, including concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional instability. The pact signifies a deepening of bilateral ties and a shared commitment to regional security.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 outlines ambitious plans for the development of the Red Sea region, aiming to transform it into a hub for tourism, trade, and sustainable development. Initiatives like the National Red Sea Sustainability Strategy and the establishment of Red Sea Global underscore the kingdom's commitment to harnessing the region's potential. These projects are designed to bolster Saudi Arabia's leadership in the Red Sea, positioning it as a central player in regional affairs.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's collaboration with Egypt to form a joint naval force to address Red Sea threats highlights a proactive approach to regional security. This partnership aims to enhance maritime security, facilitate joint operations, and assert regional leadership without external dependencies.

By patiently investing on Sinai and planning to build a Red Sea bridge, and by implication, bringing Egypt onto its side, a spoiler role in Yemen by Cairo has not only been averted, but the foundation laid for a reflection on how to restore the inter-arab state system.

The prospects for Saudi leadership in the Red Sea appear promising, given the strategic initiatives underway. The kingdom's investments in infrastructure, tourism, and regional security are poised to enhance its influence in the area. By leveraging its economic resources, military alliances, and strategic partnerships, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a central authority in the Red Sea, capable of shaping regional dynamics and fostering cooperation among littoral states.

The evolving South Asia–Gulf dynamic is now sharply underscored by the landmark Strategic

Mutual Defense Agreement signed between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in September 2025. This pact marks a historic shift in regional security architecture and adds a new layer of complexity to maritime and land-based strategic priorities.

The agreement stipulates that any aggression against either country will be considered an aggression against both, effectively binding their defense postures into a unified deterrence framework. It formalizes decades of informal cooperation and elevates Pakistan's role from a regional actor to a security guarantor for the Gulf, particularly in light of recent Israeli strikes on Qatar and rising tensions with India.

Saudi Arabia, long reliant on Western security umbrellas, now gains access to Pakistan's military capabilities—including its nuclear deterrent, as confirmed by Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Asif. While both sides emphasize the pact's defensive nature, the inclusion of "all military means" signals a strategic recalibration that could reshape deterrence equations across West Asia.

This development dovetails with the broader trend of land-based challenges dominating naval command assessments over the past 25 years. Despite the Red Sea's critical role in global trade and energy flows, sustained maritime engagement has been sporadic. The EU's Operation Atalanta, for instance, has struggled to maintain consistent presence, often overshadowed by inland security crises and reactive deployments.

The implications for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) are profound. As Pakistan and Saudi Arabia consolidate their defense alliance, the EU risks strategic marginalization in a region where its values—peace, rule of law, and multilateralism—are increasingly challenged by bilateral military pacts and shifting allegiances. Without a robust maritime strategy and deeper engagement in Red Sea security frameworks, CFSP objectives may falter in the face of rising regional assertiveness. MBS is known for wanting out of Yemen, and the European Parliament has called strengthening of maritime governance in the Red Sea and a comprehensive approach to the conflict in Yemen.¹

In essence, the Pakistan–Saudi pact is not just a bilateral milestone—it is a signal flare in a rapidly transforming geopolitical landscape. It calls for renewed attention to maritime continuity, integrated deterrence, and the recalibration of EU engagement strategies in the Red Sea and beyond. In essence, the KSA asserts strategic autonomy, balances Iran and Israel, even as it keeps its options open for further engagement. The Red Sea is a key area of interest for the Saudis for reasons of the large development projects along the coast. Together with Egypt and Sudan, KSA holds the largest coral reefs in the region, and the war in Yemen impinges on its sense of security due to the conflict and cooperation with Iran with whom it shares regional great power aspirations. Regional tourist revenues in the Red Sea amounts to € 60 billion, and KSA has a stake therein via its coastal development ambitions, its concerns for Egypt in defence of Saudi investors in Sinai and role conception as an Islamic top dog. There is considerable trade development potential on the Arabian peninsula and intra-regional trade in the Red Sea has kept on growing

¹ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA\(2024\)757606](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2024)757606)

through the last decade since the war in Yemen started. The institutional development needs of PERGSA implies some of its sultanistic leadership style in the region will have to be nuanced somewhat in defence of those interests and to partner-up with the EU, and by implication the international community using the Red Sea as a trade corridor hence preventing an insecurity spiral setting in.

Saudi Arabia's Red Sea ports—Jeddah Islamic Port, Yanbu Commercial Port, and Jazan Port—are not merely logistical nodes on maritime maps; they are geopolitical instruments, economic enablers, and territorial metonyms of the Kingdom's westward-facing ambitions. Together, they anchor Riyadh's efforts to transform the Red Sea into a corridor of strategic depth, tying Vision 2030's domestic diversification goals to the broader imperatives of regional influence and global trade integration.

Egypt's Strategic Objectives and Interests in the Red Sea: Longstanding and Contemporary Dimensions

Egypt's relationship with the Red Sea has been defined by the interplay of geography, security imperatives, and economic strategy. Its objectives in the region may be broadly divided into longstanding concerns rooted in territorial and geopolitical constants, and more recent priorities shaped by shifting global and regional dynamics.

Longstanding Objectives

The Red Sea has historically functioned as an extension of Egypt's strategic depth. Central to this is the Suez Canal, opened in 1869, which connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean and established Egypt as a pivotal node in global trade and naval movement. The protection of this artery has consistently shaped Egypt's foreign and security policy. Safeguarding sovereignty over the Red Sea coastlines and the Sinai Peninsula, while preventing external control over maritime chokepoints such as Bab el-Mandeb, has remained an enduring imperative.

From the nineteenth century through the Cold War, Egypt's strategic posture was defined by its effort to resist encirclement by external powers. Successive Egyptian regimes sought to maintain a measure of autonomy in a space subject to British, Soviet, and later American naval interests. Egypt has also framed the Red Sea in symbolic terms: as a corridor linking North Africa to the Hejaz and the pilgrimage routes to Mecca and Medina, it has carried civilizational and religious significance beyond mere military calculation.

Contemporary Objectives

In the contemporary era, particularly under the leadership of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's Red Sea strategy has broadened beyond traditional security to encompass developmental, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. Economically, Cairo has pursued a policy of maximizing the revenue-generating potential of the Suez Canal and its hinterland through the Suez Canal Economic Zone, expanded port infrastructure, and new logistics hubs, particularly around Ain

Sokhna. The Red Sea coast has also been integrated into energy strategies, including liquefied natural gas terminals and projects linked to renewable energy.

On the security front, Egypt has expanded its naval capabilities, establishing bases such as Berenice on the Red Sea, acquiring advanced submarines and frigates, and projecting itself as a guarantor of maritime security. This expansion is partly driven by concern over the conflict in Yemen and Iranian influence via the Houthis, which threatens the Bab el-Mandeb strait and, by extension, the security of the Canal. Egypt's active role in the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden reflects a determination to institutionalize its primacy in regional security governance.

At the same time, Cairo has pursued a careful balance with Gulf partners such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, supporting cooperative security initiatives while remaining vigilant against over-dependence or marginalization. Parallel to this, Egypt has opposed Turkish and Qatari military-economic forays into the Red Sea basin via Sudan and the Horn of Africa, seeing them as potential encroachments on its traditional sphere of influence.

Tourism constitutes another pillar of Egyptian interests. The Red Sea coast—home to major resorts such as Sharm el-Sheikh, Hurghada, and Marsa Alam—represents a vital sector for foreign exchange earnings. Consequently, environmental preservation of coral reefs and coastal ecosystems has acquired strategic weight.

Finally, Egypt leverages its geography to sustain great power attention. The Red Sea, as the approach to the Suez Canal, provides Cairo with bargaining power vis-à-vis the United States, the European Union, and, increasingly, China. By presenting itself as indispensable to the maintenance of global shipping lanes and maritime order, Egypt strengthens its international partnerships while asserting a doctrine of regional primacy, under which any major initiative concerning the Red Sea should take Egypt's interests into account.

Summary

Egypt's objectives in the Red Sea thus combine enduring structural imperatives—the protection of Suez, the safeguarding of sovereignty, and the prevention of external domination—with more recent priorities in the realms of economic development, naval modernization, and regional security governance. The result is a layered strategy that intertwines historical imperatives with contemporary opportunities, positioning Egypt as both a guardian of global trade routes and a regional power determined to shape the evolving balance in the Red Sea basin.

Sudan's Strategic Objectives and Interests in the Red Sea: Longstanding and Contemporary Dimensions

Sudan's orientation toward the Red Sea has been defined by its geography as a littoral state with a long coastline, its vulnerability to internal and external pressures, and its role as both a corridor

and a frontier within the regional order. Unlike Egypt, whose Red Sea policy is anchored in the Suez Canal, Sudan's objectives have been shaped by the need to balance internal fragility, external penetration, and the search for economic opportunity.

Longstanding Objectives

Historically, Sudan has regarded the Red Sea as both a lifeline and a vulnerability. Its principal port, **Port Sudan**, developed during the colonial period under Anglo-Egyptian administration, has remained the country's critical maritime outlet. Ensuring access to global trade routes and securing this coastline has been a fundamental objective for successive Sudanese governments.

Geopolitically, Sudan has occupied a liminal position between North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East. This has translated into a longstanding concern with preventing excessive foreign influence over its Red Sea coastline, particularly from Egypt, Ethiopia, and external great powers. At the same time, Sudanese leaders sought to leverage this geography to gain strategic rents from Arab and global powers interested in Red Sea access.

During the Cold War, Port Sudan and the wider coastline were periodically courted by the Soviet Union, the United States, and regional actors, making the Red Sea a locus of competition. Sudanese authorities attempted to extract economic and military support from competing patrons while avoiding direct subordination. The coastline also held symbolic significance as a gateway for religious and cultural flows between Sudan and the Arabian Peninsula.

Contemporary Objectives

In recent decades, Sudan's Red Sea policy has been deeply affected by internal instability and external rivalries. The civil wars in southern, western, and eastern Sudan undermined the state's capacity to exercise consistent control over its Red Sea region. The Eastern Front insurgency, active in the early 2000s, highlighted the fragility of Sudan's sovereignty in the Red Sea corridor. Securing Port Sudan and maintaining uninterrupted maritime trade flows thus became paramount objectives, especially after the secession of South Sudan in 2011 deprived Khartoum of much of its oil wealth and increased the importance of Red Sea trade revenues.

Economically, Sudan's Red Sea coast has become central to efforts to diversify exports and attract investment. Port Sudan remains the country's critical import–export hub, while the coastline has been the object of external interest for agricultural projects, fishing rights, and port development. Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have invested in Red Sea coastal projects, granting Sudan short-term financial relief while raising long-term concerns about dependency.

Strategically, Sudan has sought to leverage its Red Sea position to attract security partnerships. It has oscillated between different patrons: cooperating with Iran in the 2000s before aligning more closely with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the 2010s, particularly during the Yemen conflict. Port Sudan has been floated as a potential site for foreign naval bases—Russian plans for a naval logistics hub being the most notable example—illustrating both Sudan's quest for rents and the dangers of overexposure to external rivalries.

Recent political transitions and internal conflict have intensified these dynamics. The 2019 revolution and subsequent power struggles have weakened Sudan's capacity to manage its Red Sea policy coherently. The outbreak of civil war in 2023 has heightened the risk of the Red Sea coast becoming a zone of foreign penetration and proxy competition. Neighboring states, particularly Egypt and Ethiopia, as well as Gulf powers, monitor Sudan's Red Sea orientation closely, aware that instability in Port Sudan could ripple across regional trade and security architectures.

Sudan's Red Sea posture is also conditioned by the **nexus of migration and security**: the Red Sea corridor is a major transit route for irregular migration toward the Arabian Peninsula, and thus a site of interest for European Union initiatives seeking to externalize border management. Environmental factors further complicate the picture: climate change and desertification have placed new pressures on coastal communities, while overfishing and unsustainable port expansion risk undermining the ecological viability of the Red Sea littoral. The construction of competing port facilities in Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somaliland has also diluted Sudan's maritime advantage, forcing Khartoum to reconsider its competitive positioning. Moreover, the Red Sea coast has become a barometer of Sudan's fragmented sovereignty, where tribal contestation, smuggling networks, and armed actors intersect with fragile state authority.

In summary, Sudan's objectives in the Red Sea combine longstanding imperatives of securing maritime access, protecting sovereignty, and extracting strategic rents from its geography with contemporary challenges of political fragility, external dependency, and regional competition. Unlike Egypt, which asserts primacy and naval capacity, Sudan's position is more defensive and transactional: it seeks to safeguard Port Sudan, monetize its coastal assets, and attract patronage, while struggling to insulate itself from the geopolitical rivalries that increasingly define the Red Sea basin. The durability of Sudan's Red Sea strategy ultimately depends on the resolution of its internal conflicts and the restoration of state capacity, without which its littoral position risks being transformed from a strategic asset into a liability.

Rebuilding the Arab State System and the Red Sea Strategic Architecture

That's an excellent question — the **inter-Arab system** (the web of political, security, and institutional relations linking Arab states) has a long and complex interaction with the Red Sea region. In academic terms, the Red Sea serves as both a *theatre* for intra-Arab rivalries and cooperation, and as a *corridor* through which Arab regional politics intersect with extra-regional dynamics.

11. The Inter-Arab System and the Red Sea Region

The Red Sea has historically constituted one of the principal contact zones of the inter-Arab system. Stretching between the Mashreq, the Nile Valley, and the Arabian Peninsula, it links Arab states in North Africa and the Gulf while bordering non-Arab polities in the Horn of Africa. Its strategic location has made it both a shared interest and a site of contestation within Arab regional politics.

Historical Foundations

During the mid-twentieth century, the Red Sea was subsumed into the larger ideological competition within the Arab world. Egypt, under Gamal Abdel Nasser, promoted the Red Sea as part of a pan-Arab strategic sphere, positioning itself as its northern guardian. By contrast, Saudi Arabia emphasized the security of the Hejaz and its maritime approaches, framing the Red Sea in religious and dynastic terms. These competing narratives reflected the broader rivalry between republican and monarchical Arab orders. The Arab League itself provided only a limited framework for collective management, as the Red Sea was generally treated as an extension of bilateral rivalries rather than a shared Arab commons.

Security Dimension

The inter-Arab system has often projected its fractures into the Red Sea basin. Egyptian–Saudi competition in the 1960s during the Yemen war effectively militarized the southern approaches to the Red Sea. Later, the Iran–Iraq War and the Gulf crisis of 1990–91 demonstrated how Gulf security reverberated into the Red Sea, pulling littoral Arab states such as Egypt, Sudan, and Djibouti into broader alignments. At the same time, Arab states have invoked the Red Sea as a collective security perimeter. The Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, established in 2020 and spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, represents the most explicit institutional attempt to consolidate Arab and African coordination around the Red Sea, albeit under strong Saudi primacy.

Economic Dimension

Within the inter-Arab system, the Red Sea functions as a conduit for trade, energy flows, and investment. The Suez Canal, managed by Egypt, is a cornerstone of Arab economic interdependence, serving both Gulf oil exports and intra-Arab commerce. Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have in recent years invested heavily in Red Sea port infrastructure, fisheries, and coastal development projects in Egypt, Sudan, and Djibouti. These initiatives have deepened economic interlinkages but have also generated asymmetries, as weaker Arab littoral states risk sliding into dependency on Gulf capital and patronage.

Political Dimension

Politically, the Red Sea magnifies intra-Arab divisions. During the Arab Spring, Sudan and Yemen became arenas where Gulf states and Egypt projected competing visions of order. The intervention in Yemen, led by Saudi Arabia and supported by the UAE and Egypt, effectively turned the Bab el-Mandeb strait into a frontline of Arab coalition politics. At the same time, Turkey and Qatar's inroads into the Red Sea via Sudan and Somalia provoked a counter-reaction within the Arab

system, intensifying the securitization of the basin. The Red Sea thus acts as a mirror of broader Arab alignments and cleavages, where Gulf rivalries and Egyptian ambitions overlap with external influences.

Contemporary Interactions

Currently, the inter-Arab system engages with the Red Sea through three principal logics:

1. **Security governance**, embodied in attempts to create Arab-led frameworks for maritime security and to exclude non-Arab regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia.
2. **Economic integration**, visible in the Gulf's large-scale projects such as NEOM on the Saudi Red Sea coast, or in port investments in Sudan and Egypt, which reframe the Red Sea as an axis of Arab modernization strategies.
3. **Geopolitical bargaining**, where control of Red Sea routes enhances Arab states' leverage vis-à-vis external powers, especially the United States, the EU, and China.

The Arab League, Institutional Frameworks, and the Red Sea

The Arab League, founded in 1945, has historically played an ambivalent role in managing the Red Sea region. While the League's charter emphasizes collective security, economic cooperation, and cultural solidarity, its mechanisms have proven limited in addressing the specific strategic challenges of the Red Sea basin. During the mid-20th century, the League's capacity to regulate the competing claims of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan over maritime security and influence was constrained by ideological divisions, rivalries between monarchies and republics, and varying degrees of state capacity along the littoral.

Egypt, as the most populous Arab state and a self-declared regional leader, consistently sought to frame the Red Sea as a pan-Arab strategic sphere under its primacy. Saudi Arabia, conversely, emphasized its religious guardianship of the Hejaz and its economic interests in the southern approaches. The Arab League was occasionally invoked as a platform to mediate disputes, but in practice, Red Sea governance remained largely bilateral or shaped by ad hoc coalitions, highlighting the institutional limits of the inter-Arab system.

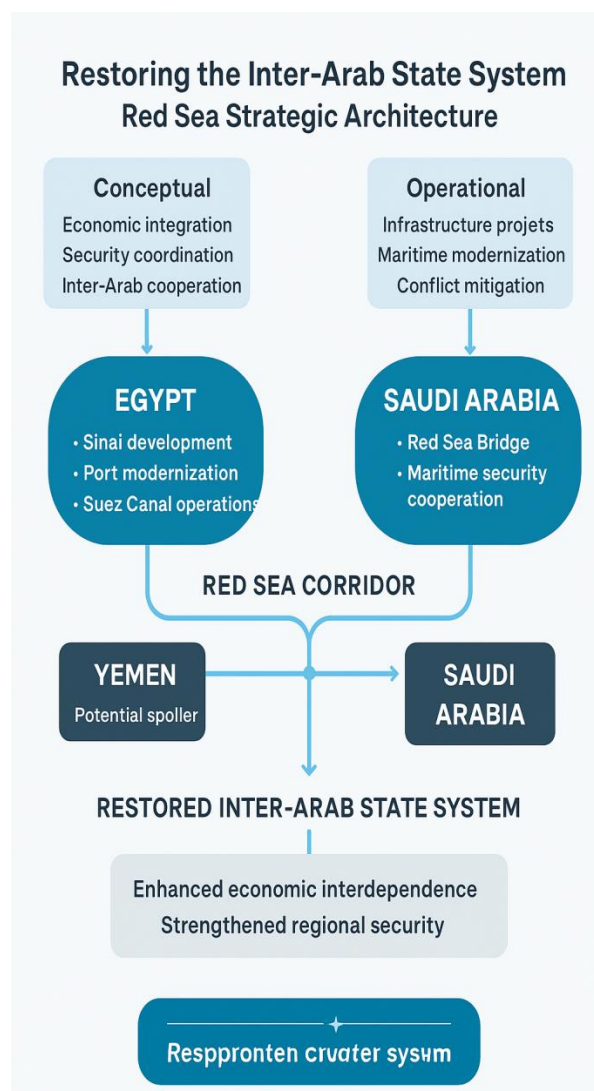
In recent decades, however, the League and associated Arab institutions have become more directly involved in Red Sea affairs, particularly in the context of transnational security threats such as piracy, smuggling, and regional conflicts. Initiatives like the **Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden** (2020) reflect attempts to formalize cooperation in maritime security, though these structures remain dominated by the Gulf states and Egypt, and their effectiveness is contingent on member compliance and resource contributions.

The Arab League also facilitates economic coordination in the Red Sea basin, though unevenly. The Suez Canal, ports in Sudan, and Red Sea free zones in Saudi Arabia and Egypt serve as arteries of intra-Arab trade and investment. Arab League frameworks occasionally support harmonization of customs regulations, shipping standards, and joint infrastructure projects, though these efforts are frequently subordinated to the strategic calculations of individual member states.

Politically, the Arab League's role in Red Sea affairs often intersects with crisis management and conflict mediation. Yemen and Sudan illustrate how the League's collective decision-making can be invoked to legitimize Arab interventions or coordinate diplomatic pressure, even when internal consensus is weak. Moreover, the League serves as a forum to articulate Arab positions vis-à-vis external actors—Turkey, Iran, China, and the United States—ensuring that the Red Sea remains a site where Arab unity is projected, even if only rhetorically.

Finally, the Red Sea illustrates both the potential and the limitations of the inter-Arab system. While institutional frameworks exist to facilitate collective action, in practice they are overshadowed by the asymmetric power, differing national priorities, and external alignments of member states. Consequently, the Red Sea continues to function as both a corridor for pan-Arab initiatives and a theater of intra-Arab competition, reflecting the persistent tension between the League's normative ideals and the pragmatic realities of geopolitics.

In sum, the inter-Arab system interacts with the Red Sea through overlapping layers of cooperation and contestation. The Arab League and associated institutional frameworks provide a platform for dialogue, coordination, and collective initiatives, particularly in economic and security domains. Yet, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is tempered by enduring rivalries, unequal capabilities, and external interventions. The Red Sea thus emerges as a prism through which to view the strengths and limitations of Arab institutionalism: a space where ambitions for collective governance coexist uneasily with national competition and dependency on non-Arab actors.



Maritime assets play a central role in this framework. Modernization of major ports in Alexandria, Port Said, and Ain Sokhna, alongside the Suez Canal, positions Egypt as a hub of intra-Arab and global trade. The Suez Canal generates significant customs revenue and serves as a strategic lever for both economic and diplomatic influence. Integrated with Sinai infrastructure and Red Sea initiatives, these developments allow Egypt to project influence, foster regional economic interdependence, and support collective security initiatives.

Egypt's strategic recalibration also reflects deeper alignment with Saudi Arabia, including shared security concerns and mutual investment in infrastructure. By linking Sinai and the Red Sea corridor with Saudi economic and military initiatives, Egypt and Riyadh have created a framework for regional stability. This alignment has enabled a managed approach to potential spoilers in Yemen, while enhancing the prospects for cooperative governance of critical maritime corridors.

The initiative builds upon Saudi leadership ambitions in the Red Sea, as delegated to operational authorities such as Balhah, and reflects a conscious effort to integrate littoral states into a cooperative security and economic architecture.

While Fahmy's report laid an important conceptual foundation for restoring the inter-Arab state system, it fell short in accounting for the structural and political challenges of operationalization. The recommendations were often abstract, underestimating the need for concrete mechanisms, such as port modernization, Red Sea connectivity, and bilateral military cooperation. The review and reactions to the report highlighted the gap between theoretical vision and actionable policy, prompting Egypt to adopt a pragmatic, phased approach that translates principles into tangible infrastructure and strategic partnerships.

Egypt's integrated initiatives carry significant implications for rebuilding the Arab state system. Economic integration through ports and the Suez Canal reduces dependence on external powers while reinforcing inter-Arab trade. Security coordination, both in Yemen and across the Red Sea corridor, strengthens collective stability. Infrastructure projects like the Red Sea Bridge enhance connectivity and foster cooperation between littoral states. These measures, while grounded in Fahmy's conceptual framework, reflect a practical evolution that addresses earlier gaps, establishing a more resilient and actionable path toward a restored Arab state system.

