Report

Russia and the Red Sea since 2022

The Wartime Engagements of an Aspiring Major Power

| Ivan UK Kłyszcz |

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List of Abbreviations

CAR	Central African Republic
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
FSB	Federal Security Service (*Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации*)
GRU	Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (*Главное управление Генерального штаба ВС РФ*)
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
OFAC	Office of Foreign Assets Control (US Treasury Department)
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

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About the Author

Ivan UK Klyszcz

Dr Ivan UK Klyszcz joined the ICDS as a Research Fellow in September 2022. Previously, he was a full-time doctoral researcher at the University of Tartu, where he obtained his PhD in international relations. Dr Klyszcz's research is centred on issues of international security, namely, great power competition, the grand strategy of major powers, and Russian foreign policy. In recent years, Dr Klyszcz has investigated the drivers, methods, and impact of Moscow's global international relations – particularly with Africa, Latin America, and South Asia – and their implications for European strategy. In addition, he has studied Russian domestic politics, with a focus on centre-region relations, Chechnya, and the North Caucasus. Since 2019, he has published over 60 articles, including research reports, peer-reviewed articles, and policy memos, as well as delivered presentations at academic and policy conferences across Europe and North America. Dr Klyszcz has been quoted in international media such as *Al-Jazeera, BBC, France 24*, and *The Economist*. His work has been cited by peer researchers and attracted the interest of diplomats, governments, and major NGOs. Dr Klyszcz is a member of *PONARS Eurasia* and a frequent contributor to *Riddle Russia*.

Executive Summary

The Red Sea has become more important to Russia since 2022. Several Russian trade and sanctions evasion routes run through the Red Sea; Russian oil exports through the Suez Canal went from null at the start of 2022 to over 70% in 2024.[1] Diplomatically, the Kremlin perceives the region as relatively close and one where it can directly confront the west. Many long-standing partners to Moscow and Washington are found in the countries of the region, with Russia having a diplomatic presence in the area since the 18th century. Moscow perceives these conditions as conducive to sustaining its claims of being a major power. More immediately, the Kremlin aims to transform its relations in the Red Sea as a source of strategic depth, with reliable partners and security access, while denying access to its perceived western rivals.

To pursue these interests and claims, the Kremlin has deployed several measures relevant to the maritime domain in the Red Sea. One of the most visible ones has been the search for a naval base on the shores of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Ongoing since the 2000s, this search has involved at different times countries such as Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. As of the summer of 2025, claims of an imminent construction site in Port Sudan have been met with scepticism. Naval diplomacy, including port calls and training of naval officers for the countries of the region, has also been recurrent in Moscow's approach. Moreover, the much-publicised Russian grain donations have been seaborne and conducted with Russian-controlled vessels.

The most significant measure, however, took place in late 2023, following the start of the Hamas-Israel war. According to reports, the Russian military has supported the Iran-aligned and Yemen-based Houthi movement (Ansar Allah). The group, intent on attacking Israel, launched a military campaign to stop Red Sea shipping by targeting commercial vessels with missiles and boarding parties. Moscow quickly established contact with the top leadership of the group and reportedly delivered materiel and intelligence to support the campaign. The cooperation with the Houthis has served to assert Russia's global relevance, gain recruits provided by the group for its war in Ukraine, and disrupt what it perceives as US interests.

These elements do not render Moscow into a key regional player but help it sustain a presence of sorts. This pattern reflects what Samuel Ramani calls Russia's "virtual" major power status in Africa.[2] Namely, Moscow's claims to being a major power in the Red Sea are based on its potential for involvement (potential to build a naval installation, potential to counter the west), rather than fully deployed capacity. Because of this, the Kremlin's goal of gaining strategic depth in the region will be hampered by its own limitations. Still, combining sustained engagement and opportunism, decision-makers in the Kremlin might perceive that the Red Sea 'is going their way'.

Policymakers in the US, NATO, and other concerned parties should neither see Russia as a newcomer to the Red Sea region nor as a 'mover and shaker' of regional politics. Like in other theatres, rightsizing the Russia factor is essential. For the Red Sea region, countering Russian engagements and strategic communications requires a proactive approach. In the realm of grains, rival donation programmes can be expanded to capitalise on the west's advantages in terms of means. Naval diplomacy can also be enhanced, addressing the areas targeted by Russia, though without compromising fundamental values and established policies. Given its proactive security policy in the area, constant monitoring of Russian engagements with regional militaries will remain critical to detect advances in potentially disruptive moves (like the support for the Houthis) or measures of potential strategic significance (naval base opening).

[1] Reid l'Anson, "Update on Red Sea trade flow impacts," *Kpler*, 1 October 2024.

[2] Samuel Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent great power or bellicose pretender?* (Hurst Publishers, 2024).

Introduction

The 2020s so far have shattered many illusions about international security. Revisionist powers, changing alliance dynamics, simultaneous economic and geopolitical crises, technological innovation, and an ever-changing threat landscape have implications for every region of the world. One part of the globe especially afflicted by these trends is the Red Sea. In the 2020s so far, its littoral states feature major wars, food scarcity, and major power rivalry, all along a waterway through which 10% of the world's merchandise pass through. Given its significance and precarious safety, it is not a surprise that ten extra-regional powers have naval bases on the Red Sea shores. This report focuses on one element of this complex setting: Russia's present-day engagements with the region.

The Red Sea connects with several core aspects of Russian security policy

The significance of this body of water is evident as it connects with several core aspects of Russian security policy. It is through there where the Baltic and Black Sea fleets can support the Russian Pacific fleet and vice versa. The Red Sea is also the necessary passage to the Indian Ocean, where Moscow routinely engages in naval exercises with India and Iran. Considering Moscow's post-2014 'pivot to the east', and the gradual redistribution of energy and grain exports to Africa and Asia, this waterway has become an essential venue for Russian sea power. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has only increased the value of these connections for the Kremlin.

Russian maritime and naval policies present a paradox for observers, amplified further by the evolution of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On the one hand, Russia has never counted among the sea-faring nations of the world. In fact, Russia – be it Muscovy, the Romanov Empire, the Soviet Union, or the Russia of today – has been regarded as the land power *par excellence*. On maritime affairs, its vast landmass is seen as an obstacle; rather than focusing on projecting power far away, protecting the territory is already enough of a challenge. In general, the sea is portrayed in Russian culture as a source of threats rather than of opportunities.[3] Along those lines, after several years of difficult battles, Ukraine's most unqualified success in its fight for survival has been pushing back against the Russian Black Sea Fleet, even opening a shipping lane to connect its agricultural industry with world markets. In other words, waging a successful blockade has been beyond the ability of the Russian navy of today.[4]

On the other hand, Russia remains "a sea power of a sort."[5] Access to the high seas (or, as the Russians refer to them, the "world ocean") has been a priority for Russia due to the country's historical dependence on foreign markets for its commodity exports.[6] Since the reforms of Peter the Great, the navy became a prized asset in the country's armed forces. Aware of the prestige of a capable fleet, Russian rulers have invested and reinvested in these capabilities, with the most recent wave happening in the 2000s. As explained further below, Russia's military resurgence has been accompanied by large investments into naval assets, including vessels capable of projecting power in the Red Sea. In addition to this build-up, Russian naval policy is adaptable. Despite setbacks in the Black Sea since 2022, Russia has relocated its naval assets from the

[3] Andrew Lambert, "Russia and some principles of maritime strategy," in *The sea in Russian strategy* (Manchester University Press, 2023), 38.

[4] The maritime dimension of the war has been widely explored. For a short approach to the lessons from it, see: Joshua C. Huminski, "Learning the right lessons from Ukraine's naval war," *Engelsberg Ideas*, 6 June 2024.

[5] Geoffrey Till, "Russia: a sea power of a sort?," in *The sea in Russian strategy* (Manchester University Press, 2023).

[6] Andrew Lambert, "Russia's long war with the maritime powers," *Engelsberg Ideas*, 3 December 2024.

Crimean Peninsula to the eastern shore of the sea. This effort has involved developing a new naval base in Ochamchire, in occupied Abkhazia (Georgia).[7]

In addition to the build-up of capabilities, Russian naval policy is adaptable

Today, the long-distance capabilities of the Russian navy are limited. As Michael Kofman argues, their primary missions are to 'fly the flag' and to retain Russia's claim to being a capable – if not major – sea power. This aspect of naval diplomacy is a key mission of the Russian navy, together with nuclear deterrence, territorial protection, and offensive operations at war.[8] An expression of this ambition is the long-distance missions that the Russian navy has pursued overseas. Just in the last few years, the Russian navy has carried out exercises in the Arabian Sea, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Caribbean, off the coast of Cuba.[9]

Another expression is the docking and basing agreements with foreign states. The Russian navy today can dock in foreign harbours from Libya to Nicaragua. Beyond the diplomatic element of these naval visits, port access sometimes translates into operational advantages. For example, access to Guinea's port of Conakry has allowed Russia to transport nearly 300 armoured vehicles for its expeditionary forces in the Sahel.[10] Basing agreements are even more consequential, but they also demonstrate Russia's limitations. At different points during the Cold War, Moscow possessed naval installations of size and capacity across the world. Up until 2025, the Russian Federation of today had only one overseas naval base – in Tartous, Syria.

Nevertheless, the spectre of Russian naval basing abroad has resurfaced in the last ten years. Indeed, reports have emerged in the international press suggesting that Moscow was considering opening naval bases in places around the world, from Venezuela to Vietnam.[11] Ultimately, evidence of Russia pushing for these bases was slim. The only area where evidence is more consistent is in the Red Sea. Since the first mention of Moscow's new ambitions to gain a Red Sea base in 2008, to writing in the summer of 2025, Russia has been in constant dialogue with local actors to secure a new basing agreement for its navy. This shows Russia's ambitions to be seen as another major player in the zone, joining the United States, China, and the European Union in having a base in the area. Simultaneously, it also shows Moscow's limitations in these efforts since, despite their long duration, they remain fruitless as of writing.

After 2022, however, Russia's continued investment in the Red Sea has presented a second paradox. Indeed, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – and ongoing as of the summer of 2025 – has resulted in Moscow directing all its attention towards the war, high-stakes diplomacy with the west, and sustaining the Russian economy despite new international sanctions. Nevertheless, Russian vessels continue to navigate the Red Sea; news reports suggest that Moscow is pursuing a base in Sudan, and the diplomacy with the countries of the area has not slowed down. More worrying still is the reported military support that Russia has provided to the Houthi movement in Yemen, allegedly consisting of arms, targeting data and intelligence, and potentially other war materiel, too. So, why is Russia continuing to build a diplomatic and military presence in the Red Sea despite its current focus on Ukraine and the west? To answer this question, this report explores Russia's foreign policy towards the Red Sea, as a region of strategic importance for the country's commercial, diplomatic, and naval interests. The post-2022 context is essential as all Russian foreign policy goals must be interpreted as shaped by the imperatives of the largest land war in Europe since the

[7] "Russia's New Permanent Naval Base in Ochamchire: When Will It Be Built?," *Rondeli Foundation*, 25 January 2025.

[8] Michael Kofman, "Evolution of Russian naval strategy," in *The sea in Russian strategy* (Manchester University Press, 2023), 95.

[9] Sergio Cantone, "Moscow revives gunboat diplomacy with nuclear submarine visit to Cuba," *Euronews*, 12 June 2024.

[10] The 300 figure is my tally drawn from various press reports. See: "How Guinea became a gateway for Russian weapons to reach the Sahel," *RFI*, 20 June 2025.

[11] Stephen Blank, "Latin America Emerges as a Russian Theater of Operations," *Jamestown Foundation*, 24 October 2019.

Second World War. In addition to asking *why*, this report addresses several descriptive questions:

- How does Russia's civil and military establishment frame the significance of the Red Sea for Russia, Ukraine, and the west, especially since 2022?
- What is the evolution of Russia's ties with Red Sea countries since 2022 in the diplomatic, economic, military, and security (e.g., intelligence) realms?
- How is Russia adapting its diplomatic, military, and naval posture to the changing politics of Eritrea and internal conflicts in Ethiopia and Yemen?
- What was the impact of the Houthi movement blockade on Russia's foreign policy?

History weighs on these questions, as many of the engagements of the past have demonstrated Russia's capacity to build a presence in the region, including after severe setbacks. Focusing on maritime engagements and the political background behind them, this report provides a concise summary of Russia's interactions with the countries of the area. Indeed, the late Romanov Empire carried out a few naval operations in the region, setting a precedent for the importance of the waterway for Russian national security. The Soviet Union pursued a sustained and strategic presence there, marking a high point in relations with the region in the 1970s. This history demonstrated to Moscow the potential role of the Red Sea as a source of strategic depth for operations in the broader area, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Middle East. After a lull in the 1990s and 2000s, since the 2010s, Russia has been rebuilding its presence, though from a different resource base and outlook. After the background section, the results of the research are presented, with over half of the report's length dedicated to describing the post-2022 period in Russia's engagements with the Red Sea and its littoral states. To close, the report offers concrete recommendations for US, NATO, and other policymakers concerned with Russia's role in Red Sea security.

Since the 2010s, Russia has been rebuilding its presence, though from a different resource base and outlook

1. Research Design and Methodology

Interest in Moscow's engagements with the Red Sea region is not new. Since the Cold War, several monographs, scholarly articles, trade books, research reports, and journalistic accounts have explored Russian relations with the broader Middle East in detail.[12] However, few of these have addressed Moscow's interests in the Red Sea itself, with most attention dedicated to the countries of the region, with the naval dimension appearing as only part of the picture. In addition, geographic specialisation, on either Africa or the Middle East, has tended to break the Red Sea along its eastern and western shores, obscuring dynamics that impact both shores.

To answer the question of why Russia has engaged the Red Sea region since 2022, this report takes on a constructivist approach. Loosely based on the work of Robert Jervis and Alexander Wendt, this research proceeds from a framework that emphasises the role of perceptions and subjective factors in international relations.[13] Indeed, the baseline assumption is that the international system 'is what states make of it'.[14] In this case, to understand Russia's motivations in engaging the Red Sea, this report assumes that the Kremlin's policy towards the region reflects both its perception of the region itself and its self-perception, that is, as a would-be major power.

The Kremlin's policy reflects its self-perception, that is, as a would-be major power

[12] Consult the List References section for further sources.

[13] Robert Jervis, *Perception and misperception in international politics: New edition* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

[14] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics," *International organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

Analysing Russia's Red Sea policy presents several challenges. First, Russia's political system is closed and opaque, with many strategic documents and policy narratives acting as covers for back-room dealings. Second, the same applies to several countries of the Red Sea region, where the state digitisation, freedom of speech, and government transparency are low. In that sense, Russia's engagements with the region are 'doubly' covered by opacity.

To translate these insights into a viable methodology, I proceed with a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative textual analysis and quantitative content analysis. Then, I make use of expert interviews to obtain additional insights, especially on how Moscow is perceived in the region, and to fill other gaps. Finally, I triangulate the results of these methods by making extensive use of primary and secondary sources obtained online and in libraries of Addis Ababa, a significant centre of regional studies and expertise.

The two text-based methods deployed draw from a large sample of Russian-language texts. The sample period encompasses the time between 4 April 2022 and 30 December 2024. The sources are, namely, the official website of the Russian President (kremlin.ru), the Lower Chamber of the Parliament (duma.gov.ru), the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mid.ru), the state-controlled think tank Valdai Club (valdaiclub.com), the state-owned magazine *Russia in Global Affairs* (globalaffairs.ru), and the state newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta* (rg.ru). Since these are all either state or state-controlled portals, they are taken as relevant sources to obtain the perspective of the Russian government as expressed across various levels of government. These range from the top (the Kremlin) to the level of implementation (the ministries, the Duma) to propaganda and messaging (state-controlled think tanks).

The sample texts were obtained by searching the keywords "Houthis," "Suez Canal," "Red Sea," and "Gulf of Aden." Using these keywords, the search resulted in a total of 862 texts. Subsequent treatments for relevance led to a sample of 115 texts with a combined total of over 90 000 words. To analyse this final sample, I deployed inductive coding to identify the key themes from the state-approved narrative on the Red Sea.[15] Then, I proceeded to count the appearance of keywords across time to identify the evolution of narratives, their emergence and decline.

The underlying assumption for deploying text-based methods is that a systematic and comprehensive analysis of these sources can provide a basis to analyse state perceptions and intentions.[16] While this assumption is not unassailable, it does bring novelty to the topic as previous analyses have overwhelmingly relied on tracing Russian moves. This report builds on their insights but addresses the role of perceptions in a systematic way.

