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RUSSO-HOUSHI TIES AMID THE GEOPOLITICAL DISPUTE WITH THE WEST

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Abstract

In the early 2000s, Russia appeared to distance itself from the former Soviet Union's traditional support for its allies in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Under Yeltsin and, to a degree, Putin, Moscow's approach in the Middle East leaned more toward Israel. However, Russia's stance has since shifted, seemingly aligning once again with Israel's adversaries. A key turning point came during the 2007 Munich Security Conference, when Putin signaled that Russia was no longer content with a secondary role on the global stage or merely as a regional superpower.

The events of October 7, 2023, and their broader regional fallout have prompted many to question Russia's evolving role in the Middle East. Putin has seized this moment to assert that the longstanding US strategy in the region has faltered. These shifts have also sparked debate over Moscow's potential gains from alternative logistical routes, its interest in maintaining high oil prices, and its readiness to leverage the situation to weaken its Western adversaries — especially those challenging it over Ukraine. This study seeks to analyze the relationship between the Houthis and Moscow, examining how the Kremlin might capitalize on the instability in the Red Sea region as part of its broader geopolitical confrontation with the West, particularly in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Keywords: Russia, Houthis, Yemen, the United States, Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab.

Introduction

The ongoing developments in the Middle East, especially since the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, have created a new battleground for major global powers. As the conflict has escalated regionally, it has reached vital geostrategic areas like the Red Sea, drawing in various international actors looking to expand their influence. Russia is one of the key powers that may see this conflict as a strategic opportunity to weaken and exert pressure on the United States and its Western allies, who are already engaged against Moscow in the Russia-Ukraine war.

This approach aligns with Russia's broader strategy of imposing pressure on the United States and West, a tactic highlighted by former President and Deputy Chairman of the Russian National Security Council Dmitry Medvedev. In a message via his Telegram channel, Medvedev called for revenge against the West "everywhere possible," emphasizing that Moscow should retaliate for the Ukraine crisis and the severe sanctions imposed on Russia and its people. Labeling the West as "enemies," he advocated for creating economic hardships, fostering public unrest in Western nations due to poor leadership, and advancing international actions that would undercut Western interests. Medvedev also suggested that these measures should be pursued "systematically, consistently, and as openly as possible," and hinted at unspecified activities "on Western territory" that go beyond typical public discourse. This emerging trend, which appears to be an official strategy, revolves around the idea that Russia should leverage the ongoing conflict in the Red Sea as a counterbalance to Western and US efforts against Russia in Ukraine. By supporting the Houthis with weapons, Russia may be seeking to harm the United States in a manner similar to how Washington has supplied Ukraine with weapons aimed at weakening Russia.

US news reports have suggested that Russia is indeed providing military assistance to the Houthis in their conflict with the United States, and it seems increasingly possible that Moscow could deepen its involvement in this regional conflict. Such involvement would offer Russia significant geopolitical advantages against the United States, particularly as it engages in its own confrontation in Ukraine. This could also enhance Russia's broader objective of undermining US hegemony and weakening its influence in the region.

These developments raise several critical questions about Russia's evolving relationship with the Houthis: What factors are shaping this partnership? How has the relationship changed following the outbreak of the Gaza war and the Houthis' entry into the broader regional conflict? And more importantly, how might Russia utilize this situation to strengthen its position against the United States and the West? The consequences of Russia's deepening involvement in the conflict, and how it will leverage the situation in its geopolitical struggle, remain to be seen.

Factors Affecting Russia's Ties With the Houthis

Russia's relations with the Houthis are affected by a host of factors, most notably the following:

The Changing Nature of Russia's Foreign Policy

Referring to the principles outlined in the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation under President Putin, particularly those introduced in 2016 and 2023, it is evident that Russia's approach to global conflict prioritizes the invocation of international law, the role of the United Nations, multilateral diplomacy, and support for legitimate regimes. Article 34 of the 2016 Russia Foreign Policy Concept "Russia facilitates the resolution of regional conflicts by political and diplomatic means through collective action by the international community, believing that such conflicts can only be resolved through inclusive dialogue and negotiations involving all sides rather than by isolating any of them."

Meanwhile, Article 92 specifically addresses the Middle East, underscoring Moscow's strategy of pursuing political and diplomatic resolutions in this region based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the right to self-determination without external interference.

