

THE STRAIT OF BAB EL-MANDEB: STAGE OF GEOPOLITICAL DISPUTES

ANTÓNIO GONÇALVES ALEXANDRE

amgalexandre527@hotmail.com

Collaborating researcher at the Research and Development Center,
Military University Institute (Portugal)

Abstract

Situated between Yemen to the Northeast and Djibouti and Eritrea to the Southwest, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is the closest area between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa and connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. Thirty-two kilometres wide, the strategic value of the Bab El-Mandeb Strait is associated with the fact that it is the shortest sea route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.

According to data from the 2019 US Energy Information Administration, 6.2 million barrels of crude and refined oil flowed daily across the Bab el-Mandeb Strait toward Europe, the United States of America and Asia in 2018. On the other hand, a 2017 report by Chatam House identified 14 chokepoints that it considered critical to global food security, with the Bab El-Mandeb Strait being one of the most relevant.

This article aims to analyze the ongoing geopolitical disputes in this region, particularly between the USA, which maintains a strong structure, and the emerging powers, China, and Russia, which are positioning themselves to strengthen their presence. The results show that this competition, at the global level, exists and is even in an upward cycle.

Keywords

Bab el-Mandeb, sea routes, international maritime trade, geopolitical disputes

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ANTÓNIO GONÇALVES ALEXANDRE

Introduction

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Figure 1) is currently one of four critical chokepoints² for international oil trade (Cunningham, 2018)

Figure 1 - Bab el-Mandeb Strait



Source: (Wood, 2018)

According to Aljamra, approximately 57 supertankers from the Persian Gulf states cross the strait every day, totaling close to 21,000 a year (2019). The flow of oil across the Bab el-Mandeb Strait accounted for 9% of total transoceanic oil (crude oil and refined petroleum products) in 2017. About 3.6 million barrels/day (b/d) headed north towards Europe and America, and 2.6 million b/d flowed in the opposite direction, mainly to China, India, and Singapore (EIA, 2019)

This strait and its surrounding waters, which Daly (2009) considered "chaotic and dangerous", and Mourad (2018) said were "the scene of a struggle for power and influence", have been facing threats that could jeopardize freedom of navigation. Those include the endless conflict in Yemen between the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and

¹ Article translated by Hugo Alves.

² Bottlenecks in the marine environment of high geostrategic and geoeconomic value that connect important waterways and cause natural congestion to maritime traffic (Popescu, 2016).



president AbdRabbuh Mansur Hadi's forces, as well as the terrorist groups operating there (Zaouaq, 2018).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), which in 2015 joined the Saudi coalition that opposed Houthi rule in Yemen, has seized the island of Perim (located on the Yemeni side of the strait), trying from there to drive Houthi militias off the extensive west coast. In mid-2019, after a United Nations-mediated ceasefire, they even gained control of the important port of Hudaydah (Figure 2), relevant to ensuring supremacy over control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Aljamra, 2019)

Figure 2 – Areas under control of the Yemeni government and the Houthis



Source: (BBC, 2019)

The rivalry for control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is part of a regional conflict between Iran and its Shiite allies on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies on the other. Tehran's involvement in the Yemeni conflict is considered by Zaouaq (2018) as part of a broader military strategy, through which Iran intends to be able to block merchant shipping traffic through the region's two important chokepoints (Ormuz and Bab el-Mandeb) (Figure 3). Soage even dubbed this conflict the "new Cold War of the Middle East" (2017)

Figure 3 - Arab Peninsula Chokepoints



Source: (EIA, 2019)



The existence of violent extremist organizations with links to al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) raises additional security concerns in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and adjacent maritime spaces. The historical precedent of the attack on the USS³destroyer, Cole, in 2000, in the port of Aden in Yemen, as well as the 2002 attack on the oil tanker Limburg in the Gulf of Aden, both claimed by al-Qaeda, symbolize the ability of these groups to undermine maritime security in the region. Both al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which dominates an important stake of territory, and a small IS organization, are active and of increased concern (Mahmood, 2019)