Egypt's combined focus on infrastructure, maritime modernization, Sinai development, and alignment with Saudi Arabia represents a pragmatic adaptation of Fahmy's vision. While the original report provided an important conceptual guide, it fell short of operational clarity. By translating these ideas into concrete projects, Cairo has strengthened its central role in Arab affairs, mitigated regional spoilers, and laid the foundations for a resilient, cooperative inter-Arab state system anchored in economic integration, security collaboration, and strategic connectivity across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

Ethiopia's Red Sea Strategy

Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access through port infrastructure and its Red Sea strategy has significantly influenced regional dynamics, particularly following the January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland. This agreement, granting Ethiopia access to the Port of Berbera, has had profound implications for Ethiopia, Somaliland, Somalia, and the broader Horn of Africa.

Ethiopia, a landlocked country since Eritrea's independence in 1993, has been striving to secure reliable and diversified port access to support its economic development. The MoU with Somaliland is a pivotal component of this strategy, aiming to establish a presence at the Port of Berbera, a key port on the Gulf of Aden. This move is part of Ethiopia's broader "two waters policy," which seeks to maximize the sustainable use of the Nile while securing access to the Red Sea through maritime channels. Historically, Ethiopia has relied on Djibouti's ports for its maritime trade. The MoU with Somaliland presents an opportunity to diversify its port access, potentially reducing dependency on Djibouti and enhancing its strategic positioning in the region.

Signed on January 1, 2024, the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland involves the lease of 19 kilometers of Somaliland's coastline to Ethiopia for a period of 50 years. In exchange, Ethiopia would become the first UN member state to recognize Somaliland's independence. The agreement includes provisions for Ethiopia to establish a naval base at Berbera, marking a significant shift in regional security dynamics.

The MoU has been met with mixed reactions. The Federal Government of Somalia has vehemently opposed the agreement, viewing it as a violation of its sovereignty, recalling its ambassador from Ethiopia, and closing consulates in Puntland and Somaliland. The deal has also faced internal criticism within Somaliland, exemplified by the resignation of Somaliland's Defense Minister, Abdiqani Mohamud Ateye, highlighting concerns over the presence of Ethiopian military personnel and the potential implications for Somaliland's sovereignty. Regionally, the agreement has strained Ethiopia's relations with Somalia, though efforts to restore bilateral ties culminated in the Ankara Declaration on December 12, 2024, mediated by Turkey, which aimed to reconcile the two nations.

The strategic and geopolitical implications of the MoU are substantial. Gaining access to Berbera enhances Ethiopia's strategic positioning in the Horn of Africa, providing an alternative maritime route and reducing reliance on Djibouti. The recognition by Ethiopia could bolster Somaliland's quest for international recognition, although its status remains contentious. The agreement has the potential to alter regional power dynamics, with countries like Somalia and Egypt expressing concerns over Ethiopia's growing influence in the Red Sea region. The establishment of an Ethiopian naval base at Berbera also raises questions about regional security and the balance of power in the Horn of Africa.

Ethiopia's MoU with Somaliland represents a significant development in the Horn of Africa's geopolitical landscape. While it offers Ethiopia enhanced access to maritime trade routes, it also introduces complexities related to regional sovereignty, security, and diplomatic relations. The long-term impact of this agreement will depend on the evolving dynamics between Ethiopia, Somaliland, Somalia, and other regional actors.



Source: Ports, military bases and treaties: Who's who in the Red Sea - The Africa Report.co m

The Red Sea region is not a vacuum; it is a confluence of strategic ambitions—particularly between the *Gulf*, the *Horn of Africa*, and *North-East Africa*. As such, these rivalries cannot be addressed in isolation. A cumulative, layered approach is essential, proceeding from local initiatives (e.g. coastal development, trade integration, people-to-people exchanges) to subregional alignments (such as multilateral forums or security arrangements), and finally toward broader region-to-region frameworks (such as the GCC-Horn of Africa or Arab-African dialogues).

A stable and integrated Red Sea region is in the interest of all major stakeholders, touching on security, trade, development, and migration management. Reducing maritime insecurity, curbing arms trafficking, and containing militant flows protects regional and global stability. Ensuring the uninterrupted passage of vessels through the Bab el-Mandeb, one of the world's most critical shipping arteries, safeguards international trade. Development prospects along coastal and hinterland areas remain largely untapped, and coordinated strategies could unlock considerable economic potential. Meanwhile, more humane and effective approaches to irregular migration and displacement would benefit both sending and receiving countries. Given the Red Sea's role as a transit hub and energy corridor, prolonged disorder could trigger ripple effects far beyond the region, reaching the eastern Mediterranean and even the Indo-Pacific, with consequences few currently anticipate.

A crucial, yet often underappreciated, aspect of regional dynamics is the implicit division of labor between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran maintains a dominant presence in the Persian Gulf and the northern Arabian Sea, relying on ideological networks, asymmetric capabilities, and a distinctive maritime posture. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, has increasingly focused on the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, leveraging investments and regional initiatives such as the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Whether by design or evolution, this has created an informal zoning, where each actor tests influence in different maritime basins. In the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence intersects with several key regional partners. Egypt shares interests in the security of the Suez Canal and Sinai, while the UAE is active in port infrastructure and logistics. Sudan and Eritrea offer geostrategic access to the western Red Sea coast, and Jordan, through Aqaba and broader diplomatic engagement, has gradually become an influential actor in shaping regional outcomes.

Yet, the region is far from tranquil. Yemen remains the most destabilizing arena, with persistent Houthi attacks on maritime routes and ongoing proxy tensions between Gulf states and Iran. Sudan's civil war has fractured Khartoum and coastal areas, drawing in foreign actors and amplifying regional fragmentation. Conflicts in northern Ethiopia, particularly in Tigray, and tensions with Eritrea have spillover potential that could further destabilize Red Sea security. Somalia's enduring challenges, especially the persistent threat from Al-Shabaab, complicate efforts to build resilience and cooperation across the region. The juxtaposition of opportunity and fragility means that the Red Sea is at once a corridor of immense promise and a theater of unpredictable risk, where the unexpected is always just over the horizon.

These conflicts do not exist in silos; they intersect with transregional power plays and economic

corridors. For instance, Turkey, Israel, Russia, and China are all increasing their presence—each in competition or cooperation with Red Sea stakeholders.

Summary: Proceeding in an Accumulative Manner

An accumulative approach means *layering confidence-building measures, economic interdependence, and inclusive dialogue platforms*, even amid rivalry. It also means *acknowledging the strategic compartmentalization* of roles (e.g., Saudi Arabia in the Red Sea, Iran in the Gulf) as a potential stabilizing mechanism—so long as it avoids direct confrontation.

Ultimately, by emphasizing shared interests and bottom-up engagement, regional actors can transform zero-sum contests into pathways for joint security and development, thereby injecting predictability into one of the world’s most volatile maritime regions.

Table State Actors in the Middle East

Country	Strategic Interests in the Red Sea
Saudi Arabia (KSA)	Maritime trade security; geopolitical influence; anti-Iran axis; SRSA sponsor; military/naval power projection
Egypt	Suez Canal and Nile water security; counter- terrorism; buffer against Ethiopian ambitions
Israel	Access to maritime routes; normalize ties in Red Sea (e.g., with Sudan); counter Iranian influence
Sudan	Political instability; strategic port development; Nile dispute; transitioning regime
Ethiopia	Landlocked state seeking port access; GERD leverage; strategic aspirations to Red Sea access
Yemen	Civil war impacts; control over Bab el- Mandeb; Iranian vs. GCC proxy conflict arena
Jordan	Maritime trade through Aqaba; minor but supportive regional role

The Red Sea region is emerging as one of the most strategically vital yet volatile zones in the global security landscape. Stretching from the Suez Canal to the Gulf of Aden, it encompasses overlapping spheres of influence from Africa, the Middle East, and global powers. The region's natural chokepoints, resource corridors, and geopolitical positioning have attracted escalating foreign interest—further complicating a landscape already fragmented by internal conflicts, institutional weakness, and historical rivalries.

At the core of regional instability lies a web of *interconnected and unresolved conflicts*, which not

only threaten domestic governance and human security but also undermine transregional trade, investment, and maritime safety. These conflicts are weighed down by several aggravating factors:

Key Factors Weighing on Regional Conflicts

- **Externalization of conflict:** Proxy dynamics, particularly involving the Gulf states, Iran, Turkey, and global actors (China, U.S., Russia), have magnified local conflicts.
- **Weak governance and institutional fragmentation:** Many Red Sea states lack cohesive governance structures capable of managing pluralism or post-conflict transitions.
- **Militarization of diplomacy:** The tendency to respond to crises through arms build-ups and base proliferation rather than negotiation.
- **Competing regional visions:** With overlapping regional organizations (e.g., IGAD, the AU, Arab League, Red Sea Council), coordination is weak, and agendas often conflict.
- **Socioeconomic fragility:** Food insecurity, climate stress, and migration pressures deepen local grievances and fuel political instability.

TableMain Conflicts in the Red Sea Region

Conflict	Description
Sudan Civil War (2023–)	Power struggle between SAF and RSF causing humanitarian disaster; destabilizing cross-border regions (Chad, Ethiopia, Egypt)
Ethiopia–Tigray & Border Disputes	Though Tigray war ended formally, tensions remain; border conflicts with Sudan, Eritrea remain active
Yemen Civil War	Protracted war between Houthis and internationally recognized government; regionalized with Saudi, UAE, Iran involvement
Ethiopia–Egypt–Sudan GERD Dispute	Dispute over Nile water rights and dam impact; threatens broader regional cooperation
Somali Maritime and Piracy Issues	Ongoing piracy, illegal fishing, and instability near Bab el-Mandeb
Eritrea Isolation	Though diplomatically thawed post-Ethiopia peace accord, Eritrea remains reclusive and militarized
Red Sea Militarization	Presence of foreign naval bases (e.g., UAE in Assab, China in Djibouti) risks escalation and security dilemmas

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- **Socioeconomic fragility:** Food insecurity, climate stress, and migration pressures deepen local grievances and fuel political instability.

Given these dynamics, a region-owned framework of cooperation is not just desirable—it is imperative.

Table: Region-Owned Approaches to Red Sea Conflicts

Conflict	Description	Region-Owned Approach
Sudan Civil War (2023–)	Power struggle between Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), destabilizing borders with Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia	Establish a Red Sea Stability Initiative led by coastal states (Egypt, KSA, Eritrea) and IGAD; focus on cross-border ceasefire monitoring and humanitarian corridors. Leverage Sudan's Red Sea coast for reconstruction and civilian-led governance platforms.
Ethiopia–Tigray & Border Tensions	Though the Tigray war has formally ended, ethnic tensions and border disputes with Sudan and Eritrea persist	Support a Horn of Africa Conflict Resolution Council under the Red Sea Council, with local mediation mechanisms and dispute arbitration. Integrate economic incentives (e.g., trade corridors) into peace efforts.
Yemen Civil War	Regionalized civil war involving Houthis (supported by Iran), internationally recognized government, and Gulf states	Launch a Red Sea Peacebuilding Track separate from UN-led talks, focused on maritime security, coastal reconstruction, and Yemen port revitalization. Support inclusive local governance in coastal areas (e.g., Taiz, Mocha).

GERD Dispute (Ethiopia– Egypt– Sudan)	Water rights dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam; high potential for escalation	Create a Red Sea Water Security Dialogue Forum to expand the scope from Nile politics to regional hydro-security. Use neutral mediation and propose mutual-use energy-water trade-offs.
Somali Piracy and Maritime Instability	Piracy resurgence, illegal fishing, and instability near Bab el-Mandeb	Develop a Red Sea Coastal Security Force, with regional coast guards, shared intelligence systems, and community-based maritime surveillance in Somalia and Djibouti. Leverage Gulf investment in Somali infrastructure as a stabilizing tool.
Eritrea Isolation	Despite peace with Ethiopia, Eritrea remains reclusive, militarized, and disengaged from regional cooperation	
Red Sea Militarization	Growing foreign naval presence (e.g., UAE, China, Turkey, France, U.S.) creating a dense and competitive security landscape	Propose a Red Sea Maritime Security Code of Conduct, with transparency protocols, arms restraint commitments, and dispute de-escalation mechanisms. Modeled on existing Black Sea and ASEAN frameworks.

Strategic Recommendations: Moving from Competition to Cooperative Security

- **Institutionalize a Red Sea Forum for Regional Dialogue**
Bring together Gulf, Horn, and Nile Basin actors to discuss security, trade, environment, and migration in an integrated framework.
- **Prioritize Development-Led Stabilization**
Use economic interdependence—ports, infrastructure, energy sharing—as a tool to build political convergence and reduce incentives for conflict.
- **Create Overlapping but Coordinated Governance Mechanisms**
Align efforts of IGAD, the AU, GCC, Arab League, and the Red Sea Council to avoid duplication and ensure coherent regional strategies.

- **Shift from Top-Down Intervention to Bottom-Up Resilience**
Empower local actors—cities, civil society, border communities—as frontline peacebuilders and development agents, particularly in conflict zones.
- **Embed Conflict Management in Maritime and Trade Agreements**
Use regional trade deals, port logistics agreements, and connectivity corridors as platforms to include dispute resolution and security clauses.

Summary Why It's in Everyone's Interest

The Red Sea region stands at a crossroads. Its fragmentation into rival spheres of influence and persistent insecurity threaten global trade, regional development, and maritime safety. Only a *regionally-owned, cooperative security framework* can break the cycle of conflict. Such an approach doesn't eliminate rivalry—but it converts it into *regulated competition* grounded in mutual interests and interdependence.

The choice is clear: strategic disorder, or structured cooperation. The tools exist. The window is narrow. The moment to act is now.

Strengthening governance under the auspices of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Strategic Regional Security Architecture (SRSA) initiative is paramount to navigating the multifaceted challenges of this critical maritime and geopolitical space. Compared to more established subregional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the African Union (AU), the SRSA faces unique structural and operational hurdles. Overcoming these requires a multifaceted strategy focused on institutional capacity-building, conflict mediation, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and strategic coordination.

To enhance SRSA's governance capacity, it is essential to develop robust institutional frameworks that integrate maritime security, economic cooperation, and environmental stewardship. This includes establishing a permanent secretariat with dedicated resources, promoting information-sharing mechanisms among member states, and fostering interoperability of security forces to address transnational threats like piracy, illicit trafficking, and terrorism.

Drawing lessons from IGAD's conflict resolution mechanisms and the GCC's economic integration efforts, the SRSA could evolve into a hybrid institution blending security cooperation with economic development and political dialogue. Furthermore, SRSA must cultivate partnerships with external actors, including the United Nations and regional powers, ensuring alignment with broader international norms and access to technical assistance.

The Red Sea region remains beset by entrenched and overlapping conflicts, such as the Sudanese civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), persistent tensions between Ethiopia and its neighbors over border and resource disputes, and the protracted civil war in Yemen involving the Houthis and the internationally recognized government. These conflicts contribute to humanitarian crises and destabilize critical maritime corridors, imperiling regional security and economic prospects. The GERD dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan further complicates inter-state relations by challenging water security in an already

fragile environment.

Within this contested landscape, a constellation of key actors pursues divergent yet sometimes convergent interests. Saudi Arabia, as a major regional power and economic heavyweight, seeks to secure maritime trade routes, counter Iranian influence, and project power through military and economic initiatives. Egypt prioritizes Nile water security and stability in the Red Sea while balancing its strategic rivalry with Ethiopia. Israel's renewed diplomatic outreach toward Gulf and African states signals a growing interest in regional maritime security cooperation and countering mutual threats. Sudan and Ethiopia are caught amid internal conflicts and regional disputes that hinder their capacity to engage constructively. Yemen remains a fragile state, whose stabilization is critical for securing the southern Red Sea. Jordan's strategic location and political stability offer a diplomatic bridge in broader Arab-African cooperation frameworks.

Amidst these dynamics, the potential for regional cooperation schemes to foster peace, stability, and prosperity is significant but requires overcoming deep-rooted mistrust and power asymmetries. The SRSA can serve as a catalytic platform for dialogue and joint action, leveraging shared interests in maritime security, trade facilitation, and environmental conservation. Coordinated efforts to develop blue economy initiatives—such as sustainable fisheries, port management, and renewable energy—can generate inclusive economic growth that benefits littoral states. Moreover, conflict-sensitive approaches that integrate local communities, diaspora networks, and civil society actors enhance legitimacy and resilience. By institutionalizing mechanisms for dispute resolution and confidence-building, the SRSA can gradually transform the Red Sea from a zone of competition and conflict into a corridor of connectivity and cooperation.

Ultimately, strengthening governance through the SRSA requires visionary leadership from core regional actors—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other key states—to commit to an inclusive, pragmatic, and incremental strategy. Aligning the initiative's objectives with the broader goals of African and Arab regional organizations enhances coherence and resource mobilization. If successful, the SRSA could emerge as a pioneering model of subregional integration that balances sovereignty concerns with shared security and development imperatives, contributing decisively to the Red Sea's stability and prosperity.

The vision for enlarging the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Strategic Regional Security Architecture (SRSA) centers on transforming it from a limited subregional security framework into a comprehensive all-region organization that includes all littoral states of the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and adjacent inland countries. This expansion aims to promote inclusive regional ownership by ensuring participation from the Horn of Africa, Arabian Peninsula, and the broader Red Sea basin. By doing so, the organization would gain greater legitimacy and effectiveness in addressing the interconnected challenges of security, economic integration, and environmental sustainability. The Red Sea's strategic importance as a global maritime nexus necessitates coordinated management, which an all-encompassing regional body could best provide.

The enlargement process should begin with consolidating engagement among the current core SRSA members, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, and Eritrea. This

consolidation phase would focus on strengthening institutional capacity and trust among existing members. Subsequently, the initiative would expand to include adjacent states with regional security interests, such as Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda from the Horn of Africa, alongside Arabian Peninsula partners like Jordan, Oman, and the UAE. The final phase would see full regional integration, inviting Gulf Cooperation Council members not yet fully engaged, Nile Basin countries, and other strategic maritime actors such as Israel and possibly Turkey, thereby maximizing regional connectivity and cooperation.

Institutional and legal frameworks must be adapted to reflect this broadened mandate and expanded membership. This involves revising founding charters to accommodate new members and establishing inclusive decision-making bodies that balance regional representation with functional efficiency. The organization could create subcommittees or thematic working groups focused on areas such as maritime security, economic corridors, environmental protection, and conflict resolution, facilitating specialized attention within the broader structure.

A crucial aspect of this enlargement is defining the relationship and synergies with the East African Regional Group on Security and Assistance (ERGSA). While ERGSA focuses specifically on East African maritime security and assistance, SRSA would serve as the overarching regional entity with a broader remit that encompasses but does not duplicate ERGSA's mandate. Formal coordination mechanisms such as joint working groups, shared intelligence platforms, and coordinated response frameworks should be institutionalized to optimize resource use and avoid overlap. ERGSA could effectively serve as the operational arm for East African maritime security within the SRSA framework, preserving its regional expertise while benefiting from a larger organizational umbrella.

Engaging multilateral partnerships and garnering external support is vital for the enlargement's success. The SRSA should seek formal observer status and partnerships with continental bodies like the African Union and the Arab League, as well as international organizations such as the United Nations and the International Maritime Organization. Aligning the enlargement process with international frameworks such as the Blue Economy Initiative and the Sustainable Development Goals can attract funding and technical assistance. Moreover, engaging external powers like the European Union, United States, and China as partners—rather than competitors—will help channel support through the regional organization and maintain local ownership of regional priorities.

Building capacity and mobilizing resources are fundamental components of the enlargement strategy. This entails developing training programs, conducting joint security exercises, and pursuing infrastructure projects that build collective security and economic capabilities.

Financial resources could be pooled through member contributions, supplemented by international grants and development loans. Transparency and accountability mechanisms are essential to build trust among members and donors alike, ensuring the organization's sustainability and effectiveness.

Given the complex and often contentious history among regional states, conflict sensitivity and inclusivity must be embedded within the organization's processes. Establishing peaceful dispute

resolution mechanisms will be critical to managing historical grievances and preventing escalations. Additionally, including civil society, diaspora communities, and private sector actors in consultative processes will broaden the organization's social base, fostering legitimacy and resilience. Addressing socio-economic disparities among members will help prevent marginalization and encourage equitable development across the region.

If successfully implemented, this enlargement will result in enhanced regional coherence and reduced fragmentation across the Red Sea basin. Maritime security coordination would improve, mitigating risks from piracy, illicit trafficking, and militarization. Economic corridors would become better integrated, promoting trade, infrastructure development, and sustainable management of shared resources. The initiative would also strengthen political dialogue and contribute to conflict prevention and resolution, establishing a credible, locally owned regional organization capable of navigating great power competition while advancing the region's collective interests.

Table- Common Interests Between Red Sea Littoral States and Major Powers

Thematic Area	Red Sea Littoral States' Interests	US of A	China	India	EU	Zones of Intersection
Maritime Security	Counter-piracy, secure shipping lanes (Bab el-Mandeb), stop arms trafficking, illicit trade	Ensuring freedom of navigation; anti-terrorism	Protecting trade routes & Belt and Road assets.	Safe sea lanes to connect Africa and India	High convergence: All powers support maritime security, anti-piracy, and counterterrorism	High convergence: All powers support maritime security, anti-piracy, and counterterrorism
Port Infrastructure & Trade	Develop logistics hubs, attract FDI, improve connectivity	Commercial partnerships; limiting Chinese influence	Strategic port development (e.g., Djibouti, Sudan)	Seeks strategic port access (e.g., in Djibouti)	Supports infrastructure via EIB, trade facilitation.	Partial convergence: All are interested, but competition between China, US, and India may fragment efforts

Energy & Resource Access	Export oil/gas, develop renewables (wind, solar), improve desalination capacity	Energy security, anti-Iran alignment	Access to resources, renewable energy investment	Renewable energy cooperation, oil access	Green energy transition and climate partnerships	Overlapping interests in renewables, but geopolitics may limit trust (e.g., China-US rivalry)
Climate & Environment	Combat coastal erosion, overfishing, coral reef loss, desertification	Disaster response, climate diplomacy	Mangrove protection, ecological projects (limited)	Indian Ocean climate science, disaster relief	Biodiversity, carbon trading, circular economy	Strong convergence on climate resilience, but underfunded and fragmented cooperation
Migration & Human Security	Manage refugee flows (Yemen, Sudan), human trafficking, diaspora remittances	Border security, anti-migration support for allies.	Limited interest, but supports stable regimes	Concerned about instability-related migration	Migration control, humanitarian aid	Shared goals in stability, but EU most focused on containment; US prioritizes counterterrorism
Blue Economy	Fisheries, aquaculture, marine tourism, port-related industries	Supportive in theory, limited action.	Interest in marine development as part of BRI	Seeks blue economy collaboration	Invests via EU-African blue economy programs	Moderate convergence; room for cooperation in fisheries and sustainability sectors
Counterterrorism & Extremism	Defeat al-Shabab, ISIS-Yemen, and loyal armed groups.	Major focus; supports regional militaries and drone ops	Supports stability via state-centric investments	Cooperates with local regimes against terror.	Focused on capacity-building and conflict prevention	Shared threat perception, but diverging methods (military vs development-led approaches)

Geostrategic Access & Bases	Sovereignty concerns, rentier agreements for bases (Djibouti, Eritrea, etc.), political leverage over base access	Has bases and logistics (e.g., Djibouti, Diego Garcia)	Djibouti PLA base; commercial-to-dual-use transitions.	Wants access no permanent base yet.	Naval cooperation, not base-oriented.	Competition more than convergence; risks of militarization and sovereignty erosion
Regional Integration	Red Sea integration, Horn-Arab ties, African development	Supports when aligned with security goals	Promotes BRI corridors and regional logistics	Seeks partnerships via Indian Ocean Rim Association	Advocates for cross-border cooperation	Overlap in promoting connectivity, but driven by different strategic agendas

Key Takeaways:

- **High Convergence Areas:** Maritime security, anti-piracy, climate resilience, and blue economy present clear win-win opportunities where both littoral states and external actors benefit without zero-sum competition.
- **Mixed Convergence Areas:** Infrastructure, trade, and energy see overlap but are increasingly sites of **strategic competition** (especially US-China rivalry). These require careful multilateral coordination or neutral platforms (e.g., SRSA or IGAD).
- **Low Convergence Areas:** Geostrategic base politics and militarization can **undermine sovereignty** and cause friction among littoral states, especially where external powers demand exclusive access or security commitments.