Russia's foreign policy concept for 2023 reaffirms the country's commitment to its core foreign policy principles. Article 6 indicates that Russia's approach remains peaceful, transparent, predictable, and consistent. It is grounded in realism and respect for widely accepted principles and rules of international law. Moreover, it stresses Russia's dedication to fostering equal international cooperation aimed at solving global problems and advancing shared interests.

The new Russian foreign policy concept, responding to international shifts, reflects a stronger tendency toward intervention and engagement. Article 11 in Chapter Two acknowledges that the intensification of prolonged armed conflicts in various regions heightens global security risks, including the potential for clashes between major powers, even nuclear-armed states. This raises the likelihood of such conflicts escalating into regional or global wars. In response, Article 24, in its fourth paragraph, emphasizes the need for political and diplomatic action to counter interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, particularly efforts to complicate political situations, facilitate unconstitutional regime changes, or threaten territorial integrity. Additionally, Russia's new concept prioritizes safe access to seas and oceans, vital for ensuring unobstructed export routes for Russian goods. Article 36, in particular, outlines the importance of securing Russia's free, safe, and comprehensive access to vital areas, transport routes, and resources in global maritime domains.

The new concept also highlights in Article 17, paragraph 3, the importance of developing effective and comprehensive international responses to shared challenges and threats, including regional conflicts and crises. While the concept underscores Russia's commitment to international law in conflict resolution, it also introduces a pragmatic approach in paragraph 7 of the same article. This section emphasizes Russia's support for its allies and partners in advancing mutual interests, ensuring their security, and promoting sustainable development — even if these allies lack international recognition or membership in international organizations.

Russia's new foreign policy concept introduces a dimension that raises critical questions about its support for various entities. Specifically, it opens debate on whether Russia's backing will be limited to entities it already recognizes as independent republics within its former Soviet sphere, like South Ossetia and Abkhazia, or if it extends to groups outside this space, such as the Houthis. The Houthis have long sought Russian recognition for their political council, particularly before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This raises the possibility of a strategic connection between Russia's stance and the Houthis' recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk as independent republics.

The Nature of Russia's Intermediary Role Between the Parties to Yemen's Crisis

Following their 2015 coup, the Houthis sought to engage with Russia for support, leveraging the alliance between Moscow and Tehran, particularly over shared interests such as their cooperation in Syria. Despite this, Russia refrained from offering any direct support to the Houthis during their internal conflict. Instead, it consistently opposed international resolutions against them. Notably, in April 2015, Russia threatened to veto a Gulf Cooperation Council draft resolution in the UN Security Council aimed at imposing sanctions on Houthi leaders and former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, as well as an arms embargo.

In August 2016, Russia further utilized its veto power to block a Security Council resolution urging the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh to cooperate with the then-UN envoy to Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed and calling for intervention to implement a proposed peace agreement. Instead, Russia advocated for an arms embargo that would encompass all factions, including the internationally recognized Yemeni government. While a resolution was ultimately passed by the Security Council, Russia's actions demonstrated its inclination to maintain a balanced stance. In March 2021, Russia continued this trend by opposing a Security Council resolution that called for an end to Houthi assaults on the gas-rich region of Marib.

Despite Russia's early stances that hindered significant international action against the Houthis, the group remained skeptical about Moscow's involvement. This skepticism appeared to stem from the perception that Russia's position was primarily a reflection of its opposition to the West rather than a strategic alliance with the Houthis, unlike its robust support for the Syrian regime. Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi articulated this sentiment, "Russia has its own calculations, interests, and policies, and we do not tease it or rely on it. I hope the Russian bears will wake up from their winter hibernation because of the American fire."

Russia has demonstrated a commitment to maintaining good relations with all parties involved in the Yemeni crisis. Since 2016, it has gradually positioned itself as a key mediator in the conflict, particularly following a message from the Houthis outlining their vision for resolving the decade-long crisis. This shift occurred against the backdrop of a division between the legitimate

government and the Southern Transitional Council, which is supported by the UAE. Despite the withdrawal of UAE forces from Yemen, Abu Dhabi's earlier efforts facilitated Russia's emerging role. By late August 2019, Russia began facilitating meetings between the Southern Transitional Council and Mikhail Bogdanov, Putin's special envoy to the Middle East and Africa. On the same day, Russian officials also met with the Houthis and Saleh's son, while continuing to engage with representatives from President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's government. Russia also hosted various Yemeni delegations in Moscow.