In methodological terms, given the limitations of space, it was necessary to delimit of the research, based on the criteria of content, space and time. Regarding content, and despite the relevance that non-state actors undeniably have, we intend to focus only on state actors, and within them only at the global level (USA, China, and Russia). The choice for these actors is that USA is the hegemonic superpower, which has been challenged by China, that wants to return to a stage where it was dominant for several centuries, and by the revisionist claims of Russia, which seeks to regain its influence in international terms, lost with the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991. The analysis focuses on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and adjacent maritime spaces (Red Sea and Gulf of Aden). In terms of time, the study is based on more recent years, especially since the outbreak of the Yemeni conflict in 2015, until the end of 2019.

Our argument is to demonstrate that the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and surrounding areas, because of their relevance to international maritime trade, especially energy, are an important stage of geopolitical competition and the assertion and projection of power by global powers, with the disputes between them on the rise.

This paper is divided into three chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusions. The first covers the historical framework of the relevance of the Strait. The second evidence the most relevant conjuncture geopolitical factors. The third presents a foresight view of geopolitical interactions between the actors concerned. The conclusions are the geopolitical disputes at stake.

1. Historical framework

In recent years, we have seen the return to a very strong geopolitical strife between the global powers in the Arabian Peninsula region and its surrounding maritime spaces. USA, whose presence has been regular and hegemonic over the years, is now looking with apprehension at China, with growing (economic and military) interests in the region, and Russia, which seeks to regain the influence that the Soviet Union once had, especially during the Cold War period (Aljamra, 2019)

When the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, Europe and Southeast Asia became closer, and the Bab El-Mandeb Strait gained greater importance. It could be sailed directly from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, so the distance from Asian ports to European ones was reduced by up to two-thirds. The route through the Bab El-Mandeb reached frank preponderance and became even one of the most crucial in the world (Wood, 2018).

³ Acronym for US Navy ships: United States Ship.

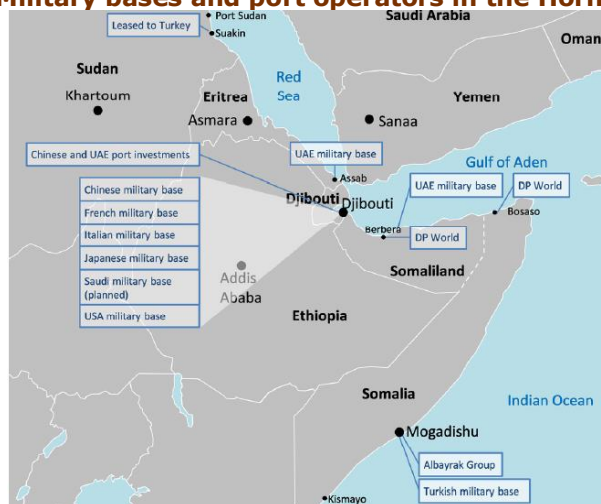


Although the Horn of Africa⁴ was (more) a stage of competition between USA and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, after its end and, above all, after the Battle of Mogadishu⁵ in 1993, the international community seemed to have become almost completely disinterested in this region, until very recently when this trend was reversed and renewed widespread attention was paid. This was largely due to the significant increase in international maritime trade. To get an idea, and according to Potheary (2016), almost all maritime trade between Europe and Asia, including energy trade, approximately 700 billion U.S. dollars (USD), went through that strait in 2016.