Other than the deployment of text-based research methods, this report draws from a variety of primary and secondary sources. Several of them were found online and in the Ethiopian National Library and Archives, in Addis Ababa (consulted in January and February 2025). Online primary sources included the official governmental websites of the Red Sea region countries and of the Russian President (kremlin.ru). An important secondary source includes journal and magazine articles written by Russian naval officers, for example, *Naval Writings* (*Морской Сборник*), among others.

Finally, several expert interviews were carried out as part of this project. These were semi-structured and held between January and May 2025. Three of them were online, with the remainder being in-person in Addis Ababa. The rationale behind expert interviews (as opposed to interviews with policymakers) is that experts are defined by the relevance of their knowledge to defining policy debates. In that sense, their knowledge and their position in society are important.[17] While most experts interviewed preferred anonymity, all the individuals who participated were selected because of their deep familiarity with topics such as Russian engagements with the Middle East, Red Sea geopolitics, and international security in the broader Red Sea region. One interviewee is a European diplomat based in Addis Ababa.

[15] Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Sage Publication, 2021).

[16] Audinet Maxime, "'Down with Neocolonialism!' Resurgence of a Strategic Narrative in Wartime Russia," *IRSEM*, 2024.

[17] Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (eds), *Interviewing experts* (Springer, 2009).

2. Background: Russia in the Red Sea up to 2021

Compared with Europe and northeast Asia, the Red Sea area is of secondary importance for Moscow. However, the region does feature several key episodes of Moscow's foreign policy, long-standing partners, and broader patterns of deep engagement, including in the naval domain. The accumulated legacies of cooperation, confrontation, messaging, and withdrawal are all relevant to how Moscow acts in the region today and how it is perceived by local actors. In that sense, Russia's engagements with the region were neither a Cold War phenomenon nor did they cease after 1991. To provide a concise background on these past engagements, this section will focus on Russia's historic relations with Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen.

Russia's engagements with the region were neither a Cold War phenomenon nor did they cease after 1991

The Suez Canal has been an inevitable feature in Russian regional engagements

2.1. From the Tsars to the 1940s

The Romanov Empire did not develop a consistent naval policy that incorporated the Red Sea. Yet, the Suez Canal has been an inevitable feature in Russian regional engagements as it is necessary to understand the region's geopolitics and the role of major powers therein. Indeed, without the Suez Canal, the Red Sea would remain a marginal waterway for global trade. Completed in 1866, the canal has been at the centre of global politics many times, even though the 1888 Convention of Constantinople rendered it into a neutral zone. Signed by the major powers (including the Romanov Empire), the Convention is arguably valid today despite repeated violations.[18]

Nearby, the Tsars carried out an abortive attempt at establishing an African colony, also with access to the Red Sea. Indeed, notables close to the Romanov court patronised an 1889 expedition meant to establish a colony in the nominally French-controlled coast of the Red Sea (what is Djibouti today). In the area, the expedition was interpreted by local colonial administrators as a first step in a Romanov partnership with France to compete with British and Italian interests in Sudan and Somalia, respectively. However, the thwarted implementation of the emerging Romanov colony led to the enterprise never prospering. Writing in the 1950s, Czesław Jeśman referred to the mission as a "futile endeavour."[19] However, the incident did prompt new interest across the Tsar's court for the region, which led to subsequent engagement with the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II. Romanov support for the Ethiopians in the 1898 battle of Adwa represented a high point in the influence over the country.[20] This project of influence over Ethiopia ended with the 1905 Russo-Japanese War (1904–05).

While the 1905 war was disruptive, it did not end St Petersburg's interest in the wider region. During the Russo-Japanese War, the Russian navy engaged in cruiser warfare by launching commercial raiding missions in the Red Sea. This was part of the broader strategy to pressure the Japanese economy. At the time, the Russian ships, the *Petersburg* and the *Smolensk*, operated between the Zubair group of islands, Hodeida, and Port Sudan.[21] This episode demonstrates that Russian naval officials have kept this waterway as a viable area of operations and as a potentially impact zone for Russian security. Nevertheless, the First World War and the subsequent Russian Civil War meant that Russian policymakers could not develop a consistent approach to the region until the post-war period.

Egypt and Ethiopia – or, more precisely, their predecessor states – are among the oldest

[18] Benny Spanier, "Freedom of Navigation in the Suez Canal and the Channels: Law of the Sea," in *The Suez Canal: Past Lessons and Future Challenges* (Springer, 2023), 117-133.

[19] Czesław Jeśman, *The Russians in Ethiopia: an essay in futility* (Chatto and Windus, 1958), 12–14.

[20] Jeśman, *The Russians in Ethiopia*, 96.

[21] Patrick J. Rollins, "Russian Commerce Raiders in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, 1904," *Naval War College Review* 47, no. 3 (1994): 86–109.

diplomatic partners of Russia outside of Asia and Europe. Indeed, the first contacts with both come from the times of Muscovy. The Romanov Empire played a role in important historical episodes of both countries. In the 1770s, St Petersburg supported the Beylik of Egypt in their shared fight against the Ottomans. In Ethiopia, the Romanov Empire provided military supplies for the country's resistance against Italian conquest, including in the Battle of Adwa. This episode – including the Russian role – is a key moment in Ethiopian history, memorialised to this day. The Soviet Union did not follow suit in the 1930s with a similar support to Addis Ababa, but Moscow never recognised the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. In turn, the Ethiopian monarchy had a profound distrust of the Bolsheviks and sympathised with the White Russian movement, hosting Romanov exiles in the aftermath of 1917.[22]

In comparison to Egypt and Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen are relatively recent partners to Russia

In comparison to Egypt and Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen are relatively recent partners to Russia. Independent from the Ottomans since 1918 and seeking to hedge against British influence, the Kingdom of Yemen signed a cooperation agreement with Moscow in 1928. During the Second World War, independent Yemen remained neutral, though the country did fight on the Arab side in the 1948 Arab-Israel war.[23] Sudan did not feature prominently in the Romanov or Soviet foreign policy until the country's independence in 1956.

2.2. From the 1940s to the early 1990s

During the Cold War, and especially since the 1960s, the Red Sea was an essential channel for Soviet ambitions in the Indian Ocean.[24] At the time, Moscow sought to deny Washington and its allies access to harbours across the region. By 1974, support for Israel and other geopolitical factors resulted in 11 Indian Ocean countries closing their ports to the US Navy, leaving only Bahrain, Iran, Mauritius, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka open to the US fleet.[25] Soviet vessels could reach from the east, through the Strait of Malacca, and from the west, from the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Another aspect was the strategic depth offered by a Red Sea presence. As the following will show, the Soviet bases and partners in the area provided essential support for Moscow's Middle East policy at different stages of the Cold War. While today Russia does not have the scope to replicate the USSR's ambitions in the broader region, these experiences – all well within living memory – continue to shape Russian perceptions about the potential of this body of water.

While Russia-Egypt engagements are among the oldest diplomatic ties Russia holds, the Cold War has left the deepest imprint on the relationship of today. After the 1956 nationalisation of the Suez Canal, Cairo became a close Soviet partner. Moscow's involvement in Egypt gained a large scale after the Six-Day War (1967), as Soviet advisors greatly contributed to reforming the Egyptian military. Soviet assets (especially anti-air defences) added to Egypt's military strategy during the war of attrition (1967–73). Moreover, the USSR had a wide impact on the formation of the Egyptian air force through training and procurement. At its peak, Soviet presence may have reached as many as 20 000 personnel.[26] This arrangement lasted until the end of the war between Egypt and Israel in 1973 and Cairo's new alignment with Washington following the 1978 Camp David

[22] Some references addressing these periods include: Robert G. Patman. *The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa: The diplomacy of intervention and disengagement* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); G. Bruce Strang (ed), *Collision of empires: Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and its international impact* (Ashgate, 2013).

[23] See: John M. Willis, "The Salafī Imāmate: Moral Reform and Anti-Imperialism in the Mutawakkilite Kingdom," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2018): 47-65. For a broader history of Yemen in global relations, see: Laurent Bonnefoy, *Yemen and the world: beyond insecurity* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

[24] Michael McDevitt, *Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean: The Past as Prologue?* (CNA, 2018).

[25] McDevitt, *Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean*, 10-11.

[26] Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967-1973: The USSR's Military Intervention in the Egyptian-Israeli Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 74, 173.

Accords. Despite the Soviet withdrawal, Moscow remained engaged in the zone through its diplomatic corps and its UN Security Council (UNSC) seat. For example, in 1973, the UN mandated that a multinational force should protect the Sinai Peninsula and maintain the peace between Egypt and Israel. Since the USSR – seeking to shield its Syrian ally – would veto an UN-led mission, Egypt, Israel, and the US established a peacekeeping organisation to fulfil the mandate.[27]

Upon gaining independence, Khartoum embraced a non-aligned policy that would, nonetheless, rely on the USSR to develop its military. The high point in cooperation came in the 1970s. According to one estimate, in 1970, there were over 2 000 Soviet and Eastern Bloc advisors in the country. Sudan's pro-Arab policy – especially since 1967 – led to close alignment with Moscow. This partnership fluctuated but came to an end by 1977. For Khartoum, Moscow had become too influential in the area, risking encirclement by Soviet-backed Ethiopia and Libya. The result was the expulsion of all Soviet advisors in Sudan. Relations further deteriorated after the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979, as Khartoum supported the Mujahedin. In turn, Sudan entered a period of pro-US alignment, especially as the Gorbachev-era Soviet foreign policy limited resource transfers to entice new Soviet partners.[28]

On the other side of the Red Sea, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represented one of the 'bourgeois', west-aligned Arab powers. In the Soviet narrative, the Gulf monarchies represented western interests, with Riyadh being among the most significant actors in that 'camp'. This double estrangement (both bilateral and in the name of regional Soviet partners) led to Soviet-Saudi relations being mostly antagonistic during the Cold War. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led to widespread rejection of Moscow in the Arab world, with Riyadh playing a key role in supporting the Mujahedin.[29]

In Eritrea, the most tangible resonance from the Cold War for the present day comes from the continued rule of President Isaias Afwerki. Leader of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) since 1970, Eritrean state policy since independence to this day cannot be separated from Afwerki.[30] Throughout the Eritrean liberation struggle, the Soviet Union was admired as an ally in the anti-colonial struggle, and the EPLF itself was conceived in Marxist terms. As Gaim Kibreab wrote about that era, "[l]oyalty to the Soviet Union and its allies was a core belief among Eritreans within the liberation movement."[31]

Having been one of the Allies in the Second World War, Ethiopia maintained positive relations with the Soviet Union. The contrasting ideological backgrounds (an absolute monarchy and a revolutionary Communist state) did not impede contacts between Addis Ababa and Moscow, especially by the way of the Orthodox Church.[32] Already then, the Horn of Africa was a key Cold War theatre as the US Kagnew intelligence station rendered the country into a valuable partner to Washington. The Soviets, for their part, developed close relations with the Siad Barre dictatorship in Ethiopia's rival Somalia, which embraced a Socialist rhetoric and Soviet-style military development.[33]

In 1974, the situation changed as the Haile Selassie monarchy fell to a military coup led by Gen Mengistu Hailemariam. Mengistu then installed the Provisional Military Administrative Council (known for short as the

[27] This is today the Multinational Force and Observers, a force dedicated to protecting navigation around the Sinai Peninsula, with personnel from countries around the world. Russian peacekeepers are not part of the Force.

[28] Peter Malcolm Holt and Martin W. Daly, *The history of the Sudan: from the coming of Islam to the present day* (Routledge, 2019), 137.

[29] Annalisa Perteghella and Valeria Talbot, "Russia's Relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey: Friends in Need, Friends Indeed?," in *Russia in the Middle East and North Africa* (Routledge, 2020), 84–85.

[30] Interview with Martin Plaut.

[31] Gaim Kibreab, *From Ally to Enemy: The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa, a Failed Intervention* (Red Sea, 2021), 4.

[32] Tobias Rupprecht, "Orthodox internationalism: state and church in modern Russia and Ethiopia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 1 (2018): 212–235.

[33] Somalia, one of Africa's two nation-states, has large irredentist claims over the Somali regions of western Ethiopia. This nationalist cause was dissimilar to the rhetoric of Soviet-style Socialism concerning nationalism, but it has been a feature of Somalian politics since independence.

Host country	Locations	Time of operations	Notes
Egypt	Alexandria, Cairo*	1967–72	Alexandria served Soviet vessels going to the Red Sea
Ethiopia	Asmara*, Nokra	1977–91	Submarine-capable
North Yemen	Hodeida	1970s–80s	Soviet-built, deep-water harbour since 1961
Somalia	Berbera, Hargeisa*	1970s	
South Yemen	Aden, Socotra[a]	1971–80s	Submarine-capable

* Airbase. a never completed.

Table 1. Soviet bases on or close to the Red Sea. *Source:* The author.

Council or *Derg* in Amharic) to rule the country. Of Socialist inclinations, the Derg and Moscow quickly became partners at the expense of other Communist movements in the region, including the EPLF and Somalia.[34] Initially, the Soviets sought to solve the Ethiopia-Somali conflict by proposing the formation of a Horn of Africa federal state under Socialist leadership. This *pax sovietica* project never came to fruition as, sensing opportunity, Mogadishu launched an attack on Ethiopia in 1977.[35] The war quickly turned Moscow against its former Somali ally, as the Soviets chose to side with the Derg over Siad Barre. Like in Egypt and Sudan, Soviet military advisors left Somalia and poured into Ethiopia. At its height, Eastern Bloc personnel in Ethiopia reached up to 12 500, mostly Cuban.[36]

The pax sovietica project never came to fruition

On the other side of the Red Sea, independent North and South Yemen pursued different approaches to their relations with Moscow. Soviet-aligned South Yemen was the Derg's best partner in the neighbourhood, while the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) was seen as adversarial.[37] While South Yemen remained engaged with the USSR throughout its existence (1967–91), North Yemen oscillated in its approach to Moscow, remaining mostly western-aligned. In the 1980s, Sana'a sought to balance between the two superpowers, signing a treaty of "friendship and cooperation" with the Soviets in 1984, assessed by the US Directorate of Intelligence at the time as "more symbolic than substantive."[38] In turn, Moscow wished to maintain positive relations with the Yemen Arab Republic and to favour republican forces, seen as more conducive to Soviet foreign policy than their monarchist rivals.[39]

Throughout these engagements, the Soviet Union developed naval bases across the region. Each period of close alignment with Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Yemen (and Somalia) offered the Soviets access to foreign harbours, including arrangements to develop naval basing. These bases gave the Soviets what may be termed 'strategic depth' by providing options and alternatives to guarantee their operational scope. This applies both to operations in the broader area, in the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Middle East. For example, by 1967, the Soviet air bases in South Yemen served as the launchpad for missions in support of Egypt during the war of attrition.[40] While in operation, the Soviet

The bases gave the Soviets what may be termed 'strategic depth' by providing options and alternatives to guarantee their operational scope

[34] Kibreab, *From Ally to Enemy*, 4.
[35] Kibreab, *From Ally to Enemy*, 21.
[36] Kibreab, *From Ally to Enemy*, 58.
[37] Kinfe Abraham, *Ethiopia and the Arab World* (EIIPD Press, 2004), 102, 159.
[38] Directorate of Intelligence, *USSR-North Yemen: Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation* (General CIA Records, FOIA Reading Room, 23 October 1984).
[39] Leonid Issaev and Andrey Korotayev, "Russia's policy towards the Middle East: The case of Yemen," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 3 (2020): 3.
[40] Ginor and Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967-1973*, 59.

airbase in Cairo served as a supply point for air missions to revolutionary Algeria.[41]

These bases came and went according to the changing politics of their host countries. For example, in 1977, an old Italian prison on the island of Nokra became the basis for a Soviet naval installation in the Dahlak archipelago, then part of Ethiopia. Dock number PD-66 opened on the island in 1980, and it would host missions with operational (in Ethiopia's war against the EPLF) and strategic value (hosting nuclear submarines).[42] The base closed in 1991 as the EPLF made new gains in the area and the Derg lost grip of the country.

During their years of close cooperation, Egypt provided the Soviet Union with access to several bases throughout the country, including close to the Red Sea. Much of Moscow's operations ran out of the Cairo west base, which was occupied and upgraded by the Soviets. The base became a command centre but also an intelligence station, as part of the Soviet mission in Egypt at the time was to monitor the US Sixth Fleet and wage a KGB-led covert war against Israel.[43]

The end of Soviet basing agreements in the area happened gradually since the mid-1980s. By that time, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan were ambivalent in their relations with Moscow. Alienated by the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, none of them offered basing options for Soviet naval or air assets. Considering these limitations, the more favourable political conditions of the southern Red Sea countries were essential for Soviet planners. However, under the policy of Communist Party Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev, Moscow gradually disengaged from that area, too.