Russia's Relations With the Regional Powers Involved in Yemen's Crisis

Regionally, Russia has been careful to maintain its policy of non-alignment with competing regional blocs in the Middle East. In the context of the Yemeni crisis, Moscow was particularly cautious not to jeopardize its friendly relations with Saudi Arabia. The main objective was to distance Saudi Arabia, a key US ally in the region, from Washington. Consequently, the Kremlin has employed a balanced approach that remains open to all parties involved in the Yemeni issue.

In this regard, Russian orientalist Pavel Gostrin, who worked within the Russian diplomatic mission in Yemen during the early 2000s, emphasized that Moscow cannot side with either party in the conflict. Such a stance would damage relations with Iran, which supports the Houthis, as well as with Saudi Arabia, an influential regional power and an important ally of Russia in OPEC+. Gostrin also pointed out that Mahdi al-Mashat, the representative of the Houthis, does not represent the legitimate government, which is recognized internationally under President Hadi, elected in 2012. He further noted that providing military assistance to the Houthis would contradict one of the fundamental principles of Russian diplomacy.

Thus, the Kremlin has adopted cautious approaches in Yemen, largely influenced by its relationship with Riyadh, particularly given Saudi Arabia's stance of strict neutrality regarding the Russia-Ukraine war and its refusal to join the West in imposing sanctions on Moscow. As a leader in the global oil market and a prominent country in the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia is keen to avoid antagonizing Moscow to prevent a confrontation over energy prices, similar to the price war that erupted in 2020. Such a confrontation would be costly for Moscow, especially amid its ongoing conflicts with the West, whether related to energy, economic sanctions, or military and political tensions in Ukraine. Maintaining high oil prices aligns with the shared interests of both Russia and Saudi Arabia, as Moscow views this as crucial for stabilizing its national currency, which, in turn, helps maintain the stability of its internal front. The White House is heavily invested in undermining Putin's regime.

Moscow also recognizes that Riyadh holds significant leverage, particularly through its energy resources, which the West needs as it seeks to diversify its strategic partnerships with various international players. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has successfully strengthened its economic partnership with China, further

enhancing its geopolitical significance. There is a clear alignment of interests between Riyadh and Moscow, especially in their mutual goal of maintaining high oil prices and continuing to adhere to the OPEC+ production cut agreement. Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030, which entails numerous projects requiring substantial investment, aligns with Russia's need for a stable national currency, the ruble, crucial for maintaining internal cohesion. Furthermore, Riyadh is focused on addressing its security concerns through regional arrangements rather than relying on military solutions.

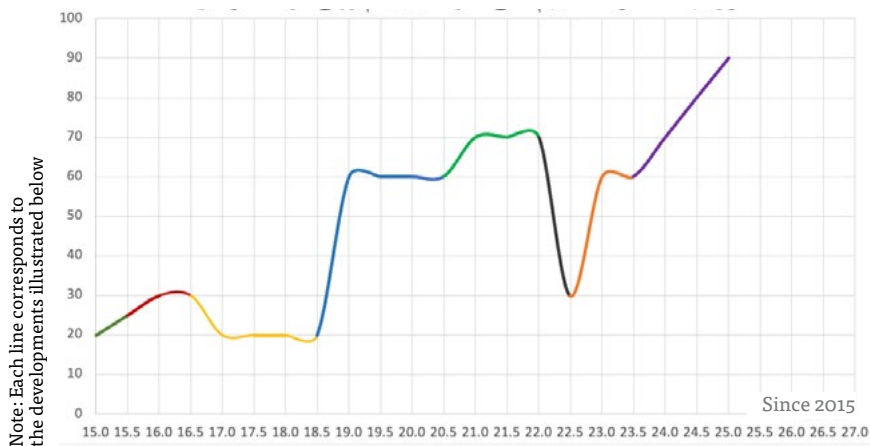
Significance of the Red Sea in Managing the Dispute With the West









The Red Sea region holds significant strategic importance for the West, serving as the shortest vital passage for trade between East and West. This is evident in the heavy Western military presence, with numerous military bases along the shores of the Red Sea and near its southern entrance at the Bab al-Mandab Strait. In contrast, Russia faces stringent Western economic sanctions and efforts to isolate it globally in response to its actions in Ukraine.

Given the escalating global tensions stemming from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which has devolved into a proxy war between Russia and NATO, the Red Sea has become increasingly crucial for Russia. This region presents an opportunity for Russia to exert pressure on the West, particularly as the Yemeni situation has garnered heightened attention from Moscow. The Houthis have emerged as a focal point in this regard. Notably, following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia's relationship with the Houthis has evolved. In August 2022, a Houthi delegation, led by spokesperson Muhammad Abdul Salam, visited Moscow, where he indicated a significant shift in Russia's stance toward the group. He emphasized that Yemen could play a strategically influential role.