The main security developments that have occurred since the beginning of the 21st century (terrorism and maritime piracy) and the region's high geostrategic value have caught the attention of various powers, creating a rampant race to build military bases. In the specific case of Djibouti, a state that became independent in 1977, in addition to a French naval base (which already existed), it now housed several foreign military bases, including an American (established in 2002), a Japanese (2011), an Italian (2012) and a Chinese (2017), the first military infrastructure in Beijing abroad. (Safak, 2019)

In the past decade, several states have invested in several ports in the Horn of Africa, often after obtaining trade agreements, with the opening of nearby military bases (e.g., China in Djibouti, the UAE in Berber, Somaliland⁶, and Turkey in Mogadishu, Somalia)(Berg & Meester, 2018)

Figure 4 - Military bases and port operators in the Horn of Africa



Source: (Berg & Meester, 2018)

⁴ Geographically comprises Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia (Melvin, 2019).

⁵ This followed the fall of the president Siad Barre, 1991. The United Somali Congress (USC) determined that it was Ali Mahadi Mahamed his successor. Parties within USC opposed it, leading to its split into two parties: those who supported Mohamed and those who supported the general Farrah Aidid. The country was involved in a civil war without a cartel. On October 3, 1993, another attempt was made (after five previous failures) to capture the general Aidid, who was supposed to be meeting with his party's chain of command in a building in Mogadishu. This mission was a huge failure and resulted in the death of numerous U.S. military personnel (Alvarenga, 2008).

⁶ It incorporates the territory of the former British Somaliland. Although it officially belongs to Somalia, it unilaterally declared independence in 1991, which, however, is not internationally recognized.



The growing number of foreign military bases (and those already projected) (Figure 4), along with the assiduous presence of high-level numbers of different nationalities in different states of the Horn of Africa, highlights the unmistakable importance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the entire Southern coast of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in terms of security, geoeconomics and regional geopolitics (Safak, 2019)

2. Identification of relevant geopolitical conjuncture factors

According to Nogueira, geopolitical studies could be better understood holistically if factors other than purely geographic ones were considered, identifying, by the way, several non-geographic factors. However, in addition to these geographical and non-geographical factors, which he grouped as "structural factors", he identified other factors, which he called "conjunctural", including social, economic, political and military factors. (2011)(Nogueira, 2011, pp. 300-303)

In this context, and due to the need to delimit our research, this chapter only proceeds to the identification of conjuncture factors, focusing on the main political, economic, and military factors that influence the geopolitical and geostrategic situation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and adjacent maritime spaces, and which have a greater impact on the relations between the actors concerned.

2.1. United States of America

Washington's overall goals have invariably focused, over the years, on containment of the power that dominates the "Heartland". In fact, Nogueira considers that during the Cold War the thought of Nicholas Spykman and George Kenan exerted decisive influence on American foreign policy, both in the constitution of alliances and in the theory of restraint of the assumed opponent (USSR), and that, more recently, geographers and political scientists, such as Cohen and Brezinski, and then Kissinger, have continued to focus their analyses on the need for control of Eurasia(2018)

In line with the above argument, Washington will not fail to avoid any hegemony in Eurasia by a power or alliances of powers, namely China-Russia, also intending to maintain a unipolar international order achieved in the post-Cold War period and the command of the sea⁷, which the status of maritime power of excellence has long conferred on it.

In political terms, since the terrorist attacks on American soil in 2001, the US has been developing an ambitious action plan against Islamic extremist groups in various regions of the Middle East (ME)⁸. The fight against terrorist organizations in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula regions, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and AQPA and IS in Yemen, is part of that plan. To this end, it was essential to set up a military base in Djibouti, the first on the African continent, the place of origin of the drones used in aerial bombings, due to its proximity to both areas of operations(Braude, 2016)

⁷ According to Julian Corbett (1918), the objective of naval warfare must always be, directly or indirectly, to ensure the Command of the sea, or prevent the opponent from guaranteeing it.

⁸ The role that the USA should play in the ME has, however, been the subject of thorough internal analysis, after more than a decade and a half of "wars" that Edelman (2019) called them "expensive, inconclusive and endless".