12. Israel and the Red Sea

The potential role of Israel in a regional organization centered on the Red Sea—such as the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (SRSA)—is a complex and politically sensitive matter. It hinges on regional geopolitics, normalization trends, maritime strategy, and security cooperation. Here's a structured analysis:

Israel's Strategic Interest in the Red Sea Region

Israel's interest in the Red Sea is longstanding and multifaceted:

- **Geopolitical Positioning:** Israel is a Red Sea littoral state through the **port of Eilat**, which connects it to the Bab el-Mandeb and the Indian Ocean.

- **Maritime Security:** Israel is concerned about **Iranian naval influence**, weapons smuggling through Yemen and Sudan, and the potential targeting of Israeli-linked commercial vessels in the Red Sea (e.g., Houthi attacks).
- **Trade and Infrastructure:** The **Eilat–Ashdod corridor** is a proposed alternative route to the Suez Canal. Israel also aims to connect Gulf trade partners to the Mediterranean via land infrastructure across its territory.
- **Energy and Technology Diplomacy:** Israel could contribute in desalination, energy cooperation (e.g., solar, gas), cybersecurity for ports, and marine science through its advanced R&D sectors.

Current Obstacles to Membership in Red Sea Regional Initiatives

Despite shared interests, Israel is not currently a member of any Red Sea regional organization such as SRSA. Key obstacles include:

- **Arab League politics:** SRSA's founding members—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Yemen, Jordan, and Somalia—are mostly Arab League states with historically strong stances on the Palestinian issue and collective Arab positions.
- **Lack of normalization with some members:** While Israel has normalized relations with Sudan, UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco under the Abraham Accords, it has not done so with Somalia, Djibouti, or Yemen (where Houthi forces remain hostile), and relations with Egypt and Jordan are often strategically cold.
- **Geopolitical sensitivities:** Some African Red Sea states may fear backlash from Iran, Islamist groups, or domestic opposition if they openly partner with Israel.

Conditions Under Which Israel Could Become a Member

Israel's inclusion would likely require a multi-layered normalization process, geostrategic alignment, and confidence-building. Possible conditions include:

- **Expanded normalization with Red Sea littoral states,** especially Djibouti and Somalia. Quiet diplomatic channels or economic agreements could lay groundwork.
- **Support from Saudi Arabia:** A **Saudi-Israeli normalization agreement** (still under negotiation and politically fraught) could pave the way for wider regional inclusion. Riyadh's leadership in SRSA gives it a decisive say in institutional expansion.
- **Functional cooperation before formal membership:** Israel could first **engage as an observer or technical partner**, contributing to **maritime security, disaster response, desalination technology, and digital infrastructure for ports**—areas with lower political sensitivity.
- **A redefined scope of SRSA:** If SRSA or a successor organization expands its mission from Arab-African coordination to a **wider Red Sea functional community**, Israel's geographic location and capabilities would make its inclusion more logically compelling.

Potential Role If Included

Should Israel be included under any formal or informal structure, its potential roles might include?

- **Maritime surveillance and security cooperation,** especially in intelligence sharing on Iranian and proxy naval activities.

- **Technology and innovation partnerships**, particularly in **marine biotechnology, digital port management, water treatment, and renewable energy**.
- **Environmental monitoring and climate resilience**, contributing scientific capacity to tackle coral reef degradation and fisheries management in the Red Sea basin.
- **Economic corridor integration**, possibly linking **Gulf states and Africa** through overland Israeli infrastructure to the Mediterranean.

Scenarios for Engagement Without Full Membership

Even short of formal membership, Israel can participate in regional Red Sea dynamics via:

- **Track II diplomacy** (think tanks, research, backchannel dialogues)
- **Multilateral maritime security initiatives** (e.g., CTF-151, EMASoH)
- **Triangular cooperation** with partners like the **UAE, Egypt, or the US** on Red Sea development or port innovation
- **Observer status or technical committee participation** in future expanded versions of SRSA or Red Sea–Horn of Africa cooperation frameworks.

Summary

Israel's inclusion in a Red Sea regional organization is plausible, but politically delicate. It depends heavily on normalization trends, Saudi endorsement, and a shift toward pragmatic, function-based regionalism rather than identity-based blocs. The logic of geography and technology is in Israel's favor; the logic of politics remains the obstacle.

Strategic Assessment of the Red Sea Bridge Project: Objectives, Impacts, and Regional Implications

The proposed Red Sea Bridge, intended to link Saudi Arabia and Egypt via the Strait of Tiran at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba, represents one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects in the Middle East. Officially conceived as a means to enhance economic integration and political cooperation between two pivotal Arab states, the project also carries substantial geopolitical, environmental, and socio-economic implications for the broader Red Sea and Aqaba Bay region.

Objectives of the Bridge

The central stated objective of the Red Sea Bridge is to facilitate trade and tourism between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, with the long-term vision of enhancing inter-Arab connectivity. The bridge is also integral to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the Kingdom's economy beyond oil through investments in infrastructure, logistics, and regional integration. For Egypt, the bridge promises to stimulate economic activity in the Sinai Peninsula, encourage religious tourism (particularly pilgrimages to Mecca), and attract foreign direct investment into underdeveloped regions.

Beyond economics, the bridge is also a political symbol of Arab cooperation and an attempt to consolidate geopolitical influence over a critical maritime and strategic corridor. It signals a deepening of bilateral relations and projects stability and modernization in a region historically

marred by fragmentation and conflict.

Anticipated Impacts

The construction of the Red Sea Bridge will have far-reaching consequences. Economically, it could significantly reduce transportation costs and travel time between North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, potentially transforming the Gulf of Aqaba into a logistical hub. By linking transportation networks across the Red Sea, the bridge could catalyze regional trade and integrate supply chains stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian hinterland.

Environmentally, the project raises significant concerns. The Strait of Tiran and the surrounding coral reefs form part of one of the most biodiverse marine environments in the world. Bridge construction, increased vehicle traffic, and related coastal development may pose serious threats to marine ecosystems. Without stringent environmental safeguards, the ecological cost could outweigh the benefits.

From a security standpoint, the bridge reconfigures the strategic calculus in the Aqaba region. It alters the geostrategic balance at the junction of four countries—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel—all of which have a vested interest in the navigability and security of the Strait of Tiran. The bridge may complicate freedom of navigation and introduce new vulnerabilities, especially in times of geopolitical tension.

Leveraging the Project in the Aqaba Bay Region

If effectively planned and managed, the bridge could be a catalyst for regional integration in the Aqaba Bay area. It could anchor a multi-state development zone involving Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, and complement major regional projects like NEOM, Egypt's Sinai development program, and Jordan's Aqaba Special Economic Zone.

Opportunities exist for trilateral or even quadrilateral cooperation (including Israel, under certain political conditions) on transport logistics, energy grids, and tourism. The development of intermodal transport corridors linking ports, railways, and highways across the region could turn Aqaba Bay into a competitive alternative to the Suez Canal route for regional trade.

The bridge could also serve as a platform for environmental diplomacy. Shared concerns over coral reef degradation, climate resilience, and marine conservation could lead to the establishment of a joint ecological monitoring and management system. This could, in turn, strengthen trust among riparian states and contribute to a broader framework of regional cooperation.

Limits and Challenges

Despite its promise, the project faces several critical limitations. The foremost is geopolitical sensitivity. The proximity of the bridge to Israeli and Jordanian territorial waters necessitates coordination with both countries. Israel, in particular, has legal rights under the 1979 Egypt- Israel peace treaty to access the Gulf of Aqaba through the Strait of Tiran. Any construction that threatens this access could provoke diplomatic or legal disputes.

Environmental limitations are equally pressing. The Gulf of Aqaba's unique marine ecosystems are extremely sensitive to temperature changes, sedimentation, and pollution. The absence of a comprehensive environmental impact assessment or transboundary environmental governance framework increases the risk of ecological damage.

In addition, infrastructure alone does not guarantee economic integration. Without complementary regulatory alignment, customs cooperation, and regional investment strategies, the bridge risks becoming a symbolic rather than a functional asset. Socio-political challenges in the Sinai and the difficulty of attracting sustained private-sector investment in politically unstable environments may also impede the bridge's full potential.

The Red Sea Bridge project embodies both the ambition and complexity of regional integration in the Red Sea basin. While it presents undeniable opportunities for trade, connectivity, and cross-border cooperation, it also raises legitimate concerns about environmental degradation, geopolitical friction, and uneven development. A sustainable and inclusive approach to its planning and implementation—one that incorporates environmental safeguards, transparent diplomacy, and multilateral coordination—will be essential to maximizing its benefits while minimizing its risks. In the context of Aqaba Bay, the bridge should be leveraged as part of a broader regional development strategy that prioritizes ecological resilience, shared prosperity, and cooperative governance.

13. The Red Sea Bridge and Jordan's Mediating Role in Regional Integration

The proposed Red Sea Bridge, designed to link Saudi Arabia and Egypt across the Strait of Tiran, stands as a transformative infrastructure project with significant geopolitical, economic, and environmental implications for the Red Sea basin. This ambitious project seeks to deepen inter-Arab connectivity by facilitating trade, tourism, and regional cooperation, aligning closely with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Egypt's development priorities for Sinai. By reducing transit times and enhancing logistical links, the bridge could reposition the Gulf of Aqaba and surrounding areas as vital nodes in regional and global supply chains.

However, the bridge's strategic location at the confluence of multiple national interests—particularly those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel—renders its implementation complex. Environmental concerns are paramount, as the Strait of Tiran hosts sensitive coral reef ecosystems vulnerable to construction impacts and increased maritime traffic. Furthermore, the legal and security implications related to freedom of navigation in these international waters necessitate careful multilateral coordination to avoid conflict or disruption of established treaties.

In this context, Jordan's role emerges as crucial. Despite its limited coastline, Jordan holds a strategic "turnkey" position through its stewardship of the port of Aqaba, the only Red Sea outlet

for the country and a regional logistics hub. Jordan's geographical and diplomatic positioning allows it to act as a mediator and facilitator among the diverse actors invested in the region's future. Jordan maintains balanced relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states, while also being a peace treaty partner with Israel, giving it leverage to mediate concerns related to maritime access and security in the Gulf of Aqaba.

Jordan's influence is further strengthened by its development of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone (ASEZ), which has modernized port operations and created a favorable business environment. This positions Jordan not only as a beneficiary but also as a stakeholder in regional connectivity initiatives tied to the Red Sea Bridge. By integrating Aqaba's infrastructure with Saudi and Egyptian transport networks, Jordan can help ensure that the economic gains from increased regional trade and tourism are broadly shared rather than concentrated solely along the new bridge's direct corridor.

To optimize its role, Jordan must advocate for inclusive, multilateral governance frameworks surrounding the Red Sea Bridge. Such frameworks should harmonize customs procedures, environmental standards, and security arrangements across the Gulf of Aqaba, thus protecting Jordan's commercial interests and preserving the ecological integrity of the region. Jordan's experience in environmental diplomacy, particularly its expertise in sustainable water and resource management, equips it to lead initiatives promoting climate resilience in the Red Sea basin—linking economic integration with environmental stewardship.

Moreover, Jordan can serve as a convener and coordinator for trilateral or quadrilateral cooperation platforms involving Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. These platforms would facilitate transparent dialogue on infrastructure planning, security concerns, and environmental protection, thereby reducing the risks of unilateral actions that could destabilize the delicate regional balance.

Ultimately, Jordan's mediating capacity, combined with its strategic infrastructure assets and diplomatic capital, makes it indispensable to the success of the Red Sea Bridge and broader Red Sea integration efforts. By positioning itself as both a mediator and an innovator in regional governance, Jordan can help transform emerging infrastructure projects from potential sources of tension into catalysts for sustainable regional cooperation and prosperity.

Supporting the Commuter Community and Advancing Coral Reef Conservation in the Aqaba-Eilat-Taba Transboundary Region

The tri-border area of Aqaba (Jordan), Eilat (Israel), and Taba (Egypt) represents a distinctive nexus of socio-economic interdependence and ecological significance. This region is characterized by a vibrant commuter community whose daily cross-border movements sustain local economies through labor exchange, trade, and tourism. At the same time, the area is home to some of the world's most resilient coral reef ecosystems, which underpin both biodiversity and economic livelihoods. Addressing the intertwined challenges faced by this community necessitates a multifaceted approach that combines enhanced socio-economic support with robust environmental cooperation.

The commuter population in this transboundary region faces several systemic challenges, including bureaucratic barriers, inadequate infrastructure, and occasional political tensions. Streamlining border crossing procedures, harmonizing employment and residency regulations, and investing in shared transportation infrastructure are critical to sustaining and expanding this workforce's mobility and economic contribution. Digitalization of cross-border administrative processes and the creation of joint economic zones could further reduce friction, facilitate trade, and foster greater economic integration across the borders.



Environmental cooperation is equally vital, particularly regarding the protection and sustainable management of the coral reefs that fringe the Gulf of Aqaba. These reefs provide essential ecosystem services, including supporting fisheries, sustaining tourism industries, and protecting coastlines from erosion. Given their transnational nature, effective coral reef conservation demands a coordinated regional framework. Joint marine protected areas, synchronized monitoring and research programs, and shared environmental standards would enable the three countries to mitigate threats such as climate change-induced bleaching, pollution, and unsustainable fishing practices.

A pioneering initiative that could advance coral reef resilience in the region is the establishment of a “coral vault”—a genetic repository aimed at preserving diverse coral species and their symbiotic algae. Such a vault would act as an insurance policy against the loss of coral biodiversity, facilitating future restoration and adaptation efforts. The coral vault would require technical collaboration among Jordanian, Israeli, and Egyptian marine scientists, supported by political commitment and international funding. Beyond its practical conservation benefits, the coral vault would also symbolize a shared commitment to environmental stewardship, serving as a platform for confidence-building and peace-building through ecological collaboration.

It is early days to discuss a red sea urban design in Aqaba and performane art hall in Eilat. Israel

has expressed interest.

Cooperation Scheme in Cargo between Eilat and Aqaba

The cities of Aqaba (Jordan) and Eilat (Israel) are geographically close, separated by a short distance across the Gulf of Aqaba, making them ideal candidates for a cooperative cargo and trade scheme. Both ports have strategic significance in the Red Sea, and their cooperation could offer substantial economic, logistical, and geopolitical benefits. A joint cooperation scheme in cargo logistics could help streamline trade between the two countries, optimize port operations, and improve the flow of goods to regional and international markets.

This article explores the potential for such a cooperation scheme, its objectives, and the benefits it could provide, both locally and regionally. It also suggests how such a scheme could be structured and how it could benefit from existing international trade agreements and regional initiatives.

The primary objective of a cargo cooperation scheme between Eilat and Aqaba would be to enhance trade efficiency, port operations, and the overall flow of goods in the Red Sea region. Such a framework would seek to facilitate the streamlined movement of cargo through shared logistical resources, thereby reducing shipping costs and transportation times. It would also optimize port capacity by enabling cross-utilization of facilities, alleviating congestion and improving operational performance. More broadly, cooperation between the two ports would strengthen regional trade integration, bringing Jordan, Israel, and other regional players—including Palestine, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia—into closer economic alignment. By opening new markets and trade routes, the scheme would not only benefit local economies but also enhance global trade flows. At the same time, an emphasis on environmental sustainability would guide joint efforts to adopt eco-friendly logistics and green shipping practices, ensuring that development occurs in harmony with the Red Sea's fragile ecosystems.

Several types of cooperation could be envisioned across port operations, customs procedures, shipping coordination, and environmental management. On the level of port operations, Aqaba and Eilat could agree to share infrastructure and facilities, reducing duplication and increasing efficiency. Shared warehousing would help businesses lower costs, while the cross-utilization of cranes, container-handling machinery, and transport vehicles would improve flexibility and resource allocation. Docking and berth-sharing arrangements could also allow ships to use facilities interchangeably, minimizing delays and downtime.

Administrative simplification represents another key dimension. Customs procedures often remain a barrier to efficient cross-border trade, and a joint scheme could align protocols to ease the movement of goods. This might include simplified procedures through a single-window electronic platform, harmonized tariffs and trade regulations, and the establishment of a joint customs clearinghouse to reduce duplication and costs.

Shipping and transport coordination would further enhance efficiency. Harmonizing cargo ship schedules for both ports would reduce waiting times and provide companies with more flexible options. Intermodal transport solutions linking sea, road, and rail could facilitate the transfer of

goods between Eilat and Aqaba, while the development of shared transshipment functions would enable both ports to serve as hubs for cargo passing through the Red Sea en route to global destinations.

Environmental cooperation would be essential given the ecological sensitivity of the Gulf of Aqaba. Joint initiatives might include emission reduction programs through cleaner fuels and energy-efficient port operations, collaborative environmental impact studies to assess the effects of port activities, and coordinated waste management strategies to minimize marine and coastal pollution.

The potential economic and geopolitical benefits of such cooperation are considerable. Economically, it would expand trade volumes, create new jobs, and generate growth opportunities not only for Jordan and Israel but also for Palestinian businesses and other regional actors. The cooperation could help to normalize relations by grounding political ties in practical, shared economic interests, thereby reinforcing the peace process. More broadly, it could serve as a model for regional integration across the Middle East and North Africa, fostering stronger trade routes that connect Arab and European markets. Infrastructural development at both Aqaba and Eilat would likely attract foreign investment, further improving port facilities and embedding the two cities into a competitive regional trade network.

Nonetheless, significant challenges remain. Political sensitivities tied to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and questions of territorial status could complicate cooperation. Security concerns, including port safety, smuggling, and regional instability, would also need to be carefully addressed. In addition, differences in regulatory frameworks, despite international trade commitments, could hinder the smooth integration of operations between the two ports.

Implementation would therefore require careful political and institutional groundwork. A bilateral agreement between Jordan and Israel would constitute the foundation of the scheme, supported by input from external partners such as the European Union and regional organizations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. A joint task force could then be established to oversee execution, focusing on technical coordination, customs harmonization, and infrastructure sharing. Such a structure would provide the institutional framework necessary to move from vision to reality.

- **International Support:** Leveraging support from international financial institutions like the World Bank or the EU to fund infrastructure improvements and technological upgrades at the ports.
- **Pilot Programs:** Initiating a series of pilot projects to test the efficiency and effectiveness of the cooperation, beginning with specific cargo types (e.g., perishables or manufactured goods).

A cargo cooperation scheme between Eilat and Aqaba offers a promising opportunity for enhancing regional trade, boosting economic growth, and fostering greater regional integration. By focusing on shared logistics resources, simplified customs procedures, and environmental cooperation, both countries can create a mutually beneficial framework that leverages their respective port strengths. Despite political and logistical challenges, this partnership could lay the foundation for broader

cooperation across the Red Sea region, contributing to stability and prosperity in both Jordan and Israel, as well as the broader Middle East.

The proposed cargo cooperation scheme between Eilat and Aqaba holds transformative potential for Palestinian exports, acting as a bridge between Israel, Jordan, and the world. By streamlining logistics and customs processes, it offers Palestinians a faster, more efficient path to global markets. Imagine Palestinian goods flowing through Aqaba's port, bypassing the barriers that have long hindered their access to international trade. This cooperation is not merely an exchange of goods but a symbol of hope, a tangible connection between the West Bank and broader regional economies.

With shared facilities and optimized transport routes, Palestinian products could be exported through Jordan's Aqaba, providing a gateway to the Red Sea and international markets, bypassing political restrictions. Eilat's access to the Suez Canal offers another significant advantage—a shortcut to Asia and Europe. Palestinians, long marginalized in global trade, would now have uninterrupted access to major shipping lanes, giving them the chance to compete on a level playing field.

This synergy between Aqaba and Eilat can spark economic independence for Palestine, especially if coupled with investment from Jordanian and international players. Palestinian merchant families in Jordan could leverage these improved transport routes to promote local Palestinian businesses. Through the strategic use of joint infrastructure, Palestinian goods could be efficiently packaged, stored, and shipped—a solution where politics and geography no longer dictate the pace of progress.

This scheme could also enhance Palestinian market access in the EU and Gulf countries, creating new export corridors that fuel growth. In the face of longstanding economic challenges, this partnership provides an opportunity to break the chains of isolation and integrate Palestinian industries into the larger, thriving regional economy. Ultimately, it transforms what has long been a political struggle into an economic triumph.

14.Paradiplomacy in the Gulf of Aqaba and Beyond: An Opportunity for Regional Cooperation and Stability

Paradiplomacy refers to the diplomatic activities carried out by subnational entities such as states, provinces, cities, or regional governments to engage with foreign governments, international organizations, or other subnational entities outside their own national framework. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is conducted at the national level by central governments, paradiplomacy allows local or regional actors to independently or collaboratively pursue specific foreign relations objectives. These objectives typically focus on areas such as economic development, trade, cultural exchange, environmental sustainability, and security, and are often conducted in parallel with the efforts of national governments. The concept of paradiplomacy, which emerged in the 1980s, has gained traction due to the rise of globalization, the increasing role of cities and regions as economic and political players, and the growing influence of regional autonomy movements. This article explores the application of paradiplomacy in the Gulf of Aqaba region and its potential to complement broader regional cooperation schemes, contributing positively to stability and prosperity in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa.

The EU-Jordan partnership, particularly as it pertains to the EU-Jordan Association Agreement, involves the establishment of 5-7 industry clusters in Jordan as part of the broader economic and regional integration strategy. Among these, the proposal to locate one of the seven agreed clusters in Aqaba—Jordan's only port city and a key strategic location—presents unique opportunities for subregional integration, economic development, and enhanced cooperation with Palestine. In this context, Aqaba could serve as a crucial hub for facilitating trade, investment, and partnerships that link Jordan, Palestine, and the wider Middle East. This article explores the feasibility of such a move, Jordan's potential role in leveraging it for subregional integration, the involvement of West Bank companies and Palestinian merchant families in Jordan's East Bank, and how the PEM Convention (Pan-Euro-Mediterranean Convention) could be applied to enhance this initiative.

Aqaba, located on the Red Sea, is Jordan's only port city, making it an ideal focal point for economic and trade activities, particularly in the context of regional cooperation. As a major logistics hub connecting the Arab world, Asia, and Africa, Aqaba offers a unique geographical advantage. The Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) has already established itself as a key player in fostering investment and international trade, attracting companies in various sectors such as tourism, real estate, manufacturing, and shipping.

The city is also strategically important because it is close to Israel's Eilat port, the Gulf of Aqaba, and the Suez Canal, making it a potential gateway for regional trade routes. With Jordan's ambitions for subregional integration and further economic development, Aqaba presents an ideal location to foster such goals, particularly as part of the broader EU-Jordan cooperation efforts.

