



Indian Council
of World Affairs



GEOPOLITICS OF THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

EXPLORING THE STRATEGIC
PRESENCE OF WEST ASIAN STATES

SANKALP GURJAR



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Geopolitics of the Northwest Indian Ocean:
Exploring the Strategic Presence of West Asian States

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CONTENTS

Abstract	7
West Asian Engagement in the Northwest Indian Ocean (NWIO) at a glance	9
Introduction	11
Northwest Indian Ocean: Defining the Region and the Strategic Importance	13
Drivers of West Asian Engagement with the Northwest Indian Ocean	17
<i>The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran</i>	18
<i>Political Islam</i>	19
<i>Power Projection in the Red Sea Region</i>	20
<i>Food and Maritime Security</i>	22
Major Global Powers in the Northwest Indian Ocean	23
<i>United States (US)</i>	24
<i>China</i>	24
<i>France</i>	25
<i>Russia</i>	25
<i>Japan</i>	25
<i>UK</i>	26

India's Interests in the Northwest Indian Ocean	26
Qatar in the Northwest Indian Ocean	27
<i>Mediation Efforts</i>	29
<i>Peacekeeping</i>	32
Turkey in the Northwest Indian Ocean.....	36
<i>Humanitarian Assistance and Strategic Expansion</i>	37
<i>Military Bases</i>	39
Iran in the Northwest Indian Ocean	42
<i>Strategic Opportunity</i>	42
<i>Religious-Regional Rivalries and Military Support</i>	43
Saudi Arabia in the Northwest Indian Ocean.....	46
<i>Military Intervention</i>	46
<i>The Red Sea Dimension</i>	48
<i>Diplomatic Efforts</i>	50
UAE in the Northwest Indian Ocean	51
<i>Port Development</i>	52
<i>Diplomatic Efforts</i>	54
<i>Military Bases</i>	55
<i>Strategic Opportunities</i>	58
Israel in the Northwest Indian Ocean	59
<i>Threat of Iran</i>	59
<i>Military and Economic Ties</i>	60
<i>Abraham Accords</i>	60
<i>Israel-India-US-UAE: I2U2</i>	61

How Africa Navigates the Strategic Rivalries	62
Concluding Remarks	65
References	69

ABSTRACT

 In the last few years, West Asian states such as Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel and United Arab Emirates (UAE) have emerged as key players in the geopolitics of the Northwest Indian Ocean (NWIO). The region is located in proximity to the energy-rich West Asia and resource-rich East and Central Africa and is home to key maritime chokepoints like Bab-el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal. The presence and activities of West Asian states in the Red Sea region have intensified in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2010-11 and the war in Yemen (2015 onwards). These states are engaging with the region through economic, political and military instruments and seek to expand their influence. In the process, the geopolitics of the NWIO is being reshaped.

The paper attempts to analyze and map the growing presence of West Asian states in the NWIO. The paper begins by defining the NWIO region and explaining the strategic importance of the NWIO. It explains the presence of major global powers in the region. In particular, India's stakes in the NWIO are considered. The paper identifies four key drivers that are driving the engagement of the West Asian states with the NWIO: the rivalry between Saudi Arabia

The paper identifies four key drivers that are driving the engagement of the West Asian states with the NWIO: the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, political Islam, power projection in the Red Sea, and food and maritime security. The paper focuses on the engagements of six West Asian players (Qatar, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel) in the NWIO.

and Iran, political Islam, power projection in the Red Sea, and food and maritime security. The paper focuses on the engagements of six West Asian players (Qatar, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel) in the NWIO. The engagement of these players with the NWIO is most visible and intense. The paper takes into account two major fault lines in West Asia: first, between Qatar and Turkey against Saudi Arabia and UAE; second, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These fault lines have been played out in the NWIO as well and are reflected in the paper.

Overall, the growing role of West Asian players in the NWIO is an important development in the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. It is reshaping the strategic milieu of the Horn of Africa as well as the Red Sea region. With the growing military presence of global powers in the region, intensifying regional rivalries add an interesting dimension to the evolving geopolitics.

WEST ASIAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN (NWIO) AT A GLANCE

West Asian State	Preferred Instruments of Power Deployed in the Northwest Indian Ocean
Qatar “Punch above the weight”	2. Diplomatic (Mediation) 3. Media (Al-Jazeera) 4. Military (Peacekeeping) 5. Strategic Ties with Turkey
Turkey “Fishing in troubled waters”	6. Humanitarian Assistance 7. Military (Training, Base and Weapons) 8. Economic (Trade and Investments) 9. Diplomatic
Iran “In search of strategic depth”	10. Military (Weapons supply and Advisors) 11. Diplomatic 12. Religious Links

Saudi Arabia	1. Military (Intervention in Yemen)
“Limit Iranian influence”	2. Diplomatic 3. Economic 4. Mediation along with UAE (Ethiopia-Eritrea) 5. Strategic

United Arab Emirates	1. Military (Intervention and Bases)
“Expanding strategic presence and influence”	2. Economic (Investments) 3. Diplomatic 4. Mediation along with Saudi Arabia (Ethiopia-Eritrea) 5. Strategic

Israel	1. Military (Intelligence)
“Limit Iranian influence and expand strategic presence”	2. Economic 3. Strategic

INTRODUCTION

 In the last few years, West Asian states such as Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) have emerged as key players in the geopolitics of the Northwest Indian Ocean (NWIO). The presence and activities of West Asian states in the Red Sea region have intensified in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2010-11 and the war in Yemen. These states are engaging with the region through economic, political and military instruments and seek to expand their influence. In the process, the geopolitics of the NWIO is being reshaped.¹

The growing role of West Asian players in the NWIO is an important development in the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. The paper attempts to analyze and map the growing presence of West Asian states in the NWIO. The paper begins by defining the NWIO region and explaining the strategic importance of the NWIO. It then identifies four key drivers that are driving the engagement of the West Asian states with the NWIO. Subsequently, it focuses on the engagements of six West Asian players (Qatar, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and UAE) in the NWIO. The engagement of these players with the NWIO is most visible and intense. The paper

The growing role of West Asian players in the NWIO is an important development in the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. The paper attempts to analyze and map the growing presence of West Asian states in the NWIO.

¹ The presence of major powers such as France, China and the United States (US) further complicates the geostrategic dynamics of the NWIO.

takes into account two major fault lines in West Asia: first, between Qatar and Turkey against Saudi Arabia and UAE; second, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These fault lines have been played out in the NWIO as well and are reflected in the paper.

NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

Defining the Region and the Strategic Importance

 The Indian Ocean is, generally, divided into three regions: Eastern, Central, and Western. The Western Indian Ocean is divided further into two sub-regions: the Northwest Indian Ocean and the Southwest Indian Ocean. Of these two, the NWIO is emerging as a focal point of intense strategic rivalries between regional as well as global players and is of interest for this paper.

The Northwest Indian Ocean can be defined as the region lying between Suez Canal in the North, Somalia in the South, and Oman in the East. It includes states in the Horn of Africa, Northeast Africa and Arabian Peninsula. Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, self-governing territory of Somaliland, an autonomous region of Puntland, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Oman constitute the NWIO. Perim, Socotra as well as other smaller islands in the Red Sea and off the coast of Yemen are part of the region. Israel, through the Gulf of Aqaba and the port of Eilat, finds itself in the geopolitics of the NWIO.



(The Northwest Indian Ocean,
Image Source: Deutsche Welle)

The existing border issues make the small Gulf state keen on pursuing strong bilateral defence ties with countries within and outside the region.

The region includes water bodies like the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Guardafui channel as well as the western flank of the Arabian Sea. It is home to the two key maritime chokepoints¹ which are critical for the global economy and energy security: the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb² and the Suez Canal. The Red Sea links these two maritime chokepoints. The Bab-el-Mandeb is described as the “strait at the center of the world”. Every year, it was estimated that 25000 cargo ships, about 2 billion barrels of oil, and 700 billion worth of cargo pass through the Bab-el-Mandeb (Maçães 2018).

The rivalries between external players have remained a key feature of the geopolitics of the NWIO. The strategic importance of NWIO went up considerably after the opening of the Suez Canal in the 1860s. Suez Canal shortened the distance between India and Europe. Throughout the late 19th century and the first

Throughout the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, colonial powers competed with each other to acquire colonies in the NWIO. Britain, France, and Italy were the most active players in this competition.

1. Maritime chokepoints are “narrow channels connecting two bodies of water along widely used sea routes. Some of the world’s most important corridors include the Panama Canal, the Turkish Straits, Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Suez Canal and the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz... Over half of the total internationally traded maize, wheat, rice and soybean – which together account for over 60% of the food energy intake and protein feed supply worldwide – are shipped through at least one of these corridors”. For more, see: Ship Technology, “Maritime chokepoints: the backbone of international trade”, October 3, 2017. Available at: <https://www.ship-technology.com/features/featuremaritime-chokepoints-the-backbone-of-international-trade-5939317/>
2. As per the US EIA, “The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is 18 miles wide at its narrowest point, limiting tanker traffic to two 2-mile-wide channels for inbound and outbound shipments. Closure of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait could keep tankers originating in the Persian Gulf from transiting the Suez Canal or reaching the SUMED Pipeline, forcing them to divert around the southern tip of Africa, which would increase transit time and shipping costs”. For more, see: Justine Barden, “The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments”, US EIA, August 27, 2019. Available at: <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073#>



(The Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, source: US EIA)

half of the 20th century, colonial powers competed with each other to acquire colonies in the NWIO. Britain, France, and Italy were the most active players in this competition. Britain managed to acquire control over Egypt, Sudan, Somaliland, and Yemen. The base at Aden (Yemen) was a key strategic outpost in British imperial strategy. France established its toehold in the region at the French Somaliland which was later renamed Djibouti while Italy took over Eritrea as well as Somalia. Italian attempts to take over Ethiopia failed in the 1890s. However, Italy briefly controlled Ethiopia in the late 1930s (Woodward 2002).