The line chart below illustrates the fluctuations in the Houthi-Russia relations from 2014 till the present (the time of conducting this study).

Fluctuations in Houthi-Russia Relations (2014-Present)



Major Developments in Houthi-Russia Relations	
	Russia refrained from voting on UN Resolution no. 2216 and received the Houthi delegation in Moscow and retained the Russian Embassy in Sana'a.
	The Russian military operation in Syria and its condemnation of the Arab Coalition's Support to the legitimate government in Yemen in addition to its rapprochement with the Houthis.
	The Houthis faced significant setbacks due to the assassination of Saleh, leading to increased tensions with Moscow. This strain was evident when the Russian embassy relocated from Sana'a to Riyadh. Despite the deteriorating ties, Moscow leveraged its veto power against a draft resolution that aimed to condemn Iran, opting instead for an alternative approach that extended the sanctions regime without explicitly naming Iran.
	Riyadh's decision to increase oil pumping into the market created an environment that fostered Moscow's rapprochement with the Houthis.
	Russia has refrained from issuing a press statement at the UN Security Council condemning the Houthis, even as they escalate their attacks on Marib.
	Russia's vote in the Security Council in favor of Resolution 2624, which condemned the Houthis and classified them as a terrorist group following their ballistic missile attacks on the UAE, was perceived as a quid pro quo arrangement between Moscow and Abu Dhabi. This vote allowed the UAE to abstain from supporting a resolution condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.
	Mohammed Abdul Salam's visit to Moscow followed the Houthis' recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent republics, prior to their annexation by Russia. During this visit, Abdul Salam expressed that there was a "real change" in Russia's stance toward the Houthis.
	Moscow and the Houthis shared aligned visions regarding the events in Gaza, as the Houthis launched their strikes in the Red and Arabian Seas. This occurred despite Russia abstaining from voting on Security Council Resolution 2722, which allowed its passage. However, the recent US aid package to Ukraine, coupled with the Houthis' promise not to target Russian ships, led media outlets aligned with the Kremlin to advocate for the establishment of a military alliance with the Houthis. This alliance would aim to target Western interests.

Russia's Employment of the Houthi Attacks

The Gaza war marked a pivotal moment in the Middle East, igniting unprecedented regional chaos and foreign interventions. One significant consequence of this conflict was the Houthis' involvement in what became known as the Gaza Support Front. Their participation raised alarms as it threatened critical global trade routes, prompting responses from the United States and its Western allies.

In this context, Russia and China, both seeking to challenge US dominance and diminish its influence in the Middle East, saw an opportunity to leverage these developments. They aimed to advance their own policies and strengthen their foothold in the region by applying increased pressure on the United States. This shift in dynamics also explains the change in Russia's stance toward the Houthis, particularly in the face of the US-led campaign against them known as Operation Prosperity Guardian. Following the Gaza war, several notable developments in Russia's position regarding the Houthis can be observed, particularly in relation to their attacks on ships transiting the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

Reassessing the Relationship With the Houthis

Russia has ramped up its diplomatic engagements with the Houthis, with the conflict in the Middle East prominently featuring in discussions between the two parties. Following an escalation in the Red Sea, which the Houthis framed as part of their "support for Gaza," a Houthi delegation led by Mohammed Abdul Salam visited Moscow on January 25, 2024. During this visit, he met with Mikhail Bogdanov, the special envoy of the Russian president for the Middle East and African countries, and deputy foreign minister. Most recently, on July 2, 2024, Abdul Salam returned to Moscow, where he was received by Bogdanov again. The Russian Foreign Ministry later announced that the discussions covered the urgent need for a comprehensive resolution to the military and political crisis in Yemen, which has persisted for nearly nine years. The talks underscored the importance of enhancing international efforts to create conducive conditions for a broad national dialogue among Yemenis, facilitated by the United Nations.⁽¹⁾ In addition to addressing Yemen's crisis, the meetings also placed significant emphasis on the tragic developments in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the deteriorating situation in the Red Sea.