The maintenance of many military and effective bases in the Persian Gulf, which Figure 5 shows, is apparently in line with the decision of the U.S. administration, which began with President Obama, that after years of strong strategic investment throughout all ME, with results below expected, they needed to reduce their presence in the region. This fact cannot cease to be seen, however, as an unequivocal warning from Washington, to Beijing, that it does not give up guaranteeing military hegemony in the Western Indian Ocean region. On the other hand, Russia's failed attempt to have a military base in Djibouti is symptomatic of the power and influence the US continues to have in the region, and a clear sign from Moscow that it will not ease its revisionist claims⁹.

Figure 5 – U.S. military bases and personnel in the Middle East



Source: (South Front, 2019)

In economic terms, the Arabian Peninsula no longer has the relevance it once had in the past to the need for access to energy, since USA has become, through the discovery of shale gas, self-sufficient and the largest single producer of crude oil in 2019, even surpassing Saudi Arabia. However, the ME, (BP, 2019) *per se*, remains a region of enormous global importance, since it is "besieged" by several seas and gulfs of unusual relevance (Eastern Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden and Red Sea) and by narrow preponders and canals (Ormuz, Bab el-Mandeb and Suez), which makes it both an aldraba and a bridge between three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa).

Washington's concerns now focus on preventing any power from disrupting the economy and energy security through oil. This may be the reason why, despite the implementation phase of the military retraction in the generality of the ME, determined by the Trump administration, the American presence in the Arabian Peninsula and surrounding maritime spaces remain at very high levels.

⁹ Despite the official argument used for banning the construction of this military base was that Djibouti did not want to "become the ground for a possible future proxy war" (Melvin, 2019).



In military terms, if the Persian Gulf's air and marine bases¹⁰ guarantee the ability to intervene in the Strait of Ormuz and allow strong opposition to Iran's possible temptations to interfere with free maritime trade at this point, Djibouti's base¹¹ is key to this happening in relation to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The U.S. presence in Djibouti also fulfills another twofold objective: to support the Arab coalition fighting houthis in Yemen, either through logistical support or through the provision of intelligence; and to isolate and weaken Iran to ensure the annihilation of its regional hegemonic temptations.

2.2. China

After centuries of isolationism and numerous internal conflicts, China has entered a cycle of strong economic growth and has been engaged in the current century, especially since 2003, with the presidency of Hu Jintao, in a process of multidimensional global expansion, which has culminated, already with Xi Jinping, in the definition of his ambitious "Chinese dream" of the "great revitalization of the Chinese nation". That is, moreover, according to Tomé (2019), Beijing's great goal, defined at the end of the 1970s by Deng Xiaoping, but which remain valid. Tomé points out that Xi Jinping's leadership only presented in a "more concrete and ambitious" way the aforementioned "Chinese dream", with the celebration of "two centenaries" symbolic for the regime: that of the creation of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021, and that of the creation of the People's Republic of China in 2049. Regarding China's "grand strategy", Tomé considers (2019, pp. 80-81) that it is based on a long-term strategy, based on "peaceful rise" and "win-win" logic, with mutual benefits for China and its partners, without taking any confrontational stance.

Beijing's option of having regional bases in the Indian Ocean is aligned with the strategic shift from simply continental to simultaneous continental and maritime power¹², empathized in its 2015 White Book on Defense, in which it is said that "[the] traditional mentality that land exceeds the sea must be abandoned, and great importance should be attached to the management of seas and oceans and the protection of maritime rights and interests" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015), and it stems from the fact that China has become open to the world, both in terms of imports and exports.

In political terms, the use of the military base in Djibouti¹³ and the management of the port of Gwadar in Pakistan assure China of the strategic depth it needs not to remain confined to the seas surrounding it: Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea¹⁴. This is very relevant, as it guarantees a possible tactical advantage in the event of a future conflict, as both infrastructure sits with greater logistical support to its fleet in a

¹⁰ In November 2019, the number of U.S. personnel amounted to about 37.000 military, divided by Kuwait (15,000), Qatar (10,000), Bahrain (7,000) and UAE (5,000) (South Front, 2019).