After the Second World War, the emergence of West Asia as an “energy heartland” heightened the strategic importance of the NWIO. The significance of the Suez Canal increased drastically as a key artery for the energy security of the Western world. During the

Cold War, both superpowers (the United States and Soviet Russia) had acquired military facilities and extended assistance to the regional states of the NWIO. For example, Berbera in Somaliland³ (which was then a part of Somalia) was a key Soviet naval base. The US had established a base at Kagnew in Ethiopia. The location of NWIO as a region adjacent to West Asia, and as a connecting link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, underscored the necessity of maintaining the strategic presence and allies.

After the Cold War, the region was in the news for the security challenges such as the presence of terrorists like Osama Bin Laden in Sudan, civil wars and instability in countries such as Sudan and Somalia, and the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea (1998-2000). The rise of maritime piracy off the coast of Somalia around 2007-08 and the inability of the Somali government to curb the piracy brought the attention of major global as well as regional players to the region. The US and its allies launched the Combined Task Force-151 to counter the threat of piracy. Many other countries including India, Russia, Iran, and South Korea sent their naval warships to the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations. Subsequently, Japan and China established their military bases at Djibouti to ensure a continued strategic presence in the region.

3 Somaliland was a British colony till 1960 which merged with the Italian Somaliland to form the state of Somalia. It seceded in 1991 and since then has been a self-governing territory seeking international recognition. Somaliland is located along the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden and is a critical country. It is a stable country as compared to unstable Somalia. Somaliland has established diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 2020. UAE is a key partner of Somaliland. Ethiopia too seeks to build a relationship with Somaliland to diversify its access to the sea away from Djibouti. For more, see: Claire Felter, "Somaliland: The Horn of Africa's Breakaway State", Council on Foreign Relations, February 1, 2018. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/somaliland-horn-africas-breakaway-state>

The Arab Spring of 2010-11 and its aftermath in countries like Egypt and Yemen was a turning point in the politics of NWIO.

Meanwhile, the economic and political rise of West Asian players such as Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Turkey coupled with the intensifying rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran has had ripple effects on the geopolitics of the NWIO. The region just across the Red Sea was never far away from West Asia but it did not feature prominently in the foreign and strategic policies of the West Asian states (de Wall 2018). It began to change gradually in the 2000s. The Arab Spring of 2010-11 and its aftermath in countries like Egypt and Yemen was a turning point in the politics of NWIO. Since then, West Asian players are actively engaging with the regional states of NWIO and are shaping regional politics and security.

DRIVERS OF WEST ASIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

 There are five key drivers for the engagement of Gulf players with the Northwest Indian Ocean: rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, political Islam, power projection in the Red Sea region, outward economic investments, and food and maritime security. These drivers constitute a framework to understand and analyze the activities of UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Iran in the NWIO.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been a key feature of the international politics of the West Asian region. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is as much about the struggle between the Sunnis and Shias as it is between the two competing regional powers (Ghattas 2019). Saudi Arabia (and to some extent, the UAE) has sought to contain Iranian influence across the region whereas Iran has tried to support Shia groups and to extend its influence. The Civil War in Yemen, in which the beleaguered Government is supported by Saudi Arabia and UAE⁴ and the Houthi rebels are supported by Iran, was a tipping point in the intra-Gulf rivalries. Yemen's strategically important location along the Gulf of Aden and the southern Red Sea meant that to contain the Houthi rebels, states located along the western coast of the Red Sea would prove useful. Therefore, in 2014, Saudi Arabia forced Eritrea and Sudan to cut off ties with Iran (de Wall 2018). Moreover, both these countries offered troops and bases to Saudi Arabia in its war against the Houthis.

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4 The UAE has also supported the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Yemen. The STC emerged as an important force in the Yemeni conflict in 2017 and is considered as a prominent separatist group located in southern Yemen. For more, see: Helen Lackner, "The Yemen conflict: Southern separatism in action", European Council on Foreign Relations, May 8, 2020. Available at: https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_yemen_conflict_southern_separatism_in_action/

Political Islam

In West Asian politics, Qatar and Turkey are championing the ideology of political Islam whereas Saudi Arabia and the UAE oppose it (Friedman 2021). Political Islamist forces seek to build an order based on the principles of Islam. Under the umbrella of political Islam, various groups, political parties, and social movements find space for themselves. The Muslim Brotherhood⁵ in Egypt, Ennahda in Tunisia, and the Taliban in Afghanistan are some of the well-known political Islamist groups. Qatar has supported⁶ these groups through various means including the propaganda by state-funded *Al-Jazeera* news channel.

The fault line over political Islam emerged as a major issue after the Arab Spring. Across the region, political parties and social movements representing the ideology of political Islam gained significant ground as the old regimes, primarily secular in orientation, gave way to a new political order (The Economist 2021). It also helped that the population in the Horn of Africa is, just like West Asia, predominantly Muslim. In Egypt, Muslim

5 It is argued that Muslim Brotherhood “has inspired groups and political parties throughout the Middle East, including in Jordan, Bahrain, Syria, Sudan, Libya, Palestine and Algeria, among others. Some of these still link themselves explicitly to the original group; others do not. Because these groups can mobilize such strong opposition, leaders of countries with autocratic governments fear the challenge they could present. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia all classify the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization”. For more, see: Cathrin Schaer, “An end to neo-Islamism in the Middle East?”, Deutsche Welle, September, 15, 2021. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/an-end-to-neo-islamism-in-the-middle-east/a-59181599>

6 There is a view which argues that Qatar is deploying the Islamist groups for its geopolitical objectives. David Roberts writes that “developing Qatar’s soft power with these [Islamist] groups is a way to cultivate influence among potential newly emerging centers of power—and a way for a small state like Qatar to be a critical part of some of the core conversations shaping the contemporary Arab world”. For more, see: David Roberts, “Reflecting on Qatar’s ‘Islamist’ Soft Power, Brookings Institution, April, 2019. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FP_20190408_qatar_roberts.pdf

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Brotherhood won the elections of 2012. In Tunisia, Ennahda emerged as the major political player.

For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the political Islamist forces embody a threat to their monarchies and internal stability (Fenton-Harvey 2020). Therefore, containing political Islamists, wherever possible, has been one of the important objectives of Saudi Arabia and UAE's foreign policy (Al-Ketbi 2018). Qatar's support for political Islamists and close ties with Iran prompted Saudi Arabia and UAE along with Egypt under the al-Sisi regime⁷ to impose a blockade in 2017. In this way, Saudi Arabia and the UAE sought to limit the challenges presented by Iran and political Islam.

Power Projection in the Red Sea Region

The Red Sea region is strategically significant for international politics as well as for economic and energy security. West Asian players would like to extend their influence in this key geopolitical space and would like to position themselves to shape regional dynamics in their favour. The economic, military, and political

⁷ In 2013, Muslim Brotherhood and the regime of President Mohammed Morsi were ousted by the Egyptian military. General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, the defence minister, took over power and he is ruling Egypt since then. For more, see: BBC News, "Egypt President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi: Ruler with an iron grip", December 1, 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19256730>

Qatar and Turkey considered the Red Sea region as a key arena for projecting their power. Qatar wanted to punch above its weight, emerge as a mediator of choice, and position itself as a key player in regional politics.

muscle of West Asian players and the relative weakness of the Horn of Africa states create favourable conditions for the power projection.

Qatar and Turkey considered the Red Sea region as a key arena for projecting their power. Qatar wanted to punch above its weight, emerge as a mediator of choice, and position itself as a key player in regional politics. It hosted peace talks for the Darfur conflict in Sudan and also between Eritrea and Djibouti. Qatari influence was amplified by Al Jazeera. Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, saw an opportunity to expand its influence in the former Ottoman territories which included NWIO (de Wall 2018). Turkey has taken a series of steps to expand its presence in the region, most notably in Somalia and Sudan (Berg and Meester 2019).

Saudi Arabia and UAE too have increased their engagement with the regional states of NWIO. The war in Yemen was a major trigger point for these two countries to engage with the Red Sea region and expand their influence. Saudi Arabia, being located on the Eastern coast of Red Sea, is developing naval capabilities for the Red Sea theatre. Its ambitious projects like the futuristic city of

Neom and the East-West pipeline, also known as the petroline⁸, to reduce dependence on the Strait of Hormuz for energy exports hinge, on the Red Sea necessitate the security capacity building by Saudi Arabia. UAE has seized an opportunity presented by the war in Yemen to augment its economic, infrastructure, and military presence in the region (Vertin 2019). UAE has taken control of the strategically located island of Socotra which was part of Yemen. It is busy developing ports (like Berbera), engaging in regional diplomacy, acquiring bases (like Assab in Eritrea), and in consolidating its presence in the NWIO (Vertin 2019). Moreover, the US' waning interest in West Asian affairs also compelled these states to build their military capabilities to protect their own interests.