The Seven Agreed Clusters in the EU-Jordan Partnership

As part of the EU-Jordan Partnership, the two parties have agreed to create a series of cooperation clusters that focus on areas like trade, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, technological innovation, and security. These clusters are designed to foster mutual benefits and contribute to Jordan's overall economic growth and regional integration.

The Aqaba cluster could be particularly focused on:

- **Trade and Logistics:** Developing Aqaba as a regional trade and logistics hub.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Promoting sustainable maritime and coastal management.
- **Innovation and Technology:** Creating a platform for startups, digital innovation, and green technologies.
- **Regional Cooperation:** Facilitating economic ties with Palestinian territories and other neighboring states.

Jordan's Leverage for Subregional Integration

Strategic Location for Trade and Investment

Aqaba is already a key logistics center and offers Jordan the opportunity to expand its role in regional trade. The EU has shown interest in supporting Jordan's economic diversification, and Aqaba's location could serve as the ideal site for the cluster focused on trade and logistics. By offering incentives such as special economic zones and improved infrastructure, Jordan could strengthen its ties with both Palestinian businesses and other neighboring countries.

This would not only benefit Jordan but could also open doors for increased cross-border trade between Jordan and the West Bank, strengthening their economic interdependence and enhancing economic cooperation. This aligns with the broader goals of regional integration, creating a shared economic framework that could help mitigate the trade barriers and economic challenges facing Palestine, particularly under the Israeli occupation.

Leveraging Palestinian Merchant Families

Many prominent Palestinian families in Jordan have substantial business interests, particularly in trade, real estate, construction, and finance. These families, whose businesses have historically operated across both Jordan and Palestine, play a critical role in economic exchanges between the West Bank and Jordan.

By strategically placing a cluster in Aqaba, Jordan could leverage these familial networks to facilitate greater collaboration between Jordanian and Palestinian businesses. This could involve:

- **Investment in infrastructure:** Joint investments in port infrastructure, logistics, and shipping between Palestinian and Jordanian entities.
- **Business-to-business partnerships:** Encouraging Palestinian families to invest in Jordan's economic zones, creating new opportunities for Palestinian-owned businesses in Aqaba.

- **Regional supply chains:** Strengthening the supply chains for Palestinian goods to be exported via Aqaba's port, helping circumvent some of the restrictions on trade imposed by Israel.

This integration would serve to create a supply chain network that benefits both Jordan and Palestine, and through shared investment in infrastructure, it could create new growth avenues for Palestinian businesses.

Opportunities for Negotiating with the PNA (Palestinian National Authority)

The presence of Palestinian merchant families and companies from the West Bank in Jordan's East Bank provides an opportunity for Jordan to engage with the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in ways that could help move forward on the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Jordan could leverage its economic power, especially through Aqaba, to advocate for greater Palestinian economic autonomy and cooperation in areas such as:

- **Infrastructure development:** By offering to co-finance joint projects, particularly in trade, shipping, and ports, Jordan could provide the PNA with tangible incentives to deepen cooperation.
- **Investment in Palestinian businesses:** Creating favorable conditions for Palestinian companies to grow within Jordan's economy, and particularly in Aqaba, would help alleviate economic pressure in Palestinian territories, allowing them to build stronger economic links to both Jordan and the EU.

Jordan could also use Aqaba as a platform for PNA officials to engage directly with the EU, leveraging trade partnerships to gain diplomatic traction in the region.

The PEM Convention (Pan-Euro-Mediterranean Convention) is a network of regional trade agreements that allow countries to benefit from preferential tariffs on goods traded between signatory countries. These agreements aim to create a free trade zone across the Mediterranean region, linking EU members with Middle Eastern and North African countries.

Jordan, being a signatory to the Euro-Med Partnership, has the potential to fully integrate the PEM Convention into its Aqaba cluster, which could serve as the cornerstone for subregional trade. Jordan could apply the PEM Convention in the following ways:

- Reducing tariffs on cross-border trade with EU members, as well as with Israel and Palestinian territories.
- Facilitating the movement of goods between Jordan, Palestine, and the EU by using Aqaba as a hub for goods transiting between these regions.
- Encouraging investment from European companies looking to take advantage of tariff exemptions and preferential treatment under the PEM framework.\

By leveraging these agreements, Jordan could enhance Aqaba's attractiveness as a trade and investment hub, while simultaneously promoting Palestinian economic development and regional integration.

The cluster in Aqaba should focus on the following areas:

- **Trade and Logistics:** Develop Aqaba as a trade hub for the wider region, including trade routes between Jordan, Palestine, and EU markets, particularly leveraging the PEM Convention.
- **Maritime Security:** As Aqaba is a key port city, the cluster should focus on maritime security and cooperation between Jordan, Israel, Egypt, and Palestine to ensure safe shipping routes and trade access.
- **Technology and Innovation:** Establish initiatives for technological innovation and green technologies in Aqaba, encouraging start-ups and businesses to develop solutions for sustainability, smart cities, and renewable energy.
- **Regional Cooperation:** Serve as a platform for cooperation with the PNA and Palestinian companies, facilitating investment and joint ventures in the development of trade infrastructure and business networks.
- **Cultural Diplomacy:** Promote people-to-people diplomacy and cultural exchanges between Jordan, Palestine, and Europe, fostering stronger social and diplomatic ties that complement the economic initiatives.

Locating one of the EU-Jordan partnership clusters in Aqaba is a feasible and strategic decision that could not only benefit Jordan economically but also serve as a platform for subregional integration and the improvement of Jordan-Palestine relations. By leveraging Aqaba's unique geographical and economic position, Jordan can build a stronger relationship with Palestinian businesses, increase its influence within the Middle East, and foster closer ties with the EU. The application of the PEM Convention will further enhance Aqaba's potential as a regional trade hub, and its focus on trade, innovation, security, and regional cooperation could contribute significantly to economic growth, political stability, and prosperity for all parties involved.

The term "paradiplomacy" gained prominence in the 1980s, particularly with the advent of regional economic integration and the decentralization of power in certain countries. The European Union (EU) and the rise of regional autonomy movements such as those in Catalonia, Quebec, and Scotland served as early examples of paradiplomatic engagement. These regions sought to establish their own relationships with other regions and countries, independent of their national governments. The concept grew as globalization encouraged regions and cities to become key players in international affairs, enabling them to forge new pathways for collaboration in trade, security, culture, and environmental protection. Subnational entities began to recognize the importance of engaging in international diplomacy to address local or regional challenges that transcended national borders, such as cross-border trade, climate change, and migration.

The Gulf of Aqaba is a strategically significant region situated at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, bordered by Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. As a critical maritime route, the Gulf of Aqaba is a vital gateway for international trade and a region where regional cooperation and security are of paramount importance. Subnational entities in this region, such as the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) in Jordan, the Eilat Municipality in Israel, and Port Said in Egypt, have an opportunity to engage in paradiplomatic efforts to enhance their regional

influence and address pressing challenges in trade, environment, security, and tourism.

- **Maritime Trade and Port Development:** Local governments in the Gulf of Aqaba can foster bilateral and multilateral trade agreements aimed at improving port infrastructure, streamlining customs procedures, and enhancing the efficiency of shipping routes. The Aqaba Special Economic Zone in Jordan, for example, could work with neighboring states such as Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia to create a cross-border trade network that facilitates regional economic growth and investment. Additionally, shared infrastructure projects could help optimize port capacities, reduce logistical barriers, and promote regional trade connectivity.
- **Environmental and Tourism Cooperation:** Another area of potential for paradiplomatic engagement in the Gulf of Aqaba is environmental protection and sustainable tourism. The Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba are home to some of the world's most biodiverse marine ecosystems, and cooperation between subnational entities could help preserve these resources. Local governments in Jordan, Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia could establish joint initiatives for marine conservation, including the protection of coral reefs and the management of marine pollution. A regional marine protected area or eco-tourism programs could provide economic incentives while fostering cooperation on environmental sustainability. This approach would not only benefit the local economies but also contribute to the preservation of the region's natural beauty for future generations.
- **Regional Security and Conflict Prevention:** Paradiplomacy could also play a role in regional security, particularly in addressing maritime threats such as piracy, smuggling, and terrorism. Subnational entities in the Gulf of Aqaba could engage in cross-border security collaborations to enhance maritime safety and ensure stability in the region. These efforts could include joint maritime patrols, coordinated anti-piracy operations, and information-sharing on security threats. By working together, regional governments at the subnational level could reduce the risks posed by transnational criminal activities and contribute to a safer maritime environment, which is crucial for both trade and regional stability.
- **Cultural and Educational Exchanges:** Paradiplomacy in the Gulf of Aqaba could also promote cultural diplomacy by facilitating educational exchanges, people-to-people contacts, and fostering mutual understanding between local populations. Local governments could organize cultural festivals, academic conferences, and joint research projects on topics such as regional history, sustainable development, and peacebuilding. These activities would help build stronger interpersonal and institutional relationships between the different countries in the region, creating a foundation for long-term cooperation.



Source: APM, ADC unveil zero-emission vision for Aqaba Container Terminal – Seaview Corporate

Extending Paradiplomacy Beyond the Gulf of Aqaba

Beyond the Gulf of Aqaba, paradiplomacy can be a tool for wider regional cooperation across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, as well as for global engagement in addressing issues such as climate change, migration, and trade.

- **Red Sea Basin Cooperation:** Subnational governments in the Red Sea region, including Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, could strengthen regional cooperation by engaging in paradiplomatic efforts to address maritime security and trade facilitation. Cross-border agreements on port development, customs procedures, and logistical connectivity would benefit the region's economy while ensuring maritime security. Additionally, subnational entities could work together to address environmental challenges, such as pollution, overfishing, and climate resilience, through regional cooperation mechanisms.
- **Africa-Middle East Cooperation:** Local governments in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East could leverage paradiplomacy to improve cooperation on migration and humanitarian issues. Subnational entities could establish cross-border initiatives for managing refugee flows, migrant integration, and human rights in a manner that is responsive to local needs. This could include joint efforts on border management, social services, and education, as well as the creation of safe and legal pathways for migration.
- **Global Climate Diplomacy:** Paradiplomacy can also serve as a platform for local governments to contribute to global climate diplomacy by acting on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Subnational entities in regions vulnerable to sea-level rise, drought, and desertification can collaborate on regional climate action plans, sustainable energy initiatives, and resource management strategies. These efforts
 - would complement national and international climate agreements, ensuring that local perspectives and solutions are integrated into global frameworks.
- **Technology and Innovation Collaboration:** Another area where paradiplomacy can extend beyond the Gulf of Aqaba is in the development of technology hubs and innovation clusters. Subnational governments in the region could form partnerships in areas like renewable energy, smart infrastructure, and water desalination, which would contribute to

sustainable development and economic resilience in the region. By creating these partnerships, local governments can position themselves as leaders in technological innovation while fostering economic growth.

Paradiplomacy offers several advantages over traditional diplomatic mechanisms, especially when it comes to addressing regional challenges. First, paradiplomacy allows for greater flexibility in decision-making, as subnational entities can often act more quickly and pragmatically than central governments, which are often constrained by bureaucratic processes and political considerations. Second, paradiplomacy enables local governments to address issues that are of direct relevance to their communities, such as port development, environmental protection, and trade, which might be overlooked or underemphasized by national governments.

Furthermore, paradiplomacy enhances cross-border partnerships by enabling regional actors to engage in direct dialogue and cooperation without being hindered by the political complexities and conflicts between national governments. This helps create a more inclusive and diverse approach to regional development and cooperation. Paradiplomacy can also supplement broader regional cooperation schemes, such as those led by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the African Union (AU), or the Arab League, by filling gaps in areas where local governments are better equipped to act.

Paradiplomacy offers a powerful tool for enhancing regional cooperation in the Gulf of Aqaba, Red Sea, and Horn of Africa regions. By focusing on areas such as trade, security, environmental sustainability, and cultural exchange, local governments can engage in constructive diplomacy **that** contributes to regional stability and prosperity. As subnational entities become more engaged in the international arena, they can complement national diplomatic efforts and help create a more inclusive, dynamic, and effective framework for tackling the complex challenges facing the region. Through collaborative efforts at the subnational level, paradiplomacy can play a key role in shaping a stable, prosperous future for the Red Sea region and beyond.

The interdependence of socio-economic vitality and environmental health in the Aqaba-Eilat- Taba region suggests that integrated policy frameworks are essential. Supporting the commuter community through improved mobility and economic opportunities can reduce pressures on natural resources by promoting sustainable livelihoods. Concurrently, enhancing coral reef conservation secures the natural capital that sustains fisheries and tourism sectors crucial to local economies. Policies that align economic development with environmental protection—such as joint ecotourism initiatives, cross-border conservation education, and sustainable fisheries management training—can reinforce both community resilience and ecological sustainability.

Elements of an Aqaba Bay Development Plan

A comprehensive Aqaba Bay Development Plan would focus on transforming Aqaba's strategic location into a thriving economic hub. The vision is to boost regional trade, foster sustainable tourism, enhance port operations, and create new investment opportunities across key sectors. To achieve this, the plan must be holistic, integrating infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and regional collaboration.

Infrastructure would form the foundation of Aqaba Bay's transformation. The expansion and modernization of Aqaba Port, with new terminals for container shipping, bulk goods, and cruise ships, would significantly enhance Jordan's trade capacity while also serving Palestine and neighboring markets. Investments in road, rail, and air connectivity, including a new airport terminal, expanded highways, and direct rail links to inland cities, Arabian Gulf ports, and Israel's Eilat, would position Aqaba as a regional transport node. Intermodal systems linking sea, rail, and road would increase efficiency. Parallel to these developments, the introduction of smart city infrastructure—renewable energy grids, intelligent traffic systems, and water conservation technologies—would establish Aqaba as a model of sustainable urban development in the region.

Economic diversification is another essential pillar. Aqaba Bay can expand beyond port activities by positioning itself as a premier tourism destination. Luxury resorts, eco-tourism facilities, and recreational projects would draw visitors drawn by the proximity of Petra, the Red Sea, and Wadi Rum. Special Economic Zones offering tax incentives for industries such as manufacturing, renewable energy, logistics, and technology could attract foreign direct investment, generate employment, and increase exports. The bay's coastal location also makes it suitable for sustainable marine industries including fisheries, aquaculture, and marine biotechnology. Education and research centers focused on environmental science, maritime logistics, and engineering would cultivate a skilled workforce to sustain growth and innovation.

Environmental sustainability must anchor the plan. Ports can be modernized into green ports, reducing carbon emissions through energy-efficient logistics and eco-friendly shipping practices. Coastal development should be carefully managed to protect fragile ecosystems, with investments in coral reef restoration, waste management, and desalination plants. The establishment of marine protected areas would help safeguard biodiversity, while renewable energy projects in solar and wind power would provide a clean energy base to power Aqaba and its surroundings, capitalizing on the region's natural advantages.

Aqaba's role as a regional trade and integration hub is central to the vision. The city could serve as a reliable outlet for Palestinian exports, offering modern port and logistics infrastructure. Partnerships with neighboring ports such as Eilat, Jeddah, and Suez would facilitate greater Red Sea trade flows, while strengthened ties with EU, Asian, and Gulf Cooperation Council markets would expand export-import channels. Free trade agreements and customs simplifications would make Aqaba a natural node of regional and intercontinental commerce.

Social development is equally critical to ensure that economic progress translates into broad-based benefits. The provision of affordable housing would accommodate both local residents and the foreign workforce supporting the development. Investments in healthcare, education, and public services would raise the quality of life for the city's growing population. At the same time, promoting and preserving Aqaba's cultural heritage would reinforce identity and integrate cultural tourism and local craftsmanship into the broader economic fabric.

The economic impact of such a plan would be substantial. Growth could be measured through

direct contributions to Jordan's GDP, increased trade volumes, tourism revenues, and industrial output. An Economic Impact Assessment would help quantify these effects. The establishment of industrial zones and smart city projects would attract foreign direct investment, while port expansion and integration into global shipping routes would drive a surge in cargo throughput and regional trade. Employment gains would be significant, both directly in sectors such as logistics, construction, and tourism, and indirectly through multiplier effects in supporting industries.

Tourism development would deliver long-term financial benefits, with revenues derived from rising visitor numbers and higher spending per tourist. Jobs in hospitality, catering, and services would expand accordingly. Environmental stewardship, meanwhile, would create measurable economic savings through reduced emissions, energy efficiency, and resource conservation. Finally, enhanced regional integration would be reflected in expanded trade routes, stronger partnerships with Palestine, Israel, Egypt, and the GCC states, and deeper participation in global markets. Taken together, the Aqaba Bay Development Plan would not only elevate Jordan's position within the Red Sea but also provide a model for balancing growth, sustainability, and integration in a region defined by its strategic geography and ecological richness.

An Aqaba Bay Development Plan is a multi-dimensional initiative that could have transformative effects on Jordan's economy, regional trade, and socio-economic stability. By improving port infrastructure, boosting tourism, and creating new industrial zones, the plan has the potential to generate significant economic growth and employment. Accurate economic impact estimates can be made through detailed assessments of GDP contributions, FDI, port traffic, tourism revenue, and job creation.

In terms of long-term sustainability, the integration of environmental management and green infrastructure will add further value, ensuring that Aqaba Bay remains a prosperous and sustainable development hub for future generations.

In conclusion, the Aqaba-Eilat-Taba transboundary region stands as a living testament to the intricate dance between human mobility, economic interdependence, and environmental fragility. It is a place where borders, far from being mere lines on a map, are threads in the fabric of shared livelihoods and mutual responsibility. By nurturing a spirit of cooperation—one that unites nations not through division, but through collaboration—regional actors can create pathways for both prosperity and preservation. The pioneering efforts in border facilitation and the visionary coral vault are emblematic of what can be achieved when innovation meets environmental stewardship. These initiatives, built on a foundation of shared values and common goals, are not just a defense of coral reefs, but a defense of the very essence of community—both human and ecological. In a world increasingly divided, the Aqaba-Eilat-Taba region offers a beacon of hope, where cross-border collaboration becomes the linchpin for sustainable development, lasting peace, and resilience against environmental decline. This model, rich in its promise, echoes far beyond its immediate context, offering a blueprint for the world to follow, where cooperation flourishes and the future is safeguarded.

15. Critical Regionalism and Maritime Regionalism: Comparative Evaluation

The governance of the Red Sea can be evaluated through two complementary conceptual lenses: **critical regionalism** and **maritime regionalism**. These frameworks illuminate both the structural challenges and the opportunities for strategic cooperation in the region.

Critical regionalism emphasizes the **social, political, and power dynamics** that shape regional interactions. It examines how regional identities, asymmetries in state capacity, and historical legacies influence cooperation or conflict. In the Red Sea, this perspective highlights the uneven distribution of capabilities among riparian states: Egypt and Saudi Arabia command significant economic and technical resources, while Yemen and Eritrea face political instability and institutional fragility. Critical regionalism helps explain why environmental security issues—such as fisheries depletion, coral reef degradation, or oil spill risks—cannot be addressed solely through technical solutions. Instead, cooperation is filtered through national interests, geopolitical competition, and historical mistrust. It also draws attention to **how external actors** (e.g., the EU, Gulf Cooperation Council, or UN agencies) interact with the region, often shaping the incentives or constraints of regional governance.

Maritime regionalism, in contrast, focuses on the **functional integration of states around maritime space**. It foregrounds **shared environmental, economic, and security concerns linked to the sea**, emphasizing institutions, norms, and collaborative mechanisms that structure transboundary maritime governance. From this perspective, the Red Sea can be evaluated in terms of **joint management of fisheries, navigation safety, pollution control, and marine protected areas**, all of which fall squarely within PERSGA's mandate. Maritime regionalism underscores the practical potential for cooperation: despite political asymmetries, littoral states have clear shared interests in preserving navigable shipping lanes, preventing ecological disasters, and sustaining livelihoods dependent on the Red Sea ecosystem.

Indeed, much of the explanatory power of **maritime regionalism** can be complemented by the insights of **critical regionalism**. Maritime regionalism excels at identifying **functional interdependencies** among states—shared seas, common resources, and the need for coordinated management of shipping lanes, fisheries, or pollution control. It highlights the **pragmatic incentives** for cooperation: littoral states have mutual interests in safeguarding navigable waters, preventing ecological disasters, and sustaining marine-dependent livelihoods. In this sense, maritime regionalism provides a **mechanistic understanding** of how institutional arrangements like PERSGA, joint patrols, or multilateral marine protected areas can foster effective environmental governance.

Critical regionalism, by contrast, directs attention to the **political, historical, and social forces** that shape regional cooperation or obstruction. It explains why shared maritime interests do not

automatically translate into effective collaboration. Power asymmetries, capacity gaps, and historical grievances—such as the relative dominance of Egypt and Saudi Arabia versus the fragility of Yemen or Eritrea—create structural constraints that cannot be resolved purely through technical agreements. Critical regionalism also draws attention to the **role of norms, identity, and perception** in shaping compliance: even with robust institutional frameworks, states may prioritize sovereignty, economic advantage, or security calculations over collective ecological goals.

By combining these perspectives, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the Red Sea. Maritime regionalism identifies the **“what” and “how” of cooperation**—shared environmental resources, legal frameworks, and institutional mechanisms. Critical regionalism explains the **“why” and “why not”**—the political and social factors that can either enable or undermine these cooperative arrangements. For example, PERSGA’s mandate to coordinate oil spill responses or fisheries management may be technically sound, but its effectiveness depends on whether riparian states perceive it as legitimate, equitable, and aligned with their national interests.

Thus, integrating critical and maritime regionalism allows policymakers to **design strategies that are simultaneously practical and politically informed**. It ensures that environmental security initiatives—whether through multilateral agreements, bilateral treaties, or regional monitoring—are grounded not only in ecological necessity but also in an understanding of regional power dynamics, institutional capacity, and the historical context of interstate relations. In short, maritime regionalism identifies the cooperative architecture, while critical regionalism illuminates the social and political forces that shape its operation and resilience.

The Red Sea occupies a unique position within the global ocean regions framework, not merely as a conduit of maritime traffic but as a distinct geopolitical and cultural space shaped by its geography, history, and strategic relevance. Unlike the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, which are vast and open, the Red Sea is a narrow, enclosed body of water bordered by some of the most politically complex and environmentally fragile states in the world. Its character as a maritime political space is defined by the convergence of global trade, regional rivalries, and transnational security concerns, making it a critical node in the architecture of global ocean governance.