¹¹ With an estimated 4,000 troops last November, according to the publication (South Front, 2019).

¹² It will be the first time in history that a continental power has cumulatively become a maritime power, calling into question classical geopolitical theories that confront the capabilities of maritime powers vis-à-vis continental powers, those developed by Halford Mackinder (1904 and 1919) and by Nicholas Spykman (1942).

¹³ With a nine-year lease, existing facilities allow to accommodate up to 10,000 military (Saffee, 2017).

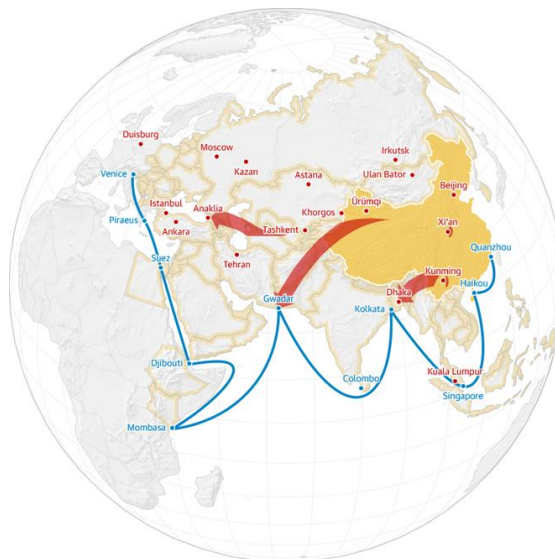
¹⁴ The establishment of Chinese military facilities in Djibouti is seen on the western side as building an advanced strategic deployment capability as an instrument of a policy to promote Beijing's gradual increase in maritime power in the Indian Ocean (Henry, 2016).



region far from mainland China, and, in peacetime, contributes to increasing maritime security in a region where there are latent threats, namely conflicts between opposing groups (as is the case in Yemen and was, Somalia), terrorism and maritime piracy. The management of the port of Gwadar and the possible building of a new military base in Jiwani also strengthen ties with Beijing's traditional ally in the region, Pakistan.

In economic terms, the security of maritime communication lines across the Western Indian Ocean is critical to the energy imports that China needs, those from the Persian Gulf producing countries, but also from Africa, as Beijing is clearly committed to diversifying its supply. But this security is vital to the success of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – "Belt and Road Initiative"



Source: (Kuo & Kommenda, 2018)

The building of the military base in Djibouti is therefore, strictly speaking, the guarantee of the energy security that China needs to import energy and raw materials and economic security to export its products, which is crucial for China's economic growth and social stability, and which Tomé considers "decisive factors as a source of legitimacy for the Chinese regime"(2019, p. 75)

In military terms, Djibouti's base allows Beijing to project a large power and outright expansion of its naval capabilities, to closely rival the dominant power, the US, which has equally significant military facilities just a few kilometers from China's and increase the status of great power in a region of enormous geostrategic relevance¹⁵.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that the decisive role that Djibouti's military infrastructure played in the process of evacuating 621 Chinese citizens and 279 foreign citizens from 15 countries from Yemen in 2015 following the escalation of the Yemeni conflict, which unequivocally showed the relevance of Beijing having a logistical base in that region (Melvin, 2019).



2.3. Russia

In a speech at the Munich Security Conference on February 10, 2007, Putin openly criticized NATO's expansion to the East and the US positioning, namely its demand for a unipolar world and the unrestricted use of force, in the shiver of international law, making it clear that Russia did not intend to fit into this kind of world order (Putin, 2007).