Taking Advantage of the Houthi Attacks to Impact the West's Economic Interests

While Russia has shifted much of its trade toward China and Far Eastern ports via rail transport — resulting in no more than 10% of its foreign trade passing through the Suez Canal — the ongoing escalation in the Red Sea has presented Russia with an opportunity to economically influence trade movements toward the West. Moscow recognizes the potential to leverage the Red Sea crisis and align itself with those opposing Western countries. In this context, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphasized this point on February 27, 2024, when he likened the actions of the Houthis in the Red Sea to the sanctions imposed on Russia. During

a press conference following talks with Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, Lavrov stated, "The impact of the Houthis' actions in the Red Sea on global trade can be compared to the impact of illegal Western sanctions against the Russian Federation." He noted that the West had encouraged Ukraine to utilize so-called safe corridors while the UN secretary-general's initiative on Black Sea grain was still active. Lavrov explained that this situation complicated logistical deliveries for goods and significantly increased insurance costs.⁽²⁾

It is noteworthy to highlight a statement from the conservative Tsargrad channel, owned by Konstantin Valeryevich Malofeev, a Russian politician and billionaire with close ties to the Kremlin. He suggested that if the Houthis did not exist, they would have had to be invented, emphasizing that recent events in the Red Sea illustrate why the Americans and the British maintain military bases on strategically crucial trade routes. While Russia currently lacks such bases, the Houthis are present and can be leveraged to Russia's advantage. Even if Israel was to agree to refrain from military action in Gaza — a scenario that seems unlikely given Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's struggle for political survival — the Houthis are unlikely to cease their attacks, particularly against Western ships. This situation raises a critical question posed by Medvedev regarding the West's stance: why should Russia alone endure "endless restrictions?" He warned that if the West desires a hybrid war, then that is precisely what they will receive.⁽³⁾

The Russian media has reframed the Houthis as a strategic asset that the Kremlin can leverage. This coverage highlights a notable absence of a similar group within Russia's own regional sphere. Two decades ago, it would have been essential for Moscow to cultivate organizations and movements aiming to break free from US influence in Bulgaria or Romania, which would have created fertile ground for subversive action. During that period, conditions were conducive for Russia to establish movements and groups aligned with its interests in the Baltic states, potentially becoming a significant challenge for local Nazis.⁽⁴⁾

An exclusive report from *The Wall Street Journal* indicates that Viktor Bout, the notorious Russian arms dealer often referred to as the "Merchant of Death," has reemerged to facilitate arms transactions with the Houthi movement. Bout had already served 12 years in US prisons. He was arrested in Thailand in a 2008 sting operation led by US Drug Enforcement Administration agents posing as Colombian leftist rebels. When Bout was released in the December 2022 prisoner swap, White House officials described it as a difficult decision but the only way to get Brittney Griner, a US basketball star, out of Russian prisons. "The small arms deal that Bout was said to have been brokering was with two Houthi representatives who had travelled to Moscow under the cover of buying pesticides and vehicles and visited a Lada factory [...] The people familiar with the deal didn't know if the deal was being negotiated at the Kremlin's behest or merely with its tacit approval. While the Houthis have been seeking Russian-made weapons, *The Wall Street Journal* couldn't determine the specific source of the planned supply," the report concludes.⁽⁵⁾ In an interview with REN TV, Bout described this exclusive

report as a “gift” to President Putin on his birthday, while also stating that it lacks factual basis and is filled with specific speculations. However, he did emphasize that the Houthi group is an ally of Russia that requires support. He believes the Houthis are quite effective at taking down US reconnaissance drones, adding the more drones they shoot down, the fewer opportunities the United States has to deploy them in the Black Sea against Russia.⁽⁶⁾

Maintaining Balanced Relations With Regional Powers — Drawing Them Away From Washington

It was not surprising that Operation Prosperity Guardian, quickly assembled by Washington, excluded key regional players in the Yemeni conflict — namely, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both countries avoided participating, likely due to concerns about their image in the Arab world and the potential backlash from publicly siding with the United States against the Houthis, who have voiced support for Gaza. Additionally, their security calculations played a role in this decision.⁽⁷⁾ Russia’s abstention from voting on the UN Security Council resolution condemning the Houthis was a calculated move. This abstention allowed the resolution to pass, reflecting the Kremlin’s desire to maintain balanced relations with dominant regional actors, as well as various Yemeni factions. Furthermore, Russia condemned subsequent US-UK strikes on Houthi positions, viewing them as violations of sovereignty and international law, which potentially undermined Saudi Arabia’s peace efforts with the Houthis. Moscow’s stance was also likely influenced by concerns about its substantial oil exports to India, which transit the Red Sea.