Table- Comparative Matrix: Red Sea in the Global Ocean Regions Framework

Dimension	Red Sea	Arctic Ocean	South China Sea	Indian Ocean	Southern Ocean
Geographic Character	Narrow, enclosed, ~2,250 km; connects Mediterranean & Indian Ocean via chokepoints	Polar, ice-covered, opening seasonal routes	Semi-enclosed sea, surrounded by major economies	Vast, open ocean bordered by diverse states	Encircles Antarctica, remote & inhospitable
Strategic Importance	Bab el-Mandeb & Suez Canal handle ~10% global trade;	New Arctic shipping lanes; resource exploitation	Overlapping EEZ claims, \$3 trillion trade passes annually	Trade hub, naval presence, key sea lanes	Scientific research, environmental protection

	critical energy flows				
Primary Governance Bodies	Red Sea Council (nascent), IGAD; overlapping Arab & African institutions	Arctic Council (established, consensus-based)	ASEAN, DOC/COC negotiations	IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association)	CCAMLR (Convention on Antarctic Marine Living Resources)
External Power Presence	Very high: US, China, France, Japan bases in Djibouti	Limited, mostly Arctic states; NATO presence	US, China, ASEAN navies; contested patrols	US, China, India, France bases	Minimal military, focus on science
Security Challenges	Piracy, Yemen conflict spillover, illegal fishing, smuggling	Resource competition, potential militarization	Sovereignty disputes, militarization of islands	Maritime terrorism, piracy (Horn of Africa)	Climate change impacts on ecosystems
Economic Drivers	Port competition, shipping fees, fishing	Oil/gas, shipping, mining potential	Trade routes, fishing, hydrocarbons	Trade, fisheries, offshore resources	Fishing, tourism, science funding
Environmental Pressures	Coral reef degradation, pollution, overfishing	Melting ice, fragile ecosystems	Overfishing, pollution, reef destruction	Oil spills, overfishing, coral decline	Ocean acidification, ice melt
Governance Strength	Low – fragmented, security-dominated	High – cooperative, science-based	Medium – fragmented but active talks	Medium – IORA not strongly binding	High – strong legal frameworks

The Red Sea resembles the South China Sea in its density of security issues and high commercial throughput, but equally strong regional institutions. It has more chokepoint dependency than any other region, even the Arctic's passages are less globally critical today. Compared to the Southern Ocean, the Red Sea is polar opposite: small but politically intense versus vast but governance-heavy. It shares external power basing trends with the Indian Ocean, especially around the Horn of Africa, but at much smaller geographic scale. The Red Sea's dual role as both a fragile ecological zone and a strategic trade artery makes any disruption reverberate far beyond its shores. Security incidents, environmental degradation, or chokepoint blockages can destabilize regional economies and global supply chains alike. Sustained institutional cooperation is thus indispensable to safeguard both maritime security and environmental resilience.

Environmental security issues

The Red Sea faces a range of interconnected environmental security issues that affect both ecosystems and human well-being. Coral reef degradation is among the most pressing concerns.

The region is home to some of the world's most resilient reefs, yet coastal development, overfishing, pollution, and rising sea temperatures place them at risk. The loss of reefs undermines fisheries, tourism revenues, and coastal protection, which directly translates into insecurity for coastal populations.

Oil spills and maritime pollution also represent a constant threat. With dense shipping traffic, including oil tankers passing through the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb, accidents or leaks can have catastrophic consequences. The case of the *FSO Safer* off Yemen illustrates the danger, where a single incident could devastate marine ecosystems and disrupt livelihoods.

Fisheries depletion compounds the challenge. Unsustainable practices such as trawling and overfishing of high-value species are reducing fish stocks that communities depend on for food and income. Because fish stocks cross maritime borders, depletion easily generates tensions among riparian states.

Water scarcity and salinity problems further strain the environment. The Red Sea basin is one of the most water-stressed regions globally, and reliance on desalination has increased. Yet desalination plants discharge highly saline brine into the sea, damaging fragile ecosystems. As demand for water grows, the ecological impact amplifies risks to regional security.

Climate change adds another layer of complexity. Rising sea surface temperatures, altered currents, and changing weather patterns may transform biodiversity and marine productivity. This in turn threatens tourism, fisheries, and the resilience of coastal settlements.

Coastal urbanization and habitat loss are equally significant. Mega-projects such as Saudi Arabia's NEOM, Egypt's expanding Red Sea resorts, and various port developments are reshaping coastlines. In the process, mangroves, wetlands, and breeding grounds disappear, weakening natural buffers that protect against erosion and storm surges.

Maritime waste and plastic pollution also pose a chronic problem. Currents in the Red Sea concentrate plastic debris and untreated sewage, particularly near ports and tourist hubs. This damages marine food chains, risks public health, and reduces the attractiveness of the region's tourism sector.

Finally, transboundary environmental governance remains weak. While the Red Sea is an ecologically unified system, management is fragmented, with instability in Yemen, fragility in Sudan, and overlapping maritime claims preventing effective cooperation. The absence of coordinated regulation and monitoring turns environmental problems into potential flashpoints for geopolitical competition.

Security issues in the Red Sea

In the modern era, the Red Sea has become increasingly militarized. The proliferation of foreign naval bases—particularly in Djibouti, which hosts American, Chinese, French, and Japanese forces—reflects the sea's strategic value. Regional powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the

United Arab Emirates have also expanded their maritime capabilities, often in competition with Iran and its proxies, notably the Houthis in Yemen. The recent escalation of Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea has transformed the region from a passive transit zone into an active theater of naval conflict. These developments highlight the Red Sea’s evolution into a contested maritime space where global and regional actors vie for influence.

Table Security Issues

Dimension	Commonalities with Other Regions	Differences in Red Sea
Threat types	IUU, smuggling, piracy	More political violence and drone/naval attacks
Governance	Polycentric, fragmented	Greater regional rivalries and naval buildup
Legal complexity	Mixed enforcement, overlapping claims	Higher degree of politicization (Yemen war)
Capacity gaps	Chronic in many coastal states	Widened by instability (Yemen, Sudan)

Environmental concerns further complicate the Red Sea’s political geography. The sea is home to some of the world’s most resilient coral reefs, yet it faces mounting threats from climate change, pollution, and overfishing. Coastal development, oil spills, and maritime traffic have placed immense pressure on its ecosystems. Environmental degradation not only threatens biodiversity but also undermines the livelihoods of coastal communities and exacerbates existing social tensions. In this context, environmental security becomes a critical dimension of maritime governance, requiring coordinated institutional responses across national boundaries.

Implications for Governance

Institutional development in the Red Sea region remains uneven. While initiatives such as the Red Sea Security Initiative and the Council of Arab and African Coastal States aim to foster cooperation, the absence of a unified maritime governance framework limits their effectiveness. Fragmented legal regimes, overlapping jurisdictions, and political mistrust hinder the development of robust institutions capable of managing the region’s complex challenges. Yet the urgency of maritime threats—ranging from piracy and trafficking to environmental collapse—demands a more integrated approach.

The environmental security issues of the Red Sea generate far-reaching regulatory, policy, and institutional development implications.

At the regulatory level, the challenges point to the urgent need for harmonized maritime environmental standards across all littoral states. Pollution from shipping, oil transport, and desalination brine cannot be addressed through fragmented domestic legislation alone. Regional adoption of uniform rules, backed by compliance mechanisms aligned with the International

Maritime Organization (IMO), MARPOL conventions, and updated fisheries regulations, would provide a baseline. Without such legal coherence, enforcement remains selective and ecological risks multiply. The situation also calls for the codification of emergency protocols for oil spills and for minimum environmental impact assessment standards before approving large-scale coastal projects such as mega-ports and tourism complexes.

From a policy perspective, environmental security in the Red Sea is inseparable from development and geopolitical agendas. National policies should internalize the costs of ecosystem degradation, for example by integrating reef protection and fisheries sustainability into national economic planning, tourism strategies, and food security frameworks. Policy also needs to reconcile economic growth with ecological stewardship: mega-projects like NEOM or resort expansions cannot proceed without safeguards for mangroves, reefs, and wetlands. Additionally, water policies that rely heavily on desalination must incorporate measures to minimize brine discharge, including technological innovation and regional agreements on disposal standards. Climate adaptation policies, particularly those aimed at protecting coastal communities and livelihoods, must be mainstreamed into national development plans.

At the institutional level, the fragmented governance of the Red Sea is the most significant gap. There is currently no robust regional authority dedicated to environmental security in the Red Sea comparable to frameworks found in the Mediterranean (Barcelona Convention) or the Caribbean (UNEP Regional Seas Programme). Strengthening or reimagining existing but underdeveloped bodies such as the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (PERSGA) could fill this void. Institutional development would involve not only upgrading technical and monitoring capacities but also creating a platform for joint decision-making and crisis response. Cooperative institutions could serve as clearinghouses for scientific data, coordinate patrols against illegal fishing, and mobilize pooled resources for rapid spill response.

In sum, the implications are threefold: legally, the Red Sea states must converge around stricter regulatory baselines and transboundary enforcement mechanisms; politically, they must integrate environmental security into their broader economic and national security strategies; institutionally, they must either empower existing regional bodies or establish new ones capable of collective governance. Only such an integrated approach can prevent environmental threats from becoming sources of instability in one of the world's most strategic maritime corridors.

Anchoring environmental security governance in **PERSGA** (the *Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden*) is both a practical and symbolic pathway, since it is already recognized by all littoral states and has a mandate linked to the 1995 Jeddah Convention. Yet to transform PERSGA from a mostly technical body into a genuine environmental security anchor, several steps are necessary across regulatory, policy, and institutional dimensions.

Regulatory anchoring requires expanding PERSGA's legal framework. The Jeddah Convention provides a baseline for environmental protection, but it is limited in scope and lacks binding

enforcement. Updating it into a “Jeddah Plus” protocol would allow for inclusion of contemporary issues such as brine discharge from desalination, large-scale habitat destruction from coastal mega-projects, and resilience-building for climate change. Member states could agree to harmonized regulations on oil spill liability, shipping standards, and fisheries quotas, turning PERSGA into a clearinghouse for compliance monitoring.

Policy anchoring means embedding PERSGA in national development strategies. Rather than being treated as an external or donor-driven body, PERSGA should become the natural policy interface for states’ marine management. This would involve requiring that large-scale infrastructure or tourism projects along the Red Sea coast undergo regional-level impact assessments facilitated by PERSGA, rather than purely domestic reviews. Policy alignment could also extend to climate adaptation, where PERSGA could lead in coordinating joint coastal defense strategies, regional fisheries management, and shared marine protected areas.

Institutional anchoring requires upgrading PERSGA’s capacity, status, and networks. At present, PERSGA is modest in scope, with limited technical staff and financial autonomy. It could be strengthened through three mechanisms: first, establishing a permanent Red Sea Environmental Security Centre under its auspices, with satellite monitoring, data-sharing, and rapid-response capabilities; second, securing a sustainable funding model (e.g., environmental levies on shipping, tourism, or desalination) to reduce dependency on external donors; and third, broadening its institutional alliances with the African Union, Arab League, and EU, which could recognize PERSGA as the legitimate regional partner on Red Sea environmental issues.

Anchoring in PERSGA also carries a symbolic advantage: it avoids creating a new competing structure and builds upon an existing organization already ratified by most littoral states. Yet anchoring must be coupled with expansion — giving PERSGA teeth, resources, and an updated legal mandate. In doing so, it could evolve from a technical coordinator into a **regional environmental security authority**, comparable to the Mediterranean’s Barcelona Convention institutions.

Table – Intersection of Environmental Security, Security & Institutional Development

Environmental Security Issues	Security Dimension (threat/impact)	Institutional Implications	Riparian Implications
Coral reef degradation	Undermines fisheries, tourism revenues, coastal defense → economic insecurity	Requires regional reef monitoring and shared MPAs under PERSGA; alignment with UNESCO/UNEP frameworks	Cooperation among Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Eritrea, Yemen; potential conflict if eco-tourism revenues diverge
Oil spills & maritime pollution	Threat to sea lanes, ports, food chains → maritime and energy security	Strengthened PERSGA protocols; harmonization with IMO/MARPOL; need for joint spill response	Yemen instability as weak link; Egypt & Saudi Arabia bear higher stakes given Suez Canal and oil

		centre	export routes
Fisheries depletion	Food security risk; illegal fishing creates cross-border frictions → livelihood & sovereignty security	Regional fisheries quotas, joint enforcement patrols under PERSGA; FAO technical support	Conflict risk between artisanal and industrial fleets; disputes among Sudan, Eritrea, Yemen, Somalia (spillover)
Water scarcity & desalination salinity	Resource competition; marine biodiversity stress → societal & ecological security	Common standards for brine discharge; regional innovation fund; linkage to PERSGA's marine pollution work	Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia major desalination users; Yemen marginalized by lack of capacity
Climate change & sea temperature rise	Erosion of adaptive capacity; displacement of coastal communities → human security	Regional climate adaptation plan; climate finance mobilized via PERSGA; link to AU/Arab League resilience hubs	Shared vulnerability across all littorals; Egypt and Saudi Arabia lead, but fragile states risk exclusion
Coastal urbanization & habitat loss	Land–sea interface tension; undermines resilience → developmental security	Require regional EIAs endorsed by PERSGA; zoning guidelines for mega-projects (NEOM, ports)	Saudi Arabia and Egypt central actors; tension with smaller states over cumulative ecological impact
Maritime waste & plastic pollution	Long-term marine ecosystem degradation → public health and tourism security	Regional waste management protocols; PERSGA-coordinated monitoring; alignment with UNEP's Regional Seas Programme	Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan must coordinate port waste management; Yemen and Eritrea lag behind
Weak transboundary governance	Absence of cooperative regimes → institutional & geopolitical security	Expand PERSGA into Red Sea Environmental Security Authority (RSESA); integrate with AU, Arab League, EU partners	Divergence: Egypt/Saudi in favor of stronger regimes; Yemen/Eritrea capacity-constrained; Sudan uncertain

Explainer: Implications for PERSGA and the Multi-Bilateral Policy Mix in the Red Sea

The environmental security challenges identified in the Red Sea are not only ecological or economic; they have direct implications for the strategic posture of littoral states and for the regional governance architecture. Each issue—ranging from coral reef degradation and fisheries

depletion to oil spills and climate-induced coastal stress—creates pressure points that cross national boundaries and demand coordinated institutional responses.

For PERSGA, this means moving beyond a primarily technical and advisory mandate toward a **centralized strategic coordinator** for environmental security. The organization must be empowered with clear regulatory authority, the ability to monitor compliance across riparian states, and rapid-response capacities to manage acute crises such as oil spills, extreme climate events, or sudden ecological collapse. Anchoring PERSGA in the regional policy architecture ensures that environmental security is recognized as a **core element of maritime and human security**, rather than a peripheral concern.

Simultaneously, addressing these challenges requires a **multi-layered policy mix**. Bilateral agreements between neighboring riparians—such as Egypt-Saudi cooperation on coastal desalination impacts, or Sudan-Eritrea coordination on fisheries enforcement—can create immediate operational solutions. Multilateral frameworks, mediated by PERSGA, can standardize environmental regulations, harmonize EIAs for coastal mega-projects, and manage shared resources like fish stocks, mangrove ecosystems, and sensitive coral habitats. External actors, including the African Union, Arab League, and EU, can provide technical assistance, funding, and strategic oversight, but their interventions must be embedded in the PERSGA-led regional framework to avoid fragmentation.

Strategically, this integrated approach has several advantages. It reduces the risk of environmental disputes escalating into geopolitical tensions, strengthens the resilience of maritime infrastructure and communities, and enhances the effectiveness of IB (Integrated Blue) planning by linking ecological health directly to economic, energy, and security outcomes. By combining **institutional empowerment of PERSGA** with a **mix of bilateral and multilateral policy instruments**, littoral states can transform environmental challenges into opportunities for cooperation, shared investment, and long-term sustainable development.

In essence, the Red Sea’s environmental security agenda is both a **test and an opportunity**: it tests the capacity of riparian states to collaborate on shared ecological risks, and it provides a pathway for PERSGA to evolve into a **regional environmental security authority**, capable of integrating ecological stewardship with broader maritime, human, and economic security objectives.

Summary

In sum, the Red Sea stands apart as a distinct maritime political space within the global ocean regions framework. Its strategic location, historical depth, environmental vulnerability, and geopolitical intensity make it a microcosm of the broader tensions and opportunities that define oceanic governance in the twenty-first century. To understand the Red Sea is to grasp the intricate interplay between geography, power, and sustainability in one of the world’s most vital maritime corridors. The Red Sea is unique in that it **hosts nearly all major global and regional powers**,

each pursuing distinct strategic, economic, or security objectives. This external presence brings both **ressources and risks**:

- **Resources:** Improved naval security, investment, infrastructure.
- **Risks:** Strategic competition, dependency, regional fragmentation, and potential militarization.

Bueger's concept of maritime regions being shaped not just by threats but also by **external power configurations** is clearly reflected in the Red Sea—where **maritime governance is as much about diplomacy and influence as it is about piracy or trade flows**. By concentrating on environmental security issues it would be possible to identify a path of least resistance forward compared with the cacophony of security issues derived from the failure of leadership of the European Union and the international community on the one hand, and on the other hand evaluating on the mandate of PERGSA and ensure a more participatory and accountable governance overthere through comparison with other ocean regions.

16.Implications for an Eu Red Sea Strategy

Over the past 25 years since the launch of Operation Atalanta, naval commanders have consistently reported that the most persistent and complex challenges they faced were land-based rather than maritime. This trend has shaped strategic priorities and exposed critical gaps in sustained engagement across the Red Sea region.

Commander feedback has emphasized that threats such as insurgencies, political instability, and organized crime networks operating from land have posed greater risks to maritime operations than piracy or open-sea confrontations. Forces have often been deployed to support border security, counter-narcotics, and anti-terrorism missions inland, diverting attention and resources from maritime readiness.

Despite the strategic importance of the Red Sea, sustained naval presence has been sporadic. Engagements have largely been reactive—triggered by piracy spikes or geopolitical tensions—rather than proactive or continuous. Initiatives by IGAD and the Gulf Cooperation Council have made strides in maritime governance and security planning, but these efforts remain fragmented, geographically dispersed and underfunded. The IGAD task force, for example, has developed protocols and regional action plans, yet implementation lags due to limited cohesion and political will.

The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) aims to uphold peace, democracy, and rule of law globally. However, the lack of sustained maritime engagement in the Red Sea undermines these goals. Inconsistent naval presence weakens deterrence against piracy, trafficking, and illegal fishing, threatening regional stability and trade routes. Without a robust maritime footprint, the EU's ability to project soft power and support regional partners is diminished, limiting its role as a global security actor. The imbalance between land-focused operations and maritime neglect risks

misaligning CFSP's strategic priorities with the realities of global trade and security dynamics.

The Red Sea is no longer a stable transit corridor but a contested space where non-state actors, regional rivals and global powers vie for influence. For the EU, the stakes are immediate and tangible: economic resilience, energy security, maritime safety, and migration management all depend on stability in the chokepoint. Ad hoc responses and overstretched naval missions are insufficient to safeguard Europe's long-term interests. The EU therefore requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates defense, diplomacy, development and energy policy. Such a strategy would not only protect Europe's trade and citizens but also reinforce the Union's credibility as a geopolitical actor capable of shaping its security environment.

The maritime dimension is of European security concerns economic and energy security, strategic security and stability, protection of critical infrastructure, geopolitical influence and regional cooperation, combating illicit activities & illegal fishing and legal and environmental importance. Overall, maritime security concerns both coastal communities and the security of sea and is vital for maintaining the EU's economic well-being, strategic sovereignty, environmental protection, and international influence across multiple regions. Since the Red Sea is one of the world's most important arteries, upon whose well-functioning a large chunk of the world economy depends the EU and the riparians have a clear and obvious interest in partnering up and reason together.

The EU will face pressures to deepen ties with the Gulf states and the Horn states, manage relations with Turkey and Israel and preserve channels of de-escalation with Iran and regional actors, a delicate diplomatic balancing act given divergent member state priorities, something Jordan is aware of. In terms of CSDP, this exposes capability shortfalls. This raises the political question in Brussels about investing in more permanent maritime capabilities and shared ISR/early warning assets. There are legal constraints in the policing of the Red Sea, necessitating cooperation with local coast guards. The EU must protect its trade and crew, as it has done for twenty-five years now and partner up locally. It must invest in ISR and more dedicated CSDP assets and rapid reinforcement agreements among member states, deepen interoperability with NATO and coalition partners. Naval deterrence must be accompanied with increased diplomacy and regional stabilization. It must reach out to industry to diversify routes/sourcing, strategic stocks and coordinate with the IMO in London and underwriters to manage commercial risk and limit economic spill-overs.

In the absence of determined action continued trade disruption and higher costs for EU consumers and industry will ensue. This could lead to the erosion of the EU's strategic autonomy as other powers deepen footholds in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa region. Everyone now agrees intensified dialogue is necessary on Yemen in the absence of which the humanitarian toll will only increase with secondary destabilization and migration pressures.

Enter Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the EU's lead partner in the Red Sea and co-leader in the Persian Gulf and now a fully modernized Arab country with whom the EU has a growing security, trade & FDI relationship. The KSA is practicing a patient and pragmatic diplomacy informed by its revenue interests linked to the energy trade, but has also starting to carry fruits for instance vis-à-vis Egypt by keeping it stable, taking control of the islands in the Tiran strait and

preventing Egypt from complicating an already challenging situation in Yemen.

Does the EU have extension nodes in the Red Sea ?

The concept of the **extension node** can be defined as a geoeconomic and geopolitical junction that facilitates the projection of trading and political systems into adjacent regions. Unlike a primary core hub such as Singapore, Rotterdam, or Dubai, an extension node performs the role of a hinge-point that enables transshipment, redistribution, and the articulation of regional economies with global maritime networks. Its significance is measured not only in terms of throughput volumes, but also in its mediating capacity, its ability to influence the regulation of flows, and its symbolic weight within regional or global hegemonic imaginaries.

Within the Red Sea, three states—Egypt, Israel, and Jordan—may be considered in terms of their potential or actual performance as such nodes.

Egypt occupies the central position in this architecture. The Suez Canal constitutes one of the most critical global chokepoints, with between 12 and 15 percent of world trade transiting its waters annually. The associated port infrastructure at Port Said, Ain Sokhna, and linked free trade zones consolidate Egypt's role as a genuine extension node of global commerce. Cairo has been able to convert this infrastructural endowment into political leverage, positioning itself as an indispensable actor in both European and Gulf strategic calculations. Yet, this real capacity is sometimes undermined by governance bottlenecks, inefficiencies in port operations, and domestic instability, which temper the exercise of this nodal power.

Israel, by contrast, presents a more aspirational trajectory. The ports of Haifa and Ashdod serve as gateways to the Eastern Mediterranean, while infrastructural projects such as the proposed rail corridor linking Haifa to Eilat seek to create an alternative, overland bypass to the Suez Canal. Although current trade volumes remain modest when compared with Egypt's canal throughput, Israel cultivates a narrative of infrastructural centrality that is reinforced by its integration into wider Indo-Abrahamic connectivity schemes promoted by the United States and, by extension, the European Union. Thus, Israel's role as an extension node is less a function of present trade metrics and more of its strategic and symbolic inscription into emerging corridor imaginaries.

Jordan represents a more modest case. The port of Aqaba, the country's only maritime outlet, handles limited shipping volumes and cannot rival Egypt or Israel in throughput capacity. Its importance lies instead in logistical mediation, particularly its ability to connect Levantine and Arabian hinterlands to the Red Sea, to host pipeline infrastructure, and to provide redundancy in crisis scenarios. While the empirical trade data reflect a marginal role, Jordan's position is often amplified in European and American discourse, where it is depicted as a stabilising pivot in an otherwise volatile region. In this sense, Aqaba's symbolic weight exceeds its measurable economic impact.

From a European perspective, this triad of extension nodes is interpreted through both **real** and **imagined dominant position of a diplomatic, trading and geopolitical nature**. The real dimension lies in the Union's reliance on uninterrupted flows of energy, container traffic, and data through the Red Sea corridor. This reliance underpins investments in port modernisation, security cooperation, and trade facilitation measures. The imagined dimension, by contrast, manifests in the EU's tendency to frame the Red Sea as a vital component of its broader connectivity narrative, exemplified by the Global Gateway initiative. In this framing, Egypt, Israel, and Jordan are incorporated into a civilisational geography of corridors that extends Europe's influence into Africa and Asia, even where the functional data would suggest more circumscribed roles.