Food and Maritime Security

Concerns about the food and maritime security of West Asian countries also prompted them to take an active interest in the NWIO, especially in the Horn of Africa countries. As the food prices spiked in 2008, West Asian states turned to Sudan and Ethiopia to purchase large tracts of fertile land to guard against the food scarcity (The Economist 2019). In the past, especially in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia had turned to the Horn of Africa for ensuring the food security and had invested considerable amount of money in

⁸ The pipeline "mainly transports crude from the kingdom's eastern fields to Yanbu, which lies north of Bab al-Mandeb so shipments could avoid that Red Sea shipping chokepoint. The Petroline has capacity to transport about 5 million bpd of the kingdom's oil exports that can reach 8 million bpd. Saudi Arabia has a parallel 290,000 bpd Abqaiq-Yanbu natural gas liquids (NGL) pipeline linking gas processing plants in the east with NGL export facilities at Yanbu. It also provides only a partial alternative to Saudi shipments of NGL from the Gulf". For more, see: Reuters, "Risks to Middle East oil and gas shipping routes", July 26, 2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi-oil-factbox-idUSKBN1KG2IA>

For UAE, the piracy in the Gulf of Aden in the late 2000s and the ensuing instability due to the war in Yemen after 2015 have raised concerns about the maritime security in the waters of the NWIO. It prompted UAE to focus on maritime security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region.

doing so. Public and private sector investments from Saudi Arabia had focused on Sudan and Ethiopia. Recently in 2017, during the crisis between Qatar and GCC countries, Sudan and Ethiopia again came in the picture as they offered land to Qatar to solve its food security crisis in the medium term. Qatar imports about 80% of its food and the arable land in the Horn of Africa could play a role in ensuring the food security.

For UAE, the piracy in the Gulf of Aden in the late 2000s and the ensuing instability due to the war in Yemen after 2015 have raised concerns about the maritime security in the waters of the NWIO. It prompted UAE to focus on maritime security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region. UAE's expansive military role in the region has to be seen in this context as well.

These four drivers shape the approaches and attitudes of West Asian players towards the NWIO.

MAJOR GLOBAL POWERS IN THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

 In the strategically important space of NWIO, apart from the regional powers of West Asia, major global powers are also present. Many of them have their military bases and strategic

facilities in the region. Here, we take a look at the presence of major global powers in the region to provide a more rounded view of the evolving geopolitics.

United States (US)

The US has a base in Djibouti, which is its only permanent military facility in Africa. Apart from Djibouti, the US has facilities in Kenya, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and in UAE. Over the years, the US has also launched four multi-national maritime task forces that operate in the region: CTF-150, 151, 152 and 153. The US presence in the region has been augmented since the launch of the Global War on Terror in 2001. Anti-piracy operations and counter-terrorism are two primary drivers of the US presence in the region. However, the growing presence of China and Russia in the region is presenting the US with another key imperative to stay present and remain active.

China

In 2017, China opened its base at Djibouti. It is the first overseas military base for China and points towards the growing Chinese power and interests in the region. China has been sending its naval warships for anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden since

Despite the reduction in the threat of piracy; China has continued to send naval escort missions to the region. China's growing economic, diplomatic and infrastructure presence in the region has been a key factor behind the US' augmented strategic presence in the region.



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France

France has a military base at Djibouti and supports operations of the EU Navfor. French presence in the region has been a constant feature of regional geopolitics. In fact, the current US base at Djibouti known as Camp Lemonnier used to house French forces. France and the US work closely in the region.

Russia

Russia has been deploying its naval ships for anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008-09. It is also eyeing the military base at Port Sudan. The base been in discussions since 2017 and will facilitate greater Russian naval and military presence in the region. The base will complement Russian base at Tartus in Syria as well. Russia has engaged Eritrea as well for logistic support facilities. Russia has conducted naval exercises in the Gulf of Aden as well.

Japan

Japan opened its overseas base since the Second World War in Djibouti in 2011. Japanese base supported anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. The base is located in close proximity of the US

base. Japan has used the base to support Japanese participation in the UN Peacekeeping Missions in South Sudan.

UK

Britain has military facilities in Somalia and Kenya. Britain also maintains a small facility in Djibouti as well. Oman has been a close security partner for Britain and in 2018; UK established new military facilities in Oman and has access to the port of Duqm.

INDIA'S INTERESTS IN THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

 India is the resident naval power in the Indian Ocean and is a major player in the geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean. For India, the NWIO is a critical strategic space for its energy as well as economic security. Therefore, India's security presence in the region is growing steadily. Indian Navy has been conducting anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008-09. India demonstrated its capabilities by evacuating citizens from Libya in 2011 and from Yemen in 2015. Djibouti was a major base for the evacuation from Yemen. Last year, in 2021, Indian navy carried out naval exercises with the Sudanese navy in the Red Sea.

Indian Navy has been conducting anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008-09. India demonstrated its capabilities by evacuating citizens from Libya in 2011 and from Yemen in 2015. Djibouti was a major base for the evacuation from Yemen.



India is also a key partner for NWIO states in the domain of development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. In 2020, India sent food assistance to Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea. The States in the region are a major recipient of India's scholarship programs. Regular ministerial visits have been taking place that ensure the sustained attention to the region. India has negotiated access facilities with Oman. The possibility of Indian naval warships refuelling at Japanese base in Djibouti is on the cards.

With the growing Chinese presence in the region, the strategic importance of the region for India has assumed critical dimensions. Chinese base at Djibouti and the likely base at Gwadar in Pakistan would significantly increase the capacity of the Chinese navy to operate in the region for long period of time. China's growing relationship with Iran is also a key factor to be considered in the regional geopolitics. India has tried to strengthen ties with the region through bilateral as well as minilateral initiatives. India engages Israel, UAE and US through the I2U2 framework. As the strategic rivalries between major powers continue to play out in the region, India's role will be critical.

In the context of this great power politics and growing strategic presence, West Asian states are expanding their strategic presence in the NWIO.

QATAR IN THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN



Among the West Asian players, Qatar was the first country to move across the Red Sea and attempted to build influence. Qatar

is a small state with deep pockets, and enormous ambitions. The personality of Qatar's ruler Emir Hamad al Thani, who ruled from 1995 till 2013, played a major role in shaping Qatar's ambitious foreign policy. He sought to position Qatar as a state that punches above its weight in regional politics (Mesfin 2016). Under him, Qatar wanted to emerge as a mediator of choice to expand its influence. It also helped that Qatar enjoyed domestic and financial stability as well as did not have any historical baggage, unlike Egypt or Saudi Arabia, of past regional engagements (Barakat 2014).

Qatar, for long, operated under the shadow of Saudi Arabia, the regional giant. However, under the Emir Hamad al Thani, it aspired to assert strategic autonomy vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia which saw itself as the traditional leader of Sunni Gulf States (Mesfin 2016). Qatar-government funded Al Jazeera news channel, which operates in Arabic as well as in English and is watched across the region with considerable interest, was another medium for the tiny state to amplify its message and maximize its influence. Al Jazeera is so influential that in 2017, when Qatar faced the blockade⁹ by the GCC countries and Egypt, one of the demands included the ban on the TV channel.

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⁹ The blockade has been lifted in 2021 and the diplomatic ties have been restored. The blockade was ruinous for Qatar's economy and has resulted in pushing Qatar even closer to Turkey and Iran. For more, see: BBC News, "Qatar crisis: Saudi Arabia and allies restore diplomatic ties with emirate", January 5, 2021. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55538792>

Qatar shares the world's largest natural gas field with Iran and consequently, maintains close ties with the Shia country. Qatar strongly opposed the Israeli war against Hezbollah in 2006 which brought it even closer to Iran (Barakat 2014). As it became apparent in 2013 that the nuclear deal between the US and Iran was imminent, Qatar further strengthened ties with Iran (Mesfin 2016). In 2015, it also signed an agreement for defence cooperation with Turkey and agreed to host a Turkish military base. Qatar's growing closeness with Turkey and Iran put it at odds with Saudi Arabia and UAE.

Mediation Efforts

Since 2006, Qatar sought to cultivate closer ties with the NWIO states. The engagement with the conflict-ridden states of the Horn of Africa in the 2000s suited the Qatari objectives. Qatar's engagement with Red Sea states like Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti helped it to gain influence and position itself as an important player in the geopolitics of the region. Qatar also mediated in the conflict in Yemen before the Arab Spring. These mediation efforts, which had mixed results, helped Qatar to obtain an outsized diplomatic presence in the region.

Qatar's engagement with Red Sea states like Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti helped it to gain influence and position itself as an important player in the geopolitics of the region.

Yemen

Although Yemen emerged as a unified state in 1990, it continued to face the challenge of internal stability. In 2004, the Houthi rebellion began in the northern province of Saada. Qatar was a supporter of the unified Yemen and enjoyed cordial ties with Iran, which was long seen as a supporter of Houthi rebels. It allowed Qatar to launch the mediation efforts in 2007 and succeeded in bringing about the ceasefire. In February 2008, an agreement was signed between the Yemeni government and Houthi rebels. Qatar pledged to invest US \$ 300-500 million to develop the Saada province. It also offered asylum to the Houthi rebel leaders in exchange for their laying down of arms. However, the agreement broke down in the next few months, fighting resumed and Qatari mediation was declared as a failure. Qatar attempted to bring peace to Yemen again in 2010, however, the intermittent clashes continued between the Houthis and Yemeni government (Barakat 2014). By 2014, the civil war in Yemen had intensified and saw the direct military involvement of Saudi Arabia in 2015.

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By and large, Qatar's efforts in Yemen had failed. A number of reasons could be cited for this failure: Qatar overestimated the agreement between the Houthis and Yemeni government. The Houthis and Yemeni government continued to harbour reservations about the Qatari role.