Waging a Diplomatic Campaign Against the United States and UK

Moscow is currently leveraging anti-colonial rhetoric to gain favor with the Global South, criticizing US hegemony and consistently opposing US actions on the world stage. The conflict in the Red Sea has provided Russia with an opportunity to undermine the United States, portraying its actions as violations of international law and imperialist in nature. This approach aligns with Russia’s broader goal of challenging the international system, weakening US dominance, and using US military interventions against Washington and its allies. Russia firmly opposed the attacks launched by the United States and UK on Yemen, condemning the missile strikes as destabilizing for the region.⁽⁸⁾ The Kremlin labeled these actions illegal, with the Russian Duma going so far as to call for President Joe Biden to be put on trial. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova emphasized this stance, stating, “The American air strikes on Yemen are yet another example of the Anglo-Saxons’ distortion of UN Security Council resolutions and their complete disregard for international law, all for the sake of escalating the situation in the region to serve their own destructive purposes.”⁽⁹⁾

The Russian Federation promptly called for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council “in connection with the US and British strikes on Yemen.” Dmitry Peskov, the Russian president’s press secretary, emphasized that “the UN Security Council

resolution, which urgently called on the Houthis to cease their attacks in the Red Sea, did not authorize any strikes.” He further stated that the strikes conducted by the United States were illegal and constituted a violation of international law. Peskov added that Russia had repeatedly urged the Houthis to stop attacking international commercial vessels, which Moscow considers inappropriate.⁽¹⁰⁾

At the rhetorical level, Moscow is framing the Red Sea crisis as yet another manifestation of the decline of US hegemony. The Kremlin philosopher and thinker Alexander Dugin commented on his Telegram channel, stating that “what is happening only serves Russia’s interests and will not lead to any meaningful result. The continuation of the bombing further underscores the waning power of American hegemony.”

Russia’s intervention in the conflict provided Moscow with an opportunity to expose the contradictions and double standards of the West. The conflict also compelled the return of certain US military assets to the region and led to increased arms support for Israel, undoubtedly impacting Western aid to Ukraine. Given the strategic importance of the Red Sea corridor for US and Western interests, the flaring-up of this region serves as a leverage point for Russia, presenting difficulties for its adversaries and acting as a pressure card against the United States and the West. Additionally, the China-brokered reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia has enhanced Russia’s influence in the Yemeni issue, positioning it to exploit the situation as a means to relieve Western pressure in Ukraine by engaging in other global hotspots, such as Yemen.⁽¹¹⁾

The Opportunities and Challenges Facing Russia

Just as the Houthi attacks on the Red Sea present opportunities for Russia, they also come with significant challenges. The opportunities and challenges can be outlined as follows:

Losses and Challenges

The economic impact of the unrest in the Red Sea due to the Houthi attacks may not be limited to Western interests but could also indirectly affect Russia. Although Russia imports goods from China via land routes that bypass the Red Sea, it still relies on European products, many of which depend on Chinese components that transit through the Red Sea. Disruptions in this vital route could raise production costs for these goods, consequently increasing costs for Russia. Additionally, the Red Sea has become a critical route for Russian oil exports due to the shifts caused by the Russia-Ukraine war. Western sanctions and the European Union’s price cap on Russian oil, set at around \$60 per barrel, forced Russia to redirect its oil from Europe to Asia, particularly China and India. This strategic shift made the Red Sea a crucial corridor for Russian oil transport. By the end of November 2023, Russian shipping companies were moving approximately 1.7 million barrels per day through the Suez Canal, compared to the earlier, minimal 0.12 million barrels destined for Asia before the war.⁽¹²⁾

In light of the growing risks in the Red Sea, shipping companies may increasingly turn to the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Moscow is actively promoting alternative routes, particularly the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects Russia to the Indian Ocean via Iran, and the NSR. If the conflict in the Red Sea escalates and further disrupts shipping, Moscow might consider rerouting oil tankers around the Cape of Good Hope. However, Russia currently lacks the capacity for this option on a large scale, underscoring the urgent need to renew its fleet of cargo carriers. This shortage of resources may explain why Russia abstained from voting on, and did not veto, UN Security Council Resolution 2722 on January 11, 2024. The resolution authorized US-UK air strikes against the Houthis. Despite abstaining, Moscow has consistently condemned the Houthi attacks, reiterating its stance for “free and safe navigation in the region.” The Kremlin has repeatedly urged the Houthis to cease their actions, labeling them as “extremely wrong.” This balanced approach likely reflects Moscow’s broader geopolitical and economic calculations, particularly its interest in maintaining stability in vital maritime routes like the Red Sea.