Under Gorbachev, Moscow gradually disengaged from the southern Red Sea area

Military disengagement was the most impactful for Moscow's partners in the southern Red Sea. Crucially, in Ethiopia, the Derg constantly bargained with Moscow for the latter to increase its arms transfers to the embattled junta, including to fight against Eritrean and other rebels.[44] In 1990, the rebelling Eritrean forces carried out a large assault on the coastal town of Massawa, employing a naval force, too. According to Russian sources, this development threatened the future of the Nokra base and risked involving Soviet forces further. So, on 12 February 1991, the Nokra was handed over to Ethiopian forces, and the Soviets evacuated, first to Yemen and then to Vladivostok. The disengagement only deepened in the early post-Cold War years. In 1994, Russia evacuated its Yemen base in Aden, ending its naval presence in the area for the foreseeable future.

2.3. From the late 1990s to 2014

Russian foreign policy from the late 1990s to the mid-2010s was marked by a fluctuation between confrontation and cooperation with the west, especially with the US. In parallel, interest in Moscow for Africa and the Middle East increased gradually from its nadir in the early 1990s. The goal of those engagements was to demonstrate independence from the west, occasionally to pressure Washington and its allies, and to claim Russia's continued relevance in world affairs. Given its location and sensitive role in world trade, this broader trend also carried increased Russian interest in the Red Sea, culminating in the open ambition to rebuild a naval presence since the late 2000s.

Interest in Moscow for Africa and the Middle East increased gradually from its nadir in the early 1990s

Despite the lack of sustained co-operation at the time, Egypt remained cordial, though superficial in its engagements, with only tourism standing out until the 2010s. For the Kremlin, re-engaging Cairo

[41] Ginor and Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967-1973*, 61.

[42] Kibreab, *From Ally to Enemy*, 180.

[43] Ginor and Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967-1973*, 61, 234.

[44] Throughout its existence, the Derg fought against rebellions in Eritrea, Oromia, and Tigray, with a coalition of these and other forces taking down the junta and capturing Addis Ababa in 1991.

was essential as part of its re-entry into the Middle East in the 2000s, and for the Egyptian government, Russia appeared as a viable partner for foreign policy diversification. The 2013 coup d'état proved a decisive moment, as the traditional western partners of Egypt appeared to hesitate to back the new al-Sisi regime due to its human rights record. In turn, reinforced authoritarian tendencies brought a new impulse to the relationship between Cairo and Moscow. Finally, personal rapport appears to have been a factor facilitating contact between the two highly personalistic regimes.[45]

The goal was to demonstrate independence from the west, occasionally to pressure Washington and its allies, and to claim Russia's continued relevance in world affairs

In Sudan, relations with Russia reached their nadir as the Islamist foreign policy of Khartoum at the time led Moscow in 1993 to accuse the government of supporting independent *Nokhchii* (Chechnya).[46] Moreover, at the time, Russia generally avoided close partnerships with the regimes in open conflict with the west, such as North Korea and Iran. The same applied to Islamist-ruled Sudan as well as the emerging rule of Omar al-Beshir. The country remained marginal to Russian interests, especially when compared to Egypt and Ethiopia, two larger markets and well-trodden terrains for Russian diplomats. Still, Russia – together with China – used its UNSC veto to shelter Sudan as early as the 1990s. In the coming years, arms sales and cooperation in the oil sector rendered Khartoum and Moscow closer, with Russia accused of thwarting accountability in Darfur.[47]

On the other side of the Red Sea, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Moscow reached their nadir in the 1990s. Not having recovered after the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, the two wars with Chechnya damaged Moscow's standing with countries across the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia. While the rejection of Russia was less severe in the Second Chechen War (1999–2001), several attempts at a reset in relations failed to result in enhanced cooperation. Also weighing against a rapprochement is the mutual suspicion, especially as the Kremlin believes that Riyadh is a patron of Muslim extremism inside and close to Russia.[48] The revolts and revolutions of the 2011 Arab Spring led Moscow and Riyadh to develop a closer mutual understanding thanks to their shared preference towards anti-democratic regimes, as both intervened against democratic uprisings in recent years.[49] Still, in Syria, even before Moscow's 2015 intervention, the two countries supported opposite sides, ensuring mistrust would endure.

The Arab Spring led Moscow and Riyadh to develop a closer mutual understanding thanks to their shared preference towards anti-democratic regimes

Despite having been *de facto* Cold War enemies, Moscow and Eritrea – now an independent state – established diplomatic ties early in 1993. The Russian embassy opened in Asmara in 1994, and the Eritrean one did so in Moscow in 1996. The rapid recognition of Eritrea reflected Russia's overall foreign policy at the time, oriented towards cooperation with the west on global issues. (Not far from the area, the Russian navy contributed to the US-led Iraq blockade of the early 1990s.) It also reflected Yeltsin's enduring decision to differentiate his foreign policy from Soviet patterns, including by reaching out to former Cold War rivals.[50]

A critical episode happened in the 1998–2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Prompted

[45] Hebatalla Taha, "Strategic Partners or Tactical Allies?: A Decade of Egypt–Russia Relations," *SAIIA Occasional paper* 359 (2024).

[46] Mohammed H. Sharfi, *Islamist foreign policy in Sudan: between radicalism and the search for survival* (Routledge, 2019), 17.

[47] "Russia opposes tough UN sanctions against Sudan," *Sudan Tribune*, 30 March 2005.

[48] Perteghella and Talbot, "Russia's Relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey," 85.

[49] Among others, Saudi Arabia prevented a revolution in Bahrain, and Moscow intervened in the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

[50] On the shift in Russian Africa policy under the early Yeltsin years, see: Samuel Ramani, *Russia in Africa* (Hurst, 2024), 36.

by a dispute over the designation of the border, the war began after mounting tensions over the administration of the Badme area. For Eritrea, it pushed the country further into isolation and precipitated the consolidation of the Issaias Afwerki dictatorship. For Ethiopia, the war ended its access to the Eritrean harbours of Assab and Massawa. Russia played a discrete role in the conflict. During the 1990s, the post-Socialist Ethiopian state and independent Eritrea failed to create air forces capable of waging a conventional war, so they reached out to external partners to acquire these capabilities. While the Eritreans sourced MiGs and pilots from Ukraine, the Ethiopians did so from Russia. Although perceived as pro-Ethiopian, Moscow did sell arms to Eritrea, including anti-tank weapons.[51] In fact, according to reports, arms procurement was the main mission of the first Eritrean ambassador to Russia, Naizghi Kiflu (1996–2001). Kiflu has been referred to as Afwerki's '*eminence grise*', which hints at the high importance of the Moscow embassy for the Eritrean regime at that time.[52] While Ukraine and Russia were among other suppliers to the warring parties, only they provided pilots.[53] The upshot was that both Ethiopia and Eritrea came to regard Russia as a potential military provider of last resort, especially in crisis situations.

It was in relations with Yemen where Russia's new interest in the Red Sea was the most direct from early on

In Yemen – now a unified state – Russia maintained its closest contacts among politicians from the former Southern Yemen, as well as with Saleh's government. It was in relations with Yemen where Russia's new interest in the Red Sea was the most direct from early on. Indeed, it was in October 2008 when Sergey Mironov, then Chairman of the Russian Federation Council, raised the prospect of Russian vessels using Yemen's ports. This was followed by anonymous reports in Russia hinting at the Kremlin's potential interest in naval basing in the country.[54] Indeed, Aden's favourable location has made it a recurrent site for foreign basing in the past. The context was important in driving Russian interest; the country had just fought a war with Georgia in August 2008, which caused tensions between Moscow and the west. While engaging Yemen, however, the Kremlin did not want these improvements to come at the expense of its relations with Saudi Arabia, Yemen's rival.[55] Russia initially relied on former officials of Southern Yemen and those who participated in relations with the Soviet Union to then ground its influence on playing a role in the mediation process of the 2012–14 political crisis in the country.[56]

In parallel with the new stated goal to secure a base in the area, Russia began to cooperate with NATO in anti-piracy missions

In parallel with the new stated goal to secure a base in the area, Russia began to cooperate with NATO in anti-piracy missions in the Red Sea. Upon the start of the piracy crisis in the Gulf of Aden in 2008, Russia joined the NATO-led operation with vessels from its Northern Sea and Pacific Ocean fleets.[57] As part of the Russian operations in the area, several Russian vessels were liberated from pirates. This context was also relevant to the first appearance of mentions concerning naval basing in Yemen.

2.4. From 2014 to 2021

Reflecting its resurgence as a belligerent major power with global ambitions, during the 2010s and early 2020s, international media and public figures worldwide began to pay more attention to Moscow's global foreign

[51] Kidist Mulugeta, "The Ethiopian-Eritrean War of 1998–2000," *Regional security in the post-cold war horn of Africa* (2011): 31.

[52] Léonard Vincent, "Eritrea: Naizghi Kiflu, the dictatorship's eminence grise," *Reporters without Borders*, May 2008.

[53] Aleksandr Pinchuk, "Командировка в Африку [Business trip to Africa]," *Red Star*, 11 April 2009.

[54] Samuel Ramani, "The Russian Role in the Yemen Crisis," *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis* (2020) 83.

[55] Ramani, "The Russian Role in the Yemen Crisis," 82–83.

[56] Ramani, "The Russian Role in the Yemen Crisis," 85.

[57] Vladimir Pryamitsyn, "Военно-Морскои Флот России Вносит все Возрастаиущии Вклад в Борбу с Пиратством в Индиском Океане [The Russian Navy Is Making an Ever-Increasing Contribution to the Fight against Piracy in the Indian Ocean]," *Voyennaya Letopis Otechestva*, no. 10 (2018): 6.

policy. Crucially, the Russian occupation of Crimea, intervention in Syria, and the visibility of the Wagner Group raised Moscow's profile as a disruptive actor with a long reach. Like in the Cold War, Russian interest in the Red Sea grew along with the expanded ambitions in the Indian Ocean, especially in maritime cooperation and trade with the countries of the area.[58]

Like in the Cold War, Russian interest in the Red Sea grew along with the expanded ambitions in the Indian Ocean

After 2014, Egypt remained a positive partner to Russia. Cairo's foreign policy since 2013 has been shaped by attempts at neutrality to avoid additional criticisms from the international community. This has benefited Moscow and has been conducive to sustained engagement even after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[59] Cooperation with Egypt would proliferate in these years on several topics, including Russia-Africa relations. Indeed, Egypt was the co-host of the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit, which marked a symbolic turning point in a more focused Russian engagement with the continent. In defence matters, Egypt remained a major arms buyer up until 2020. Between 1992 and 2024, Egypt accounted for 3.3% of all arms exported by Russia, measured by value.[60] Heavy dependence on Soviet and Russian models and systems has locked the country to Russian suppliers. Egypt stands out as Russia's largest African trade partner, taking up 26.87% of all trade with the countries of the continent in 2021.[61] Finally, Egypt and Russia have had moments of alignment on regional issues, including the Libyan and Syrian civil wars.[62]

Despite these advantages, the Egypt-Russia relationship has not acquired the depths witnessed at different points of the Cold War. The main divider is Cairo's relationship with – and, to an extent, dependence on – Washington. While Egypt consistently engages non-western powers, these engagements are calculated not to alienate its partners in Europe and North America, which are its largest sources of trade and security cooperation. This pattern has continued after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and does so to this day.

Russia's strategic re-entry into Sudan was initiated by Prigozhin.[63] According to John Lechner, el-Bechir had been searching for military instructors since at least 2015, when support from Iran became scarce. In May 2017, el-Bechir established contact with Prigozhin in Khartoum, where the oligarch was visiting, seeking business opportunities. The bargain struck with al-Beshir involved Wagner Group training for the Sudanese armed forces in exchange for access to the country's gold trade. The Russian military may have even supported this encounter for it to serve as a building block towards Russia gaining a naval base in Port Sudan.[64] In either case, in November 2017, el-Bechir travelled to Moscow and signed an agreement with Putin to establish a Russian naval base on the Sudanese coast. What followed was the consolidation of the Wagner Group network in the country, especially with all the main intelligence agencies of Sudan.[65]

The 2019 revolution was a blow to the Wagner Group operations in the country as many counterparts to Prigozhin fell from power. In turn, the prospect of a naval base became dimmer. *En revanche*, Prigozhin began to cooperate with Mohammed 'Hemedti' Dagalo, the commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The relationship quickly prospered in mining and in the security sphere.[66] In parallel, the 2021 coup d'état presented a new opportunity for Moscow to capitalise on its long-standing relations with the country's military establishment, many of whom were trained in the Eastern Bloc. Yet, the coup also created more uncertainty about the future of the Russian naval installation in Port Sudan.

[58] Samuel Ramani, *Russia's Growing Ambitions in the Red Sea Region* (RUSI, 2021), 5.

[59] Taha, "Strategic Partners or Tactical Allies."

[60] "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," SIPRI databases, accessed in September 2025.

[61] "Decode Global Trade. Unlock Strategic Insight," OEC data, last updated 16 September 2025.

[62] Taha, "Strategic Partners or Tactical Allies."

[63] Whether Sudan was a Prigozhin initiative that he later 'sold' to the Kremlin or he was acting on the Kremlin's behalf, it is not known definitively.

[64] John Lechner, *Death Is Our Business. Russian Mercenaries and the New Era of Private Warfare* (Bloomsbury, 2025), 73–74.

[65] Lechner, *Death is Our Business*, 96.

[66] Lechner, *Death is Our Business*, 96–97.

Ethiopia under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed fluctuated in its relations with the west, from initially heavily courting western capitals to then facing isolation after the Tigray War. While the US was supportive of the 2022 settlement, Addis Ababa resented the sanctions imposed, the expulsion from the Africa Growth Opportunities Act, and the cessation of European cooperation funds. In turn, Ethiopia's leadership was appreciative of Chinese and Russian positions at the UNSC, which – from Addis Ababa's perspective – left the widest scope for the country to wage the war in Tigray.[67] Eritrea, for its part, was the first to send officials to the occupied Ukrainian territory of Crimea in 2014.[68]

The intervention in Syria made Moscow an unavoidable actor in the area, with finding a modus vivendi becoming a priority for both Russia and Saudi Arabia

The 2014–21 period saw several breakthroughs in the Russia-Saudi Arabia relationship. The 2015 Russian intervention in Syria made Moscow an unavoidable actor in the area, with finding a *modus vivendi* becoming a priority for both countries. In turn, Moscow did not stand by its anti-interventionist policy in 2015 upon the launch of the Saudi intervention in Yemen. In other words, the Kremlin chose to lambast the west's operation in Libya but refrained from doing so with Riyadh's long war in Yemen.[69] By 2017, both Moscow and Riyadh demonstrated their ability to compartmentalise their discord over Syria to engage in cooperation in defence, energy, and regional affairs.[70] Especially important was the establishment of the OPEC+ format, in which Russia and Saudi Arabia act as key players, coordinating their policies in the energy market. Moreover, Moscow would benefit from tensions in the US-Saudi relationship, such as in the aftermath of the 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi.[71] Still, entrenched mistrust, Russia's growing relations with Iran, and Saudi long-term commitments with Washington made this relationship "extremely volatile and contingency-driven."[72]

In Yemen, Russian decision makers did not anticipate either the Houthis' 2014 capture of Sana'a or the 2015 Saudi intervention in the war. Still, Moscow retained its diplomatic representations in Aden and Sana'a, expecting the Houthis to remain a force in Yemeni politics thereafter.[73] As the civil war unfolded, Saleh aimed to receive comprehensive backing from Moscow along the lines of Syria's Bashar al-Assad, though Moscow was not forthcoming. In hindsight, it was in the Saleh-Houthi partnership that Moscow developed an affinity for the latter. By 2016, commentators saw Russia's constrained sympathies for the Houthis.[74] In 2017, changing Saudi policy towards Syria led to greater convergence with Russia there, culminating in the closure of Moscow's Sana'a representation.[75] In 2018, the Houthis made another effort to reach out to Russia.

By that point, Russia's position with all relevant actors – the Yemeni parties, Saudi Arabia, Iran – was stronger than before. Based on these contacts, Arab players in Yemen tended to overestimate Moscow's influence on the Houthis, which remained low at the time. Like before, the Kremlin maintained better relations with southern political forces, themselves aligned with the United Arab Emirates (UAE).[76] By 2021, Moscow sought to differentiate itself from other actors in the Yemen war by adopting a 'neutral' stance, in dialogue with all non-western parties, with Russian politicians even condemning that year's Houthi strikes against Saudi Arabia.[77]

[67] Sizo Nkala, "No dog in this fight: Interrogating Ethiopia's calculated neutrality towards the Russia-Ukraine war," *Contemporary Security Policy* 45, no. 4 (2024): 8.