In sum, Egypt operates as the **gatekeeping extension node**, Israel as the **aspirational bypass node**, and Jordan as the **symbolic hinge node**. Together, they illustrate how the Red Sea's geography is constituted not only by measurable trade flows, but equally by the imaginaries of connectivity and hegemony projected upon it

Dimension/country	Jordan	Eilat	Masr-Sinai	KSA
Trade (flows, infrastructure)	Aqaba is Jordan's only port and an SEZ (Aqaba Special Economic Zone) that the EU accesses via trade & investment channels; EU–Jordan Association Agreement/FTA framework reduces tariffs and facilitates goods/services links.	Israel is a major EU trading partner; Eilat/Eilat–Aqaba corridor matters for trans-shipment, tourism, and potential north–south logistics (Eilat free-zone and infrastructure investments). EU–Israel trade links are large relative to Israel's economy.	Egypt controls the Suez/Red Sea approaches and has an EU Association framework — trade and port connectivity (Nuweiba/Taba) link European shipments to Red Sea routes; EU–Egypt trade & infrastructure cooperation is institutionalized.	No direct EU–KSA free trade deal; EU–GCC dialogue covers trade/investment. KSA's projects (ports, regional logistics) shape alternative routes and investment flows that affect Aqaba's competitiveness.
Diplomacy (agreements, political ties, aid/investment)	EU engages Jordan via Association Agreement, large development/aid packages, and	EU–Israel ties include deep trade links and research/political dialogue; political tensions (human rights /	EU describes Egypt as a strategic partner; diplomacy combines trade, security	EU–KSA diplomacy is high-level and focused on energy, security and investment dialogue rather

	investment in Aqaba's port/logistics projects (ASEZA cooperation). Diplomacy is pragmatic and centres on stability, trade facilitation and reform.	regional crises) can quickly spill into trade/diplomatic measures — recent EU moves to consider suspending some trade preferences illustrate this linkage.	cooperation (Suez security, migration), and investment projects that influence Red Sea routing and port upgrades.	than a full FTA; cooperation on maritime security and regional stability has increased (informal but consequential for Red Sea politics).
Geopolitics (security, chokepoints, conflict risks)	Aqaba's development is strategic for Jordan's economy and for EU regional stability objectives. Jordan's proximity to Israel/Egypt makes Aqaba sensitive to cross-border political shocks. Jordan has agreed to act in favor of chokepoint stabilization.	Eilat/Aqaba sit at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba — any escalation (Red Sea strikes, blockades, sanctions) affects shipping, tourism and EU–Israel trade. EU political measures vs Israel could have knock-on economic effects here. Israel now favors regionalization following 2024 decrease in throughput at both Elat and Aqaba harbours.	Egypt's control of Sinai coasts and the Suez funnel makes it a regional security gatekeeper; instability or naval threats in the Red Sea raise insurance, rerouting and diplomatic responses from the EU.	KSA's geopolitical weight (Gulf diplomacy, ties with Gulf navies) shapes coalitions and maritime security initiatives in the Red Sea — indirectly affecting freedom of navigation and risk premiums for routes serving Aqaba/Eilat.

Aqaba, despite its modest size, occupies a position of strategic significance within the regional and European economic and political landscape. The establishment of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone and the ongoing modernization of its port infrastructure have transformed the city into a central node for trade, investment, and sustainable port development initiatives, particularly in the

context of EU–Jordan relations. The European Union’s trade framework with Jordan, which emphasizes preferential access and development cooperation, enhances Aqaba’s role as a conduit for goods flows while positioning it as a site where economic modernization intersects with broader geopolitical concerns

This significance is heightened by the city’s geographical proximity to other key border points, notably Eilat in Israel and Taba/Nuweiba in Egypt. The close spatial configuration of these crossings creates what might be described as a condition of sensitive interdependence. Economic and political shocks—whether arising from border closures, security incidents, or the imposition of sanctions—reverberate almost immediately across this tightly interlinked micro-region. Decisions taken by the EU in relation to one partner therefore possess a multiplier effect, transmitting consequences not only through diplomatic channels but also through the everyday functioning of local economies and cross-border commerce.

The security environment of the Red Sea, and by extension the northern Gulf of Aqaba, further underscores Aqaba’s precarious yet pivotal position. This maritime corridor is embedded within a larger system of chokepoints whose vulnerability to disruption—through Houthi attacks, illicit trafficking, or military posturing—elevates both costs and risks for global trade. For the EU, whose engagement with regional states and Gulf partners increasingly integrates maritime security into its diplomatic agenda, the reliability of ports such as Aqaba is closely tied to broader questions of freedom of navigation and energy supply security.

By enhancing the return to institutional power it may maximize the geopolitical rent it accrues from its exceptional geography and a role as turn-key at the nexus of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, its three trilaterals Iq-Jo-EG, KSA-Jo-Syr, Jo-PNA-ISR combined with effective management of its Nabataen Vision of trade promotion and exchange in the Arabian Peninsula and wider afield, something that is reinforced by both the war in Yemen and trade creation due to the AU FTA, allowing the desert kingdom to play an influence disproportionate to its size and wealth – wenn man will.

Within this matrix of interdependence, the political economy of EU trade instruments assumes particular relevance. The Union possesses considerable leverage through its association agreements, tariff preferences, and aid mechanisms, which provide it with the capacity to convert normative concerns into trade policy tools. When political crises or human-rights violations arise, the EU has at times contemplated or enacted restrictions on trade preferences as a form of diplomatic signaling. Such measures, while intended to target specific actors, invariably reverberate through the border and port economies of the region, underscoring the asymmetric nature of EU influence. The recent debates on conditioning trade preferences with Israel illustrate how swiftly normative considerations can materialize in the form of concrete economic pressures that spill over into neighboring nodes like Aqaba.

The regional environment is further complicated by the strategic choices of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Large-scale investments in port infrastructure, coupled with evolving patterns of naval cooperation, have the potential to alter routing dynamics and reshape the flow of goods across the

northern Red Sea. These choices can either mitigate or intensify the pressures faced by Aqaba, redefining its role as a gateway for the Levant. Consequently, the trajectory of EU relations with Cairo and Riyadh exerts a decisive, if indirect, influence on Aqaba's prospects, situating the city at the intersection of economic modernization, regional competition, and European external strategy.

Saudi Arabia's expanding trade relationship with the European Union reflects its broader economic transformation under Vision 2030. The EU, now the Kingdom's second-largest trading partner, plays a pivotal role in supporting diversification beyond hydrocarbons, particularly in sectors such as renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and logistics. Bilateral trade reached approximately \$52 billion in 2024, underscoring deepening interdependence. Regulatory reforms have enhanced market access and investment transparency, aligning Saudi Arabia more closely with international standards. However, human rights concerns—including capital punishment and migrant labor conditions—continue to influence EU diplomatic engagement.

Saudi Arabia's modernization trajectory, driven by institutional restructuring and megaprojects like NEOM, positions it as the most technologically advanced Arab state. Vision 2030 has catalyzed shifts in governance, innovation, and cultural liberalization, making the Kingdom a admired and envied among the man in the street in the arab world. This evolution enhances Saudi Arabia's geopolitical leverage, enabling it to act as a gateway to Gulf markets and a strategic partner in global supply chains. For the EU, deeper engagement with Saudi Arabia offers access to broader GCC opportunities and a more stable, reform-oriented Middle East.

Implications

For **European businesses**, the Red Sea corridor constitutes both an opportunity and a risk field. Insurance premia linked to maritime security, the pace and direction of port capacity upgrades, and the impact of diplomatic measures such as sanctions or the suspension of trade preferences can alter costs and access with little notice. Firms dependent on predictable supply chains must therefore monitor not only commercial indicators but also political signals, as the boundary between trade risk and strategic risk is increasingly porous.

For **policymakers**, the challenge lies in balancing long-term development support with immediate crisis management. Investments in infrastructure—such as the greening of Aqaba port and further development of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone—can generate durable economic resilience, but their value depends on parallel investments in maritime security cooperation, information-sharing, and contingency planning. Crisis-proofing measures, including the cultivation of alternate routes and redundant logistics chains, are not optional but essential in a corridor exposed to piracy, regional conflict, and state fragility.

For **regional actors**, the gains from local cross-border cooperation remain real but fragile. Initiatives such as tourism and customs facilitation between Eilat and Aqaba illustrate the potential for economic spillovers when border regimes are relatively open. Yet these exchanges depend heavily on external stabilisation guarantees and on sustained EU involvement in conflict-mitigation.

While such cooperation can anchor local prosperity, it is highly vulnerable to geopolitical shifts, rendering it a barometer of both the promise and precarity of Red Sea regionalism.

We anticipate an action plan to be adopted and increased engagement by the European Union in the Red Sea, once governance has been strengthened in Club Med. The departure point for this could be political, economic and financial support for an integrated coastal and management plan in the format of PERGSA.

Building on the strategic and economic dynamics of Aqaba and the Red Sea, the European Union could also play a role in **strengthening governance at the Suez Canal Authority**, reinforcing the continuity and reliability of maritime routes that underpin the region's trade flows. By offering targeted technical assistance and institutional support, the EU could help the Authority modernize its regulatory frameworks, improve transparency, and enhance operational efficiency. Capacity-building initiatives, ranging from managerial training to digitalization of traffic and logistics management, would foster professionalization and resilience, enabling the Suez Canal to better absorb shocks such as geopolitical tensions, security incidents, or rapid changes in shipping demand. Moreover, multi-stakeholder coordination, linking the SCA with regional states, international shipping actors, and maritime security partners, could improve policy coherence and crisis preparedness, while aligning governance reforms with tangible incentives—such as access to EU investment programs or collaboration on green port initiatives—would ensure that institutional strengthening is both sustainable and mutually beneficial. Integrating these efforts with broader EU engagement in the northern Red Sea, including Aqaba and adjacent corridors, positions European influence as **both stabilizing and enabling**, enhancing the reliability of global supply chains while navigating the complex interplay of local, regional, and international interests.

A helping hand to the Suez Channel Authority

Strengthening governance at the Suez Canal Authority (SCA) from a European Union perspective would require a **multi-dimensional, partnership-oriented approach** that combines technical assistance, institutional capacity building, regulatory alignment, and strategic dialogue, all tailored to the canal's centrality in global maritime trade. Key avenues for the EU to reinforce governance, framed in academic and policy-oriented terms, could include:

Institutional and regulatory support: The EU could provide expertise on modern governance frameworks for port and canal authorities, drawing on European experience with public-private partnerships, transparency mechanisms, and regulatory compliance. This might involve advisory support for internal audit systems, risk management processes, or strategic planning structures to improve the SCA's operational efficiency and resilience.

Capacity building and professionalization: Training programs and knowledge exchange initiatives could be deployed to enhance technical, administrative, and managerial competencies among SCA personnel. Focus areas might include logistics management, digitalization of canal operations, maritime safety, environmental management, and anti-corruption measures.

Embedding EU best practices in organizational development could foster institutional culture change and long-term professionalization.

Digitalization and innovation support: The EU could collaborate on the integration of advanced digital systems for canal management, such as traffic monitoring, predictive analytics for shipping flows, or environmental impact tracking. Such initiatives would not only increase operational efficiency but also enhance the SCA's capacity to interact with international shipping partners and comply with global maritime standards.

Stakeholder coordination and multi-level governance: Strengthened governance requires integrating the SCA into broader regional and international frameworks. The EU could facilitate multi-stakeholder forums connecting the SCA, shipping companies, regional states, and international organizations to improve policy coherence, crisis preparedness, and joint security measures.

Strategic partnership and incentive alignment: Governance reforms are more likely to be sustainable if they are linked to concrete incentives, such as increased access to European markets, participation in EU infrastructure or green investment programs, or technical support for sustainable port development. Aligning EU assistance with measurable outcomes—efficiency gains, transparency, environmental compliance—would create mutual benefits while reinforcing institutional credibility.

Overall, the EU's role would be less about direct control and more about **enabling institutional autonomy, resilience, and transparency**, strengthening the SCA's capacity to manage the Suez Canal as a critical global chokepoint while embedding international best practices. By focusing on capacity building, regulatory guidance, and multi-stakeholder coordination, the EU can help the SCA navigate the strategic, commercial, and security complexities of one of the world's most consequential maritime arteries.

The Bifurcated Nature of Red Sea regionalism

The Red Sea's bifurcated geography—straddling the African and Arabian littorals—presents a series of structural and strategic challenges that complicate both regional governance and external engagement. The African coast, encompassing Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea, and the Arabian coast, including Saudi Arabia and Yemen, exhibit profound asymmetries in political stability, economic capacity, and institutional maturity. These disparities generate a fragmented geopolitical landscape, wherein the interests and capacities of littoral states diverge, impeding coordinated action.

Economic asymmetries further exacerbate the region's bifurcation. Northern littoral states possess relatively advanced infrastructure, diversified ports, and access to international trade networks,

whereas southern and western counterparts often lack the institutional and financial capacity to support integrated regional economic development. These disparities constrain the formation of coherent trade and logistics frameworks and limit opportunities for equitable economic integration. Institutional fragmentation constitutes an additional structural challenge. African regional bodies such as IGAD and nascent Saudi-led frameworks for the Red Sea possess differing mandates, priorities, and operational capacities, complicating efforts to harmonize governance across the basin. Environmental and ecological vulnerabilities intersect with these institutional gaps. Coastal ecosystems, coral reefs, and fisheries are increasingly threatened by overexploitation, port expansion, and climate-induced pressures, yet transboundary regulatory mechanisms remain limited or inconsistent.

Moreover, cross-border governance deficiencies—including ambiguities over maritime jurisdiction, inconsistent enforcement of maritime law, and weak rule-of-law structures—impede coordinated responses to security and environmental threats. External interventions by major powers, including the United States, China, and the European Union, introduce additional complexity, as the simultaneous pursuit of strategic interests by external actors can undermine regional ownership. Finally, socio-economic pressures, particularly migration flows and humanitarian crises in Yemen and Eritrea, intersect with trade and security concerns, further complicating regional planning. In sum, the bifurcated nature of the Red Sea produces asymmetries across governance, security, economic, and ecological domains, which together present significant obstacles to the formation of integrated regional strategies or institutions. Any attempt to stabilise the Red Sea or promote regional economic cooperation must therefore contend with these structural challenges, balancing support for regional leadership with targeted interventions that address the distinct needs and capacities of both African and Arabian littoral states.

The Red Sea region is characterized by a highly complex and overlapping institutional landscape, in which multiple regional and international organizations engage in political, economic, security, and environmental initiatives. These institutions frequently exhibit intersecting mandates, resulting in redundancy, limited coordination, and occasional policy incoherence. Understanding the roles and interactions of these actors is essential for analyzing governance dynamics and opportunities for regional cooperation.

The **African Union (AU)** constitutes the primary continental framework addressing trans-regional challenges. Its mandate encompasses the promotion of peace, security, and stability across Africa, including the Red Sea littoral. The AU addresses issues such as maritime piracy, arms trafficking, and environmental degradation. Despite its comprehensive remit, the AU often assumes a reactive role due to the complexity of local and regional dynamics (ISS Africa, 2021).

At the sub-regional level, the **Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)** focuses on integration, peace, and security within the Horn of Africa. IGAD has operationalized its Red Sea interests through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Taskforce (RESGAS), which aims to formulate regional policies, develop coordinated action plans, and raise awareness of security and environmental concerns in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (IGAD, 2023). Complementing IGAD's

regional integration agenda, the **Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)** emphasizes trade liberalization, investment facilitation, and broader economic integration. COMESA's initiatives frequently intersect with IGAD's policies, particularly in harmonizing economic corridors and maritime trade regulations (COMESA, 2023).

The **League of Arab States (LAS)**, primarily concerned with political, economic, and social coordination among Arab countries, engages with Red Sea issues largely through the prism of member-state cooperation. While LAS contributes to regional policy dialogue, its Arab-centric orientation constrains its capacity to address trans-littoral concerns comprehensively. Similarly, the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** pursues security, economic, and political coordination among its member states. The GCC's strategic interest in the Red Sea is reflected in its support for initiatives such as the **Red Sea Council**, which seeks to formalize cooperation among littoral states in matters of political, economic, and security significance (Stimson, 2021; Arab News, 2020).

The **Red Sea Council**, initiated by Saudi Arabia, represents a recent effort to institutionalize inter-littoral coordination. While its mandate includes fostering cooperation in security and development, the Council's effectiveness remains contingent on the alignment of member-state interests and integration with existing regional frameworks.

The multiplicity of actors operating in the Red Sea results in overlapping mandates and, at times, fragmented governance. Both the AU and IGAD address security challenges, while IGAD and COMESA advance economic integration, creating potential redundancies. Initiatives spearheaded by the GCC, particularly through the Red Sea Council, further intersect with continental and sub-regional efforts, occasionally leading to conflicting policy priorities (OpenEdition Journals, 2021). This institutional cacophony complicates coordination and constrains the region's capacity to respond effectively to multidimensional challenges, including environmental degradation, maritime security threats, and cross-border economic development.

In this piece, we have resolved to proceed by means of a strengthening of governance and enlargement of PERGSA to maintain the Red Sea as a pristine environment for all riparians and stakeholders through an approximation of EU and regional regulations and governance styles.

History demonstrates that the stability of the Red Sea is intrinsically linked to the political and economic resilience of its littoral states. A stable corridor requires Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia to maintain functional governance and robust institutions, as these countries collectively anchor the Nile and Red Sea trade routes, mediate regional water and security disputes, and shape the economic environment of the northern Red Sea. Equally critical is the exclusion of destabilizing external actors, notably Iran, whose strategic ambitions in the Gulf and Red Sea littoral could exacerbate maritime insecurity and fragment regional alliances. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia must assume an activist leadership role, leveraging its political influence and economic resources to coordinate littoral states, mediate disputes, and drive institutional consolidation through frameworks such as the Council of Red Sea and Gulf of Aden States.

At the same time, EU engagement could be instrumental in stabilizing the fragile relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea. By supporting confidence-building measures, joint development projects, and regional integration schemes, Brussels could help transform Ethiopia's role in the Horn of Africa from a contested hegemon into a constructive anchor of peace and development. Ethiopia's strategic position—as host of the African Union and a key partner in EU counter-terrorism and trade initiatives—makes it central to any long-term vision for regional stability. A more cooperative Ethiopia-Eritrea dynamic, under-pinned by EU diplomacy and investment, could unlock new opportunities for infrastructure connectivity, migration management, and maritime security across the Red Sea and the broader Horn, without excluding peace and reconciliation in Somalia, even as integrated coastal and marine management is established at both the level of PERGSA and the Red Sea riparians. In time, Eritrea could host a European Union-funded Red Sea Center for Seismic Activity, strategically positioned along one of the world's most active geological zones—where volcanic processes and oceanic crust formation continue to reshape the Earth's surface.

Will the Nile reach the Mediterranean ?

EU funding could serve as a catalytic instrument for strengthening the Nile Basin governance framework, particularly by revitalizing and expanding the mandate of the Nile Basin Initiative or a future Nile Commission. By strategically channeling resources into inclusive dialogue platforms, technical cooperation, and basin-wide infrastructure planning, the EU could help bring all riparian states—including Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and South Sudan—into a more cohesive and cooperative arrangement. This would not only reduce tensions over water allocation and dam construction but also embed environmental sustainability and climate resilience into transboundary water governance.

Transboundary river basin management has consistently demonstrated that effective governance relies on a combination of institutional clarity, technical rigor, and inclusive political processes. Extension of these principles to the Nile Basin suggests that durable cooperation, reduction of conflict, and climate-sensitive development require institutions capable of bridging both national interests and shared environmental imperatives. Successful river basin organisations (RBOs) operate with transparent mandates, inclusive membership, and well-defined decision-making procedures, ensuring that political dynamics do not undermine technical coordination. Complementing this institutional foundation, shared data systems, joint monitoring, and interoperable hydrological models are crucial in reducing asymmetric information and building mutual trust among riparian states.

A central lesson from global experience is the value of framing cooperation around benefit-sharing rather than fixed water allocations. Approaches that link upstream and downstream gains through mechanisms such as shared hydropower revenues, coordinated irrigation projects, or navigation improvements tend to produce more stable political outcomes than arrangements that focus solely on volumetric entitlements. Similarly, the integration of basin-wide infrastructure planning with

joint environmental and social impact assessments enhances transparency, reduces unilateral action, and strengthens legitimacy. Stable financing for RBOs, including predictable core contributions and donor coordination, further underpins institutional resilience, while inclusive governance practices—engaging local stakeholders, civil society, and sub-basin authorities—ensure that decision-making is both technically sound and socially legitimate. Climate resilience and environmental sustainability, embedded within the planning and execution of basin projects, are now widely recognised as fundamental to maintaining the long-term viability of transboundary rivers, while structured mechanisms for dispute resolution reduce the likelihood of escalation when technical disagreements arise.

The European Union is well positioned to act as a catalytic actor in strengthening Nile Basin governance. By strategically channeling resources into the revitalization or expansion of the Nile Basin Initiative or a future Nile River Basin Commission, the EU could support the development of a professional secretariat, robust data platforms, and a technical advisory capacity that are critical for institutional continuity. Investment in joint fact-finding, hydrological modelling, and climate impact assessment would provide a neutral, scientifically grounded basis for negotiation, fostering trust among Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. Funding pilot projects that operationalize benefit-sharing principles, such as cooperative hydropower or irrigation initiatives, would create tangible incentives for cooperation and demonstrate the practical value of a collaborative approach. Furthermore, supporting integrated project pipelines that adhere to rigorous environmental and social standards could reduce the risk of unilateral infrastructure development while embedding climate resilience and ecosystem considerations at the core of decision-making.

EU engagement should also prioritise inclusive governance, ensuring that sub-basin authorities, civil society actors, and vulnerable groups have meaningful participation in decision-making processes. By coupling technical and development support with high-level diplomatic engagement and conditional incentives for cooperative behavior, the EU can strengthen both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the basin institution. Strategic use of blended finance, guarantees, and de-risking instruments could attract private investment into projects that advance collective benefits while preserving the impartiality of the institution. In this way, EU support would address both the technical and political dimensions of basin governance, helping to reduce tensions over water allocation and infrastructure development while fostering long-term environmental sustainability and climate resilience.

Ultimately, a coordinated EU approach that sequences institutional strengthening, technical cooperation, benefit-sharing, and inclusive governance could materially enhance the Nile Basin's capacity for cooperation. By integrating lessons from other river basins and carefully calibrating funding and diplomatic engagement, the EU could help transform the Nile from a source of tension into a platform for shared prosperity, environmental stewardship, and regional stability.

Yemen

A consensus is now emerging among regional and international actors that intensified engagement in Yemen is essential, both to mitigate humanitarian crises and to secure the southern approaches

to the Red Sea. Such engagement, whether diplomatic, developmental, or security-oriented, will necessarily require time to crystallize, given the entrenched political divisions and the complex interplay of local, regional, and external actors. In this context, the European Union and China are already demonstrating avenues for cooperation, particularly in Sudan, where coordinated investment and capacity-building initiatives can enhance governance and economic stability. The broader African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) further reinforces these dynamics by facilitating regional trade integration, building economic confidence, and creating the preconditions for cross-littoral market linkages. Collectively, these historical lessons and contemporary initiatives underscore that Red Sea stability is not a product of singular interventions but of a sustained, multi-layered effort encompassing governance, security, trade, and regional leadership.

The European Union's strategic interests in the Red Sea are multifaceted, encompassing the safeguarding of maritime security – coastal communities and at security at sea, the protection of critical energy and data infrastructure, the promotion of resilient regional economies, and the advancement of ecological sustainability. Central to these interests is the stabilisation of the Bab el-Mandeb strait, a linchpin for global commerce and energy flows. The EU's role is not to impose external architectures but to facilitate cooperative frameworks among the littoral states, aligning with its broader foreign policy objectives of peace, sustainability, and a rules-based international order.