Houthi and Yemeni government continued to harbour reservations about the Qatari role. Qatar underestimated the influence of Saudi Arabia in Yemeni affairs. Saudi Arabia considered Qatar's efforts in Yemen as a direct interference in its traditional sphere of influence. Besides, Qatar lacked an effective mechanism for monitoring the agreement (Barakat 2014). It was observed that, "the initiative essentially amounted to throwing money at a problem, hoping it would disappear" (International Crisis Group 2009, 22). However, the fact was that, the problem did not disappear.

Sudan

Qatar mediated in the Darfur conflict of Sudan. The conflict had been brewing since 2003 and had led to widespread killings and displacement. In 2008, Arab League chose Qatar to mediate in the conflict. The talks started in 2010 and succeeded in bringing about ceasefire and framework agreements with important rebel groups such as the Justice and Equality Movement (Ulrichsen 2014). In fact, Qatar succeeded in bringing about 30 factions for the agreement (Doherty 2010). The Qatari effort continued after 2010 to bring about other groups to the negotiating table. After the agreements were signed, the then Sudanese President Omar-al-Bashir declared that the conflict in Darfur¹⁰ had ended. The African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) also helped in the mediation (Ulrichsen 2014). However, the role of Qatar was seen as more prominent than these two organizations.

¹⁰ In reality, the conflict continued to simmer in Darfur till 2020 when Sudanese government again signed a peace accord with rebels. For more, see: BBC News, "How Sudan's rebel deal offers lifeline for peace", September, 9, 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54071959>

Qatar incentivized the mediation in Sudan with offers of economic assistance and investments. It promised to invest US \$ 2 billion as well as the formation of a development bank to address the underdevelopment of Darfur.

For the mediation efforts, Qatar hosted both parties in Doha for a long period. It was reported that, “Sudanese rebel leaders, far from the war in Darfur, whiled away their free time” by “smoking fruit-flavoured waterpipes and dining at all-you-can-eat buffets in Doha luxury hotels as peace talks wore on” (Doherty 2010). The negotiations saw the active involvement of senior officials of the Qatari government. Qatar incentivized the mediation in Sudan with offers of economic assistance and investments. It promised to invest US \$ 2 billion as well as the formation of a development bank to address the underdevelopment of Darfur. Qatar also engaged Sudanese government in developing farmlands for food exports to Qatar. It was estimated that about US \$ 1 billion would be attracted in such investments (Barakat 2014).

Owing to the mediation, Qatar managed to further deepen the ties with Sudan. The mediation in Darfur amplified Qatar’s role as a prominent mediator in regional conflicts. It came after the Qatari efforts in Yemen and Lebanon. Although the efforts in Yemen had failed, Lebanon and Darfur are seen as a success.



Peacekeeping

Eritrea-Djibouti

Eritrea and Djibouti fought a short, border war in 2008 over the control of the strategically important area of Ras Doumeira which is located along the shipping lanes passing through the Red Sea. France, being a principal security partner of Djibouti, had provided logistical and intelligence support to Djibouti. In 2010, Djibouti and Eritrea agreed to a mediation effort by Qatar. Under the Qatari mediation, Eritrea and Djibouti signed an agreement to resolve their dispute through the negotiated settlement. Eritrea agreed to withdraw its troops from the disputed region. Qatari military observers were deployed to the disputed border. The Qatari initiative and the steps taken by Eritrea and Djibouti were welcomed by the UN Security Council (UN News 2010). The presence of 500-strong troops at a disputed border in the Red Sea region was an indication of an active interest by Qatar. The positions at the Eritrea-Djibouti border placed Qatari troops in a region which assumed increasing strategic importance owing to the major power presence, the war in Yemen and strategic rivalries.

Qatar withdrew its troops from the Eritrea-Djibouti border in 2017. The withdrawal came after the blockade of Qatar by GCC countries. However, Qatari withdrawal was not linked with the blockade. Instead, in an opinion piece published on *Al Jazeera* website, it was suggested that Qatari withdrawal came after the realization that Eritrea and Djibouti have not been able to demarcate the border and instead have grown comfortable with a mutually beneficial

stalemate guarded by Qatari troops. The second reason is the presence of major powers in and around Djibouti. It was argued that this “corner of the Horn of Africa is by now far too crowded for a small nation like Qatar to justify its military presence as a buffer” (Barakat and Milton 2017). Moreover, the growing closeness between UAE and Saudi Arabia with Eritrea was also a factor in Qatari withdrawal. The Qatari troop presence along the disputed border makes them “a soft target for direct or indirect retaliation” (Barakat and Milton 2017). Besides, the size of Qatar’s armed forces (12,000 troops) is not too big to justify a prolonged military presence abroad when security challenges closer home have intensified. Therefore, Qatar decided to withdraw from the strategically significant corner of the Red Sea.

Ethiopia and Somalia

Qatar’s close ties with Eritrea, around 2008-2010, complicated its relations with Ethiopia. Eritrea and Ethiopia had fought a border war in 1998-2000 and since then, the ties between the two neighbours remained hostile. Therefore, Qatar’s warming ties with Eritrea, due to the mediation in the border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti, upset Ethiopia. It was also concerned about Qatar’s proximity with the Somali political elite. Ethiopia was particularly wary of Qatar’s funding of Somali politicians. Meanwhile, *Al Jazeera* had published a report about the restive, Somali-speaking Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Ethiopia had fought a war with Somalia (in 1977-78) over the issue of Ogaden and therefore, Ethiopia is extremely sensitive about the region. It felt that Qatar’s deepening ties with Eritrea and Somalia are posing a challenge to security.



Therefore, Ethiopia accused Qatar of destabilizing the Horn of Africa and withdrew its ambassador from Doha. The relations were restored in 2012 after the talks between political leadership of the two countries. Ethiopia and Qatar also signed a number of agreements to enhance economic and investment relationships (Mesfin 2016).

Qatar wanted to undercut Saudi influence in Somalia and hence built close ties with the Somali political class. Qatar had supported the rebuilding of institutions and infrastructure in Somalia. However, the government of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud turned out to be corrupt and ineffective and disappointed Qatar. As a result, Qatar began to engage with Ethiopia, which is a dominant power in the Horn of Africa, to influence developments in Somalia. Moreover, around the same time, in 2012-13, Qatar's ties with Eritrea also began to change as it grew increasingly frustrated with the attitude of Eritrea, and that suited Ethiopia (Mesfin 2016). Recently, Qatar had a role to play when; Somalia restored diplomatic ties with Kenya. Interestingly, Somalia and Kenya thanked the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Al Thani. It demonstrates the fact that Qatar continues to be a key player in Somali politics (Kiruga 2021).

Overall, Qatar's efforts in the Northwest Indian Ocean are centred on mediating between the conflicting parties which helps it to punch above its weight. Mediation in the crises in Yemen, Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti helped Qatar to position itself as a key stakeholder in regional peace and security. However, whether Qatar succeeded in building a continued, lasting influence remains an open question.

TURKEY IN THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

 Since the days of Ottoman Empire, Turkey had established a presence in the Horn of Africa. Post-Ottoman Turkey had a limited engagement with the region however; it has been changing since 2011. Turkey under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been pursuing an expansive foreign and strategic policy, with an objective to revive the Ottoman leadership role, in its immediate neighbourhood and in the wider region (de Wall 2018).

In the first decade of the 21st century, the Turkish economy grew rapidly. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew from about US \$ 200 billion in 2001 to 950 billion by 2013. Moreover, the AKP government consolidated its power base at home, provided domestic political stability, and allowed the Turkish economy to expand (Berg and Meester 2019). It helped to brand Turkey as an emerging economy in world affairs. Turkish private companies began to search for markets abroad. Economic imperatives played a role in the making of Turkish foreign policy. During 2002-2010, Turkey sought to make peace in the region with a policy of zero problems with neighbours. However, the foreign policy orientation began to change in the new decade (Veen and Yüksel 2018).

Post-2011, Turkey sought to play an active role in the Syrian civil war, strengthened its friendship with Qatar, and also introduced ideological content of political Islam in its foreign policy approach. Turkey supported Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Sunni sectarianism. It aligned well with the domestic political ideology of AKP and Erdogan (Berg and Meester 2019). Qatar too was



supporting political Islamists in the region and therefore, the fault line of Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and UAE on the other became more pronounced during this period. Turkey began to expand its footprint in the former Ottoman territories.¹¹ In the NWIO, the region around the Red Sea saw renewed Turkish engagement. Among the region states, Somalia and Sudan received maximum attention.

Humanitarian Assistance and Strategic Expansion

Somalia

As maritime piracy off the coast of Somalia emerged as a serious threat to global shipping, in 2009, Turkey too sent its naval warships to the region. Being a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Turkey joined the US-led CTF-151, a multinational anti-piracy coalition. Since then, Turkish naval deployments to the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea have continued (Melvin 2019).

The next major Turkish move was to help Somalia in 2011. Somalia was facing severe famine and Turkey emerged as a major partner for Somalia. Turkish President Erdogan visited Somalia with a large delegation of about 200 people. It was the first visit by a non-African leader to Somalia in two decades (Berg and Meester 2019). In 2011, Turkish President Erdogan wrote an op-ed in the

¹¹ Turkey has also played a major role in the conflict in Libya. Turkey is the major supporter of the Government of National Accord in Libya which is fighting against the forces of General Khalifa Haftar supported by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Russia. Turkey's ambitions for an expansive role in the Mediterranean affairs are a factor in Turkish intervention in Libya. For more, see: Ahmed Helal, "For Turkey, the Libyan conflict and the eastern Mediterranean are inextricably linked", *Atlantic Council*, October 28, 2020. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menascience/for-turkey-the-libyan-conflict-and-the-eastern-mediterranean-are-inextricably-linked/>

Foreign Policy outlining his approach towards Somalia. He argued that “The tears that are now running from Somalia’s golden sands into the Indian Ocean must stop”. For this, Turkey has “decided to launch a major humanitarian effort to help restore normalcy to Mogadishu”. To this end, Turkey is “preparing to provide assistance in the fields of health, education, and transportation” (Erdogan 2011).