[68] "High-level Eritrean delegation headed by Foreign Minister Osman Saleh conducting visit in Crimea," Ministry of Information, Eritrea, 6 June 2014.

[69] Issaev and Korotayev, "Russia's policy towards the Middle East," 7.

[70] Perteghella and Talbot, "Russia's Relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey," 85–88.

[71] Ramani, "Russia's Growing Ambitions in the Red Sea Region," 12.

[72] Perteghella and Talbot, "Russia's Relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey," 95.

[73] Ramani, "The Russian Role in the Yemen Crisis," 85–86.

[74] Diana Alghoul, "Russia's role in the Yemen conflict," *Middle East Monitor*, 22 January 2016.

[75] Ramani, "The Russian Role in the Yemen Crisis," 90.

[76] Issaev and Korotayev, "Russia's policy towards the Middle East," 8.

[77] "Russia slams Houthi movement's attacks against Saudi Arabia – official," *TASS*, 17 October 2021.

In these manoeuvres, Moscow has sought to use its position to marginalise western players without illusions of its own capacity to bring about a resolution to the war.[78]

Moscow has sought to use its position to marginalise western players without illusions of its own capacity to bring about a resolution to the war in Yemen

During the 2014–21 years, there were several episodes that hinted at Moscow's continued interest in Red Sea basing. According to reports, in 2014, Moscow approached Djibouti with a request to gain naval access in the country. In the 2010s, the small northeast African country was already a major naval hub, with busy harbours, a privileged location close to the Bab el-Mandeb strait, and the host of the naval bases of several countries, notably the US and China (since 2017). The scope of Russian engagements with Djibouti is not known, but reports suggest that high up-front costs and pressure from Washington were involved in thwarting Moscow's goal to gain a base there.[79]

In those years, Moscow also approached the authorities of Berbera (Somalia), Massawa and Assab (Eritrea), and Aden (Yemen) for basing options. In Yemen, the Aden base would be preferable as it indeed hosted Soviet forces in the past, but high up-front costs and limited efficiency deterred those ambitions.[80] By 2017, the deal with Omar al-Beshir emerged as the most feasible option. At that time, el-Beshir was embattled, having alienated his previous western partners and facing increased opposition at home. The 2019 revolution and the subsequent coup d'état that brought the Sudanese military to power made it necessary for Russia to remain engaged in order not to lose its basing deal.[81]

In 2020, Russia signed an agreement with Khartoum to develop a logistical base in Port Sudan. Better than nothing, the location of Port Sudan is, nonetheless, unfavourable for serving missions in the Indian Ocean, and building the installation would require extensive infrastructure development.[82] Despite this apparent commitment, Russia continued to maintain an open dialogue with Eritrea concerning naval basing, a trend that continued after 2022 (see below).

Finally, despite having no bases in the region and ending anti-piracy cooperation with NATO, the Russian navy continued operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. These were naval protection missions, often carried out with Chinese, Indian, Iranian, and Pakistani partners. Exercises such as the Aman-2021 were framed by the Russian participants as part of efforts to secure commercial shipping in the area.[83] Other arrangements proliferated, such as the 2017 security cooperation with Egypt, creating potential routes for engaging in maritime security.[84] At the time, Russia's external trade did not rely as much on the Red Sea, though commercial ties with China still compelled Moscow to maintain a security interest in the area.[85]

Despite having no bases in the region and ending anti-piracy cooperation with NATO, the Russian navy continued operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea with Chinese, Indian, Iranian, and Pakistani partners

[78] Oved Lobel, "Russia is astutely playing the players in Yemen," *ASPI The Strategist*, 29 April 2021.

[79] Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Signs New Lease to Keep Strategic Military Installation in the Horn of Africa," *The New York Times*, 5 May 2014.

[80] Issaev and Korotayev, "Russia's policy towards the Middle East," 11.

[81] Ivan U.K. Klyszcz, "Russia's Thwarted Return to the Red Sea," *Orient XXI*, 10 November 2020.

[82] Ramani, "Russia's Growing Ambitions in the Red Sea Region," 9; "Many Obstacles Remain For Russian Naval Base In Sudan," *Africa Defense Forum*, 18 March 2025.

[83] Iu. Kuroedov, "За кормои два океана [Two oceans behind the stern]," no. 11(2096): 51–54.

[84] Ramani, "Russia's Growing Ambitions in the Red Sea Region," 7.

[85] Issaev and Korotayev, "Russia's policy towards the Middle East," 11.

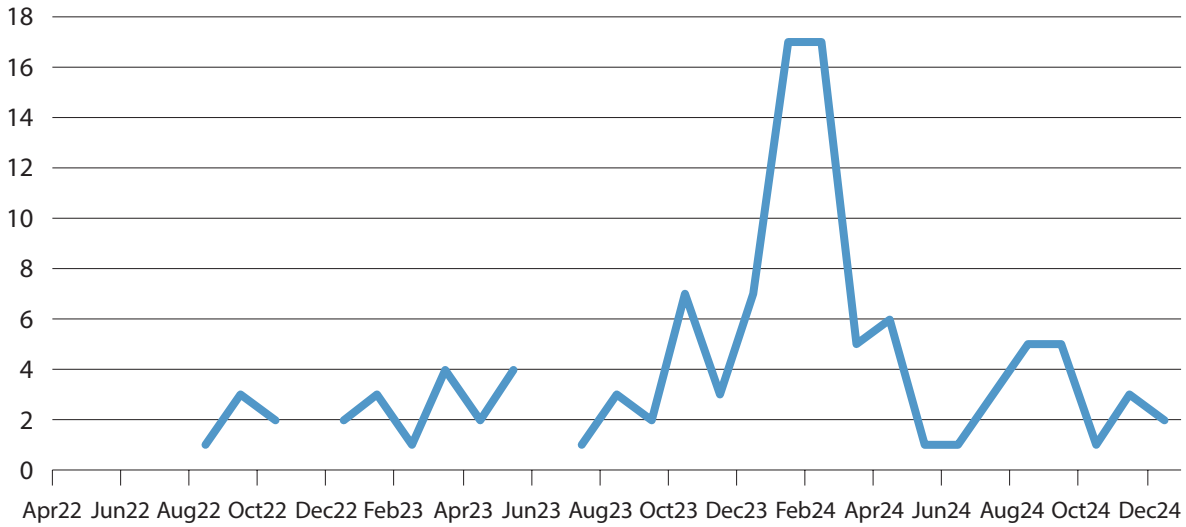

Figure 1. The distribution across time of the 115 texts in the sample analysed. *Source*: The author.

3. Results

3.1. Russian Perceptions of the Red Sea since 2022

The textual analysis deployed demonstrates two different periods in Russian narratives about the Red Sea: before and after the October 2023 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, peaking in January and February 2024 (Figure 1). The start of the fighting in Israel and Gaza, as well as the Houthi actions in the Red Sea, sparked considerable new attention to the Red Sea region across all Russian state-controlled sources consulted.

In the 115 texts analysed, Eritrea and Ethiopia are mentioned only in two each. In contrast, Yemen is mentioned in 29 different texts in the sample. The lack of mentions of Eritrea and Ethiopia hints at a gap in knowledge among Russian elites. Stated otherwise, these two countries are treated as a topic of specialist concern and not a topic for Russia's general concern. In turn, the relatively large presence of Yemen in the sample is due to the US-UK operations in the region, especially in January and February 2024. This only highlights the extent to which the Red Sea region becomes important for Russia inasmuch as it becomes part of broader major power politics. This is reflected in how the region is covered by official sources (Table 2).

The Red Sea region becomes important for Russia inasmuch as it becomes part of broader major power politics

Official sources address the Red Sea along four recognisable patterns or narratives. These are described below and can be labelled the 'geopolitics', 'economics', 'major powers', and 'war' narratives (Table 1). Before 2024, the narrative on the Red Sea was dominated by economic issues, with other narratives rising in priority later. Describing these narratives can help bring together an overall dispersed picture of Russian perceptions of the Red Sea.

Geopolitics narrative	Economics narrative	Major power narrative	War narrative
• Russian security policy • Major power actions	• Russian economic statecraft • Sanctions • Trade routes	• Russia as a great power	• The Red Sea region as a zone of fighting • US-UK operations in Yemen
Throughout 2022–24			After October 2023

Table 2. The four main themes of Russia's narrative about the Red Sea. *Source*: The author's own elaboration based on the analysis described in pages 10 and 11 of the present report.

3.1.1. Geopolitics

The geopolitics theme was the most common of all. In concrete terms, the narrative relies on descriptions of the actions and intentions of foreign actors, as well as of ongoing crises, with explanations often drawing from realist assumptions. In that sense, this narrative presents the mainstream of the Russian analytical community concerning international relations. The geopolitics narrative often reflects an understanding of Russian security policy, including threat assessment and foreign policy goals. By adopting these two lenses, the narrative often centres on the role of major powers and exhibits the biases of Kremlin foreign policy (i.e., opposition to the US, sympathy to the "Axis of Resistance"). For example, a January 2024 text at the presidential administration-connected Valdai Club stated about the Houthi blockade and the coalition response:

> The situation in the Red Sea is directly linked to the development of the crisis in Palestine. The operation in the Gaza Strip has triggered retaliation by a number of Muslim armed groups against the US and other Israeli allies. If the situation is not resolved, other countries in the region could become involved in the Middle East crisis.[86]

Despite the apparently neutral tone of this narrative, it sometimes relies on debatable explanations and assumptions about the facts on the ground. For example, one 2022 text in the sample addressed Türkiye's security policy in the Red Sea, hinging on the questionable allegation that Ankara actively seeks a naval base in Sudan:

> Türkiye is also eyeing the possibility of opening a naval base on Suakin Island in Sudan. At one point, the island was an important naval station in Ottoman geography to secure the Hijaz region (now in Saudi Arabia) from raids from the Red Sea. Suakin occupies a strategic position opposite Saudi Arabia across the Red Sea and Egypt to the north, putting Türkiye in a position of strategic competition with regional powers.[87]

In addition to erring into the speculative, the geopolitics narrative often relies on well-established tropes in Russian state communications. Portraying the US as a fundamentally aggressive actor is found repeatedly in the texts analysed. For example, at a Foreign Ministry's briefing on 26 January 2024, the ministry's spokesperson responded to a question about the US-UK Red Sea operation with the following:

In addition to straying into the speculative, the geopolitics narrative often relies on well-established tropes in Russian state communications

> It is not just an attempt to divert attention, but rather an additional act to implement the policy of chaos and destabilise the situation in the region. This is consistent with the typical approach of the United States, as they aim to take certain actions that align with their current interests (according to the US understanding). Unfortunately, this is their traditional pattern.[88]

Overall, the geopolitics narrative reflects common themes in Russian state communications and security policy, as well as common analytical frameworks (realism, geopolitics) of the Russian analytical community. In that sense, the Houthi blockade could be assessed as a local war with global implications, but is portrayed in the Russian geopolitical narrative as a global crisis defined by major power involvement.

3.1.2. Economics

The economics theme is focused principally on the essential role the Red Sea plays in international trade. Like with the geopolitics narrative, the economics narrative reflects an understanding of Russian economic statecraft and security policy, especially concerning the centrality of energy in the country's finances. The Kremlin's response to the sanctions imposed on Russia since 2014, and especially since 2022, colour the economics narrative

[86] "Валдайский клуб проведёт дискуссию, посвящённую эскалации в Йемене и Красном море [Valdai Club to hold a discussion on escalation in Yemen and the Red Sea]," *Valdai Club*, 26 January 2014.

[87] Denis Mirgorod, "Турция – на пределе «жёсткой» силы [Türkiye - at the limits of 'hard' power]," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 4 April 2022.

[88] "Брифинг официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой, Москва, 26 января 2024 года [Official MFA Briefing by Maria Zakharova]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 26 January 2024.

about the Red Sea. Here, the Suez Canal is often mentioned as a key point for Russian energy exports. For example, a Russian analyst quoted at length on 10 January 2023 at the Russian government-edited *Rossiskaya Gazeta* discussed Russian state policy concerning energy policy:

> For example, the transhipment of oil from one ship to another at sea. It is no coincidence that in mid-December, there was a significant increase in the amount of Russian oil being shipped by sea without an endpoint. By 20 December 2022, more than half of all tankers leaving with Russian oil from Arctic, Baltic, and Black Sea ports were heading through the Suez Canal without a final destination.[89]

The Kremlin's response to the sanctions imposed on Russia since 2014, and especially since 2022, colour the economics narrative

This understanding of Russian economic policy gained new relevance after the Houthi attacks:

> But these [sea-based energy] cargoes were shipped mainly via the old route from western Russian ports. Pipeline infrastructure cannot be rebuilt overnight, and it was designed to deliver oil to Baltic and Black Sea ports. Naturally, logistical costs have increased dramatically. They increased even more after the conflict in the Middle East escalated, forcing many carriers of Russian oil to abandon the delivery route through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea in favour of a longer route around Africa.[90]

Several articles mentioned the Suez Canal as an infrastructure project that allowed its major power sponsors to change the world. The context for this was a few items that mention the Suez Canal in reference to the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project. Here, one common comparison – and denuded of the grandiose rhetoric – is the repeated claim of the allegedly shorter transit times for merchandise going from Asia to Europe using the INSTC. So, Putin himself stated to potential investors on 16 March 2023:

> "I'm telling you for real: think about it [investing in the INSTC], it's a good project. It is promising, stable and effective [*маржинальный*]," the president persuaded the business community and compared the project of a new route from Russia to the Persian Gulf with the route through the Suez Canal.[91]

The project was first mentioned in 2002, as part of the Kremlin's growing interest in Eurasian connectivity, but never enjoyed broad interest from international firms or from partner countries. Only after 2014 did international sanctions increase the Kremlin's interest in the project, with 2022 being the watershed year for the corridor. As of 2025, it has been hard to gauge the extent to which the corridor is functional. Most of the Russian trade still relies on other routes.

3.1.3. Major power

The major power theme is oriented towards portraying Russia as one of the great powers in the world of today, a common trope in Kremlin communications. In the Russian narrative about the Red Sea, the major power theme tended to focus on the country's supposed capacity to face its alleged peer powers, namely the US and China. Within this framework, the legacy of the Suez Canal is tangible in that it represents a project with historical consequences, driven by the foreign policy of a major power. This association was explicit when addressing the INSTC:

The major power theme tended to focus on the country's supposed capacity to face its alleged peer powers, namely the US and China

> "We support this project, Iran supports this project, Azerbaijan supports this project. It is very interesting not only for us, but for all participants of world trade, because it is a significant addition to the Suez Canal and the Black Sea straits. It makes the route cheaper, which means that the final price of goods will be lower," Putin said. He is confident that the corridor "will work just like the Suez Canal, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles."[92]

[89] Sergey Tikhonov, "Россия будет искать новые способы поставки нефти на мировой рынок [Russia will look for new ways to supply oil to the world market]," *RG*, 10 January 2023.

[90] Sergey Tikhonov, "Нужны ли России новые нефтепроводы на Восток [Does Russia Need New Oil Pipelines to the East]," *RG*, 14 April 2024.

[91] Aysel Gereykhanova, "Путин в цифрах рассказал, как складывается ситуация в российской экономике [Putin told in figures how the situation in the Russian economy is developing]," *RG*, 16 March 2023.

[92] "Путин посоветовал российским бизнесменам, куда можно хорошо вложить деньги [Putin advised Russian businessmen where they can invest money well]," *TASS*, 16 March 2023.

Despite the lack of references in the sample, the idea of Russia projecting power to the Red Sea is relatively commonplace in the Russian military. In turn, Russian capabilities are limited, and especially so after 2022. From the point of view of local actors, Russia's capacity to shape developments in the Red Sea region is assessed on these realistic grounds.[93] Within this framework, Russia is portrayed not as a would-be hegemon, but as a capable partner in a multipolar world:

The idea of Russia projecting power to the Red Sea is relatively commonplace in the Russian military

> Contrary to Washington's plans, the Ukrainian crisis has led to deeper cooperation between Russia and the Arab world, as the latter has chosen the path of constructive partnership with Moscow. The Arab world has matured and has become more aware of its own interests and better able to distinguish between friends and foes in a multipolar world where it is no longer possible for one dominant power to prevail.[94]

3.1.4. War

The war theme consisted principally of descriptions of the war in Yemen after October 2023. Indeed, prior to this date, the Russian narrative on the Red Sea did not contemplate any of the other conflicts in the region, such as, for example, the Sudanese civil war. The theme of war tends to use a factual tone and focuses on descriptions of fighting and its aftermath. Despite the seemingly even-handed tone, the theme tended to focus on US-UK actions, presenting the Houthi's campaign entirely as reactive.

