

## BRIEF

# RUSSIA AND THE RED SEA SINCE 2022

## MILITARISED FOREIGN POLICY OR STRATEGY OF CONFLICT?

| IVAN U.K. KEYSZCZ |

**Accounting for over 10% of world trade, the Red Sea is an essential waterway and a chokepoint for international shipping. Piracy, instability, and inter-state conflict are long-term challenges that have kept regional and extra-regional powers engaged in contributing to the security of the area. Since 19 October 2023, the Red Sea attacks on commercial shipping by the Yemen-based Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) have only raised the stakes.**

In this context, Russian engagements with the region deserve scrutiny. 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%.<sup>1</sup> Moscow's reported support for the Houthi movement, its search for a naval base on the Red Sea shores, and its broader military diplomacy raise questions about the Kremlin's intentions in the area. What is Russia's approach to the Red Sea? How does it fit into Moscow's broader aggressive foreign policy?

## THE RED SEA DIMENSION OF RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

### ERITREA AND SUDAN: BASING OPTIONS

In 2008 emerged the first confirmation of Russia's interest in opening a naval base on the Red Sea shores. Since then, attempts to acquire an installation on the shores of Yemen, Djibouti, and Somalia (Berbera) did not prosper. Today, the most promising sites are in Eritrea and Sudan. Indeed, since 2017, Russia has been engaging in negotiations with Khartoum for establishing a 300-strong naval installation in the Port Sudan area.<sup>2</sup> Despite its promise, domestic

and international events have thrown into question the feasibility of the project. So, in parallel to these negotiations, Moscow has maintained a dialogue with Asmara on a logistics facility in the port of Assab, ongoing since at least 2018, with renewed impetus since 2022.<sup>3</sup>

This balancing has remained relevant in recent years. The Russian navy visited Massawa in 2024—welcomed by Eritrean President Issaias Afwerki—after the Russian ambassador to Sudan stated in February that it might be impossible to implement the original basing deal in Port Sudan.<sup>4</sup> Later, on 12 February 2025, Russian and

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Sudanese officials confirmed being “in complete agreement” over the base, stating that it would proceed.<sup>5</sup> Still, going forward would require large-scale construction efforts, including dredging and establishing electricity infrastructure.<sup>6</sup> Regional actors, including the Gulf monarchies, were initially interested in Russia's moves, but currently follow a wait-and-see approach.<sup>7</sup>

### THE HOUGHIS: ZERO-SUM CALCULATIONS

Generally, Russia is not perceived in the region as a direct supporter of the Houthis, though Moscow's growing alignment with Tehran raises that possibility for local observers.<sup>8</sup> According to reports, the pivotal moment in the Kremlin's Houthi engagements came on 25 January 2024, when Russian diplomats met with Mohammed Abdulsalam, spokesperson of the Houthi movement. Abdulsalam has since become a key

facilitator for the relationship with Moscow, including liaising with the country's military.<sup>9</sup>

These engagements evolved quickly. According to reports, Iran brokered Russian support for the Houthis, including by transferring satellite targeting data for the Red Sea attacks.<sup>10</sup> Reports of potential Russian transfers of light arms and ballistic missiles surfaced by September 2024.<sup>11</sup> The Houthis also facilitated the recruitment of "hundreds" of Yemeni soldiers to fight for Russia in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

What else has Russia obtained from the Houthis? Reportedly, Mohamed Ali Al-Houthi, head of the Houthi politburo, pledged that the group will not endanger Russian (and Chinese) Red Sea vessels.<sup>13</sup> Despite certain ships being indeed targeted by the group, the Russian press reported in June 2024 that the Red Sea remains safe for the country's ships.<sup>14</sup> In March 2025, the Houthis reaffirmed their 'ban' on Israeli and US vessels to transit the Red Sea, with Russian diplomacy continuing to advocate for the movement.<sup>15</sup>

#### HORN OF AFRICA: NAVAL DIPLOMACY

Regional dependency on Russian fertilisers and grains will remain a factor for actors in the region to continue engaging with Moscow.<sup>16</sup> The maritime element is essential as Russia has supplied grains directly to Houthi-controlled harbours, with other deliveries made by Russia to Massawa and Mogadishu.<sup>17</sup>

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Naval diplomacy has also been relevant in the Kremlin's growing ties with Addis Ababa. Being the landlocked country with the largest population in the world, Ethiopia has sought to enhance its trade route security by building a navy. In 2019, Russia provided naval training to an estimated 1000 Ethiopian officers. Reportedly, Moscow's goal was to displace Paris as Addis Ababa's partner of choice on the topic.<sup>18</sup> By the start of 2025, the training mission appeared to have reached its end, though a March 2025 agreement between the two countries might resume this exchange.<sup>19</sup>

## NARRATIVES

Since 2022, Russian officials and state-owned media have stressed the importance of the Red Sea for Russia's economy. Indeed, in 2024, 83% of oil flows departing from western Russia have transited through the Suez Canal.<sup>20</sup>

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After October 2023, the Red Sea became more prominent and has been portrayed as another arena for Russia's confrontation with the west. Driving Russian communications was the reaction to the January 2024 US-led campaign to deter the Houthi strikes. Commentators at the time described the Russian reaction as "outrage."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the US-led operation was portrayed by Russian diplomats and other officials as "illegal" and part of an alleged agenda for Washington to maintain "hegemony" over the Middle East. They also made analogies between the operation and past US operations abroad, especially with loaded comparisons with the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars.