The Houthis’ leveraging of their relationship with Russia could impose regional costs on Moscow, particularly given the concerns of Saudi Arabia and the UAE about how this growing polarization affects regional security and their interests. Russia’s apparent shift from mediation to actively seeking to influence events for its own benefit and in its conflict with the West has begun to raise concerns in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The renewed conflict between the Houthis and the internationally recognized Yemeni government highlights these tensions, with Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi attacking Saudi Arabia in response to measures taken by the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden against banks operating in Houthi-controlled areas. Although these measures were later canceled, leaving the economic file to be discussed between the legitimate government and the Houthis, the group’s ongoing maneuvering in the Red Sea suggests that it is seeking international recognition while presenting itself as a “free ally” of Russia. Moscow, in turn, may use the Houthis as a bargaining chip in its broader geopolitical games in the region. After a Houthi delegation’s visit to Moscow, some Russian news outlets framed the visit as part of Yemen falling under Russian influence, arguing that if Russia was to control the southern gates of the Red Sea, it would gain substantial global influence. Talks of launching a direct shipping line between the Russian port of Novorossiysk and Hodeidah have surfaced, allowing agricultural exports to bypass third-party countries. Additionally, the possibility that an Israeli raid on Hodeidah was linked to the Houthi visit to Moscow has been suggested, reflecting fears of Russia’s expanding influence in this strategic region. Competitors, particularly Israel, seem unwilling to let Russia gain ground in such a pivotal area.⁽¹³⁾

While the Kremlin anticipated that the war in Gaza and the escalation in the Red Sea would divert Western attention from the Ukrainian front, the recent announcement of a \$61 billion financial aid package for Ukraine by Congress highlighted that the West remains focused on the conflict. This reveals a continuing

resolve to deliver a strategic defeat to Russia, undermining its geopolitical ambitions.

Russia may be particularly wary of Ukraine's successful attacks and territorial incursions in regions like Kursk, alongside strikes targeting critical Russian interests, including oil-producing areas.

Gains and Opportunities

From the onset of the Red Sea events, it was evident that the risks the Houthis posed to Moscow's oil exports were minimal. In fact, Russia was the only country that did not reduce its oil transit through the Red Sea. Throughout the attacks, the fleet of shadow oil tankers continued to navigate this route without significant interruption. Notably, the Houthis did not intentionally target Russian vessels; this was largely due to Moscow's beneficial relationship with Iran, which provides the Houthis with intelligence on the routes taken by Russian oil tankers, thereby helping to avoid mishaps. Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a senior member of the political bureau of the Houthis, confirmed this in an interview with the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*. He stated that the Houthis are prepared to ensure the safe passage of vessels from all nations, except Israel, and specifically highlighted security guarantees for Russian and Chinese ships.⁽¹⁴⁾ This assurance was evident when, just hours after the Israeli-owned ship *Swan Atlantic* was attacked by a Houthi drone on December 18, 2023, the Russian tanker *Butterfly*, laden with Rosneft oil and bound for India, safely crossed the danger zone. On the same day, five additional tankers carrying Russian oil also traversed the Red Sea after passing through the Suez Canal.

Russia has successfully secured its trade movement through the Red Sea by exploring various strategies to protect its vessels. A study conducted by researchers Kupriyanov Alexei Vladimirovich and Ramnik Ilya Alexandrovich, published in 2021, proposed potential cooperation with the Houthis to enhance the safety of maritime routes. The study outlined two main paths for collaboration: first, establishing protective structures, which involves creating either private or public entities to directly safeguard ships in the Red Sea. This could include deploying specialized agents or a dedicated force in the region to ensure the security of Russian vessels and those carrying Russian economic interests, with potential partners including East African nations, particularly Eritrea. Second, the study suggests developing a conditional information exchange system that facilitates a "friend-or-foe" framework, enabling tripartite collaboration between Russia, Iran, and the Houthis. This system would enhance communication regarding ship transit through the Red Sea, helping to prevent disruptions to Russian maritime traffic and reducing overall military tensions in the area. While the first option for ensuring the security of Russian ships necessitated considerable financial expenditure, the second option appears to be more promising and effective, as it focuses on the informational and diplomatic sphere, which does not require substantial financial investments.⁽¹⁵⁾

Reports from Bloomberg on March 21, 2024, indicate that the Houthis assured both Russia and China that they would not attack their ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This understanding reportedly emerged from negotiations held in Muscat, during which the Houthis expressed expectations for political support from Moscow and Beijing in international forums, particularly in the UN Security Council.⁽¹⁶⁾ For Russia, maintaining secure shipping routes is strategically crucial, as over half of its seaborne oil exports — approximately 2 million barrels per day — transit through this area.