In this regard, Tomé points out that Russia is "a great resurgent power willing to take its place in a multipolar power structure". Its global objectives thus include the restoration of its "sphere of influence", adopting "expansionist" behaviors, in a logic of imposing a "living space", once lost (2018, p. 70)(2018, p. 92)

In this context, Russia sees stability in Southern Yemen as an essential condition for its goal of developing this sphere of influence throughout the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea and aiming to achieve the preponderance it once had, especially during the Cold War period, particularly after seeing the possibility of having a military base in Djibouti. On the other hand, negotiations for the establishment of a logistics centre to support Russian military forces in Sudan have entered a phase of lesser flash¹⁶. The Yemeni option thus naturally appears as the priority route.

As the opposing parties to the Yemeni conflict retain control over separate areas with access to the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea coasts – the United Nations recognized government controls the island of Socotra, the Southern Transition Council (STC)¹⁷ exercises authority *de facto* over the port city of Aden and the Houthis occupy ports on the Northwest coast – Russia sees the policy of strategic neutrality¹⁸ as the guarantor of a future lasting presence in the region, even if it often engages with the various rival factions.(Ramani, 2019)

It is in this sense that, in political terms, Moscow has opted for initiatives that have earned it recognition from the various regional powers. In the Yemeni conflict, for example, it has put in place a bold plan of neutrality among the various opponents, allowing it to keep open the possibility of assuming preponderance, at the UN, in the negotiations of a peace plan for the country that serves all (antagonistic) interests in attendance.

In another context, it has successfully bet on an ambitious package of soft power measures¹⁹that has allowed it to change, almost radically, the perception that the states in the region have about Russia.

¹⁶ Much is due to the hesitations of the Sudanese leaders, who, although have initiated a rapprochement with Moscow at the end of 2017, do not want to antagonize the US government, after economic sanctions that lasted two decades were lifted and allowed for a disconnection of relations between Washington and Khartoum (McGregor, 2017).

¹⁷ Armed movement that defends the independence of southern Yemen. The purpose it pursues is the refounding of the People's Republic of Yemen, a socialist state that has existed since decolonization in 1967, and which during the Cold War had the support of the Soviet Union (Ribeiro, 2018).

¹⁸ It can be explained, according to Ramani (2019), by Moscow's material interests in the Gulf of Aden, by aspirations to promote soft power throughout the Middle East and the desire to balance the divergent interests of the other powers present in the region.

¹⁹ The first, and perhaps the most relevant, is related to the building of the international television network, the Russian Today (RT), which has a service in Arabic, the RT Arabic, and which is already one of the three largest TV networks in the region, along with Al Arabiya and the Al Jazeera (Suchkov, 2015). Another initiative driven by Moscow is the use of Russian compatriots as potential "agents of change", native Russian spouses who moved to the region some time ago. They are supported by the Russian Federal



In economic terms, Moscow's interest in establishing a logistics centre in Eritrea, to be realized, aims to expand the volume of trade in agricultural and mineral products throughout the region. But oil product transactions will also continue along the Suez and Bab el-Mandeb route, especially if the Arctic route cannot be used throughout the year. This will certainly increase the Russian presence throughout the region.

In military terms, Moscow is committed to regaining the status of great power it has held in the region, still in the time of the former Soviet Union. To do so, it is necessary to ensure access to bases where they once existed, such as the port of Aden in southern Yemen, very close to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and Socotra Island, geographically located in the middle of the Gulf of Aden, near the extreme northeast of Somalia, in the Puntland region (Figure 7).

Figure 7 - Geographical location of the port city of Aden and Socotra Island



Source: Adapted from Google Earth (2018)

But Russia has even more ambitious goals than trying to connect the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula. To this end, Moscow has developed several contacts with Djibouti to build a military base there, without success though. After that they turned to Somaliland, a project under development that, to be realized, and once the doors of the port of Aden are opened, will guarantee it a substantial future strategic advantage around the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

3. Geopolitical interactions- aforesight view

We will now seek to focus our attention on the potential relationships between the interests of these actors, in line with the geopolitical factors that were listed before. From the analysis we can identify areas of accommodation, areas of possible conflict and areas of probable conflict, meaning, respectively, areas where there is expected to be no conflict soon, areas in which due to supervening developments conflicts may occur, and, finally, areas in which the conflict is already latent. It is also possible to list

Agency for International Development, and their role focuses mainly on culture, scientific cooperation, the study of the Russian language and the promotion of ties with the Russian diaspora (Suchkov, 2015).



relations of opposition (which are the overwhelming majority) and convergence (only perceived in terms of energy security) between the actors concerned.