After the visit, Turkey reopened its embassy in Somalia, and Turkish Airlines began the direct flights to the Somali capital, Mogadishu. Turkish private companies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) entered Somalia in a big way. Turkish companies are operating and maintaining the airport and seaport of Mogadishu. Turkey has extended developmental assistance to Somalia in the form of building roads, schools, and hospitals and has provided scholarships to Somali students to study in Turkey. By 2016, the bilateral trade between Turkey and Somalia has gone up to US \$ 120 million and Turkey claims to have provided the assistance worth US \$ 1 billion to Somalia (Berg and Meester 2019).

Turkey’s engagement with Somalia did not stop with increasing trade, aid, and developmental efforts. Security assistance and diplomatic support are key elements of Turkey’s approach to Somalia. Turkey has established a military base in Mogadishu to train Somali National Army. The base, built at the cost of US \$ 50 million, is spread over four sq. km and can accommodate 1500 trainees. Turkey is also providing Somalia’s coast guard with the necessary training as well as equipment (Melvin 2019). Turkey has actively supported the talks between Somalia’s national government and the self-governing territory of Somaliland.



Turkey is also accused of funding of Somali politicians. The competition between Qatar and Turkey and Saudi Arabia and UAE has, apparently, worsened the intra-Somali disputes (Berg and Meester 2019).

So far, the systematic efforts of a decade have resulted in building Turkish influence in Somalia. Turkey's military training facility at Mogadishu and the control over the operations of the airport and seaport provide it with forward military positions to project its influence in the region. In 2020, Somalia has invited Ankara for the oil exploration in Somali waters which, if materialized, has the potential to further consolidate its presence in the region (Mules 2020). Apart from Somalia, Sudan features prominently in the Turkish policy towards the Red Sea.

Military Bases

Sudan

Turkey has engaged Sudan in acquiring a naval base in December 2017¹². Turkey has signed an agreement with Sudan to develop the Ottoman-era port of Suakin. The port would have a dock that could maintain civilian and military vessels. The deal was portrayed as an effort to develop Suakin for tourism-related purposes (Melvin 2019). However, the military connotations of the agreement were hard to miss as the Sudanese foreign minister was quoted saying

12 Interestingly, Sudan signed a deal to host the Russian naval base at Port Sudan in 2017. The base, also known as the logistics support facility, would be built for 300 soldiers and four warships. The Russian base in the Red Sea would further complicate the strategic picture of the Red Sea region. For more, see: John C. K. Daly, "Russian Naval Base in Sudan: Extending Moscow's Influence in Middle East and North Africa", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17 (168), November 25, 2020. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-naval-base-in-sudan-extending-moscosw-s-influence-in-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

Suakin is located close to the Egyptian border and across the sea from Saudi Arabia's western coast. Turkish base at Suakin and in Somalia would ensure Turkish presence in the region long seen as a backyard of Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

the agreement may “result in any kind of military cooperation”. Turkey and Sudan also decided to cooperate in the counter-terror training (Amin 2018). Since the announcement, Turkish companies have increased their presence in Sudan’s energy and agricultural sectors (Berg and Meester 2019).

The agreement to develop Suakin has had implications for the regional balance of power and strategic rivalries in the NWIO. Suakin is located close to the Egyptian border and across the sea from Saudi Arabia's western coast. Turkish base at Suakin and in Somalia would ensure Turkish presence in the region long seen as a backyard of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It would make Turkey a serious player in the geopolitics of the Red Sea and in the NWIO.

The timing of the agreement after the blockade of Qatar in June 2017 indicated the Sudanese tilt towards Qatar and Turkey (Berg and Meester 2019). The bilateral ties between Egypt and Sudan were already under strain and the deal exacerbated the tensions. Both countries are engaged in a border dispute over the control of the mineral-rich Hala’ib triangle. As a response to the deal, reportedly, Egypt sent hundreds of soldiers to the UAE’s base at Assab in Eritrea. Sudan reacted by closing off borders with Eritrea, withdrawing its ambassador from Cairo, and mobilizing troops



to the region (Melvin 2019). Sudan later denied the claims of the upcoming Turkish base at Suakin.

Djibouti

In 2017, it was reported that Djibouti would be willing to host a Turkish military base. Djiboutian ambassador to Turkey has said that the “possible steps from Turkey to build a military base in the country would be welcomed”. Turkey is interested in building a Special Economic Zone in Djibouti (Sevinç 2017). The rising military and economic presence in Djibouti would further boost Turkish role in the region.

Ethiopia is Turkey’s largest trading partner in the region whereas Ankara has modest economic ties with Eritrea. It has supported the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia (Berg and Meester 2019). Recently, Turkey has signed a deal with Ethiopia’s federal government to supply it with advanced drone aircraft. Ethiopia hopes to deploy these drones in its war against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).

Overall, the growing Turkish presence and consequently, expanding influence in the region has added a new dimension to the regional geopolitics of the NWIO and the Red Sea as well as to the intra-West Asian rivalries. Despite the expanding Turkish presence in the region, it is still seen as a relatively new player, and more importantly, “aligning with it brings uncertain prospects” (Berg and Meester 2019, 13).

IRAN IN THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN



Iran has been attempting to establish a strategic presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to expand its regional influence. It also serves to open a new flank in its strategic rivalry with the Sunni Arab states, primarily with Saudi Arabia (Melvin 2019). Iran's former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was President from 2005 to 2013, is credited for placing Africa prominently in Iranian foreign policy (Hammond 2013). The outreach to Africa in general and with the Horn of Africa, in particular, has continued even after the departure of Ahmadinejad. In fact, engaging Africa serves Iran's domestic as well as foreign policy objectives. Domestically, Iran has managed to convince its population that despite international sanctions, the Islamic Republic is an important state in the Muslim as well as in developing worlds. Iran's expanding engagement with Africa has pushed its rivals to spend considerable resources and diplomatic energy in wooing these states (Hammond 2013). Therefore, it is interesting to consider Iran's strategic engagement with the NWIO.

Strategic Opportunity

Eritrea

Iran saw an opening in Eritrea in 2006 when the US cut ties with the Red Sea state over its hostile relations with Ethiopia and continued support for the Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The presidents of Iran and Eritrea made reciprocal visits and also signed agreements to boost trade, political and economic relations. Iran also managed to gain



access to the strategically located ports of Massawa and Assab in Eritrea (Cafiero and Čok 2020). Ostensibly, Iran had established its presence in Eritrea to protect a Soviet-era oil refinery (Melvin 2019). It was later alleged by Saudi Arabia that Iran has been using its base in Eritrea to support Houthi rebels in Yemen (Cafiero and Čok 2020). In 2011, Iran had sent its navy ships through the Suez Canal. Reportedly, it has deployed its submarines to the Red Sea¹³ as well (Melvin 2019). In 2015-16, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia entered the war in Yemen, they managed to persuade Eritrea away from Iran. In fact, Eritrea closed the Houthi mission, ended the Iranian access to its ports and supported the Saudi war efforts (de Wall 2018, Melvin 2019). Interestingly, in 2016, Sudan too cut ties with Iran with the promises of Saudi assistance.

Religious-Regional Rivalries and Military Support

Yemen

Iran considers itself as a protector of Shia interests across the region. Consequently, it is supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shias in Iraq, and Houthi rebels in Yemen. Iranian support to Houthis apparently began in 2009 and has intensified after 2015 (Juneau 2021). As the Houthi rebels gained momentum and strength, and it became apparent that the rebellion can't be defeated, Saudi Arabia and the UAE entered the war in 2015. Since then, Saudi Arabia

13 The Red Sea remains an "important route for Iranian weapons smuggling to militants in Gaza and Syria, and senior Iranian naval officers have announced plans to maintain a permanent maritime presence in the region". As of now, "Iran does not possess the same level of naval capability in the Red Sea and the Gulf as it does in its coastal waters in the Strait of Hormuz". However, Iran does possess "a narrow range of capabilities in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait". Besides, "Iran has demonstrated that it can send submarines on extended cruises of the Red Sea". For more on the Iranian naval capabilities in the Red Sea, see: James Farher, "This presence will continue forever: an assessment of Iranian naval capabilities in the Red Sea", CIMSEC, April 5, 2017. Available at: <https://cimsec.org/presence-continue-forever-assessment-iranian-naval-capabilities-red-sea/>

has been embroiled in the Yemeni quagmire as despite the Saudi intervention, naval blockade of the Yemeni coast, and airstrikes, Houthi rebels continue to pose a formidable challenge.

Iran supports Houthis by supplying small arms and assault rifles as well as advanced and lethal weapons. Iran uses maritime as well as land routes to dispatch supplies. Maritime supply routes pass through the Gulf of Aden whereas land routes pass through Oman which is Yemen's eastern neighbor. Oman rejects the charge that weapons are smuggled through its territory (Bayoumy and Stewart 2016). The war in Yemen has tested Oman's neutrality in the conflict.