At the same time, the security of Red Sea maritime trade remained a fixture of state communications. This messaging, however, did not attribute the rise in shipping insecurity to the Houthi attacks. For example, on 27 February 2024, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov stated:

"[Russia] does not justify strikes on commercial shipping, no matter the reason. But we also cannot dismiss the aggressive actions of the US and UK against the territory of Yemen."<sup>22</sup>

In this context, Russian state-controlled media has portrayed the Houthis as defending the sovereignty of Yemen, avoiding the 'terrorist' label when addressing the group.<sup>23</sup> So, Russian officials actively conflate their support for the Houthis with support for Yemen.<sup>24</sup> For example, Russian state officials portray the role of Moscow as "acting to stop the escalation" in the Red Sea, "a strategically important region of the world."<sup>25</sup>

By the middle of 2024, the Red Sea became less visible in official narratives, being just an addition to the general retelling of the ‘instability’ in the Middle East, and the accusation of western culpability in producing it.

## RUSSIAN NAVAL DOCTRINE

In the Russian government, there is no official document on Red Sea strategy, or an Africa or Middle East strategy. Instead, there are several strategic documents concerning broad policy areas, which reflect resource demands from different stakeholders directed at the Kremlin, rather than actual strategy. Of the recent documents, the 2022 Russian Naval Doctrine is the only one that mentions the Red Sea outright.

Indeed, the Doctrine mentions the development of relations with Red Sea littoral states as a priority for the development of naval transport in a way “that would contribute to the economic independence and national security of the Russian Federation.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, developing a “military-naval” presence in the Red Sea is listed as a priority, namely, to facilitate Russian access to the Persian Gulf and to the Indian Ocean. This includes the use of the infrastructure of states in these regions, as well as “sites of material-technical support.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, 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.”<sup>28</sup> This is listed as a priority, but only after other regions, especially the waterways directly connected to Russian territory.

The reason for this prioritisation is that Russia’s navy is that of a continental power. Closing the Danish Straits and the Dardanelles have been recurrent missions for the Russian navy, more so than the control of trade routes and maritime power projection.<sup>29</sup> Still, Russia’s long coastline and four fleets demand a commitment to sea power. Adjusted for price levels, the Kremlin spends an estimated \$30 bn every year since 2014 for the navy, making Russia’s the third or fourth largest naval budget worldwide.<sup>30</sup>

Despite being bound to territorial protection, the Russian navy has invested in overseas basing and missions in the high seas (called the ‘world ocean’ in Russian). 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. In turn, missions in the high seas are a way for the Kremlin to signal Russia’s capability to secure goals overseas and to remain a sea power.<sup>31</sup> The Red Sea is often a venue for these demonstrations. For example, in 2008, Russia contributed naval assets to the international mission to fight against piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and Russia-NATO cooperation on the subject continued until 2013.<sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>33</sup>

## EXTENDING THE SCOPE OF THE WAR

Russia’s views and actions in the Red Sea region reflect its broader belligerent and militarised foreign policy. Moscow’s support for the Houthis directly undermines regional security. Rather than increasing regional security, the would-be Russian naval base in Sudan or Eritrea will principally serve as a tool for the Kremlin’s security policy. Naval diplomacy attempts to break Russia out of isolation and increase its appeal as a partner. In the context of Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine, these engagements cannot be separated from the war in Europe and the international sanctions imposed on the country.

*Russia’s engagements in the Red Sea cannot be separated from the war in Europe and the international sanctions*

In turn, local actors are essential for Moscow. Several governments of Red Sea littoral states decided not to host the Russian navy, with only Eritrea and Sudan continuing a dialogue on the topic. While it is unclear who initiated the cooperation, the ties between the Houthis and the Kremlin point to a bargain, not unilateral patronage. Finally, engaging in naval diplomacy shows that Russia requires local buy-in to advance its goals in the region. Recognising the agency of local actors is an essential element for any response to Russia in the Red Sea.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>9</sup> US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Houthi Leaders Involved in Smuggling and Procuring Weapons," 5 March 2025.
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- <sup>18</sup> "Moscow makes moves to replace France for navy training," *Africa Intelligence*, 25 March 2022.
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- <sup>22</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Yemeni Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Ahmed Awad Bin Mubarak," 27 February 2024.
- <sup>23</sup> Sergey Serebrov, "Йеменские хуситы: кто это, почему и против кого? [Yemen's Houthis: Who Are They and Who Are They Against?]," *Rossiia v Globalnoy Politike*, 27 December 2023.
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- <sup>27</sup> Naval Doctrine, Article 59, 4.
- <sup>28</sup> Naval Doctrine, Article 15, 4.
- <sup>29</sup> Andrew Lambert, "Russia and some principles of maritime strategy," in Andrew Monaghan & Richard Connolly (eds.), *The sea in Russian strategy* (Manchester University Press, 2023), 44-50.
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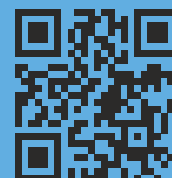
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