3.1. United States of America

In the case of the US, winning the "war on terror" does not entail any implication for any of the other powers. It is Washington's plan since the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil in September 2001, and both China and Russia have remained on the sidelines of this initiative to carry out successive attacks against hot spots by Islamic extremist groups in Somalia and Yemen. Ensuring energy security in maritime spaces also seems not to cause any embarrassment in the other powers. They are both, therefore, accommodation areas.

The initiative to seek to isolate Iran and weaken the Houthis rebels in Yemen is in clear opposition to Moscow's policy of maintaining "bridges" with the most influential actors in the Yemeni conflict, which, too, is not openly hostile to Iran. The ongoing American strategic retraction in the ME does not seem to have extended to the various military bases existing in the different maritime spaces of the Arabian Peninsula. However, if the option of redirecting the defense effort to East Asia led to a significant decrease in personnel in the Western Indian Ocean, this could lead to a considerable increase in the influence of the other powers in the region, right away due to the absence of the dominant power, and, at the limit, to a possible increase in disputes between them. But if the U.S. option for a greater presence in East Asia does not mean reducing the numbers in this region, then surely the U.S. will try to ensure the hegemony it has maintained, which may conflict with the growing interests of both China and Russia. We are here in the presence of possible areas of conflict.

U.S. hegemonic ambitions in the region and the attempt to gain military advantages in a potential future conflict with the other powers, with China, are assumed to be areas of probable conflict.

3.2. China

As for China, the area relating to the protection of energy imports does not seem to collide with any area of the other powers. Both USA and Russia are energy exporters, so it is not expected that they can influence the acquisition of the energy that China needs and passes through the western Indian Ocean Sea routes (unless by an American containment strategy). This is, therefore, an accommodation area.

The protection of the BRI may, soon, conflict with the interests of the other powers, especially if there are substantive dividends for Beijing that will allow it to consolidate the top role of economic power and be tempted to channel a significant part of the proceeds obtained to strengthen its military power. We are here in the presence of a possible area of conflict.

Intending to assume the status of great power in the region and balance the traditional influence of Washington, Beijing clearly goes on a route of excessive rapprochement with the power that has been hegemonic in the region, the USA, and even with the revisionist power, Russia, which seeks to return to a plan of great prominence and



relevance that the Soviet Union has once had. The use of the Djibouti Base to obtain future income, to achieve tactical advantage in the event of conflict, is opposed to the American interest in ensuring military superiority at the top of the spectrum of conflict. China's transition from continental power to both continental and maritime power comes in clear opposition to the U.S. that it detains and intends to maintain military hegemony in the Western Indian Ocean. They are all areas of probable conflict.

3.3. Russia

Moscow is seen as the last of the major powers to seek to join the other, USA and China, which have already established positions near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and to increase their political, military, and economic influence in the region (Dahir, 2018)

As far as the expansion of Russia's economic interests is concerned, it is unlikely that such enlargement will raise extreme opposition from the US and even China, if the major project of the BRI is not jeopardized. This is an accommodation area.

Russia's unequivocal commitment to favouring a robust soft power policy in the region, that will allow it to alter the perception of countries in the region and to make future dividends, not only in leading a possible peace process in the Yemeni conflict, seeking to isolate Washington, that openly supports one of the contenders, such as, above all, in the ambitious project to return to Yemen and settle in the Horn of Africa, it could cause an escalation of tension in the region, particularly with USA, but also with China. We are in the presence of areas of possible conflict.