Iran supplies technologically advanced parts that "the Houthis then combine with other locally acquired or produced ones. They assemble these parts into working weapons with technical assistance from Hezbollah and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps advisers". Consequently, this approach "has allowed the Houthis to now field short and long-range drones and an increasingly diversified fleet of missiles capable of striking deep inside Saudi Arabia" (Juneau 2021). With the Iranian support, drones operated by the Houthis have managed to target Saudi Arabia's oil refineries as well.

Somalia

The conflict in Yemen has had an impact on Somalia as well. The UN experts have been warning about the weapons flow from Yemen and Iran to Somalia. In the last few years, it has been reported that as many as four weapons shipments have been arriving every month.



Overall, limited financial resources and the necessity to focus on the immediate neighbourhood have constrained Iran's ability to shape the developments in the NWIO. Iran is also considered as a destabilizing player in regional politics by the Sunni Gulf states.

Western as well as local forces have intercepted ships carrying weapons to Yemen and Somalia. The weapons on these ships have been either made in Iran or in North Korea (The Economist 2021). In the past, Iran has been accused of supporting the Union of Islamic Courts in Somalia. The group emerged in the 1990s and fought against Somalia's transitional government. Iran has violated the arms embargo and supplied the UIC with weapons. It caused a rift between Iran's relationship with Somalia (Cafiero and Čok 2020). Iran has also deployed its naval warships to the Gulf of Aden, off the coast of Somalia, for anti-piracy missions since 2009 (Melvin 2019). In the recent past, Iran has conducted naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman with Russian and Chinese navies.

Overall, limited financial resources and the necessity to focus on the immediate neighbourhood have constrained Iran's ability to shape the developments in the NWIO. Iran is also considered as a destabilizing player in regional politics by the Sunni Gulf states. Iran has never developed strong ties with Ethiopia and Somaliland (Cafiero and Čok 2020). Iran's ties with Egypt are influenced by Egypt's close relationship with Saudi Arabia and UAE. However, despite the challenges, Iran has managed to strengthen Houthis in Yemen and build ties with Eritrea before being evicted from Eritrean ports in 2015-16.

Iran considers the presence in the Horn of Africa and Yemen as necessary to provide it with a strategic depth (Segall 2019). However, strategic challenges closer home has constrained Iranian capabilities and influence in the region. In the evolving fault line between Qatar and Turkey on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and UAE on the other, Iran, which is a major player in West Asian politics, has been reduced as a relatively marginal player in the Horn of Africa and Reed Sea region.

SAUDI ARABIA IN THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

 Among the major West Asian players, Saudi Arabia is the only one with a coastline on the Red Sea as well as on the Persian/Arabian Gulf. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's location has positioned it closer to the three maritime chokepoints: Suez Canal, Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz. The strategically significant position enables Saudi Arabia to play an active role in the Southern Arabian Peninsula as well as in the Horn of Africa.

Saudi involvement in the NWIO is driven by two primary objectives: containing the influence of Iran, which prompted Saudi intervention in Yemen, and securing routes for oil exports by building naval capabilities and pipelines in the Red Sea. Besides pursuing these objectives, Saudi Arabia is also seeking to expand the ambit of influence by engaging with the states in the NWIO.



Military Intervention

The War in Yemen

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is being played out across the West Asian region. Countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have been at the receiving end of this rivalry (Marcus 2019). One of the major reasons for the blockade of Qatar in 2017 was Qatar's growing closeness with Iran (Ramani 2021). In this context, the intensification of the civil war in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's military intervention seemed to be a turning point in the geopolitics of the NWIO.

Saudi Arabia considered Yemen as part of its sphere of influence. Therefore, when Qatari efforts at mediation in the Yemeni civil war in the late 2000s have failed, the failure was partly attributed to the lack of understanding of Saudi Arabia's interest in Yemeni affairs and the feeling of being sidelined by the Qatari mediation. By 2014, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia grew increasingly concerned about the developments in Yemen, the ascendance of Houthi rebels supported by Iran, and the consequently growing Iranian influence along its southern periphery. In 2014-15, the Iranian nuclear deal was in the final stages of negotiations which

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would embolden Iran even further. Therefore, in the view of Saudi Arabia, the strategic environment seemed to be worsening and the Kingdom needed to take urgent steps to arrest the slide.

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia along with the UAE launched its military intervention in the Yemen conflict to support the beleaguered Yemeni government. It launched a campaign of airstrikes. Saudi Arabia sought to isolate Yemen economically. The US provided intelligence and logistics support in the Saudi campaign (Robinson 2021).

The Red Sea Dimension

To apply pressure from the southern Red Sea and to block the arms supplies intended for the Houthis, Saudi Arabia reached out to Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea. These states decided to put their lot with Saudi Arabia and UAE and cut off ties with Iran. Sudan even sent its 7000 soldiers to fight in Yemen (de Wall 2018). Meanwhile, in 2016, Saudi Arabia signed an agreement with Djibouti for establishing a military base. So far, Saudi Arabia has not yet opened its base (Melvin 2019).

However, by now, it is clear that Saudi intervention in Yemen has turned into a costly, military quagmire. Saudi intervention could not decisively defeat the Houthi rebels (The Economist 2020). On the contrary, Houthis have targeted Saudi military and oil production facilities (Hubbard, Karasz and Reed 2019). Stability is still elusive and the country is paying a terrible human cost. Yemen has had seen the outbreak of cholera, the collapse of health facilities, and four million people are internally displaced. The



prolonged civil war has devastated the Yemeni economy. The air and sea blockade has restricted the operations and capacities of international aid organizations (Robinson 2021).

The Red Sea in Saudi Strategic Calculations

Saudi Arabia depends on the Strait of Hormuz for the exports of the bulk of its oil. However, in the last decade or so, Saudi Arabia has grown increasingly concerned about the prospect of an Iranian blockade of the Strait of Hormuz and the cost of such a blockade on Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Saudi Arabia is developing a pipeline network to transport oil via the Red Sea. The pipeline will bring oil from the eastern fields to the port of Yanbu which is located north of the Bab al-Mandeb. It is also developing facilities for exporting gas on the Red Sea (Reuters 2018). The route through the Red Sea will partially alleviate Saudi concerns about the closing off of the Strait of Hormuz.

Saudi Arabia is also developing the futuristic city of Neom on the Red Sea coast. Neom, an ambitious project of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, is part of Saudi Arabia's drive to diversify its economy away from oil. The project is expected to rival other well-known business and transport centres in the Gulf such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha (Azhar 2021). From a geopolitical

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perspective, the scale of investments in Neom and its role in the future Saudi economy will further enhance the importance of the Red Sea coastline.

Council of the Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden

In January 2020, eight countries formed an organization named the “Council of the Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden”. The organization has eight member states: Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. These eight states are littoral states of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Cok, Competing for cooperation in the Red Sea 2020). Israel, despite being a Red Sea state, is conspicuous by its absence. The organization is focused on matters of regional security. Saudi Arabia is the driving force behind this initiative and therefore, Saudi priorities are likely to dominate the focus of the organization (Custers 2021).

Diplomatic Efforts

Ethiopia-Eritrea Rapprochement

In 2018, Saudi Arabia and the UAE helped Eritrea and Ethiopia, two bitter neighbours in the Horn, to normalize ties with each other. Eritrea was already in the ambit of Saudi and UAE as it has allowed the port of Assab for the war in Yemen. In exchange, Saudi Arabia and UAE offered economic assistance to these states, primarily to



With the US' waning interest in West Asia, Saudi Arabia has recognized the need to do more for its own security.

Saudi strategy to bypass the Strait of Hormuz, as much as possible, and to diversify its economy will see continued engagement with the Red Sea.

Ethiopia. It also signalled the growing diplomatic importance of Africa in Saudi foreign policy (Oneko 2018).

With the US' waning interest in West Asia, Saudi Arabia has recognized the need to do more for its own security. Saudi strategy to bypass the Strait of Hormuz, as much as possible, and to diversify its economy will see continued engagement with the Red Sea.

UAE IN THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

 Just like Qatar, UAE is a small state flush with cash. The Emirati cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi are well-known financial and tourism centres in the world. In addition, in the last few years, the UAE has demonstrated a political willingness to carve out a role for itself in the NWIO. Consequently, among the West Asian players, UAE is probably the most active and assertive player in the geopolitics of the NWIO (de Wall 2018). It has sought to expand its influence through instruments such as trade, investments, aid, military partnerships, and infrastructure building. UAE's engagement with the NWIO is driven by four key factors: the instability unleashed by the Arab Spring of 2011, growing Iranian influence, the emergence of maritime piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and the war in Yemen (International Crisis Group 2018). UAE

has consciously sought to address these concerns through its strategic activities.

UAE and Saudi Arabia share concerns about the influence of Iran and the support extended to the political Islamists by Qatar and Turkey. UAE and Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen in 2015 to limit the growing power of Houthi rebels. They also acted jointly to blockade Qatar in 2017 for its behaviour. The depth of activities undertaken together by Saudi Arabia and UAE might provide a false sense that they are best friends. However, in the last few years, UAE is rethinking its foreign policy positions as well and adjusting its policies. If it meant not following Saudi Arabia's line of thought, UAE has not shied away from doing so. It is most evident in the war in Yemen since 2019.

In this context, it would be interesting to see UAE's presence in the NWIO.