If Russia were to obtain a naval base on the Sudanese shore, it would be primarily because of the Sudanese civil war

The war narrative emerges after the launch of the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023. Before that, the Red Sea region was not portrayed by the sources used as a zone of war or fighting. Indeed, the geopolitics theme, while sometimes using a sensational tone of conflict among major powers, did not involve the description of wars in the region. Indeed, the Sudanese civil war (ongoing since April 2023) is absent. The Russian media and official sources have tended to compartmentalise this war from the Red Sea region. If Russia were to obtain a naval base on the Sudanese shore, it would be primarily because of the Sudanese civil war, so its exclusion from the Red Sea narrative is unexpected. At the same time, most of the fighting is in the centre, east, and south of Sudan, with the coast and Port Sudan relatively spared by the fighting.

Also absent in Russia's Red Sea narrative is the Tigray war. Indeed, that war featured the active involvement of Eritrea, as Asmara entered the war against the Ethiopian province of Tigray on the side of Addis Ababa.[95] The war did not carry immediate dangers to Red Sea security, but it created longer-term risks. Indeed, the war did have spillovers, such as in Sudan. Stated otherwise, there is limited evidence that the Tigray war shaped the Kremlin's views on the Red Sea. In contrast, the Sudanese civil war did shape Russian narratives about the Red Sea, especially due to the naval basing agreements with the authorities of that country.

3.1.5. Assessment

The four official Russian narratives about the Red Sea, documented between the start of 2022 and the end of 2024, reveal a few points about Russian perceptions of this region. First, Russia's engagements with the Red Sea are closely related to the core of the Kremlin's foreign policy. This is why the emphasis of the narrative on the region has been on major powers, sanctions evasion, and upholding Russia's claims to major power status. The fact that these mainstream topics define the narratives on the Red Sea suggests that Moscow perceives the region as another arena for its global foreign policy. Its distinct interests in the region are thus linked to this core policy direction. The spike in texts relevant to the Red Sea between December

[93] Informants 6, 7.

[94] Nurkhan El-Sheikh, "Арабы и молчаливая поддержка России [The Arabs and Russia's silent support]," *Valdai Club*, 31 January 2023.

[95] For an authoritative account of the war, see: Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan, *Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War* (Hurst Publishers, 2023).

2023 and March 2024 coincides with the US-led operations to deter the Houthis, which reinforce the assessment that Russia's attention to the region is bound to major power politics.

Russia's engagements with the Red Sea are closely related to the core of the Kremlin's foreign policy, with the emphasis on major powers, sanctions evasion, and upholding claims to major power status

Second, Russia's perception of the region is blind to certain smaller, local actors. Civil societies – such as in Israel, Sudan, or Yemen – receive no attention despite their roles in their respective regions. Israel and the Houthis are relatively smaller actors, but their relationship with the major powers makes their appearance commonplace in the texts analysed. There is also selectivity when it comes to the conflicts to highlight. While local scholars and analysts emphasise the connection between security in the Horn of Africa and in Yemen, the fighting in Ethiopia – that followed the Tigray war – received no attention in Russian official communications. This selectivity reflects a longer trend in the Kremlin's communications, namely, of focusing on major power politics and de-emphasising the sovereignty of smaller states.

Third, the impact of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is visible concerning sanctions and relations with the US. The economics narrative described above hinges on the impact and potential evasion of sanctions. The rising role of the Red Sea for the Russian economy is visible in the increased attention given to the energy trade passing through there, especially in 2022 and 2023. At the same time, common tropes used by the Kremlin in the context of Ukraine are repeated in the context of the Red Sea. Namely, the accusation of the US being an aggressive actor has the centre stage, especially after 2024. Russia is then portrayed as one among the major powers, capable of major undertakings (e.g., the INSTC) and of countering Washington's foreign policy.

Common tropes used by the Kremlin in the context of Ukraine are repeated in the context of the Red Sea

In sum, the Kremlin's interest in the Red Sea is circumscribed to what it sees as more important and urgent matters, namely, relations with the great powers and being perceived as a major power. This confirms assessments made in the recent past that Russia has no regional policies but only a global foreign policy, one that is presumptive of Moscow's major power status.

3.2. Russia's Diplomatic, Economic, and Military Policies

Since 2022 and as of writing in the summer of 2025, Russia's global foreign policy has experienced various transformations. Overall, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 increased the importance of the Red Sea for Russia.[96]

Russia has no regional policies but only a global foreign policy

First, the loss of European energy markets has pushed Russian companies to seek new buyers, many of which can be reached only by sea. These changes took time to consolidate. According to estimates by Reid l'Anson, Russian sea-based energy trade increased after 2022, with special importance for the Red Sea. Crucially, between January 2022 and August 2024, Russia's share of the total oil transit through the Suez Canal jumped from just above 0% to almost 70%. In 2024, 83% of oil flows departing from western Russia have transited through the Suez Canal.[97] This increased trade reflected, in part, the limitations of Russian energy exports to China – the key energy consumer – and the more significant role of India as a buyer of Russian oil. In turn, the strategic value of this trade has reaffirmed the importance of anti-piracy operations for Russia (see below).

[96] This assessment was shared by informant 6.

[97] L'Anson, "Update on Red Sea trade flow impacts."

	ES11/1	ES11/2	ES11/3	ES11/4	ES11/5	ES11/6	ES11/7
Egypt	For	For	Abstain	For	For	For	For
Eritrea	Against	Against	Against	Against	Against	Against	Against
Ethiopia	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain
Saudi Arabia	For	For	For	For	For	For	For
Sudan	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain
Yemen	For	For	Abstain	For	For	For	Abstain

Table 3. Voting pattern of the Red Sea states in several UNGA resolutions critical of Russia's war against Ukraine. *Source:* Author's compilation based on UN News data.

Second, the rapid spike of international sanctions on Russia as retaliation for its war of aggression has been driving Moscow to lean on foreign partners to address its industrial gaps. China's large and diverse industrial base has been the main supporter of Russia's economy, and increasingly of its military industry.[98] Similarly, sanctions evasion schemes have relied on exploiting permissive jurisdictions, leading to western-made components and products arriving in Russia continuously since 2022.[99] As a connection to Asian markets, the Red Sea has been a conduit for these inputs. BRICS enlargement and the renewed interest in the INSTC have raised the possibility of Moscow pushing for the corridor to extend into eastern Africa, including the Horn.[100]

Third, uneven support from governments worldwide encouraged the Kremlin to continue investing in global diplomacy, including in Africa and the Middle East. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) voting patterns of the Red Sea countries are seen as an opportunity in Russia (Table 3), warranting additional diplomatic resources in the region. The vote pattern has remained consistent across the years, from 2022 (ES11/1 to ES11/5), 2023 (ES11/6), and 2024 (ES11/7).

During 2022 and 2023, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov engaged in several diplomatic tours in the two regions, visiting nearly every Red Sea country. The Russian special representative to the Middle East and Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov, visited each of them several times since 2022. More broadly, Russia has been expanding its regional presence by opening new embassies and consulates, diverting trade to these regions, and tapping into local influence networks to evade sanctions and to disseminate propaganda. In 2024, BRICS enlargement included Ethiopia and Egypt.

Russia has been expanding its regional presence to evade sanctions and to disseminate propaganda

Saudi Arabia has also been invited to the group but reportedly has been 'on the fence' about joining.[101] The enlargement of the organisation is yet to result in an enhanced Red Sea cooperation, though the region is relevant to the group. In the joint declaration following the 2024 Kazan BRICS Summit, Red Sea security was listed as a topic of interest. The text makes an explicit reference to the issue of freedom of navigation:

> We stress the importance of ensuring the exercise of navigational rights and freedoms of vessels of all states in the Red Sea and Bab Al-Mandab Strait, in accordance with international law. We encourage enhanced diplomatic efforts by all parties to that end, including by addressing the causes of the conflict, and continued support for dialogue and Yemen's peace process under UN auspices.[102]

Fourth, the full-scale invasion and the subsequent disruption of Black Sea trade

[98] "China has become the most important enabler of Russia's war machine," *The Economist*, 19 June 2025.

[99] Yevheniia Martyniuk, "Zelenskyy: Russian missiles and drones still packed with Western tech – and still killing Ukrainians," *Euromaidan Press*, 28 June 2025.

[100] Informant 6.

[101] Pesha Magid, Maha El Dahan, and Manya Saini, "Saudi Arabia sits on fence over BRICS with eye on vital ties with US," *Reuters*, 8 May 2025.

[102] The Kremlin, *Kazan Declaration Strengthening Multilateralism For Just Global Development And Security* (Kremlin, 23 October 2024).

routes revealed the extent to which Russia (and Ukraine) had become an essential agricultural exporter. After a significant decrease in output in the 1990s, by the mid-2010s, the Russian primary sector had come back into the focus of state policy. Part of the motivation to develop this sector came from the 2014 sanctions over Russia's first invasion of Ukraine, in part to compensate for the partial loss of European agricultural imports and to earn hard currency. By 2023, Russia had emerged as the world's largest wheat exporter by tonnage.[103] Thanks to certain competitive advantages and favourable market conditions, Russian grain managed to acquire a large share of the African and Middle Eastern markets, and Russian fertilisers also became indispensable for several states. Red Sea countries were especially affected by the 2022 disruptions: Egypt (80%), Somalia (100%), and Sudan (80%) were highly dependent on wheat from Russia and Ukraine. Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Yemen are also reliant on Russian agricultural products (including fertilisers) for their yearly needs. By contrast, nearly all grain imports to Saudi Arabia come from the EU.

For the Kremlin, grain and fertilisers have been a connector to the Red Sea region

For the Kremlin, grain and fertilisers have been a connector to the Red Sea region, one that has a distinct naval component. The disruptions to the Black Sea grain trade caused by Russia's invasion raised accusations of Moscow using hunger as a weapon to pressure the west to reduce its support for Ukraine. Seeking to respond to this accusation, the Russian government made several grain donations to countries around the world, including to Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Yemen. The announcement of these donations was highly publicised by the Kremlin as they were construed into a narrative of Russia being a responsible major power, and to deflect accusations of using hunger as a weapon.[104] The implementation of these donations reflects this concern: rather than make donations through multilateral organisations, the Russian government has organised direct deliveries of wheat using Russian-controlled vessels.[105] Many times, the grain donated is stolen from fields in occupied Ukraine, and several of these deliveries have been plagued by logistical and administrative hurdles.[106]

Finally, the Kremlin has been actively looking for opportunities to harm (what it perceives are) western interests worldwide. This has been an ongoing policy goal for decades, involving principally subversive means as well as diplomatic manoeuvres at the UNGA and around the globe.[107] One of the means of subversion has been spreading disinformation and propaganda narratives, including in the Red Sea region. As described in the previous section, these narratives are hostile to the west, as they portray the US and its allies as aggressive. So, for example, the Cairo offices of Russian state broadcaster *RIA* and state-controlled *Sputnik* are considered "Russia's Arabic disinformation factor[ies]."[108] In February 2025, *Sputnik* opened a media hub in Addis Ababa with media operations in Amharic.[109] Given the geopolitical importance of the Red Sea and the presence of western allies in the region, including through naval basing in Djibouti, these and other anti-western moves have a local dimension, too.

In sum, sanctions, economic statecraft, diplomatic semi-isolation, and anti-western policy have pushed Russia to engage more consistently with the countries of the Red Sea in pursuit of what it perceives to be a counter-US foreign policy. As the following will show, Moscow's engagements with the southern

[103] Lalita Avd and Vivian Iroanya, "COMMODITIES 2025: Russia wheat exports to slow down sharply in H1 2025 due to lower harvest, export curbs," *S&P Global*, 30 December 2024.

[104] "1 000 and 4 000 days of Russia weaponising food and energy," *EuvsDisinfo*, 13 December 2024.

[105] In general, Russian contributions to multilateral and international aid organisations have been declining since 2022. See: Ivan U.K. Klyszcz, "Russia's Self-Serving Aid. Influence, Opacity, and Propaganda," *ICDS*, March 2025.

[106] Omer Mbadi and Estelle Maussion, "Quand un don de blé russe à la Centrafrique sème la zizanie au Cameroun [When a Russian Wheat Donation Stirs Up Trouble in Cameroon]," *Jeune Afrique*, 12 January 2024.

[107] On subversion, see: Thomas Rid, *Active measures: The secret history of disinformation and political warfare* (Profile Books, 2020).

[108] "Egypt: inside Russia's Arabic disinformation factory," *Reporters without Borders*, 30 January 2025.

[109] "Russia's Sputnik Pledges to Play Positive Role in Resonating Voice of Africa, Ethiopia Globally," *ENA*, 22 February 2025.

Red Sea countries have been more intensive, with the northern ones still receiving attention from the Kremlin.

Sanctions, economic statecraft, diplomatic semi-isolation, and anti-western policy have pushed Russia to engage more consistently with the countries of the Red Sea

3.2.1. Russian Naval Policy in the 2020s

Before proceeding with the narration, a few more points on Russian naval policy are needed. Between 1992 and 2021 (inclusive), Russia's economy trebled in size, with most growth happening in the 2000s. By the start of Moscow's re-engagement with the Red Sea in the 2000s, the Kremlin considered itself a resurgent power, capable of operating autonomously and even in opposition to Washington. Part of this resurgence was propelled by Russia's increased confidence in its armed forces, especially after the defeat of Chechnya in the second Chechen war and even more so after the 2015 intervention in Syria.[110] Another part comes from the constant investment in military capabilities, including the navy. Adjusted for price levels, the Kremlin spends an estimated $30 bn every year since 2014 on the navy, making Russia's the third or fourth largest naval budget worldwide.[111]

The application of this naval power to the Red Sea is guided by the Russian Naval Doctrine. Indeed, there are no official strategic documents covering specifically the Red Sea on its own. The latest edition of the Doctrine was published in 2022, probably too early to reflect any lessons from the ongoing full-scale war with Ukraine. The document does mention the Red Sea as a priority area, calling specifically to develop a "military-naval" presence to enable Russia's access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the Doctrine alludes to the Red Sea when listing the priority regions for Russian national interests at sea, described as the "[regions] running along the Asian and African coasts."[112] This is listed as a priority but only after other regions, especially the waterways directly connected to Russian territory.

The way the document suggests developing this presence reflects several of the historical experiences described in the sections above. Namely, the importance of naval basing (or "sites [*пунктов*] of material-technical support"), positive relations with the host country, and engagement in missions to protect maritime trade. The purpose of naval bases abroad is to facilitate the mobility of Russia's four fleets across theatres, and to enhance the ability to intercept enemy fleets on their way to Russia. Positive relations with the host countries are thus essential. The case of the Ethiopian Derg is illustrative. Due to material constraints, insecurity, and logistical challenges, and even with a willing partner in Addis Ababa, the opening of the Nokra base took nearly six years after the Derg takeover in 1974. Commentators saw in the 2022 Doctrine the imperative of good relations with India, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia for facilitating Russia's Indian Ocean policy.[113]

While a continental power, Russia still makes routine claims about its capacity to protect maritime trade. As mentioned above, Russia contributed to western-led anti-piracy missions in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden until 2013 and carried out exercises in the area with other partners thereafter. According to a Russian source, the cooperation with NATO at the time involved "joint operations, the exchange of information, joint training, and the exchange of experiences."[114] In the context of the Houthi blockade, the 12 March 2024 naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman – carried out with China and Iran – were statedly aimed to "improve the security of maritime trade."[115]

[110] Jade McGlynn, *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

[111] Estimates by Richard Connolly, "Russia as a maritime power: economic interests and capabilities," in Andrew Monaghan and Richard Connolly (eds), *The sea in Russian strategy* (Manchester University Press, 2023), 139–141.

[112] President of the Russian Federation, *Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (The Kremlin, 31 July 2022).

[113] Prokhor Tebin, "The New Naval Doctrine of Russia," *Valdai Club*, 4 August 2022.

[114] Pryamitsyn, "The Russian Navy," 8.

[115] "В Оманском заливе началось военно-морское учение России, Ирана и Китая [A naval exercise between Russia, Iran and China has begun in the Gulf of Oman]," *Interfax*, 12 March 2024.

The 2022 Doctrine elaborates on this priority at several points, including in the coordination between the Russian navy and other state organs, including the Federal Security Service (FSB).[116]

3.2.2. Northern Red Sea

While the focus of this report is on the southern part, a brief overview of Russia's post-2022 moves in the northern part of the Red Sea is needed. Indeed, this part of the sea has several major Middle Eastern actors, namely Egypt, Israel (Eilat), Jordan (Aqaba), and Saudi Arabia. These four countries have maintained relations with Russia before and after 2022. None of the four countries condemned Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and none of them imposed sanctions, though some restrictions on engagements with Moscow have been reported. In their exchanges, the Red Sea element is marginal, though there are a few points to consider in each case.