Within this constellation of actors, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel constitute important regional partners: Egypt as the Suez anchor, Jordan as a northern sentinel of the Red Sea, and Israel as a technological and infrastructural innovator. Yet, on the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia is emerging not as a secondary node but as a lead partner with both the political will and material resources to drive stabilisation. Riyadh's initiatives—such as the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden—position it to spear-head the institutional consolidation necessary for the region.

The EU, working through mechanisms such as IGAD and its own Global Gateway investment frameworks, could support this trajectory by adopting a “leading from behind” posture: offering incentives, technical expertise, and financial instruments while encouraging ownership by regional actors. This approach lends credibility to Saudi Arabia's role in shepherding the gradual merger of existing regional organisations, with the long-term objective of forging a Red Sea Regional Economic Community. Such a body would not only enhance governance and conflict-management capacity but also provide a platform for integrating trade, energy, ecological, and security agendas in a coherent regional framework.

From this perspective, the EU's engagement should prioritise (a) reinforcing maritime domain awareness and convoy security at Bab el-Mandeb, (b) investing in green port infrastructure and subsea connectivity across Egypt, Jordan, and Israel, and (c) supporting Saudi Arabia's convening capacity in transforming fragmented initiatives into a durable regional institution. By aligning these measures, the EU can ensure that its strategic interests—secure trade flows, resilient infrastructure, and stable governance—are advanced in tandem with regional aspirations for prosperity and cooperation.

The European Union, leveraging the Global Gateway framework, is uniquely positioned to accommodate the diverse interests of its Red Sea partners while simultaneously supporting Saudi Arabia as the lead actor on the Arabian Peninsula. A coordinated set of initiatives can advance maritime security, economic integration, ecological stewardship, and institutional consolidation, thereby laying the foundation for a more coherent regional order. Central to this approach is the development of an Integrated Maritime Domain Awareness Network, which would link EU naval assets and surveillance capacities with those of Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, enabling real-time information-sharing, coordinated patrols, and the joint monitoring of shipping and illicit activities. Complementing this, a Bab el-Mandeb Safety Corridor could combine EU-financed vessel traffic systems, convoy scheduling, and rapid-response protocols with Saudi-led operational management, thereby safeguarding one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime chokepoints.

In the energy domain, the EU could facilitate the creation of Green Hydrogen and Power Corridors, investing in interconnectors that link Egypt to Greece, Jordan to Saudi Arabia, and Israel to Cyprus, forming a Red Sea–Mediterranean backbone that advances both energy security and the clean-energy transition. Similarly, a Subsea Cable and Data Security Compact would establish technical standards, maintenance protocols, and rapid-repair capacities for undersea fiber-optic infrastructure, reflecting the growing importance of digital connectivity and cybersecurity in regional economic resilience.

Economic infrastructure would be strengthened through a Red Sea Clean Ports Programme, delivering shore power, waste reception facilities, and green bunkering capacities across Suez, Aqaba, Jeddah/NEOM, and Eilat. This initiative aligns EU climate and sustainability goals with Saudi and regional port-modernisation ambitions, while also reducing environmental risks that have historically undermined economic stability. Contingency planning for improved infrastructure from Alexandria-Port Said to Egyptian ports on the Red Sea should not be ruled out. Complementarily, the development of an Aqaba–NEOM Trade and Logistics Corridor would integrate smart customs systems, digital trade windows, and logistics hubs, improving cross-border flows and embedding Saudi development zones within a wider, regionally coherent trade network.

On this basis, we envisage digitalisation, throughput at harbours, greater integration of supply chains, improved logistics and customs harmonization to intensify on the current trajectory. If peace were to erupt in Yemen and progress on the Palestinian track gain traction in a non-exclusive manner, a peace agreement between the KSA and Israel is near-by. In such a scenario, trade could increase exponentially among the Red Sea riparians, raising questions about environmental security encore thus further institutional development combining integration of functional integration schemes with the outlined merger of PERGSA –Red Sea Council towards a Red Sea Economic Community.

Until then, it is a double bind—a paradox wrapped in inertia. The Red Sea, that ancient artery of trade and conflict, drifts rudderless, without even the ghost of a maritime strategy. And the European Union, architect of values and vanguard of multilateralism, stands without a Red Sea

strategy proper, like a lighthouse with no beam.

The Red Sea is not merely a body of water—it is a corridor of consequence. Yet today, it floats in strategic limbo. It is a theater without actors, where piracy, trafficking, and geopolitical brinkmanship play out unchallenged. It is a chessboard with no grandmaster, where regional powers maneuver while the EU watches from the sidelines. It is a mirror reflecting neglect, where the absence of sustained naval engagement reveals deeper fissures in global security thinking.

The European Union, with its Common Foreign and Security Policy, speaks the language of peace, stability, and rule of law. But in the Red Sea, its voice is a whisper. It is a conductor without a score, unable to orchestrate coherent maritime policy amid rising tides of regional militarization. It is a gardener without a map, planting seeds of diplomacy in soil it barely surveys. It is a sentinel without a tower, unable to see or shape the shifting sands of Red Sea geopolitics.

This twin absence—of vision and presence—carries profound consequences. Security gaps widen as non-state actors exploit the vacuum, turning trade routes into corridors of chaos. Diplomatic capital erodes, as regional players turn inward or eastward, seeking alliances that offer muscle over message. Values become vapor, as the EU's normative power fades in a region where hard power speaks louder than soft principles.

In rhetorical terms, this is a tragedy of omission, not commission. It is a symphony of silence, where the notes of strategy are missing, and the echoes of neglect grow louder. Until the EU crafts a Red Sea strategy worthy of its ambitions, and until the Red Sea is treated not as a periphery but as a pivot, the double bind will persist—anchoring both in a sea of missed opportunity.

17. Counterpart of KSA-PERGSA

A Roman saying goes: *Do ut Des*. I give so that you can provide. Saudi Arabia's counterpart could then be to initiate a process through which the Jeddah Convention would be ratified by all riparian states, through which the strengthened PERGSA framework would be fully adopted, and through which regional cooperation and compliance would be institutionalized.

The Jeddah Convention, formally known as the Regional Convention for the Conservation of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Environment, is a legally binding agreement established in 1982 to protect the marine and coastal environments of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The governing body responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Jeddah Convention is the **Ministerial Council** of the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (PERSGA).

The Ministerial Council comprises the ministers responsible for environmental affairs from each of the seven member states: Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. This

Council convenes biennially to approve technical and financial policies, ensuring that PERSGA's activities align with the objectives of the Jeddah Convention and its protocols.

The Secretariat, headed by the Secretary-General, is responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of PERSGA. It implements the tasks outlined in the Jeddah Convention, its protocols, annexes, and action plans, coordinating programs with member states through national focal points. persga.org

Established in 1989, the Emergency Mutual Aid Centre in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Region (EMARSGA) is a key component of the Jeddah Convention's governance framework. Located in Hurghada, Egypt, EMARSGA facilitates regional cooperation in combating marine pollution, particularly from oil spills and other harmful substances. It serves as a coordination hub for emergency response and mutual assistance among member states.

Together, these bodies form a comprehensive governance structure that enables PERSGA to effectively manage and implement the objectives of the Jeddah Convention, promoting regional cooperation for the conservation of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden environments.

Strengthening the Jeddah Convention: Governance, Scope, and Alignment with International Standards

The Jeddah Convention, governing the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, requires comprehensive strengthening across governance, thematic coverage, and alignment with international ocean governance frameworks such as the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the OSPAR Convention, and the Barcelona Convention. Institutional reform should focus on establishing a clear Secretariat with defined scientific, legal, and enforcement units, while reinforcing decision-making bodies such as the Conference of Parties, Bureau, and Scientific and Technical Committee through transparent procedures. Stakeholder participation, including engagement with non-governmental organizations, the private sector, local communities, and academia, is essential to enhance legitimacy. Compliance and enforcement mechanisms should incorporate a framework for regular reporting and independent assessment, alongside dispute resolution procedures inspired by OSPAR and Barcelona. The adoption of graduated sanctions and incentives could further encourage compliance, while capacity building through regional training programs and knowledge exchanges with EU marine governance institutions can enhance national capabilities in monitoring, enforcement, and reporting.

The EU's asks is that the thematic scope of the Convention should be expanded beyond pollution control to include marine biodiversity and ecosystem protection, climate change impacts and resilience, integrated coastal zone management, regulation of maritime activities, and standardized data sharing and monitoring. These expansions mirror the ecosystem-based and integrated management approaches employed by OSPAR and the Barcelona Convention, and ensure that the Convention addresses contemporary environmental challenges in a holistic manner. Alignment with EU and international ocean governance standards can be achieved through the adoption of an ecosystem approach, harmonization of environmental indicators and reporting protocols,

incorporation of binding legal provisions for land-based and maritime pollution, and institutionalization of transparency and public participation mechanisms.

The table below summarizes the key areas, actions, and international benchmarks for strengthening the Convention:

Area	Key Actions	Benchmark Examples
Governance	Strengthen Secretariat, compliance mechanisms, dispute resolution, stakeholder participation	OSPAR, Barcelona
Thematic Scope	Biodiversity protection, climate resilience, integrated coastal management, maritime regulation, data standardization	EU MSFD, Barcelona
Alignment	Ecosystem approach, harmonized indicators, legal harmonization, transparency and public participation	EU/Oceans Governance, OSPAR
Ratification	Political incentives, technical support, phased adoption, capacity building	Barcelona, Mediterranean Strategy
Advocacy	Public awareness campaigns, economic framing, regional forums	EU/UNEP regional programs

Implementation Plan: Outline

The first step involves conducting a comprehensive review of the existing governance and institutional arrangements under the Jeddah Convention. A revised institutional structure for the Secretariat will be established, with defined scientific, legal, and enforcement units. Decision-making bodies, including the Conference of Parties, Bureau, and Scientific and Technical Committee, will adopt transparent procedural rules. Mechanisms for stakeholder participation, incorporating NGOs, local communities, private sector actors, and academia, will be formalized. A compliance and reporting framework will be developed, including independent assessments and periodic reporting obligations. Dispute resolution mechanisms modeled on OSPAR and Barcelona conventions will be integrated. Graduated incentives and sanctions will be introduced to promote adherence to the Convention's obligations. Capacity building initiatives will be launched, including regional training programs and exchanges with EU marine governance institutions. The Convention's thematic scope will be expanded to address biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and integrated coastal zone management. Regulation of maritime activities such as shipping, oil and gas operations, and port management will be enhanced. Standardized monitoring

and data sharing systems will be implemented for pollution, biodiversity, and ecosystem health. Legal frameworks will be harmonized with EU and international standards, emphasizing ecosystem-based management and binding pollution controls. Transparency and public participation requirements will be institutionalized. Political engagement and diplomacy efforts will target high-level endorsement by all riparian states. Economic incentives, including highlighting benefits for fisheries, tourism, and sustainable ports, will be communicated. International technical and financial support will be mobilized to assist national implementation. Phased adoption strategies will allow gradual incorporation of stricter obligations. Public awareness campaigns and dissemination of scientific assessments will build regional support. Regional forums linking environmental objectives with economic development will be convened. Finally, periodic evaluation and adaptive management mechanisms will ensure continuous improvement of the Convention's effectiveness.

As resolved the EU help the riparians 2025-27 with an integrated coastal and marine management plan, at which plan we plan to elaborate an PERGSA Climate Coral Reef Conservation strategy. Enter also the relationship between the Jeddah Convention and lawmaking in the member states.

Ratification Strategy

Securing ratification by all riparian states demands not merely incentives, but inducements; not merely diplomacy, but deliberate orchestration; not merely implementation, but phased, strategic enactment. Financial and technical support from international actors—whether the United Nations, the Global Environment Facility, the European Union, or the World Bank—serves as both scaffold and compass, guiding states toward compliance, while framing the Convention through the prism of economic opportunity—fisheries revived, tourism flourishing, ports operating sustainably—transforms abstract obligations into tangible gain. High-level political forums act as both stage and crucible, where commitment is forged and peer pressure tempers hesitation; where reluctance encounters resolve; where sovereignty is balanced against shared destiny. In this way, ratification becomes more than a legal formality—it is the weaving of a net of obligations and incentives, taut yet flexible, capable of holding the currents of national interest in harmony with the tides of regional cooperation.

Phased adoption strategies allow states to implement non-controversial measures initially while progressively adopting stricter obligations, supported by capacity building and technical assistance. Communication and advocacy efforts, including public awareness campaigns, dissemination of scientific assessments, and forums combining economic and environmental objectives, can further enhance acceptance and ratification.

Strategic Area	Objective	Mechanism / Action	Lawmaking Link
Environmental & Economic Incentives	Demonstrate tangible benefits of ratification	Highlight conservation of biodiversity, sustainable fisheries, tourism benefits, pollution control	Encourages incorporation of international norms into domestic law by showing economic and ecological rationale
Regional Diplomatic Platforms	Build consensus and facilitate norm diffusion	Engage Arab League, PERSGA, and other regional forums for dialogue and negotiation	Supports adoption of legal norms through multilateral diplomacy and peer influence
Technical & Financial Support	Reduce barriers to implementation	Provide capacity building, training, and financial assistance for compliance	Bridges gap between treaty obligations and domestic law enforcement
Inclusivity & Stakeholder Engagement	Enhance legitimacy and trust	Involve local communities, NGOs, private sector; establish conflict resolution mechanisms	Ensures participatory lawmaking and strengthens compliance with regional norms
Alignment with International Law	Reinforce legal coherence and credibility	Emphasize compatibility with UNCLOS, High Seas Treaty, and other global instruments	Integrates regional agreements into the broader international legal framework, facilitating domestic adoption

This framework does not merely integrate strategic measures with the lawmaking process; it entwines obligation with opportunity, enforcement with persuasion, authority with consent. It

articulates benefits tangible and intangible, economic and normative, immediate and long-term; it leverages diplomacy and multilateral channels, financial scaffolds and technical supports, participation and persuasion alike. By aligning with international law, the convention binds nations to cooperation even as it empowers sovereignty, and empowers sovereignty even as it binds nations to cooperation. Governance is revealed as iterative, as self-reinforcing, as law that flows upward from the courtrooms into the councils, rather than merely descending from statutes to subjects; obligations breathe, and treaties speak, and norms walk as if they carried their own gravity.

The Relationship between the Revised Red Sea Convention and Regional Lawmaking: Strategies for Ratification

The revised Jeddah Convention for the Conservation of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Environment exemplifies the dynamic interplay between regional agreements and the broader lawmaking process. Regional environmental conventions operate both as instruments of ecological protection and as mechanisms for harmonizing national legislation, promoting cooperative governance among riparian states, and shaping regional legal norms. The effectiveness of such conventions, however, depends critically on the ratification and active participation of all relevant states.

1. Environmental and Economic Incentives as Drivers of Legal Commitment

Non-member states are more likely to ratify regional conventions when the benefits of participation are tangible. The revised convention emphasizes marine biodiversity conservation, sustainable resource management, and pollution control, which directly support economic activities such as fisheries, tourism, and coastal development. By highlighting these shared advantages, the convention creates a normative and legal framework that encourages states to incorporate its principles into domestic legislation, thereby bridging international obligations and national lawmaking. Strategies to capitalize on these incentives include:

- **Demonstrating shared benefits:** Presenting evidence of ecological preservation, economic gains from sustainable fisheries, and reduced pollution costs to illustrate the tangible advantages of participation.

2. Regional Diplomatic Platforms and Legal Norm Diffusion

Regional organizations, including the Arab League and the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (PERSGA), provide critical platforms for dialogue, negotiation, and consensus-building. These forums facilitate the diffusion of legal norms by enabling states to observe, discuss, and gradually internalize standards of environmental governance. Strategies for leveraging these platforms include:

- **Engaging multilateral forums:** Utilizing established diplomatic venues to foster dialogue, address concerns, and build consensus among non-member riparian states.

3. Capacity Building and the Legal Implementation Gap

The ratification of international agreements often encounters barriers related to technical and financial capacity. The revised convention addresses these challenges by offering mechanisms for capacity building, technical assistance, and financial support, thereby reducing the implementation gap between international commitments and domestic law. Ratification strategies in this context include:

- **Providing technical and financial support:** Assisting states with training, expertise, and funding to facilitate compliance with the convention's provisions.

4. Inclusivity, Stakeholder Engagement, and Legal Legitimacy

Legal instruments gain legitimacy when they incorporate the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. By engaging local communities, non-governmental organizations, and private actors, the convention ensures that its provisions reflect a wide spectrum of interests. Additionally, conflict resolution mechanisms strengthen compliance and reduce the potential for disputes. Ratification strategies include:

- **Ensuring inclusive participation:** Involving diverse stakeholders in discussions to address concerns and foster trust.
- **Establishing dispute resolution mechanisms:** Creating clear procedures to resolve conflicts during implementation.

5. Alignment with International Legal Frameworks

The revised Red Sea Convention complements broader international legal instruments, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the High Seas Treaty. By aligning regional obligations with global legal norms, the convention enhances coherence in environmental governance and demonstrates the interconnectedness of regional and international lawmaking processes. Strategies in this area include:

- **Highlighting compatibility with international law:** Emphasizing how the convention reinforces global legal standards to strengthen its legitimacy and incentivize ratification.

Summary

The revised Red Sea Convention illustrates how regional agreements operate as both normative and practical instruments in lawmaking, as subtle yet decisive frameworks, as quiet engines of change. Through strategic emphasis on environmental and economic benefits, and through engagement with regional diplomatic platforms, and through the provision of technical and financial support, and through inclusive stakeholder participation, and through alignment with international legal frameworks, the convention fosters ratification among non-member riparian states—though is it truly enough, and can mere treaties compel commitment where politics and interests collide? In doing so, it facilitates the integration of shared environmental norms into domestic legislation, embedding rules into law, into policy, into practice, while underscoring the dynamic, paradoxical, ever-shifting relationship between treaty-making and the creation of regional

legal regimes. It is a small revolution, a gentle imposition, a necessary contradiction: a living law that must be both enforced and voluntarily embraced, both rigid and adaptable, both abstract and intensely concrete.

This exercise provides the conditions for addressing how to merge the Red Sea Council and the Red Sea Council. Or ?

Conclusions

Key geopolitical factors influencing stability in the Red Sea region include geopolitical rivalries, such as tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the competition between the UAE and Qatar. These rivalries often lead to proxy conflicts that create divisions among Red Sea states and undermine collective security efforts. The fragility of countries like Yemen and Sudan poses existential threats to regional stability, hampering effective governance and security responses. This fragility can exacerbate migration issues and maritime safety concerns. Environmental change, particularly climate change and ecological degradation, threatens the resources and health of the Red Sea, complicating security dynamics and requiring collaborative responses among littoral states. Additionally, economic disparities between the northern and southern littoral states create a fragmented geopolitical landscape that hinders coordinated action.

Regional organizations such as the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden contribute to conflict resolution and cooperation by serving as platforms for collective security coordination and facilitating dialogue among member countries. These frameworks promote cooperative environmental initiatives, addressing transboundary challenges such as marine biodiversity loss and disaster resilience, which are essential for stability. Through these organizations, states can engage in joint military exercises, share information, and develop frameworks for conflict resolution, thereby enhancing trust and collaboration.

External actors like the United States, China, and the European Union play significant roles in shaping the political and economic landscape of the Red Sea. Their strategic interests often lead to military presence and partnerships with regional governments, influencing local dynamics. These actors may also drive economic investments through initiatives like China's Belt and Road, which shape infrastructure development and trade routes. External involvement can increase fragmentation as these powers may operate around regional institutions, prioritizing bilateral agreements that can either support or undermine local governance.

Institutional strategies designed to enhance governance and collaboration in the region include developing a framework for inclusive governance that incorporates various stakeholders, such as civil society and local communities, which is vital for building trust and regional ownership. Establishing conflict resolution mechanisms within regional organizations can provide a structured approach to managing disputes, particularly in protracted civil wars and interstate conflicts. Strengthening institutional capacities through targeted training and technology transfer can enhance the effectiveness of governance in maritime security, trade facilitation, and environmental

management. Encouraging economic integration through regional trade agreements can enhance intra-regional trade and economic stability, helping to reduce reliance on external markets and foster cooperation among states.

The Red Sea region serves as a critical maritime crossroads, where geopolitical ambitions intersect with historical conflicts, environmental challenges, and socio-economic dynamics. Our analysis highlights several key findings that underscore the complex interplay of factors shaping the future of the Red Sea:

The Red Sea is fundamental to global trade and security, making it a focal point for both regional and external powers. The area's natural chokepoints, resource corridors, and strategic ports enhance its importance, necessitating cooperative management to mitigate conflicts and ensure safe navigation.

The persistence of various active and latent conflicts—such as those in Yemen, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa—poses significant threats to regional stability. These conflicts often have transnational implications, influenced by external actors and their competing interests.

Climate change and ecological degradation impact the Red Sea's health and resources, further complicating security dynamics. Collaborative efforts toward climate resilience and sustainable resource management are essential for promoting regional stability.

The interests of key regional players—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and others—are crucial in understanding the balance of power within the region. Their alliances and rivalries must be navigated carefully to foster a collaborative security framework.

Empowering existing regional institutions, such as the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, can enhance dialogue and cooperative security arrangements. A structured approach that prioritizes collective action is vital in addressing shared challenges.

The influence of diasporic communities in shaping narratives and fostering cultural connections highlights the need to integrate cultural diplomacy into regional cooperation frameworks. This can strengthen social cohesion and mitigate mistrust among nations.

In summary, the future of the Red Sea hinges on the ability of regional states and external actors to move beyond traditional power rivalries and embrace a more collaborative and integrated approach. By fostering inclusive governance, enhancing regional dialogue, and prioritizing sustainable development, stakeholders can create a more stable and prosperous Red Sea region. This proactive stance will not only benefit the littoral states but also contribute to broader global stability and economic growth. We have already resolved Yemen has to be fixed by issuing guidelines to Safadi, and contributed to the stabilization of Iraq leading from behind making it clear this is a condition for engaging Iran in the Persian Gulf, something that lead Zarif to consent to informal foreign policy dialogue in the format of GCC+1.

The evolving strategic landscape of the Red Sea demands a shift from fragmented and competitive approaches toward integrated, multilateral cooperation. For littoral states, a critical priority is the development of collaborative maritime security frameworks. Strengthening joint patrols, enhancing real-time information sharing, and coordinating naval and coast guard operations are essential to counter threats such as piracy, arms trafficking, and the destabilizing effects of unregulated maritime activity. These efforts should be embedded within the mandates of existing regional organizations, notably the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which offers a platform for collective security coordination.

Environmental governance must be elevated to a strategic priority. Climate change, marine biodiversity loss, and coastal degradation are transboundary challenges that undermine both human and ecological security. Regional states should pursue cooperative environmental initiatives focused on climate adaptation, marine conservation, and disaster resilience.

Establishing a dedicated regional environmental task force could facilitate harmonized data collection, promote ecosystem-based management, and coordinate climate financing mechanisms in line with international frameworks such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Stabilizing the region also requires sustained engagement in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery, particularly in Yemen, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa. Addressing these crises involves not only diplomatic interventions but also support for inclusive political processes that engage civil society, women's groups, and historically marginalized communities. Regional states must invest in conflict-sensitive development strategies that target the socio-economic root causes of instability.

Efforts to promote economic integration should prioritize the development of shared infrastructure and trade corridors that link inland regions to strategic ports. Such connectivity projects must avoid exacerbating regional rivalries and instead foster equitable growth. A coordinated infrastructure planning body could help align national development agendas, promote intermodal transport systems, and facilitate cross-border trade.