Port Development

Djibouti

UAE's state-backed company DP World developed the port of Doraleh in Djibouti in the late 2000s. In 2009, a container terminal built by investing US \$ 400 million opened at Doraleh. The modern port facilities helped Djibouti to double the cargo handled at the port. Ethiopia's dependence on Djibouti as a conduit for sea and the rising costs at Yemen's port of Aden following the terrorist attack on *USS Cole* in 2000 contributed to boosting the importance of a modern port in Djibouti. Doraleh emerged as



UAE and Saudi Arabia had leased facilities in Djibouti in April 2015. However, the unauthorized landing of a military aircraft in Djibouti and conflict regarding the lease resulted in the breaking off of diplomatic ties between the UAE and Djibouti.

the sole deep-water port in the region which could handle the 15,000-tonne-plus cargo ships. The port development at Doraleh was seen as a stepping stone for the UAE's expanding role in the NWIO. Meanwhile, Djibouti's President Omar Ismail Guelleh had built strong ties with the political and business elite of the UAE (Styan 2013).

The relations between UAE and Djibouti soured in the next few years. In 2014, Djibouti had accused the DP World of bribing officials for securing the contract for 50 years to manage and operate the port of Doraleh.¹⁴ The UAE's intervention in the war in Yemen sharpened the disagreements even further. UAE sought to establish a military base at Djibouti, which is located across the Bab-el-Mandeb strait from the Yemeni coast, for supporting military operations in Yemen. UAE and Saudi Arabia had leased facilities in Djibouti in April 2015. However, the unauthorized landing of a military aircraft in Djibouti and conflict regarding the lease resulted in the breaking off of diplomatic ties between the UAE and Djibouti. Djibouti ordered the UAE and Saudi Arabian troops to leave the country (Melvin 2019).

¹⁴ In 2018, finally, Djibouti seized the port from UAE and awarded the operations to a Chinese company. The DP World has taken Djibouti's government to courts and so far, has won seven cases against it.

Since then, Saudi Arabia has rebuilt ties with Djibouti. However, UAE and Djibouti have been locked in a dispute over the Doraleh port.

Eritrea

As Djibouti refused to assist the UAE and Saudi Arabia in their war in Yemen, they turned to Eritrea. At the behest of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Eritrea signed a long-term agreement for military cooperation and the UAE's forces began to use the port of Assab for military activities. UAE was keen to develop the base at Assab including a military airfield and a deepwater naval port. UAE deployed combat aircraft such as F-16 and Mirage-2000, helicopters, military transport, and maritime patrol aircraft at Assab (Melvin 2019). Reportedly, Sudanese troops, which were sent to fight in Yemen on behalf of UAE and Saudi Arabia, were dispatched from the port of Assab (Vertin 2019).

UAE's engagement with Eritrea helped it to end the isolation and benefit from the interest of these West Asian players. UAE's activities at Assab including the transfer of military material from, as well as the military assistance to, Eritrea were considered as a violation of the international arms embargo on Eritrea (Nichols 2016). Apparently, UAE has trained thousands of Yemeni forces at Assab in counter-terror operations. It is also part of a network of UAE's detention centres (Melvin 2019). Interestingly, in 2021, UAE dismantled parts of its base at Assab as part of its strategy to pare down expansive strategic presence (AP 2021).



Diplomatic Efforts

Ethiopia-Eritrea Mediation

In 2018, UAE along with Saudi Arabia played a key role, albeit behind the scenes, in normalizing ties between Ethiopia and Eritrea. However, the exact role of these players in the Ethiopia-Eritrea deal remains unclear. Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed Bin Zayed has visited Addis Ababa while the deal was being worked out. He also deposited a billion dollars in Ethiopia's central bank to sweeten the deal (Mahmood 2020). UAE has awarded its highest civilian award, the Order of Zayed, to Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrea's President Isais Afwerki (Mbamalu 2018). The follow-up to the July 2018 deal was signed in September 2018 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

It was clear that Saudi Arabia and UAE were facilitating the rapprochement between the two bitter rivals. However, interestingly, when a Saudi official claimed credit for the deal, Eritrea issued a blistering critique (Mahmood 2020). Nonetheless, the normalization of ties at the behest of UAE and Saudi Arabia has helped these Gulf powers to expand their influence in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Military Bases

The Port of Berbera and Somaliland

In 2016, UAE decided to establish a base at Berbera and also develop the port of Berbera (Vertin 2019). The interests of UAE,

Somaliland, and Ethiopia converged in the port of Berbera (Cannon and Rossiter 2017). Somaliland's strategically important location along the southern coastline of the Gulf of Aden is critical in the evolving geopolitics of the NWIO. In the past, the port of Berbera in Somaliland had attracted foreign powers. For example, the Soviet military had established a key naval and air base at Berbera in the late 1960s (Wilkins 2019).

UAE's engagement with Somaliland serves multiple objectives: Berbera could support military operations in Yemen and it could also emerge as a rival to the port of Doraleh in Djibouti (Ivudria 2020). For Ethiopia, the development of Berbera would help in diversifying its access routes to the sea and reduce the dependence on Djibouti. It will also open up connectivity for the southern Ethiopia (Cannon and Rossiter 2017).

Consequently, UAE, Ethiopia, and Somaliland joined hands to develop the port of Berbera and the necessary support infrastructure. UAE also wanted to establish a military base at Berbera. In 2019, UAE scaled back its ambitions and decided to develop only civilian facilities at Berbera (Ramani 2021). In June 2021, the newly modernized deepwater port of Berbera was opened. Ethiopia is developing connecting roads and other infrastructure. An economic corridor and free trade zone are also on the cards (Gurjar 2021).

In the last few years, UAE has emerged as a key external backer of Somaliland. It has provided security guarantees to the self-governing territory (Vertin 2019). The operating of the port of Berbera and the strategic partnership between UAE and



Somaliland is likely to provide UAE with a strong foothold near the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb.

Somalia

In 2015, UAE funded the establishment of a training centre in Mogadishu to train Somali National Army. UAE trained hundreds of Somali soldiers as part of efforts that were “boosted by an African Union military mission to defeat an Islamist insurgency and secure the country for the government” (Sheikh 2018). UAE had emerged as one of the key donors in Somalia’s security sector. However, in 2018, Somalia decided to close down the UAE’s training program. The rift between Somalia and UAE was caused by the spilling over of tensions between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and UAE and Saudi Arabia on the other (Sheikh 2018). UAE’s relationship with Somaliland is also a contributing factor in this regard.

Moreover, UAE has signed a contract with the semi-autonomous, regional government of Puntland to develop the port of Bosasso. UAE’s DP World was awarded the concession for 30 years and is expected to invest the US \$ 336 million in two phases for the development of the port including “port infrastructure, cranes, dredging, and construction of 450-meter quay” (Vertin 2019).

UAE’s activities in Somaliland and Puntland have not gone down well in Somalia. The federal parliament of Somalia also did not appreciate the pressure tactics deployed by UAE and Saudi Arabia to cut ties with Qatar and Turkey.

UAE's activities in Somaliland and Puntland have not gone down well in Somalia. The federal parliament of Somalia also did not appreciate the pressure tactics deployed by UAE and Saudi Arabia to cut ties with Qatar and Turkey. It has banned the DP World in Somalia citing the violation of sovereignty (Reuters 2018). During the blockade of Qatar by the GCC countries in 2017, Mogadishu wanted to stay neutral. However, Puntland and Somaliland have clearly decided to side with UAE (Vertin 2019). Therefore, questions remain about the UAE's role in Somalia and its impact on Somalia's relationship with Somaliland and Puntland.

Strategic Opportunities

Yemen

With the involvement in the war in Yemen, UAE has sought to establish its presence on the northern littorals of the Gulf of Aden. Yemeni government forces despite the support and intervention by UAE and Saudi Arabia have not been able to defeat the Houthi rebels. However, UAE sensed an opportunity to establish and expand its presence in and around Yemen. As we saw, it established a strategic presence in Eritrea and Somaliland to support its operations in Yemen. Along with Saudi Arabia, it also cajoled Sudan to send troops to Yemen.

Meanwhile, UAE had taken over strategically located Yemeni islands and ports such as Aden, Mokha, Mukalla, Perim, and Socotra. The exact plans for these outposts remain unclear. UAE's



UAE has quietly downsized its presence from the Yemeni quagmire. It is also supporting the separatist forces of STC. The efforts are on to consolidate the gains in Yemen and establish a near-permanent strategic presence in the region around the Bab-el-Mandeb.

objectives include “targeting al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), countering Houthi forces, and deterring Iranian influence along its [Yemen’s] 1200-mile coast” (Vertin 2019). UAE has established a firm foothold over Socotra with military presence, connectivity, and infrastructure building activities.

UAE had built an airstrip on Perim Island. However, in 2018, it withdrew from Perim and focused on Berbera (Melvin 2019). Mokha in Yemen is a key forward maritime military base for UAE whereas Shihir is important as a terminal for exporting oil and gas. Coupled with bases in Assab, Berbera, and Bosasso; control over the Yemeni ports and islands will allow UAE to monitor and influence the strategically significant space of the Southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Vertin 2019).

Meanwhile, the UAE has been adjusting its strategies in the war in Yemen. UAE has quietly downsized its presence from the Yemeni quagmire. It is also supporting the separatist forces of STC. The efforts are on to consolidate the gains in Yemen and establish a near-permanent strategic presence in the region around the Bab-el-Mandeb (Riedel 2021).

ISRAEL IN THE NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

 In the discussions on the Red Sea region, Israel is often conspicuous by its absence. However, through the coastline on the Gulf of Aqaba and the port of Eilat, Israel has an access to the Red Sea. In the NWIO, Israel has had a complicated relationship with Egypt. They fought four wars (1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973) and were bitter rivals. However, since the late 1970s, have established diplomatic ties and both are major recipients of American military assistance.

Threat of Iran

Israel and Saudi Arabia share similar threat perceptions about Iranian nuclear program as well as its aggressive regional behaviour. Both are close US allies in the region. Therefore, they have built covert ties especially in the domain of intelligence.