In recent years, Russia's engagements with Egypt have been principally commercial. In 2023, Egypt represented 34.48% of Russia's trade with Africa.[117] The Russian government has allocated resources to develop a plot in the Suez Canal Economic Zone, though its development has been on hold for years. In military ties, Egyptian officials do receive training in Russia, but Russia is one destination among others. In turn, Egypt is a large arms buyer from Moscow; in fact, it has been in fifth place for cumulative purchases since 1992 (as of 2024).[118] Finally, Russia's Rosatom has been developing the Dabaa nuclear power plant. The first agreements on the topic were signed in 2015, though construction only began in 2022. Costing an estimated $20 bn, the facility acts as an anchor for Russia's presence in Egypt. In addition, Russian diplomats use the al-Dabaa plant as proof that Moscow can deliver large-scale projects to their African and Middle Eastern counterparts. While not located in the proximity of the Red Sea shore, the scale of the al-Dabaa project makes it a feature in Russia's presence in the eastern Mediterranean and Red seas.[119]

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected most of these areas of bilateral cooperation. Egypt has been a large buyer of Russian and Ukrainian wheat, which covers a large portion of its yearly needs of this staple food. When Moscow attempted to gain control over Ukraine's Black Sea shore, this affected the worldwide wheat and other agricultural exports from both countries. Egypt was immediately affected, with a 28% drop in wheat imports from Ukraine and a 6.7% drop from Russia.[120] While Russian agricultural exports have never been sanctioned, Ukrainian authorities have requested governments worldwide not to purchase grain from the parts of the country occupied by Russia. The stolen grain has been an asset in Moscow's need for hard currency, though Egypt has reportedly desisted, at times, from buying stolen grain from Russia-occupied territories.[121] Still, Russian wheat re-exports from Syria (before the fall of Assad) have helped to conceal the stolen origin of the grain, including to Egypt. Reportedly, in 2024, at least 25 tonnes of stolen Ukrainian wheat arrived in Egypt from Syria.[122] Despite the uncertainty in the Black Sea, Egypt changed its procedure for buying Russian grain, from tenders to direct purchases, and will continue to rely on Russian imports for its consumption needs for the foreseeable future.[123]

In the arms trade, the picture is different. After being a top arms buyer, Egypt stopped receiving arms from Russia in 2021.[124] In fact, according to reports, in April 2023, the Egyptian government sought to supply Russia

[116] Tebin, "The New Naval Doctrine of Russia."

[117] OEC World data.

[118] SIPRI data.

[119] See: Surafel Getahun Ashine, "The New Global Super-Power Geo-Strategic and Geo-Economics Rivalry in the Red Sea and its implications on Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa," *Ethiopian Defence Journal of Strategic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2023): 152

[120] Sarah El Safty, "Egypt relied on competitive Russian wheat as imports dipped in 2022 -data," *Reuters*, 12 January 2023.

[121] "Ukraine thanks Egypt for turning away Russian ship carrying grain," *Reuters*, 19 May 2022.

[122] Selma Mhaoud, Shaya Laughlin, Misha Gagarin, "Russian Company Behind Egypt Wheat Cargo Had History of Selling 'Stolen' Ukraine Grain," *OCCRP,* 5 February 2025.

[123] Mohamed Ezz, Michael Hogan, and Olga Popova, "Exclusive: Egypt secures wheat needs through June 2025," *Reuters*, 27 December 2024.

[124] SIPRI data.

with 40 000 rockets in exchange for wheat. Cairo ultimately desisted from the deal not to harm its relations with Washington.[125] Still, reports suggest that Egypt has provided Moscow with aircraft engines with potential dual civilian and military use.[126] The long-planned Egyptian purchase of Su-35 fighter jets for $2 bn was finally cancelled in 2022, with the aircraft – already produced – reportedly ending up in Algerian possession.[127] Finally, as mentioned above, Cairo has emerged as a hub for Russian state media, reportedly under expansion as of 2025, as Moscow seeks to grow its Arabic-language disinformation operations.[128]

Cairo has emerged as a hub for Russian state media, as Moscow seeks to grow its Arabic-language disinformation operations

On the Egyptian Red Sea shore, Russia's presence is small. Russo-Egyptian naval exercises have been taking place since 2022, but on the Mediterranean – not the Red Sea.[129] There have been a few instances when the Russian navy has docked in Egyptian ports on the Red Sea. For example, during the 2021 Suez Canal obstruction, the Russian navy vessel *Stoyki* was blocked from its path from the Red Sea to the then-Russian Tartus naval installation in Syria. The ship was returning from naval exercises with Iran in the Arabian Sea. Due to the blockage, *Stoyki* (and its service ship *Kola*) was forced to wait for the reopening of the canal just off the shore of the Egyptian town of Suez.[130] Reportedly, the obstruction also prompted new Russian interest in the INSTC (see above). Finally, the coastal towns of Hurghada and Sharm el-Sheikh are popular tourist destinations for Russian citizens, with consulates operating in both towns.[131] According to one 2017 Russian estimate, there were up to 20 000 Russian citizens living in Hurghada.[132]

Russian relations with Saudi Arabia – the other major northern Red Sea state – have also evolved since 2022. Like Cairo, Riyadh is cautious about alienating its western partners by engaging in close relations with Moscow. Unlike Egypt, Saudi Arabia has never been a significant arms buyer from Russia, with Russian sales offers of anti-air systems S-300 and S-400 never materialising.[133] According to leaked documents, Riyadh did opt for the Pantsir-S1M system, signing a €2 bn contract with a Rostec subsidiary in 2021, with partial deliveries made in 2023. Still, post-2022 sanctions may have deterred Riyadh from proceeding further with the deal.[134] In general, Russo-Saudi bilateral trade has been marginal, without large changes since 2022. The OPEC+ format – which includes Russia as well as other non-OPEC members – has remained a constant area of Russo-Saudi dialogue, but also of occasional tensions over production targets.[135]

In diplomacy, Saudi Arabia positioned itself early on as a potential mediator in the Russo-Ukrainian war. So, Saudi diplomats have visited Kyiv and Moscow, as well as Washington and the European capitals, presenting their country as neutral in the war. Benefiting from close relations with the Kremlin, as well as hosting Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky at the 2023 Arab League Summit, has added to Riyadh's case. The high point in these efforts so far was the February 2025 meeting between US and Russian representatives, hosted by Prince

[125] Missy Ryan, Evan Hill, Siobhán O'Grady, "Egypt nearly supplied rockets to Russia, agreed to arm Ukraine instead, leak shows," *The Washington Post*, 17 April 2023.

[126] Thomas Grove and Summer Said, "Russia Turns to Longtime Arms Customers to Boost War Arsenal," *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 November 2023.

[127] Douglas Barrie, "Felon outflanked?," *IISS*, 8 April 2025.

[128] RSF, "Egypt: inside Russia's Arabic disinformation factory."

[129] "Egypt, Russia conclude joint naval drill Bridge of Friendship in Mediterranean - Defence - Egypt," *Ahram Online*, 17 April 2025.

[130] "У Суэцкого канала застряли корвет Балтфлота и танкер СПГ «Газпрома» [Baltic Fleet corvette and Gazprom LNG tanker stranded off the Suez Canal]," *EA Daily*, 24 March 2021.

[131] The Hurghada consulate opened in 2017, while the Sharm el-Sheikh one was announced in 2025.

[132] "Press release on the opening of the Russian Consulate General in Hurghada (Egypt)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 23 January 2017.

[133] Henry Meyer, "Putin Offers to Sell Saudis S-400 Missiles to Bolster Defenses," *Bloomberg*, 16 September 2019.

[134] Alisa Yurchenko, "Sanctioned Russian Firms Sold $2B Air Defense System to Saudi Arabia, Leaked Documents Show," *OCCRP*, 24 January 2025.

[135] Ahmad Ghaddar, Dmitry Zhdannikov, and Alex Lawler, "Behind OPEC+ oil output hike, Saudi-Russian tensions simmer," *Reuters*, 2 June 2025.

Mohammed.[136] This is part of the Kingdom's strategy to raise its global profile through conflict diplomacy. According to Neil Quilliam, the 2025 meeting added to Saudi Arabia's "newfound diplomatic prestige."[137]

Russia's partnership with Iran has been a divider

At the same time, Russia's partnership with Iran has been a divider. While the Riyadh-Tehran rivalry has fluctuated in the 2020s, Israel and Saudi Arabia share an apprehension over a closer Iran-Russia partnership in the security realm. In part, this alignment – however, constrained – has a Red Sea dimension, as the Iranian navy has been increasingly active in the Red Sea in the 2020s, being a driver for Saudi–Israeli security cooperation.[138] Moscow has attempted to remain neutral in the Iran-Saudi rivalry, engaging both countries on security matters before and after 2022. The potential of BRICS membership accorded to both Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2024 would continue along that logic, but Riyadh's apparent dismissal of the offer only stresses the limits of Moscow's approach to the region. The 2023 breakout of the Hamas-Israel war and the subsequent conflicts only stressed the differences even further (see below).

The Gulf monarchies see Russia as one actor among others in the Red Sea area, beset by its limited capabilities and capacity for true strategic weight

The Red Sea dimension of the Russia-Saudi Arabia relationship has gained new relevance since 2022. In general, Egypt's restrained foreign policy under al-Sisi has presented Riyadh with the opportunity to expand its Red Sea influence, including through urban projects.[139] Russia's efforts to regain a presence in the Red Sea since the 2010s came as a shock to the Gulf monarchies (including Saudi Arabia). Today, they see Russia as one actor among others in the Red Sea area, one beset by its limited capabilities and capacity for true strategic weight. Indeed, Moscow's different moves in the region have not resulted in the monarchies changing their calculations over their policies to the Horn of Africa or the Red Sea. Their position can be characterised as 'wait and see', including the prospect of a Russian naval base in the area.[140] For example, in April 2023, the hypersonic missile-capable Russian frigate *Admiral Gorshkov* made a port call in Jeddah, the first stop by a Russian navy ship in a Saudi harbour in over ten years.[141] This gesture hints at a measure of Saudi accord over Moscow's increased interest in the region.[142] Russia also has a consulate-general in the coastal town of Jeddah.

3.2.3. Eritrea

Eritrea and Russia have supported each other in international fora, especially for sheltering each other from accountability for the human rights violations they have each committed in their recent wars. Eritrea is a member of the Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations, a UNGA grouping centred on criticising human rights enforcement, featuring Chinese, Iranian, North Korean, Russian, and Syrian participation, among others.[143] Asmara's membership in the group, established in 2021, points to a degree of foreign policy convergence with Moscow on core normative issues. In 2022, Eritrea stood out by being the only African country to vote against the UNGA resolution ES11/1 condemning Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A 4 March 2022 press release from the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs echoes Russia's rhetoric on the war:

[136] Jon Gambrell, "Saudi Arabia's crown prince wins points for hosting the Russia-US summit on Ukraine," *AP*, 18 February 2025.

[137] Neil Quilliam, "Ukraine talks show Saudi Arabia is now a major diplomatic player," *Chatham House*, 16 April 2025.

[138] Camille Lons and Benjamin Petrini, "The Crowded Red Sea," *Survival* 65, no. 1 (2023): 57–67.

[139] Lons, Petrini, "The Crowded Red Sea," 59.

[140] Informant 6, 7.

[141] WION, "Frigate armed with hypersonic missile in Jeddah," YouTube, 6 April 2023.

[142] While the Gulf monarchies do not see Russia as a major actor in the Red Sea, they also do not wish to antagonise Moscow in the area. Informant 7.

[143] "Group of Friends of the UN Charter," Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations, accessed in September 2025.

> This is not a crisis that erupted yesterday. The seeds of the current crisis were planted and have been brewing for the last thirty years by forces of domination and hegemony who craved to establish a unipolar world order. The inevitable corollary of this misguided and perilous policy was the encirclement and "containment" of Russia since it was perceived as the primary obstacle to their objectives.
>
> Ukraine is sadly a victim and has been scapegoated in their overarching scheme of "tightening the noose on Russia."[144]

Observers interpreted Asmara's position at the time as demonstrating Russia's isolation and Eritrea's opportunism. As Jędrzej Czerep argued, the vote rendered Eritrea into an informal representative of the pro-Russian position in Africa.[145] Writing in 2024, Martin Plaut suggested that the Eritrean UNGA vote "sealed the deal" for greater cooperation between Asmara and Moscow.[146] Eritrea's position on the Russo-Ukrainian war – as articulated by its top leadership – has not changed drastically since 2022. For example, in a December 2024 interview with state media, Afwerki was quoted as stating:

> The end of the Cold War fostered a desire for a unipolar world order, which in turn gave rise to the US notion and predilection of "dominating and conquering the world." […] Indeed, the ramifications of this philosophy are evident in ongoing conflicts such as the situation in Ukraine; the tensions surrounding Taiwan; as well as in the various other global disputes which have been fuelled by the desire for increased influence and power.[147]

Russia's response has been welcoming. Russian analysts argued that Asmara's position could be explained by Eritrean anti-Americanism and positive views on Russian diplomatic support.[148] A 27 April 2022 Eritrean visit to Moscow was received by Lavrov, who stated that the Russian government:

> […] appreciate[s] Eritrea's objective and responsible position on the situation in Ukraine. We appreciated the understanding of the fundamental nature of that situation, which is inextricably linked to the global crisis in the European security architecture as a result of the aggressive policies of the North Atlantic Alliance.[149]

In turn, according to the Russian press release, the Eritrean visit "gave a new impulse" to bilateral cooperation between the two countries.[150] From Asmara's perspective, engaging Russia is a way to obtain resources and major power patronage.[151] Moreover,

Moscow is seen as a less engaged and more transactional partner, meaning that the Eritrean side will have scope to define the terms

Moscow is seen as a less engaged and more transactional partner, meaning that the Eritrean side will have scope to define the terms of the relationship. In their rhetoric, their shared opposition to international sanctions has been a connector, especially after 2014.[152] Afwerki visited Russia twice in 2023, with his May visit being his first to Moscow, to be followed by his participation in the Russia-Africa Summit. Cooperation has been slow to materialise, with trade, arms transfers, and other interactions taking time to emerge. According to the documents signed in those visits, Asmara committed itself to the purchase of military equipment, specifically transport. However, writing in March 2024, a Russian exile newspaper commented that bilateral exchanges were slow to develop, and that Eritrea had not provided Russia with any support other than UN votes. Natural

[144] "Ukraine As Sacrificial Lamb," Ministry of Information of Eritrea, 4 March 2022.

[145] Jędrzej Czerep, "Eritrea as an Informal Representative of the Pro-Russia Forces in Africa," *PISM Bulletin* 44 (1961) (22 March 2022).

[146] Martin Plaut, "Why are China and Russia silent players in the Red Sea's escalating security situation?," *Kings College London*, 29 January 2024.

[147] "Interview with President Isaias Afwerki: On Global, Regional, and Domestic Issues (Part I)," Ministry of Information of Eritrea, 4 December 2024.

[148] Aleksandr Matveev, "Блог Александра Матвеева Почему Эритрея поддержала Россию? [Why did Eritrea support Russia?]," *RIAC*, 18 March 2022.

[149] Mariana Belenkaya and Aleksei Tselunov, "Кругом одни Эритреи [There is Eritrea all around]," *Kommersant*, 28 April 2022.

[150] "О предстоящем рабочем визите в Россию Министра иностранных дел Государства Эритрея О.Салеха [On the forthcoming working visit to Russia of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea, O. Saleh]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 26 April 2022.

[151] Interview with Martin Plaut.