The potential of cultural diplomacy and diaspora engagement remains underutilized. Diasporic communities play an influential role in shaping transnational ties, economic flows, and peacebuilding narratives. Littoral states should leverage these networks by investing in cultural exchange, academic collaboration, and public diplomacy programs aimed at deepening inter-societal trust and mitigating interstate tensions.

For external powers with enduring interests in the Red Sea, a recalibration of engagement strategies is required. Rather than pursuing unilateral or zero-sum policies, external actors should reinforce multilateralism and contribute to capacity-building within regional institutions. Foreign assistance and investments must be designed with conflict sensitivity in mind, ensuring that external support aligns with local priorities and does not deepen existing political or economic disparities.

In parallel, external powers can support regional climate and development goals by providing access to green technologies, financing climate adaptation, and promoting sustainable resource use. Collaboration with local stakeholders to establish environmentally sustainable development zones can generate long-term benefits while reinforcing regional resilience.

Securing freedom of navigation and protecting commercial shipping lanes must be approached through neutral, internationally sanctioned mechanisms. Diplomatic engagement, rather than military posturing, should underpin external maritime strategies to avoid militarizing key chokepoints and exacerbating tensions among littoral and global actors.

Finally, inclusive dialogue platforms that bring together all Red Sea littoral states, alongside relevant African and Middle Eastern partners, are vital. These platforms should go beyond state-centric diplomacy to include academic institutions, youth leaders, and civil society organizations. Such inclusive processes can help institutionalize trust, expand regional ownership, and build the normative foundation for a cooperative Red Sea order.

In conclusion, prioritizing sustainable development is not merely an ethical imperative but a strategic necessity for ensuring long-term stability. To foster a secure and prosperous future, it is imperative that we recognize and act upon the essential relationship between environmental health and human livelihoods. Effective governance frameworks must balance ecological conservation with economic development, embracing an interdisciplinary approach that includes environmental science, social equity, and participatory decision-making.

Furthermore, investment in education and capacity building within communities can enhance awareness and proactive engagement in sustainability initiatives, empowering individuals to become stewards of their environments. By cultivating a culture of environmental responsibility, we can mobilize collective action toward resilience against economic disruptions and ecological threats.

In addition, the involvement of diverse stakeholders—including governments, local communities, and private sectors—is critical for the success of sustainable policies. Their collaboration can lead to innovative solutions that address both ecological vulnerabilities and socioeconomic challenges, reinforcing the notion that sustainable development is a shared responsibility. Collective efforts in tackling climate change will not only safeguard natural ecosystems but also create robust pathways for inclusive growth, ensuring that all communities benefit from a healthier planet and a more equitable future. As such, our commitment to sustainability will ultimately dictate the health and prosperity of future generations.

Theoretical Implications

In the analysis of the geopolitics of the Red Sea region, integrating critical geopolitics with maritime regionalism serves to enhance the understanding of various dynamics at play. Here's how this integration has informed the analysis:

Enhanced Understanding of Human Security: By incorporating critical perspectives, the

analysis moved beyond traditional security frameworks to emphasize human security. This approach illuminated the humanitarian implications of environmental stresses, such as water scarcity and ecosystem degradation, impacting local communities. It highlighted the need to consider how these stresses affect not just state security, but also the livelihoods, health, and migration patterns of affected populations, thereby providing a more human-centered view.

Connection to Historical Contexts: The analysis benefited from linking contemporary geopolitical dynamics to historical processes and patterns. By drawing on the work of theorists like Bhabha and Anzaldúa, the historical context of trade, migration, and conflict was better integrated. This connection allowed for a deeper understanding of how historical trajectories shape identity and influence current governance and security challenges in the Red Sea region.

Multi-Scalar Analysis: Integrating critical geopolitics facilitated a comprehensive multi-scalar approach—linking local ecological and social conditions to broader regional rivalries and global strategic interests. By examining how local factors interact with external powers' strategies, the analysis underscored the complexity of governance in the maritime space, revealing the interconnectedness of various levels of analysis. This multi-scalar focus is essential for understanding the implications of regional dynamics on local populations and vice versa.

Balanced View of Cooperation and Rivalry: The analysis, through a critical lens, addressed the dual nature of state behavior, considering both cooperation and rivalry. By examining successful cooperative mechanisms and instances of failure, it recognized that geopolitical relationships are not solely defined by unity or conflict. This balanced viewpoint allows for identifying systemic barriers to cooperation and understanding the conditions under which these failures occur, thus enriching the overall narrative of regional governance.

Practical Applicability of Frameworks: An emphasis on critical geopolitics led to a more nuanced exploration of how theoretical frameworks translate into practice. By evaluating case studies of governance and security operations, the analysis assessed the real-world applicability of various policy recommendations. This empirical approach highlighted gaps and challenges in implementing effective maritime governance and security strategies, particularly under conditions of conflict and environmental stress.

Overall, integrating critical geopolitics with maritime regionalism in the analysis of the Red Sea region resulted in a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of local, regional, and global factors. It enhanced the analytical depth and provided a clearer picture of the challenges and opportunities facing the region, informing more robust and effective policy recommendations for fostering stability and cooperation among littoral states.

Further research

Further research into the geopolitical dynamics of the Red Sea region, particularly through the

analytical lenses of critical geopolitics and maritime regionalism, may be structured around several interrelated thematic domains. These areas of inquiry offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted challenges and opportunities shaping the region's strategic landscape. A tentative solution has been how to proceed on regionalization of the red sea region: environmental security issues>security>institutional development. This raises the question whether to merge the PERGSA and the Red Sea Council simultaneously, a challenging requiring further work.

This research strand seeks to examine how local populations experience and respond to environmental stressors such as climate change, water scarcity, and ecosystem degradation. Key questions include the extent to which these challenges affect livelihoods, public health, and migration patterns, and how community-level coping mechanisms influence national and regional policy responses. A mixed-methods approach—combining qualitative techniques such as interviews and focus groups with quantitative analyses of demographic and health data—will yield a holistic understanding of human-environment interactions.

Exploring the historical trajectories of trade, migration, and conflict provides critical insight into contemporary governance and security dilemmas. This line of inquiry interrogates the influence of pre-Cold War and colonial legacies on current geopolitical relationships among littoral states, and considers the role of identity, hybridity, and historical memory in shaping regional governance structures. Archival research and historical mapping, complemented by contemporary case studies, will illuminate the enduring impact of historical processes on present-day political configurations.

This dimension focuses on developing an integrated framework that links local ecological and social conditions with broader regional and global geopolitical dynamics. It investigates how localized governance practices inform regional policy-making and how external powers shape governance outcomes at multiple scales. Employing systems thinking and network analysis will facilitate the visualization of interdependencies across governance levels and reveal the structural complexity of maritime regulation in the Red Sea.

This theme analyzes the drivers of both successful cooperative mechanisms and persistent rivalries within the region. It considers structural and situational factors that foster collaboration or exacerbate conflict, and examines how historical antagonisms continue to influence contemporary diplomatic and security arrangements. Comparative case studies of cooperative initiatives and failed collaborations will provide empirical grounding for understanding the conditions under which regional integration is feasible.

This area assesses the extent to which theoretical models and institutional frameworks translate into effective governance, port management, and maritime security operations. It evaluates the efficacy of existing policies in addressing piracy, climate stress, and administrative challenges, and identifies best practices for enhancing policy implementation in complex and contested environments. Case studies focused on operational outcomes and stakeholder engagement will inform recommendations for pragmatic reform.

Recognizing the importance of soft power and social capital, this research domain investigates how cultural diplomacy and grassroots engagement contribute to regional cooperation. It explores the potential of cultural ties to build trust among states and the role of diasporic communities in shaping transnational narratives and fostering collaborative initiatives. Participatory action research and community-based methodologies will be employed to capture local perspectives and facilitate intercultural dialogue.

This strand addresses transboundary environmental challenges and their implications for regional security and governance. It examines the impact of climate change and ecological degradation on political stability and resource competition, and explores innovative governance models for collaborative resource management. Analytical work will focus on evaluating existing environmental frameworks and proposing adaptive strategies grounded in principles of sustainability and equity.

Finally, this theme investigates the strategic interests and interventions of external actors—such as the United States, the European Union, and China—in the Red Sea region. It considers how these powers influence local governance structures, security dynamics, and economic development, and assesses the alignment or friction between external strategies and domestic priorities. Interviews with policymakers and analysis of diplomatic communications will uncover the motivations and consequences of external engagement.

Counterarguments

Efforts to establish integrated governance frameworks in the Red Sea region face a constellation of structural, political, and strategic challenges that complicate regional cooperation and policy harmonization.

States along the Red Sea littoral often exhibit reluctance to delegate authority to supranational entities, perceiving such arrangements as potential encroachments on national sovereignty. This apprehension can manifest as resistance to shared decision-making mechanisms, thereby impeding the development of cohesive governance structures.

The region encompasses a wide spectrum of political regimes, cultural orientations, and strategic priorities. This heterogeneity complicates consensus-building, as states may privilege domestic imperatives over collective regional interests. The absence of normative alignment poses a significant barrier to the formulation of unified governance models.

Deep-seated historical antagonisms and unresolved inter-state tensions continue to undermine trust among regional actors. These legacies of conflict foster skepticism regarding the intentions behind cooperative initiatives, often resulting in limited engagement or outright non-participation in multilateral governance efforts.

The proliferation of overlapping regional organizations—including the African Union (AU), the

Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and emerging ad hoc initiatives—has led to a fragmented institutional landscape. This multiplicity of actors can generate redundancy, jurisdictional ambiguity, and competition, thereby diluting the effectiveness of governance interventions.

The strategic significance of the Red Sea has attracted the involvement of external powers with competing geopolitical agendas. Their influence over domestic and regional decision-making processes can exacerbate existing divisions and obstruct the formation of coherent governance strategies aligned with local needs.

Many littoral states contend with limited administrative capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and resource scarcity. These structural deficiencies hinder the implementation of integrated governance approaches, even when political will exists. Capacity-building remains a prerequisite for sustainable regional cooperation.

Integrated governance frameworks may be perceived as vehicles for external domination, particularly in sensitive domains such as security and resource management. Such perceptions can provoke resistance from both state actors and civil society, undermining the legitimacy and viability of collaborative arrangements.

The region's diverse ecological profiles and uneven levels of environmental degradation complicate the design of uniform policy responses. Disparities in resource endowments and environmental vulnerabilities contribute to divergent priorities, making harmonized environmental governance particularly challenging.

The operational presence of non-state actors—including armed groups, tribal networks, and informal economic entities—can circumvent formal governance structures. These actors often operate outside the purview of state institutions, thereby weakening the authority and coherence of integrated governance models.

Governments may prioritize immediate security concerns or economic gains over long-term regional integration. This short-termism undermines strategic planning and investment in durable governance frameworks, perpetuating a cycle of reactive and fragmented policy responses.

These counterarguments underscore the complexities of enhancing governance and collaboration in the Red Sea region. Addressing these challenges is crucial for formulating informed strategies that consider the diverse perspectives and realities of the states involved.

Policy recommendations

Here are policy recommendations for enhancing governance and cooperation in the Red Sea region, considering the complex geopolitical dynamics and existing counterarguments:

Establish a Regional Governance Framework

Develop a binding regional governance framework that promotes inclusivity and transparent decision-making among Red Sea littoral states. This framework can provide a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution, allowing states to negotiate shared interests while respecting national sovereignty.

Strengthen Institutional Capacities

Invest in building the institutional capacities of regional organizations such as IGAD and the AU. Enhancing the capabilities of these institutions can facilitate better coordination among states and improve the effectiveness of regional governance.

Promote Trust-Building Initiatives

Initiate trust-building measures, such as joint maritime security exercises and collaborative disaster response training. Such initiatives can foster mutual understanding and cooperation, helping to mitigate historical rivalries and build a foundation for stronger governance.

Enhance Environmental Cooperation

Create a regional environmental task force focused on shared ecological challenges, such as climate change and marine conservation. This task force can harmonize efforts, encourage cross-border collaboration, and address collective environmental vulnerabilities that impact all littoral states.

Facilitate Economic Integration

Implement a regional trade agreement that simplifies trade regulations and encourages intra-regional trade. Enhancing economic interdependence can drive cooperation and provide mutual benefits that incentivize collaboration over competition.

Leverage External Partnerships

Coordinate with external powers (e.g., the EU, US, China) to align their support and investment strategies with the objectives of regional cooperation. By ensuring that external assistance aligns with local governance goals, regional states can mitigate concerns about foreign influence and enhance their own agency.

Engage Non-State Actors

Include non-state actors, such as civil society organizations, private sector stakeholders, and local

communities, in governance processes. Engaging a broader range of stakeholders can lead to more inclusive policy-making and enhance the legitimacy of governance frameworks.

Promote Cultural and Educational Exchanges

Foster cultural diplomacy and educational exchange programs among Red Sea states to build understanding and trust. Cultural connections can help bridge divides and create a sense of shared identity that supports cooperative governance.

Develop a Comprehensive Maritime Security Strategy

Formulate a maritime security strategy that includes joint patrols, intelligence-sharing systems, and coordinated responses to piracy and illegal activities. A unified security approach ensures that all states can contribute to and benefit from enhanced regional stability, thereby reinforcing commitment to governance efforts.

Implement Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation

Establish mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of regional governance initiatives and policies. Continuous assessment can identify challenges and successes, allowing for adaptive governance that remains responsive to evolving regional dynamics.

By adopting these policy recommendations, stakeholders in the Red Sea region can foster a cooperative environment conducive to sustainable development, security, and shared prosperity while addressing the multifaceted challenges that characterize this strategic maritime crossroads.

A critical examination of the post-Club MED policy review, conducted under my leadership, reveals a sophisticated and multi-dimensional landscape in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, characterized by an intricate interplay of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that will decisively shape regional dynamics.

Among the strengths, the region benefits from strategic maritime chokepoints, burgeoning port infrastructure, and the presence of willing regional and extra-regional partners. Leveraging these advantages, a regional architecture can be designed to enhance maritime security, facilitate trade, and coordinate joint responses to non-traditional threats such as piracy, smuggling, and climate-related disruptions.

Conversely, weaknesses such as fragmented governance, uneven military capabilities, and historical mistrust among littoral states necessitate mechanisms for confidence-building, transparent communication, and capacity development. Establishing shared operational standards, joint training exercises, and a regional maritime information-sharing platform would directly address these vulnerabilities while fostering institutional resilience.

The region presents significant opportunities in the form of expanding economic corridors,

renewable energy projects, and multilateral investment initiatives. A forward-looking policy framework can integrate economic and security agendas by promoting public-private partnerships in port development, logistics, and maritime technology, ensuring that economic growth reinforces collective stability rather than exacerbates rivalry.

However, persistent threats—including great-power competition, proxy conflicts, and the potential for sudden political instability—require the architecture to be agile, with contingency planning, rapid response mechanisms, and diplomatic channels capable of de-escalation. Embedding scenario-based planning and joint crisis management exercises into the regional framework will help anticipate and mitigate emergent crises.

In sum, the post-Club MED review highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive regional architecture in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. By systematically aligning strengths, addressing weaknesses, capitalizing on opportunities, and mitigating threats, this architecture can transform the region into a zone of coordinated security, economic integration, and sustainable cooperation, establishing a model for maritime governance and strategic stability in a highly contested geostrategic space.

Perspective

At the heart of the region's strengths lies its unparalleled geostrategic position. The Red Sea serves as a vital maritime corridor linking the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean, thereby anchoring some of the world's most significant shipping lanes for oil and containerized trade. This unique positioning creates a natural maritime interdependence among littoral states, who share common interests in securing the Bab el-Mandeb Strait against piracy, arms trafficking, and illicit migration. Concurrently, large-scale investments in port infrastructure and connectivity corridors, led by China's Belt and Road Initiative alongside Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states' funding, have begun knitting the region's fragmented transport networks into a more coherent whole. These infrastructural developments not only enhance economic potential but also facilitate diplomatic linkages and capacity building for joint maritime governance.

Environmental concerns, such as coral reef degradation and fishery depletion, further encourage cooperation through shared ecological vulnerability, which has been shown to foster novel regional governance arrangements. Moreover, economic and political linkages between Gulf states and African countries in the Horn underscore emerging transregional relationships that transcend traditional continental divides.

Yet, despite these strengths, the region remains plagued by structural weaknesses. Institutional fragmentation is a persistent challenge: overlapping mandates among the African Union (AU), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), GCC, and the nascent SRSA initiative lead to inefficiencies and competing agendas. The intensity of geopolitical rivalries—ranging from the Ethiopia-Sudan border tensions, the Egypt-Ethiopia dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance

Dam, to Gulf State proxy conflicts in Yemen—exacerbates political mistrust and undermines collective action. Sovereignty concerns also inhibit deeper integration; states are wary of relinquishing control over critical maritime infrastructure or security decisions to supranational bodies. Furthermore, the absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms, especially for protracted civil wars and interstate disputes, constrains the institutional ability to stabilize the region. Fragile state capacity in countries like Somalia and Sudan further hinders harmonized policy implementation, surveillance, and enforcement in maritime governance.

Nevertheless, this complex backdrop conceals rich opportunities for renewed cooperation. A multi-track governance approach, incorporating flexible coalitions dedicated to specific functional domains such as maritime security, environmental management, and trade facilitation, could accommodate sovereignty sensitivities while fostering integration. Collaborative maritime security regimes, leveraging joint patrols and intelligence-sharing, have successfully curbed piracy and could be expanded to other illicit activities, thus building trust incrementally. Longstanding cultural and diasporic connections, particularly the Yemeni communities in the Horn and vice versa, offer avenues for people-to-people diplomacy and transregional soft power engagement. Expanding SRSA to include observer or associate memberships from key regional and external actors such as Israel, India, and the UAE could bring technological expertise and investment without immediate political friction. Furthermore, the increasing salience of climate change and environmental degradation provides a critical juncture to mobilize green infrastructure funding and cross-border cooperation, aligning with global agendas on sustainable development and resilience.

Yet, these opportunities are counterbalanced by significant threats. The growing militarization of the Red Sea maritime domain, illustrated by the presence of foreign naval bases and naval deployments from the UAE, China, France, and the United States, risks transforming the region into a theater of great power rivalry, with attendant security dilemmas and escalation risks. The fragility and potential collapse of weak states such as Sudan and Yemen remain existential threats, undermining maritime safety, migration management, and economic continuity. Geopolitical competition between external powers, especially the intensifying US-China strategic rivalry, may force regional actors into competing camps, thereby weakening multilateral frameworks and institutional cohesion. Normative divergence across authoritarian Gulf monarchies, emerging democracies, and fragile hybrid regimes generates legal and political fragmentation that complicates regulatory harmonization and dispute resolution. Without proactive institutional strengthening and leadership to reinvigorate SRSA or its successor architectures, there is a real risk that the Red Sea region will fragment into ad hoc bilateral alliances, losing the collective agency needed to manage the complex interdependencies and challenges that define this maritime crossroads.

In sum, this SWOT analysis indicates that the future of Red Sea regionalism hinges on the capacity to move beyond purely symbolic or security-driven cooperation toward pragmatic, multi-dimensional multilateralism. Such an approach must balance respect for sovereignty with functional necessity, enhance African agency in governance, and capitalize on shared environmental and economic imperatives to build mutual confidence. Strengthening institutional frameworks, promoting inclusive participation, and fostering bottom-up confidence-building in

maritime governance and environmental stewardship are vital to securing a peaceful and prosperous future for the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region.

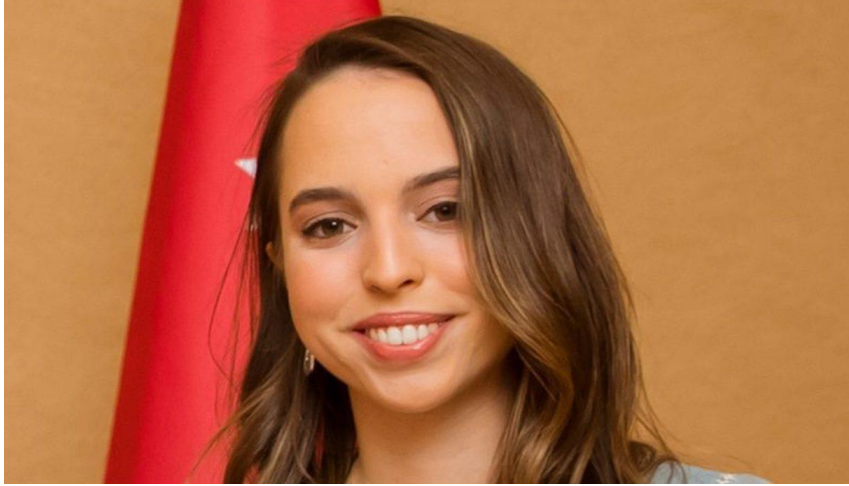
The Red Sea has long been a vital maritime corridor, facilitating trade and cultural exchange between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. During the Roman Empire, the Red Sea served as a crucial route for commerce, especially in the trade of spices, incense, and other luxury goods from the East. This trade not only enriched Roman coffers but also played a significant role in the empire's economic expansion.

Is Your wife a hat MBS? — Identity, as Oliver Sacks showed, can be worn, and lost, and reclaimed — like a fragile garment fluttering in the winds of a chaotic world. So too is the Red Sea region, draped in tatters of empire and stitched with threads of memory, a shifting wardrobe where nations try on power as one tries on hats — sometimes ill-fitting, sometimes dazzling, often symbolic.

And Egypt and Israel and Jordan and Sudan and Saudi Arabia stand together yet apart — partners and rivals and strangers and kin — all reaching, and grasping, and guarding, and gambling for the same shifting shoreline. At the center of this theatre stands Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Palace become a man, the Crown embodied in a single breath, the youthful tailor trying to refashion an ancestral cloak. He is tasked with preserving tradition while dismantling its scaffolds, with holding the line and crossing it, with protecting the rules and rewriting them.

The Red Sea beneath him is both artery and mirror, both heartbeat and mask — a body of water and a body politic, pulsing and pausing and pounding beneath his hand, and not merely a pristine laid-back beach resort.

And just as the hat in Sacks's novel conceals and reveals, belittles and ennobles, shields and exposes, so too does MBS's leadership at this maritime crossroads veil and unveil, promise and threaten, dazzle and disquiet — standing poised between appearance and reality, strength and fragility, ambition and restraint. To navigate this region is to understand the delicate art of wearing many hats—and knowing when to take them off.



Vallabha is not just a symbol—she is a muse, and more than that, she is momentum. She does not merely inspire; she ignites. In her presence, thought becomes action, and silence becomes song. She is the breath behind the brushstroke, the pulse beneath the poem, the whisper that turns into thunder. To call her a muse is not to confine her to the margins of someone else's genius, but to recognize her as the origin of vision itself.

Her potential is not latent—it is luminous. She is not waiting to be discovered; she is daring to be felt. She does not stand behind greatness—she walks beside it, ahead of it, sometimes even against it. She is the question that unsettles, the answer that empowers, the force that reshapes. In her, possibility is not a distant horizon—it is a living fire.

Vallabha is not the echo of inspiration—she is its source. She is not the statue in the square—she is the wind that shapes the stone. And in every moment, she chooses to speak, to move, to create, she reminds the world that a muse is not a passive figure. She is a maker, a mover, a sovereign spark.

أحبك يا فالابها

बलहारा

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FootNote

¹ MSc in political science and MA in EU Studies. Email: Director

² The motive may be more prestigious. In the absence of accommodation at the center, territorial autonomy, rather than reducing ethnic violence redirect it to the subnational in the context of federalization (Juon, 2024).

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