Military and Economic Ties

Israel, in the 1980s, has helped Eritrean liberation struggle including the military assistance against the Derg regime of Ethiopia. After the independence of Eritrea, apparently, Israel managed to establish a covert military facility in Eritrea along the Red Sea (Pfeffer 2012). However, in the 2000s, Eritrea moved closer to Iran which complicated its ties with Israel. The intense engagement by Saudi Arabia and UAE following their military intervention in Yemen managed to bring Eritrea back into their fold (Cok 2020).



In the last few years, Israel has engaged with Ethiopia and Sudan as well. Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmad paid a visit to Israel in 2019. The visit was significant as both sides agreed to strengthen economic, technological and security relationship (Africa News 2019). However, Israel's ties with Egypt and the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam complicate the Israel-Ethiopia relationship (Cok 2020).

Abraham Accords

In the past, Sudan and Israel have had difficult relationship. Reportedly, Israel had supported the Southern Sudanese rebels whereas Sudan had helped Hamas (*Ibid*). However, the toppling of the al-Bashir regime and the US mediation in the context of Abraham Accords has changed the texture of Sudan-Israel ties. Apart from the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, Sudan is the fourth African state that normalized the relationship with Israel in 2020 (AP, AFP 2021).

The relationship between the UAE and Israel has improved dramatically in the context of shared threat from Iran. Apart from the covert cooperation in the domain of security and intelligence, UAE sees Israel as a useful partner in the Gulf of Aden. Both sides have normalized the relationship since 2020 and are deepening

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their partnership. On 30-31 January 2022, Israeli President Isaac Herzog will visit the UAE, which is the first visit by an Israeli President to the Gulf monarchy (Al Jazeera 2022). Israel has reportedly established an intelligence facility on the Socotra Island, which is under the *de-facto* control of UAE. The UAE and Israel, along with India and the US have unveiled a new quadrilateral grouping in the Western Indian Ocean.

Israel-India-US-UAE: I2U2

On 18th October, 2021, foreign ministers of UAE, Israel, India and the US held a virtual meeting. India's foreign minister S Jaishankar was visiting Israel and he joined from Israel. The meeting discussed “expanding economic and political cooperation in the Middle East and Asia, including through trade, combating climate change, energy cooperation, and increasing maritime security” (US Department of State 2021).

The meeting is significant as it opens up opportunities for the four partners to work together in the Western Indian Ocean. The participating countries in this mechanism have established deep strategic ties with each other. It will be interesting to see the next steps of these Quad partners. The “new” Quad has attracted a lot of media attention. The I2U2 met again in 2022 and has been expanding the cooperation. However, these are still early days and we will have to wait and see how the mechanism works out in the near future.



HOW AFRICA NAVIGATES THE STRATEGIC RIVALRIES

 African states from Egypt to Somalia are at the receiving end of the strategic engagements and activism of West Asian states. However, they are not passive objects in these rivalries. Strategic rivalries and competition, while presenting with difficult options, also help the states who are at receiving end of it. African states are actively engaging with willing powers, are playing off one against the other and drawing maximum benefits for themselves. In strategic parlance, African states have been hedging their bets and have become quite adept at that.

Sudan is a case in point. It “has expertly balanced its relationships, never fully cutting ties with any partner even while succumbing to the pressure or entreaties of another” (de Wall 2018). However, Sudan has also engaged with Russia and signed a deal with Russia to allow it to establish a military base at Port Sudan. Eritrea also sensed an opportunity when Iran in 2006 and UAE and Saudi Arabia after 2015 sought to engage with it. It sought to end its isolation by building ties with these states. During the Qatar-GCC crisis of 2017, Sudan and Ethiopia were deeply uncomfortable and

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did not side explicitly with GCC countries. They balanced their ties Qatar and GCC simultaneously.

Ethiopia “sought to balance good commercial and security relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, all of which have investments in the country and the ports it uses” (de Wall 2018). Moreover, Ethiopia has managed to deepen ties with UAE to an extent wherein UAE along with China and Turkey supported the drones which were critical for the battlefield victory of Ethiopian army against the northern rebels of TPLF. UAE and Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in Ethiopia.

UAE has also been engaged in the mediation efforts between Ethiopia one the one hand, and Sudan and Egypt on the other, over the issue of Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD). Finally, in the case of Somaliland and Somalia, they too have “benefited from Arab investment, generally taking advantage of competition between their Middle Eastern sponsors; the Gulf dispute has, however, upset the power balance between the federal government in Mogadishu and the regional governments, particularly Puntland” (de Wall 2018).



CONCLUDING REMARKS

 In the last few years, West Asian players are taking an active interest in the geopolitics of the Northwest Indian Ocean. The region is home to key maritime chokepoints like Bab-el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal. The region is located in proximity to the energy-rich West Asia and resource-rich East and Central Africa.

Among the West Asian states, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and UAE are the most active and visible players in the NWIO. For West Asian players, Arab Spring of 2010-11 was a turning point in their engagements with the NWIO. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, political Islam, power projection in the Red Sea, and food and maritime security are four major drivers that shape the engagement of West Asian states with NWIO. The fault line between Qatar and Turkey, who champion political Islamists, and Saudi Arabia and UAE, who are opposed to the political Islamists, adds an important dimension to the strategic rivalries which are being played out in the NWIO.

Qatar was the first West Asian state to engage actively with the NWIO. In the mid to late 2000s, it made efforts to mediate in the conflicts in Sudan and Yemen. Qatari mediators were also active in the dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti. In fact, Qatar had

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deployed its troops at the border between Eritrea and Djibouti. Qatar's efforts positioned it as a mediator of choice and raised its profile. Qatar-government-backed TV Channel *AlJazeera* amplified Qatar's message and influence. However, Qatar's efforts had limitations as well. Qatar failed in resolving the conflicts in Sudan and Yemen. In 2017, as Qatar was blockaded by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, it withdrew its troops from the Eritrea-Djibouti border. Despite the activism of a decade and intensive engagements, Qatar's influence remains limited in the NWIO.

Turkey began to engage with the NWIO in 2011. Turkey under the leadership of Erdogan sought to rebuild influence in the former Ottoman territories. Turkey reached out to Somalia and extended generous military, economic, political, and developmental assistance. It supported the dialogue between various Somali factions. Turkey also signed an agreement with Sudan for establishing a naval base at the port of Suakin, which used to be a former Ottoman naval base. Reportedly, Djibouti is willing to host a Turkish base as well. Meanwhile, Turkey has agreed to supply drones to the federal government of Ethiopia. As a result of its activities, Turkey has managed to carve out a space for itself in the NWIO.

Iran believes that its presence in the Red Sea and Yemen provides it with a much-needed strategic depth. Iran's engagement with the NWIO is centred on Yemen and Eritrea. Iran established a base in Eritrea and has deployed its navy to the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations. Houthi rebels in Yemen receive Iranian support including arms supplies and technical assistance. Saudi Arabia and UAE believe that the Iranian base in Eritrea was useful in supplying Houthis. Iranian support to Houthis and the inability



of the Yemeni government to defeat the Houthis prompted Saudi Arabia and UAE to intervene in the war in Yemen. Iran's limited financial abilities and the requirements to focus on immediate neighbourhood constrain Iranian engagement with the NWIO.

Saudi Arabia is a major Red Sea power by virtue of its location. It is located along the Eastern periphery of the Red Sea. It is making efforts to diversify its oil export routes away from the Strait of Hormuz. It is also building a futuristic city of Neom on the Red Sea. To protect its interests in the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia is building its naval capabilities as well. Saudi Arabia considers itself as a key player in Yemen. Therefore, it intervened in Yemen along with the UAE in 2015 to defeat the Houthis. However, the intervention in Yemen has not succeeded and it has turned into a quagmire for Saudi Arabia. Through regional multilateral initiatives, Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as the leader of the Red Sea states.

UAE is the most active and assertive player in the NWIO. Its financial and political muscle ad military power helped it to expand its influence in the NWIO. Just like Saudi Arabia, UAE remains concerned about the growing influence of Iran and political Islam.

It is a major player in developing ports in the NWIO such as Berbera. UAE has established military facilities and bases along the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. UAE controls the Socotra Island and has taken over strategically important outposts along Western and Southern Yemen like Perim Island. It is also nimble in its strategic orientation and in response to the changing geopolitical environment, has quickly adjusted its policies. It has facilitated the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Overall, the growing role of West Asian players in the NWIO is an important development in the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. It is reshaping the strategic milieu of the Horn of Africa as well as the Red Sea region.

UAE's engagement with the NWIO has clearly enabled it to expand its influence and contribute to shaping the strategic environment of the region.

Israel is often conspicuous by its absence in the discussions of the Red Sea region. However, Israel is an important littoral country in the NWIO through its coastline on the Gulf of Aqaba. Israel has had a complex relationship with Egypt. Since the late 1970s, it has been a diplomatic partner of Egypt. Sudan and UAE have normalized their ties with Israel. UAE and Saudi Arabia share the threat perception *vis-a-vis* Iran with Israel. India, US, Israel and UAE are engaged in a “new” Quad mechanism in the Western Indian Ocean. The initiative has generated much interest in the strategic debates and its progress has been tracked across the region. The paper also considers how Africa navigates the strategic rivalries.

Overall, the growing role of West Asian players in the NWIO is an important development in the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. It is reshaping the strategic milieu of the Horn of Africa as well as the Red Sea region. With the growing military presence of global powers in the region, intensifying regional rivalries add an interesting dimension to the evolving geopolitics.



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