



By: **Harvey Morris**

Escalating Red Sea crisis would stretch UK's resources



Well over a century since Britannia could credibly claim to rule the waves, the UK has stepped up to the challenge of defending international Red Sea shipping lanes against the depredations of Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis.

The government's decision to join its US ally in launching strikes on Houthi weapons dumps and missile launch sites has received broad domestic political support, which might yet evaporate if the conflict escalates.

It has nevertheless also revived concerns about whether 21st century Britain can continue to aspire to boxing above its weight on the world stage at a time of dwindling military resources.

Defence procurement minister James Cartlidge **said** after the initial strikes that the two vessels of the UK's problem-plagued aircraft carrier fleet were ready and available for deployment to the Red Sea.

But his departmental boss, Grant Shapps, indicated the government was crossing its fingers that such a greater UK commitment would not be necessary. He told the BBC that Britain had no interest in an extended engagement.

A list of concerns

Even before the present crisis erupted, defence analysts were fretting that the UK's armed forces, including the navy, were ill-equipped to confront the challenges of an increasingly uncertain world.

In an end-of-year review in December, the independent UK analyst Navy Lookout **published a list of concerns** surrounding the fitness of the force, topped with a crisis in recruitment.

The Royal Navy was simply failing to attract enough new recruits. Combined with a high outflow of personnel, "the RN will soon start to grind to a halt as operations are curtailed, deployments have to be over-extended or

ships cannot sail at all."

In a recent update, the analyst warned: "The deterrent effect of the once mighty RN on adversaries is further diminished and the UK's image is tarnished among its friends and allies."

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Similar concerns have long been expressed about the state of the British army, which is due to provide the bulk of a 20,000 UK force that will lead a major NATO exercise this year designed to convince Russia's Vladimir Putin of the Western alliance's unity and determination.

Recent defence ministry data indicated recruitment to junior army ranks had been below target in every year since 2010, amounting to a more than 20,000 shortfall in a 120,000 target.

The recruitment challenge has been blamed variously on an increase in job opportunities in civvy street and the pusillanimity of Generation Z. More obviously, the military's problems are linked to a lack of money.

Despite announced increases in the defence budget, the UK still faces a £17 billion hole in its equipment budget, largely due to higher inflation.

Deputy sheriff

Although Prime Minister Rishi Sunak **decried** the UK's Red Sea operation as an act of self-defence, it is clear that the Houthi harassment of shipping is a threat to all trading nations and the consumers who depend on them.

Crude oil prices spiked after the operation and a growing number of vessel operators have announced they are diverting cargoes around

the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transport costs and delivery times to Europe.

The UN Security Council has passed a resolution demanding that the Houthis end their attacks on shipping, while a score of countries have signed up to a Washington initiative to increase naval patrols in the region.

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The UK, however, is so far the only state to have joined the US in direct strikes on Houthi forces, albeit with the support of the Netherlands, Canada, Bahrain and Australia.

That reflects the UK's interest in serving as Washington's most dependable ally, acting as a kind of deputy sheriff in a range of international theatres with mixed outcomes.

The gamble this time around is that the short, sharp shock of the latest strikes will force the Houthis back into their bunkers rather than prompting an escalation by the Yemeni militants and their Iranian backers.

Unresolved situation in the Red Sea

In a worst case scenario, the action could spark an escalation of the regional tensions stoked by Hamas's attack on Israel and the Israeli response.

More likely, the Houthis will try to maintain a level of harassment that will continue to impact on international shipping without inviting an even more muscular US-led response. The militants' Iranian backers have shown considerable talent in using proxies to create troublesome disruption while avoiding state-on-state conflict.

One unintended consequence of the so far unresolved situation in the Red Sea is to fuel

tensions in the Horn of Africa, across the narrow Bab-el-Mandeb.



A potential spread of the Red Sea crisis to the shores of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean is yet one more potential conflict that the Western allies, including the UK and its hard-pressed military, will be eager to avoid

Shipping companies have expressed concern about an opportunistic revival of Somali piracy, a threat that had been quelled for more than a decade by the creation of an international task force to prevent attacks. UK operators have reported a recent surge in incidents in which small boats with armed crews have approached merchant ships.

Further tensions are meanwhile emerging over the future of Somaliland, the relatively prosperous and peaceful breakaway territory of northern Somalia that the UK has described as a beacon of democracy despite its lack of international recognition.

Under a memorandum of understanding signed at the start of the year, Somaliland agreed to allow its land-locked neighbour Ethiopia to develop a naval base on its coastline.

Somalia reacted by threatening war in the event of Ethiopia recognising Somaliland's statehood, with its president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, calling on Somalis to prepare for the defence of the homeland.

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