On the other hand, we have been witnessing a firm commitment by Moscow to regain the lost status in the surrounding maritime spaces of the Bab el-Mandeb, in line, moreover, with what Grygiel (2019) argues, which regards Russia's return to the Mo as one of its "three axes of expansion". In this sense, Moscow has been pursuing a bold project allowing it to gain permanent access to military bases in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and a further link between the two spaces. If that happens, this will mean obtaining an extremely relevant and advantageous position in the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, clearly rivaling the two other powers. This is a likely area of conflict.

Conclusion

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a chokepoint of high geostrategic and geoeconomic value and has become in recent years, together with the adjacent maritime spaces, a place of intense competition between global powers, which have objectives they intend to achieve. The involvement of these actors and the intricate pleiade of interests at stake, rarely coincident, produce, unsurprisingly, numerous relations of opposition between them and scant relations of convergence, particularly focused on energy security.

In general, the three global powers have sought to consolidate their presence in states of the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden, not only to gain access to other regions thereafter, but also to project power far beyond their natural borders. The establishment of an American military base in Djibouti in 2002, China's subsequent entry into the Western Indian Ocean in 2017, also through Djibouti, and Russia's



attempt to ensure a continued military presence in those maritime areas, particularly in Yemen, are an example of this.

Washington will certainly want to maintain the command of the sea in the Horn of Africa, that its status as a maritime power of excellence has enabled throughout the century, and it is not expected that the ongoing USA military retraction throughout the ME will be followed in that region and, consequently, in the maritime spaces surrounding the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. In this context, Djibouti's military base assumes increased preponderance not only for USA to secure control over a fundamental strait for international maritime trade, in particular energy, such as Bab el-Mandeb, but also as a way of containing any expansionist attempt by China in the region, especially after Beijing has managed to establish its first military base out of its doors, precisely in the territory of Djibouti.

China's choice to build that military infrastructure has raised alarms in USA. On the one hand, because this action undermines their strategic interests, calling into question its long-standing dominance in the region, both economically and militarily. On the other hand, because they consider that China's so far limited role in the region can be understood as an incentive for a more significant future military presence. And it is indeed expected that this will happen, as a more robust presence of China in the Horn of Africa will serve a dual purpose: to ensure the safety of the BRI maritime route, which crosses the Gulf of Aden, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Red Sea; also, to balance Washington's traditional influence in that region. In this sense, China's actions in Djibouti will certainly influence its ambitions for power in the region, especially when it intends to assume itself as a relevant maritime power.

Russia, for its part, seeks to return to a level of significant influence in the region it has held in the past, in the Soviet Union era, especially by establishing at least one military base in Aden, Yemen, very close to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This revisionist stance collides, however, with the American hegemonic claims and the clear rise of China. We can therefore face in the long term the coexistence of military infrastructure of the three global powers, separated only by a few tens of nautical miles. Tensions between them in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and surrounding areas will be inevitable.

The maritime spaces of the Red Sea, Horn of Africa and Gulf of Aden have in fact become successively more securitized over the past decade, leading to an unprecedented militarisation of the region, with USA, China, and Russia taking a very active part in this process. However, the interest of these actors in ensuring that international maritime trade, especially energy, is not threatened, leads to the thought that safe passage into the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is not called into question, and this is perhaps the only relationship of convergence between them. However, the other relationships that could be identified between the global powers are of opposition. And it is even expected that we will continue to walk a path centered on a seemingly endless cycle of sharp growth of geopolitical disputes in the region at the global level.

We conclude by stating that it was possible to prove that the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and adjacent maritime spaces, in particular because of the relevance they have to international maritime trade and the possibility of asserting and projecting power of the actors present there, are, nowadays, an important stage of geopolitical competition of the global powers (USA, China, and Russia), and that the disputes between them are in an ascending phase.



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