[152] "Russia interested in logistics potential of Massawa port in Eritrea – Lavrov," *Interfax*, 27 January 2023.

resources on the country's territory could also be a source of future cooperation between Asmara and Moscow, an unexploited potential as of writing.[153] In June 2025, a Russo-Eritrean Cooperation Commission was approved by the Russian government, signalling efforts to deepen bilateral ties.[154]

The Eritrean Red Sea shore has been a connector for Asmara and Moscow, before and after 2022. Massawa, the Dahlak archipelago, and Assab have been pointed to by analysts and officials as potential sites for Russian naval activity. While Massawa has been at the centre of attention for Russian officials, Assab is a potential site for Russian use, given the infrastructure development pursued by the UAE during its use of the harbour in the 2010s.[155] As described above, Russian representatives made statements in 2018 suggesting an interest in acquiring naval basing rights or access in Eritrea. This interest continued after 2022. While visiting Eritrea in January 2023, Lavrov commented:

> Among the far-reaching plans that have yet to be explored in detail, I'd mention the possibility of using the logistics potential of the Massawa port and the airport. The Massawa port is interesting from the point of view of its transit capabilities.[156]

That same month, the cities of Sevastopol and Massawa signed an agreement on cooperation, namely, on the exchange of official delegations.[157] In July 2023, the Russian ambassador to Eritrea commented that an agreement was in preparation to be signed between the two countries over the use of the Massawa harbour.[158] In April 2024, the *Marshall Shaposhnikov,* a frigate from the Russian Pacific Fleet, arrived in Massawa, later Assab, on a visit meant to mark the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

In neighbouring Ethiopia, the evolution of Russia-Eritrea ties received little attention. Despite the symbolic gesture of *Shaposhnikov's* stop in Eritrean harbours, the event had no coverage in Ethiopia. In turn, the motives behind Asmara-Moscow ties are often understood as part of shared anti-Americanism and Eritrean opportunism, especially seeking potential patrons for the country's isolated regime.[159]

3.2.4. Ethiopia

When discussing the relationship with Russia, Ethiopian sources often go back to the shared religious ties, the Cold War partnership, and history, all perceived to play an important role in driving the two together.[160] For the older generation in the Ethiopian armed forces, Russia (and the Soviet Union) remains a point of reference.[161] Despite the fond rhetoric, relations with Russia are seen in pragmatic terms. There are no illusions about Russia's limited capabilities and intentions to engage the area.[162] Moreover, some blame the pro-Soviet policy of Mengistu for the 'loss' of Eritrea.[163] For Ethiopia today, other partners, including China, India, and the Gulf monarchies, are seen as especially promising. Moreover, these engagements are not conceived in zero-sum terms, as cooperation with the US and Europe remains desirable for Addis Ababa.[164]

Ethiopia's reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine resembled that of other countries in the global south. Namely, a policy of neutrality that violates their commitment to the principle of sovereignty, flagrantly disregarded by Moscow when invading Ukraine. At a normative level, Addis Ababa followed a position of not siding with the

[153] Aleksandr Fokin, "Африканская КНДР [African DPRK]," *Novaya Gazeta Evropa*, 7 March 2024.

[154] "Russian cabinet approves creation of Russia-Eritrea cooperation commission," *TASS,* 25 June 2025.

[155] Andrew McGregor "Russia in the Red Sea (Part Two): Port Options in Eritrea," *Jamestown Foundation*, 6 November 2023.

[156] Interfax, "Russia interested in logistics potential of Massawa port in Eritrea."

[157] "Город-порт Массауа и Севастополь заключили договор о сотрудничестве [Port town Massawa and Sevastopol sign partnership agreement]," *RIA Novosti*, 8 January 2023.

[158] "Посол Эритреи сообщил о работе над соглашением с Москвой по порту Массауа [Eritrean Ambassador spoke on the agreement with Moscow on the Massawa port]," *RBK*, 19 July 2023.

[159] Informants 1, 3.

[160] Informants 1, 3. About the role of religion since 2022 in Ethio-Russian relations, see: Ivan U. Kłyszcz, "Russia's Spiritual Expansion in the Global South," *Russia.Post*, 31 May 2024.

[161] Informant 1.

[162] One source emphasised that Russia's rhetoric and moves towards Ethiopia were not born out of a sense of care for the region. Informant 1.

[163] Informant 3.

[164] Informant 5.

major powers to avoid being dragged into a conflict, which echoes the Cold War-era non-alignment. Moreover, neutrality towards Russia was a form of retribution for the west's condemnation of Ethiopia during the Tigray war.[165] More broadly, Addis Ababa tends to balance US influence – which has been large at different points – by developing relations with China and Russia.[166]

Facing isolation of its own, Addis Ababa pursued enhanced relations with Moscow

Still, the war impacted Ethiopia severely, like other Red Sea countries, through volatility in the international fertiliser and grain markets. Already reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Tigray war, the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war added pressure to the fragile societal situation in Ethiopia. Facing isolation of its own, Addis Ababa pursued enhanced relations with Moscow. According to one source, the end of the Tigray war was as significant a moment in the country's international relations as the 1977 war with Somalia, suggesting that Russian support at both junctures is important.[167]

In practical terms, this cooperation aimed to replace some of the lost European markets for its exports, as well as to attract foreign investment.[168] Grain imports and fertilisers have played an essential role, as bilateral trade crept upwards in recent years.[169] Moreover, in 2024, Russia made its first arms transfer to Ethiopia in several years, interpreted by some as part of Addis Ababa's efforts to face internal rebellions.[170] The Ethiopian membership of BRICS, effective since 2024, was part of this effort to improve the country's situation through diversification, rather than joining an anti-western coalition. In that sense, for Ethiopia, BRICS is one organisation among others, and one that affirms the country's middle-power status.[171]

Having sensed an opportunity, Russia has invested heavily in its Ethiopian diplomacy in recent years. Benefitting from a generally positive image, Russian public diplomacy has sought to portray the two countries as natural partners, including in the fight against 'fascism', a malicious reference from Russia's propaganda towards Ukraine.[172] The Russian embassy is highly active in the country, with the Russian ambassador constantly in the media.[173] In 2025, a branch of the state-controlled media *Sputnik* opened in Addis Ababa, set to broadcast in the Amharic language, adding to Russia's communications and propaganda dissemination in the area.[174] Major state-owned Russian companies have made moves into Ethiopia, including in the strategically sensitive area of nuclear energy. In 2024, Rosatom signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ethiopian government to develop nuclear power in the future.[175]

In recent years, the Ethio-Russian relationship has developed a maritime element. Strictly speaking, Ethiopia is not a Red Sea state because it does not have a shore on the sea. Still, since Eritrea's 1993 independence, access to world markets through the Red Sea has been a constant concern for Addis Ababa. Being the world's largest landlocked country in terms of population, Ethiopia has sought to guarantee its secure use of neighbouring Red Sea ports, especially in Eritrea (until 1998) and Djibouti.[176] Under Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian government has developed a renewed concern with the country's maritime access, conceived as vital to the country's interests.[177] This has been an ongoing project led by Abiy Ahmed, leading to the 2020 re-establishment of the Ethiopian navy. In the case of Ethio-Russian relations, Addis Ababa seeks international partners to legitimise its claims to being an actor invested in maritime security despite having no direct sea access of its own.

[165] Sizo Nkala, "No dog in this fight," 2024.
[166] Informant 4.
[167] Informant 4.
[168] "Russia looks for new ways to import African coffee," *Africa Intelligence*, 13 March 2024.
[169] Informant 5.
[170] SIPRI data.
[171] Informants 3, 5.
[172] Roza Ismagilova, "Russia – Ethiopia: 125 years of Diplomatic Relations," *The Institute for African Studies*, 31 March 2023.
[173] Informants 1, 3.
[174] ENA, "Russia's Sputnik Pledges to Play Positive Role."
[175] Bilal Mousjid, "Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda … agreements with Russia's Rosatom nuclear energy agency on the rise," *The Africa Report*, 6 June 2024.
[176] The 1998–2000 Badme war between the two countries ended Ethiopia's access to the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa.
[177] English summary of the book by Dareskedar Taye, *The Grand Strategy of the Two Water Bodies* (2025).

According to reports, Russia was involved for many years in the training of Ethiopian naval officers. Some observers characterised this as part of a rivalry with France, which was the other supplier of academic instruction for Ethiopia's nascent navy.[178] Reports suggest that up to 1 000 Ethiopian officers have benefited from Russian training under this cooperation scheme. As of the start of 2025, naval cooperation with Ethiopia apparently lapsed, with France wielding the most influence by then.[179] However, it was reported in March 2025 that the Ethiopian and Russian navies signed an agreement to resume training cooperation.[180] Were it to bear fruit, this cooperation would ensure Russia benefits from any new Ethiopian advances on the Red Sea.

Were the agreement to resume training cooperation to bear fruit, it would ensure Russia benefits from any new Ethiopian advances on the Red Sea

In turn, Russia's ongoing moves in the Red Sea have received limited attention. For example, Russo-Eritrean cooperation is not seen as a potential threat or challenge to Ethiopia.[181] In turn, Russia's cooperation with the Houthis (see below) is of interest concerning Ethiopia's dependence on maritime shipping for its international trade.[182]

3.2.5. Sudan

Due to the outbreak of the Sudanese civil war in April 2023, Russo-Sudanese relations have been shaped by Moscow's approach to the fighting parties. At the start of 2022, the Wagner Group was cooperating with Hemedti in their mining operations and providing limited logistical support, especially on the Sudanese borders with Libya and the Central African Republic (CAR), where the group operates. Russian diplomacy, in turn, had maintained ties to both Burhan and Hemedti, investing its attention rather in shaping the political transition since the 2019 revolution.

Before the Sudanese civil war began, Lavrov visited the country in February 2023 to hold a meeting with al-Burhan, Hemedti, and other members of the government. The goal was to resume relations after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and to confirm the establishment of a Russian naval base in Port Sudan.[183] At the time of the meeting, relations between Burhan and Hemedti were already under strain.[184] On 15 April 2023, the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) broke into fighting, which began the Sudanese civil war, ongoing as of writing. The underlying cause of the conflict is the empowerment of the RSF – into what some have called a 'state within a state' – and Hemedti's ambitions.

When the war broke out, the Wagner Group remained engaged with the RSF. In both the east of Libya and the CAR, Wagner Group personnel and infrastructure became involved in the UAE efforts to supply Hemedti during the fighting. Their relative ease of access to Sudan and their local networks positioned the Russians well to perform this task.[185] However, Moscow did not have a hands-on approach to the war at the time, with the Wagner Group playing a marginal role in the logistics of the conflict. Little over a year into the full-scale war with Ukraine, the Kremlin's priorities abroad were to cope with international sanctions and demonstrate its continued relevance as a global actor. Only the alleged delivery of anti-air systems to the SAF made Russian participation in Hemedti's favour a factor in the war.[186] While the war has a foreign component, Russian sources tend to portray the conflict as a US plot to destabilise the country. Along the way, they use al-Beshir as a referent of authoritarian stability, against the tumultuous 2019 transition and the 2023 civil war.[187]

[178] "Both Moscow and Paris maintain navy-focused presence in Ethiopia," *Africa Intelligence*, 25 August 2022.

[179] Informant 1.

[180] "Landlocked African nation set to complete major naval facility with Russian support," *Business Insider Africa*, 7 June 2025.

[181] Informant 1.

[182] Informant 2, 3.

[183] Samy Magdy, "Sudan military finishes review of Russian Red Sea base deal," *AP,* 11 February 2023.

[184] Lechner, *Death is Our Business*.

[185] "Libye: Plateforme Logistique du Groupe Wagner [Libya: the Logistical Platform of the Wagner Group]," *All Eyes on Wagner*, 20 April 2023; Lechner, *Death is Our Business*,203.

[186] Jihad Mashamoun, "The Bear in the Red Sea," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, Occasional Papers 1 (July 2024), 2.

[187] Ramani, *Russia in Africa*, 337–339.

Russia is not alone in engaging the parties of the Sudanese civil war. The UAE is the RSF's main backer, with Chad and eastern Libya cooperating, too. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for their part, have been on the side of the SAF.[188] Ukraine established contact with the SAF shortly after the start of the Russian full-scale war in 2022. Reportedly, in 2023, Kyiv struck a bargain with Khartoum where Ukraine would supply special forces personnel and drones in exchange for weapons (mostly shells).[189] The special forces would strike against Wagner Group assets while the Sudanese shells would be used to defend Ukraine against Russia. For the SAF, cooperation with Ukraine was a way to discourage Moscow from supporting the RSF. Adding the incentive of reopening the subject of a Port Sudan Russian naval base by April 2024, Moscow decidedly switched to the side of the army against the rebelling forces of Hemedti.[190] This brought Russia to closer alignment with Saudi Arabia and, incidentally, Eritrea, as Afwerki reportedly holds positive relations with al-Burhan.[191] In turn, the war has become a place where the UAE and Russia are on opposite sides.[192]

Moscow decidedly switched to the side of the army against the rebelling forces, bringing Russia to closer alignment with Saudi Arabia and Eritrea

Since then, the bilateral dialogue between the al-Burhan junta and Moscow has expanded to include cooperation on topics including post-war reconstruction, fuel deliveries, grains, and mining, though defence cooperation remains the focus of attention. The volume of Russian arms deliveries to the SAF since 2024 is not known yet; reports allege that these span from light arms to more sophisticated systems and jet components. These are reportedly delivered as part of broader negotiations on the future of a base in Port Sudan, allegedly carried out together with Iran.[193] Analysts have also suggested that the May 2025 RSF drone strikes on Port Sudan targeted the construction of the Russian naval base, though verification is needed.[194]

3.2.6. Yemen

Yemen has not been a high priority for Moscow in the 2020s. Like in previous years, the Kremlin's approach to the country and its civil war focused on differentiating itself from other actors and promoting a position that alienates the west from managing that conflict. Moreover, Moscow often calculated its moves in Yemen in relation to its more valuable partners in the Gulf monarchies. Because of this relative disengagement, the news of Russian contacts with the Houthi movement in 2023 and 2024 caused consternation. Namely, they fit into a broader narrative of Russian aggressive foreign policy worldwide, and alignment with Iranian proxies in the Middle East. Regional actors have had more measured responses. For example, in Ethiopia, the allegations of Russian support for the Houthi movement received little attention as of the start of 2025.[195]

Moscow often calculated its moves in Yemen in relation to its more valuable partners in the Gulf monarchies

In 2022, Moscow's engagements with Yemen focused principally on the international grain market (see above), the humanitarian situation in the country, and the Russian position on the country's civil war. In late 2023, the breakout of conflict in the Levant brought new Russian attention to Yemen, specifically to the Houthi movement. By that point, the Houthis began a military campaign, targeting shipping lanes on the Red Sea. In

[188] Mashamoun, "The Bear in the Red Sea," 1.

[189] Alexander Khrebet, "Zelensky discusses Russia-backed groups with Sudan's leader during unplanned meeting," *The Kyiv Independent*, 23 September 2023.

[190] Informant 6. Mashamoun, "The Bear in the Red Sea," 2.

[191] Mashamoun, "The Bear in the Red Sea," 3–5.

[192] Informant 6.

[193] Simon Marks and Mohammed Alamin, "Sudan Civil War Fueled by Russia Guns, Iran Drones," *Bloomberg*, 18 December 2024.

[194] "«Рыбарь»: В Судане атакована строящаяся российская военно-морская база «Фламинго» [Rybar: in Sudan, the construction of the Russian naval base 'Flamingo' has been attacked]," *The Insider*, 13 May 2025.

[195] Informant 3.

parallel, the Houthis demonstrated again their long-range capabilities – previously on display in their strikes against targets in Saudi Arabia – by launching salvoes against Israel. While the intended targets were Israeli, the boarding of several commercial vessels effectively resulted in a drop in shipping through the Red Sea. By December 2023, Red Sea shipping had dropped by half, rerouted through the Cape of Good Hope. This trend remained in place by the spring of 2025 despite several pauses in the Houthi campaign.[196]

Upon the start of the Houthi Red Sea campaign, the press did not record any substantial engagements between Russia and the belligerent Houthis, other than a shared pro-Palestine rhetoric (see above).

The Houthis had echoed Russia's propaganda about the Russo-Ukrainian war, signalling their alignment with Moscow on European security

In addition, the Houthis had echoed Russia's propaganda about the Russo-Ukrainian war, signalling their alignment with Moscow on European security.[197] In January 2024, the first reports emerged that the group would not target Chinese and Russian vessels in their campaign, statedly out of a shared opposition to the US, a key ally of Israel.[198] While not visible at first, the potential for synergy between the Russians and the Houthis was already present, namely, by their shared ties to Iran. As a well-known Iranian partner on the Arabian Peninsula, the Houthis are part of the so-called Axis of Resistance, a network of Iran-backed non-state actors, upon which Tehran relies to compensate for its military weaknesses relative to Israel. Russia's pro-Palestinian position upon the breakout of the Hamas-Israel war made Moscow an honorary member of the Axis.[199] By that point, cooperation between Moscow and the other members of the Iran-aligned network was mostly the object of speculation. For instance, during the Israel-Hezbollah confrontation in early 2024, Moscow did not provide material support for the group.[200]

Iran's relative weakness might have driven the Houthis to seek support from other foreign sources. In a hard-to-access region, most of what we know about these contacts comes from a handful of sources. The exact start of the cooperation between the Houthis and Moscow is not known, but the visit of Mohammed Abdelsalam, spokesperson of the Houthi movement, to Moscow on 25 January 2024 likely signalled the beginning of the partnership.[201] Abdulsalam has since become a key facilitator for the relationship with Moscow, including liaising with the country's military. These contacts quickly bore fruit. In March 2024, the Houthis had formalised their agreement with Russia (and China) on Red Sea transit.[202] Then, according to *Middle East Eye*, Russian GRU intelligence officers had travelled to Houthi-controlled Yemen months before August 2024.[203] In the summer of 2024, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) states, Russia-based businessmen provided the Houthis with Ukrainian stolen grain.[204]

The logic behind providing the Houthis with intelligence and targeting data was to prevent Russian cargo from being hit

In the press, reports emerged that part of the Russian support for the group came in the form of intelligence sharing, with GRU

[196] Robert Perkins, Max Lin, and Kelly Norways, "Infographic: Red Sea tensions reshape shipping, commodity markets," *S&P Global*, 20 May 2025.

