The Red Sea Crisis

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Escalation of Iran–U.S. tensions

In the early hours of 28 January 2024, a drone strike shocked an American military outpost in northeast Jordan and killed three U.S. soldiers. This marks the lethal climax of over 160 attacks that U.S. troops have faced in the region lately. Blaming Iranian proxy forces, President Biden announced retaliation, which followed swiftly. On 02 February, the U.S. carried out airstrikes on 85 targets in Syria and Iraq. The next night, American and British fighter jets struck 30 targets controlled by the Houthi movement in Yemen. Why do we witness such an escalation? The United States and its partners, most notably Israel and Saudi Arabia, have long been struggling

for influence in the Middle East with Iran and its "Axis of Resistance". The latter features various Iran-backed militias, including the Palestinian Hamas in Gaza, and the Yemeni Houthi movement. Against this backdrop, the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 triggered a chain reaction, plunging the region into crisis.

After Israel started its war against Hamas, the Houthis launched multiple missiles and drones toward Israel on 19 October, which marked the beginning of the Red Sea crisis. Although they were all intercepted by the U.S. Navy, the Houthis continued with their attempts to strike Israel. On 19 November, they introduced a new dimension to the conflict by hijacking a commercial vessel in the Red Sea and announcing further attacks on shipping. This made one of the world's most important sea routes for international trade – linking Europe and Asia – very risky to use. Shipping companies began to reroute, opting for the 6000km longer trip around Africa, which threatens to increase consumer prices and disturb global value chains. Israel's critical port Eilat saw an 85% decrease in activity. In response, the United States launched "Operation Prosperity Guardian" on 18 December, aiming to restore order in the Red Sea. Ever since, tensions have built up. The Houthis managed to strike multiple vessels, pressuring the U.S. and U.K. to launch their first airstrikes on targets in Yemen on 12 January. The conflict escalated until Iranian proxy forces killed American soldiers for the first time on 28 January.

What does the future hold?

Predictions are speculative and difficult, but the risk of a larger regional war seems apparent. Despite the escalating spiral of violence, there are reasons why the conflict could be contained. Both the United States and Iran have refrained from direct strikes against each other, the latter has also rejected any responsibility for the attacks. Further escalation could be dangerous for a regime that seeks to consolidate its power in light of political turmoil and economic hardship. Recently, UN's IAEA reported that Iran seems to decelerate its nuclear program, which could be indicative of a desire to ease tensions. On the other side, President Biden faces an election in November, in which he would likely perform better without a new war. But time is pressing. The longer hostilities endure, the higher the risk of further fatalities, and the greater the pressure on political leaders to respond rigorously, making it ever more difficult to find some solution.