

Summary

Recent incidents in the Gulf of Aden and threats from the Houthi rebels have marked a significant escalation in maritime security threats. The Houthis' claimed the acquisition of a new hypersonic missile and the announcement that they will target ships en route to the Cape of Good Hope, signalling an expanded area of operations beyond their previous focus on the Red Sea and Suez Canal. This strategic shift follows a deadly attack on a commercial vessel on March 7, demonstrating their willingness and ability to engage in direct action resulting in loss of life and potential disruption of international shipping lanes.

Recent events and developments

On March 15, the Houthis claimed to possess a new hypersonic missile, enhancing their offensive capabilities. Furthermore, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, the supreme leader of the Houthis, announced a strategic shift in their operations, stating that they will begin targeting ships en route to the Cape of Good Hope. This announcement marks a significant escalation as it threatens a major alternative shipping route that bypasses the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, which were previously the primary targets. In light of these developments, the deadly impact of the Houthi's actions was underscored on March 7 when a missile struck a commercial ship in the Gulf of Aden, killing three crew members and forcing the survivors to abandon ship. It was marked as the first lethal strike against maritime vessels by the Houthis. In a recent suspected attack by the rebels on March 17, an explosive detonation occurred near a ship in the Gulf of Aden. However, the British military's maritime operations center off Aden's coast reported no damages or casualties. Despite their history of targeting shipping lanes, the Houthis did not claim responsibility for this particular incident. Meanwhile, U.S. military actions have targeted Houthi drone boats and drones, but these engagements have not resulted in any reported damages. Amidst these external threats, internal divisions persist within the anti-Houthi coalition, especially between the internationally recognized government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which is advocating for independence or greater autonomy for southern Yemen.

Impact assessment

Recent activities in the region have raised concerns about the potential for broader geopolitical implications. The increasing maritime threats posed by Yemen's Houthi rebels, as evidenced by their recent claim of a hypersonic missile and a shift in targeting strategy towards ships en route to the Cape of Good Hope, significantly raise security risks in the region. These risks include the possibility of non-interceptable strikes on critical maritime infrastructure, enhancing Houthi offensive capabilities that could threaten international shipping lanes, and a potentially higher rate of successful attacks. The potential for clashes between STC factions add another layer of uncertainty. Thus, there is a threat of rearmament of anti-Houthi forces, possibly with advanced weaponry and increased intelligence support. Such could lead to a direct escalation in ground and naval confrontations. Recent Houthi activity and escalatory rhetoric could be met with increased military operations by anti-Houthi coalitions to neutralize the perceived maritime threat and prevent further attacks on commercial and military shipping. The rearming of anti-Houthi forces could provoke a cycle of retaliation, leading to an increase in missile and drone attacks on military bases, critical infrastructure and areas of strategic importance. Thus, an increase in armed clashes and rocket attacks could destabilize the already volatile security situation in the region.

Advice from Forth Global

- Make sure all employees travelling to Yemen undertake a three-day HEAT training prior to deployment.
- Advise staff to maintain increased vigilance for armed clashes in STC-controlled areas, including Aden.
- Continuously monitor local news and liaise with local partners to stay up to date with developments in the region of operations.

Customized advice

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