[197] Emil Avdaliani, "Russia-Iran Ties Extend to the Houthis of Yemen," *Stimson Center*, 27 November 2024.

[198] "Houthis promise not to attack Russian, Chinese, German ships in Red Sea," *TASS,* 22 January 2024.

[199] Hamidreza Azizi and Hanna Notte, "Russia's Dangerous New Friends," *Foreign Affairs*, 14 February 2024.

[200] Russia-Hezbollah ties increased in intensity and volume after 2022, including, potentially, with arms transfers to the group. See: Azizi and Notte, "Russia's Dangerous New Friends."

[201] "Huthis In Moscow To Discuss Increasing Pressure On U.S., Israel To End Gaza War," *RFE/RL*, 26 January 2024.

[202] Sam Dagher and Mohammed Hatem, "China, Russia Reach Agreement With Yemen's Houthis on Red Sea Ships," *Bloomberg*, 21 March 2024.

[203] Sean Mathews, "Exclusive: US intelligence suggests Russian military is advising Houthis inside Yemen," *Middle East Eye*, 2 August 2024.

[204] "Treasury Sanctions Houthi Network Procuring Weapons and Commodities from Russia," OFAC, 2 April 2025.

officers allegedly providing targeting data for the Houthi strikes. In part, the logic behind providing the Houthis with intelligence and targeting data was to prevent Russian cargo from being hit. Indeed, the Yemenite group reportedly was not able to distinguish between Russian-flagged vessels and those carrying Russian goods, including those ships of the shadow fleet.[205] In addition to material support, Russia has advocated for the group. In March 2025, the Houthis resumed their campaign against Israel and US vessels in the Red Sea, with Russian diplomacy continuing to advocate for the movement.[206]

While fuel and grains are widely reported to have been delivered, transfers of arms and more advanced systems – such as missiles – are yet to be confirmed. According to reports, Iran was active in brokering these negotiations on arms transfers in September and October 2024. In turn, the notorious Russian arms dealer, Viktor Bout, is said to have managed the negotiations during an Aden visit.[207] Yet, US pressure may have discouraged the Kremlin from providing military aid, opting instead to deliver other aid and intelligence.[208]

Russia's relative weaknesses may be a factor pushing Moscow towards the Houthis. Namely, to demonstrate that the Kremlin is still relevant worldwide.[209] The Houthis also facilitated the recruitment of hundreds of Yemeni soldiers to fight for Russia in Ukraine, in what may be called a human trafficking operation.[210] With constant manpower shortages, this personnel addresses a direct need of Russia's war machine. Moreover, the visibility that the Houthis gained because of their campaign gave them a larger platform to disseminate pro-Russian messaging, including wartime propaganda targeting Ukraine.[211] Finally, protection from the Red Sea Houthi campaign might also be a factor at play. As the Red Sea energy trade becomes more important for Russia, protection from Houthi attacks is an asset for Moscow's sanction-busting schemes.

Protection from Houthi attacks is an asset for Moscow's sanction-busting schemes

The short Iran-Israel war might result in a reorientation of Tehran's foreign policy, especially as Tehran's proxy warfare strategy – which drove it to support the Houthis – appears to have fallen apart. This raises the prospect of the Houthi movement continuing their partnership with Russia to compensate for Iran's weaknesses. While Moscow's foreign policy benefited from its support to the group, on Russia's side, future cooperation will remain tied to the broader partnership with Iran. Were tensions between Moscow and Tehran to resurface, the connections to the Houthis will suffer. Despite the closeness of the cooperation between Moscow and the Houthis, Russia has maintained its ties with southern political forces. According to *INPACT/All eyes on Wagner*, Moscow has been engaged in negotiations to open a diplomatic representation in Aden since at least 2024.[212]

There are several maritime aspects of the Russia-Houthi cooperation. Not only is the Russian support meant to coordinate in a maritime campaign, but much of the Russian support to the group arrived by sea. According to Ukrainian foreign intelligence, the Russian shadow fleet (consisting of vessels controlled by Russian proxies and flying flags of convenience) has used the Houthi-controlled harbour of Ras Isa to supply the group with fuel. These deliveries ran from August 2024 to May 2025.[213]

[205] Sean Mathews, "Exclusive: US intelligence suggests Russian military is advising Houthis inside Yemen."

[206] Yevgeny Falko, "США проинформировали Россию о решении начать операцию против хуситов [US informs Russia of decision to launch operation against Houthis]," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 16 March 2025.

[207] Julian E. Barnes, "Russia Could Expand Its Assistance to Houthis, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, 25 October 2024.

[208] Michael R. Gordon and Lara Seligman, "U.S. Launches Effort to Stop Russia From Arming Houthis With Antiship Missiles," *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 July 2024.

[209] Informant 6.

[210] "Moscow double-dealing in Yemen," *All Eyes on Wagner*, 26 November 2024.

[211] "Yemen's Houthi rebels declare support for Russia's Ukraine annexation," *The New Arab*, 22 February 2022.

[212] "Moscow double-dealing in Yemen," *All Eyes on Wagner.*

[213] "The rf's "Shadow" Fleet Working for the Houthis: russian Oil Is Setting the Middle East on Fire," Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine, 8 May 2025.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Russia's presence in the Red Sea deserves attention due to Moscow's overall aggressive foreign policy and aspirational moves worldwide. At the same time, there is only so much the Kremlin can accomplish in the area. Generally, local actors in the Red Sea region tend to seek support among the major powers by over-emphasising the relevance of major power competition in northeast Africa and the Red Sea. More precisely, they claim that rivalries among larger external actors are at the source of the region's instability, requiring deeper engagement from them. The reality is otherwise, as foreign patrons become entangled in conflicts driven principally by local actors, based on local grievances.[214] So, this approach tends to distort Russia's Red Sea presence, portraying it as more impactful than it is. Russian communications intentionally add to this trend.

Russia's policy towards the Red Sea features sustained engagement and opportunism. The result is a paradoxical policy. On the one hand, Russia's relations with the countries of the region are multifaceted. As the background and results sections point to, Russia has been present in the area through trade, diplomatic, and military cooperation, with ties going centuries back in the cases of Egypt and Ethiopia, and nearly one hundred years in Yemen. Public diplomacy, activities in the media space, and alleged intelligence operations only add to Russia's scope. For the Russian navy, the harbours of the Red Sea have been open most of the time, with basing being a fact for most of the Cold War, and a desire since the late 2000s. On the other hand, Russia's lack of capabilities results in Moscow having to rely on adventurism and opportunism to compensate for conventional weaknesses.[215]

The harbours of the Red Sea have been open most of the time, but Russia's lack of capabilities results in having to rely on adventurism and opportunism to compensate for conventional weaknesses

These trends have been reaffirmed since the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Diplomatic semi-isolation, severe international sanctions, and a policy focus on Ukraine have reduced the bandwidth for the Kremlin to pursue new adventures. In 2022 and 2023, Moscow made large efforts to convince partners worldwide that it remains a viable player, illustrated by the frenetic pace of diplomatic tours by Lavrov in those years.

The presence of several major players and various visible conflicts have made Russia's engagements even more significant

In the Red Sea region, the presence of several major players – Egypt, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia – and various visible conflicts – in Sudan and Yemen – have made Russia's engagements with the area even more significant. This trend was reinforced by the redirection of Russian energy exports through the Suez Canal and by the rising importance of China and India in Russian trade. To reiterate, 2022 made the Red Sea more important for Moscow than ever before.

The October 2023 Hamas attacks were seized by Russia as a strategic opportunity. As revealed by Russian official narratives about the Red Sea, Russian perceptions of the region changed before and after October 2023, with much more attention subsequently dedicated to it. The Kremlin's long-term concern with major power status, its strategy of confrontation with the west, and its maritime policy sharpened its focus on the Red Sea. As mentioned above, much of this attention was part of an informational campaign oriented at disparaging US policy in the Middle East, especially against Operation Poseidon Archer (US-UK airstrikes on Yemen). More significant still, this interest translated into support for the Houthi movement, meant to disrupt world trade and create a new flashpoint for the west.

[214] Informant 7.

[215] Informant 6.

From this optic, the repeated claims of a Russian Red Sea naval base – be it in Eritrea or Sudan – remain a virtual element in Moscow's power projection. When addressing players in the area, the expectation of a naval base is an asset in itself for the Kremlin, regardless of whether the installation will be developed or not. The virtual nature of Russia's base reflects the broader status of Moscow's engagements in Africa, where the country claims to be a major power despite its limited ability to deliver outcomes. This renders the Kremlin into what Ramani calls a "virtual great power" on the continent.[216] Thus, this condition is only replicated in the Red Sea.

Despite this virtual nature, the Kremlin's approach to the region has had its impact. Maintaining the promise of a future Russian naval base in the area has necessitated a constant dialogue with Eritrea and Sudan. In the case of the former, this empowers Asmara, breaking out of its isolation. In the case of Sudan, it adds to the flames of one of the most destructive wars of the 2020s so far. While neither Egypt nor Saudi Arabia consider Russia a major player in the Red Sea, they do not intend to disrupt Moscow's plans in the area, seeking accommodation instead. Ethiopia, aiming for a resurgence as a Red Sea actor, has seen value in engaging Moscow on the topic. By aligning themselves with Moscow, the Houthis have transformed their Red Sea campaign into a feature of global politics, raising the prospect of a wider conflagration between Russia and the west in the region.

By aligning with Moscow, the Houthis have transformed their Red Sea campaign into a feature of global politics

In that vein, Russia's official communications have tended to portray the Red Sea as an area of major power competition. Seldom is the agency of smaller actors woven into the narratives that state officials, state media, and Russian diplomats articulate about the Red Sea. So, the US, the UK, Türkiye, and China often take the main roles, rendering the broader region into an arena of confrontation driven by these and other major actors.

[216] Ramani, *Russia in Africa*.

Since 2022, the impact of sanctions has been discussed in the development of the INSTC and of alternative routes for Russian sea-borne energy exports. The Houthi attempt at a Red Sea blockade since 2023 has brought increased attention to the area in Russian official communications. Like before, their focus centred on the US, portraying the US-led operation to deter the blockade as a US war of aggression. Within these various narratives, Russia is presented in these official sources as a major power, capable of grand projects and restraining the US.

Overall, Russia's post-2022 engagements with the region have been driven by perceived opportunities for the Kremlin to advance its global ambitions. So, the 2022 redirection of energy sales through the Red Sea was in part driven by the sense of opportunity, namely, that sanctioned vessels would not be detained in the area. Then, the rapprochement with Ethiopia was built in part because of that country's isolation coming out of the Tigray war. Eritrea's UNGA support for Russia also granted Moscow the opportunity to gain a regional champion, ready to endorse the Kremlin's narratives about Ukraine and the west. The engagements with the Houthis were also enabled by the Hamas-Israel war, which both the Houthis and the Kremlin saw as an opportunity to deepen their military cooperation.

Nevertheless, this opportunism is possible only thanks to the Kremlin's efforts to build a presence in each one of the countries, dedicating resources – however effectively – to naval diplomacy and other initiatives. The long-standing defence partnerships ground Russia's presence in the region. As the background section shows, all countries in the Red Sea region except for Saudi Arabia have at times received training from the Soviet Union or Russia. Nearly all countries in the area field

The long-standing defence partnerships ground Russia's presence

Soviet and Russian arms models and defence systems. Positive relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been the result of consistent engagements and not of opportunism.

Finally, the Houthi movement will remain a significant feature in Russia's regional engagements. While the blockade was officially lifted in June 2025, as of writing, risks remain that the fighting between the group and Israel might resume, threatening navigation once again. Assisting the group proved a relatively low-cost, high-impact measure for Russia to undermine what it perceives as western interests. The rerouting of world trade around the Cape of Good Hope and the fallout from the blockade taught Moscow the wrong lessons. Namely, that the Houthis can deliver outcomes and that the Red Sea is a vulnerable region where covert operations can have a large impact.

Drawing from this analysis, the recommendations for US, NATO, and other policymakers concerned with Russia's role in Red Sea security are as follows:

- **A proactive approach is needed.** A 'business as usual' attitude will only enable Russia to entrench anti-western foreign policies in the Red Sea area, marginalise western initiatives, and further empower Moscow's partners. Gaining a base, access to resources (including hard currency), and securing transit all contribute to Russia's wartime foreign policy. The risk is for the Red Sea to become again what it was for the Soviet Union: a source of strategic depth for Moscow's manoeuvres in even more critical theatres, such as in the Levant and the Persian Gulf.

  - Moscow's engagements with the region are conceived in the Kremlin as part of a broader fight with the west, one that runs from Ukraine to Yemen. This mindset is aggressive and belligerent, empowering Russia to side with equally belligerent actors, such as the Houthis.

  - A response to Russia in the Red Sea region must be oriented towards denying Moscow the gains of its aggressive foreign policy, be it in the region itself or in Ukraine. To accomplish this, a combination of monitoring, pressure, cooperation, and competition is needed.

- **Monitor Russian basing claims closely.** Construction in Port Sudan, Massawa, Hodeida, and other harbours should attract the attention of western intelligence agencies. Sources, including satellite imagery, should be routinely exploited to monitor potential construction or port use by Russian forces. The monitoring must be constant, and its products disseminated promptly. The knowledge of the status on the ground will help decision-makers avoid being misled by Russian claims of imminent basing. At-will sharing of these assessments with local partners can also be an asset to undermine Russian narratives of major power status in the area. This way, close western partners will know whether to treat claims by the Kremlin of imminent basing as a real factor or a boisterous claim.

  - Currently, only Sudan appears to offer a plausible site for a new Russian naval installation, though future locations cannot be dismissed. In Sudan's case, any progress in the development of Russian basing must be monitored and measured against the evolution of the civil war.

- **Increase pressure on the supply logistics to the Houthis.** A direct confrontation with the Houthis has risks and limited potential, but isolating the group is possible. The status of Russian support for the Houthis is undetermined as of writing, but pressure against arms transfers to the group must persist. In turn, pressure on the intermediaries and actors managing

The risk is for the Red Sea to become again what it was for the Soviet Union: a source of strategic depth for Moscow's manoeuvres in even more critical theatres

Currently, only Sudan appears to offer a plausible site for a new Russian naval installation, though future locations cannot be dismissed

the relationship with Russia must continue through targeted sanctions and exposure. In addition, Tehran must be pressured, too, as it is an essential facilitator of the Russo-Houthi exchange. In that sense, negotiators with Iran must consider incorporating Yemen and the Houthis into the dialogue.

  - US Treasury Department sanctions on the group and its enablers must be the object of coordination with allies and like-minded partners.

- **Tackle the gold trade.** Gold mined by Russian-aligned actors in Central Africa and Sudan is often shipped to international markets through Port Sudan. This gold helps finance Russia's paramilitary presence across Africa and serves to evade sanctions. This must become a topic in any negotiations in Sudan concerning sanctions lifting or post-war reconstruction. In other harbours, Russian gold passes by not because of conscious support but because of gaps in due diligence among port authorities. Investing in increasing the capacity to detect gold sourced from illicit sources will help disrupt Russian mining operations.

- **Promote alternatives to Russian grains and fertilisers.** Yemen and northeast Africa are among the regions with the most food stress in the world. Supporting alternative providers of agricultural products, including fertilisers, in the region will improve the humanitarian situation and accomplish several objectives concerning Russia. Crucially, it will put pressure on a key source of hard currency for Moscow, and it will counter Russia's messaging concerning grain policy. Initiatives such as "Grain from Ukraine" offer a solution that directly counters Russian narratives. Other major grain exporters, such as Australia and Canada, can receive commercial assistance through business delegations or through other grain donation programmes. Major fertiliser producers, such as India, can also be brought into the picture to expand their market share.

  - Major regional markets, such as Egypt and Ethiopia, cannot fully distance themselves from Russian suppliers, at least not in the short term. In these two cases, promoting alternatives and providing support must be taken as a gradual process, but one that will benefit from constant engagement rather than sharp denunciations.

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