Despite Russian objections to Washington's approach and condemnation of its actions throughout the crisis, Moscow did not intervene against US operations in the Red Sea. On January 11, the United States succeeded in securing UN Security Council Resolution 2722, which legitimized attacks on Houthi infrastructure in Yemen. Contrary to its usual practice, Russia refrained from using its veto power against this resolution. This suggests that Russia aimed to implicate Washington and the West in the conflict. Following the US-UK strikes against the Houthis on January 12, 2024, immediately after the resolution's adoption, Russia began to assert that the resolution did not grant the right to strike Yemen.⁽¹⁷⁾ It is difficult to believe that the Russian representatives, when voting on this matter in the UN Security Council, were unaware that the Americans could interpret the clause regarding "the need to eliminate the root causes that lead to increased regional tension and destabilization" as a basis for launching a campaign against the Houthis, particularly given the clear trajectory of events leading toward imminent strikes by the United States and the UK.⁽¹⁸⁾

Conclusion

Russia has adopted cautious approaches toward various conflicts in the Middle East, particularly regarding Yemen, due to its complex regional entanglements and the nature of its relationships with the parties involved in the Yemeni situation. Despite the Houthis' hopes of leveraging Tehran's relationship with Moscow to gain international recognition — especially following Tehran's acknowledgment of the Sana'a coup government, the only recognition the group has received — and Moscow's own recognition of the Hadi government as the legitimate internationally recognized authority, the Houthis have continued to seek a closer alignment with Moscow and Beijing. This effort is underscored by Houthi leader Mahdi Al-Mashat's message to Moscow, requesting intervention to resolve the Yemeni crisis, stop the aggression, and lift the siege on Yemen. The Houthis also recognized the independence of the Luhansk and Donetsk republics immediately after Moscow announced its military operation, indicating their awareness of Moscow's interests. Russia's cautious stance, which aims for a balanced approach among regional actors in Yemen, is seen as a way to improve its relations with key Gulf countries, namely Saudi Arabia and the UAE, particularly as it seeks safe havens for capital amid Western sanctions linked to the war in Ukraine. Additionally, this balancing act helps maintain ties with Iran, especially

in light of the Israeli war on Gaza, with the Houthis linking their operations in the Red Sea to this conflict. Russia's position, which often appears to support the Palestinian resistance in the United Nations, is likely influenced by its ongoing conflict with Western capitals over Ukraine. The Kremlin's prior friendly relations with Netanyahu's government have shifted, leading Russia to recognize the importance of opening new fronts to weaken Western hegemony and to divert its focus from Ukraine.

The Red Sea crisis provided Moscow with an opportunity to highlight the benefits of its alternative logistics routes and increase activity along the railway connections linking the Chinese mainland with Russia and extending to Europe. It also underscored the perceived suffering of US hegemony, as characterized by Kremlin thinkers. However, the crisis also revealed confusion in Moscow's stance. While Russia condemned the Houthi attacks, it abstained from voting on a UN Security Council resolution, allowing it to pass, and later denounced the US-UK aggression against Yemen. This inconsistency may stem from Moscow's desire to maintain a balanced position in the region, despite a clear tilt toward Tehran, as well as its concerns over the substantial oil exports passing through this route to India. By linking its condemnation of the US-UK strikes on Houthi targets to Washington's efforts to undermine peace initiatives in Yemen and disrupt the Muscat negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, Moscow aims to avoid antagonizing Riyadh, which is keen on alleviating its security concerns. This careful approach seeks to ensure that relations with Riyadh do not negatively impact OPEC+ agreements on production cuts. Additionally, Moscow acknowledges Riyadh's independent foreign policy, particularly its "strict neutrality" regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, which aligns with the support of Global South countries for Moscow's push toward establishing a multipolar world order.

In the last few months of the crisis, a striking development has been the continuous calls from Russian media outlets close to the Kremlin for providing the Houthis with the necessary expertise, technology, and weapons, suggesting that the group is regarded as an important ally of Moscow. This emphasis appears to be linked to the rapid developments on the Ukrainian front, particularly the increased volume of Western support for the Kyiv regime, which indicates a potential escalation of the conflict with NATO into a more dangerous phase.

Endnotes

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