



New Maritime Task Force Needs Credible Military Force for Successful Deterrence

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Amid a now almost daily drumbeat of attacks by the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen against commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, the United States [announced](#) on December 18 the formation of a multinational naval task force, called Operation Prosperity Guardian, to better protect commercial vessels traveling through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Though U.S. attention to the issue is encouraging, the task force as currently configured appears more focused on defend against Houthi attacks—which U.S. and partner forces currently deployed to the region were already doing—rather than deterring and preventing more Houthi attacks.

Unless efforts at providing greater protection to ships sailing through international waterways also coincide with the use of military force against Houthi and Iranian aggressors, the attacks will continue. As former U.S. Central Command commander Gen. Frank McKenzie [said](#) this month, “we’ve given [the Houthis] no reason not to continue [attacking] ... there’s a fine line between avoiding escalation and inviting continued opportunities for Iranian and Houthi attacks, based on a perceived fecklessness on our part ... Sometimes you’ve got to throw a pitch.” Particularly in light of Iranian threats that such a task force would [create](#) “extraordinary problems” for the United States, the Biden administration should shift its policies and rhetoric alike to a more forceful position, and follow through on its [pledge](#) “to uphold the freedom of navigation and ensure maritime security” in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden by using military force against the Houthi and Iranian forces attacking commercial shipping.

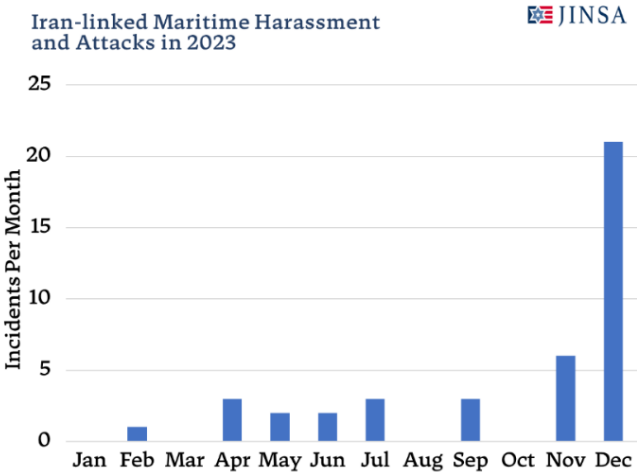
What Happened?

- On December 18, the Department of Defense [announced](#) the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian, a new multinational security initiative including the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and Spain, in order to “jointly address security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, with the goal of ensuring freedom of navigation for all countries and bolstering regional security and prosperity.”
 - » The task force, according to the announcement, will operate “under the umbrella” of the U.S.-led 38-nation coalition called the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), which is headquartered in Bahrain.
 - » Specifically, Operational Prosperity Guardian will operate under the leadership of one of CMF’s five task forces, Combined Task Force 153 (CTF 153), which was [formed](#) in April 2022 to enhance maritime security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.
 - » According to *Politico*’s Lara Seligman, [19 nations](#) have signed on to the new task force but the majority do not want to publicize their involvement.

- According to [reporting](#) in *Bloomberg*, the United States and its partners are considering launching military strikes against the Houthis, although the Biden administration continues to favor diplomacy and has not yet decided to proceed with military action. The Pentagon is reportedly preparing a “heavy” response to the Houthi attacks for President Biden to consider.
- Already, the Houthis’ and their backers in Tehran have challenged the United States and warned them against setting up a task force.
 - » Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani [said](#) on December 14 of a prospective U.S.-led task force that “if they make such an irrational move, they will be faced with extraordinary problems. Nobody can make a move in a region where we have predominance.”
 - » On December 18, Houthi official Mohammed al-Bukhaiti posted on X that the Iran-backed terrorist group will [continue](#) to attack shipping in the Red Sea despite the announcement of a U.S.-led multinational maritime coalition for Red Sea security.
- On December 18, BP [announced](#) it was suspending all shipments through the Red Sea due to rampant Houthi attacks on merchant vessels.
 - » The company said in a statement that “in light of the deteriorating security situation for shipping in the Red Sea, BP has decided to temporarily pause all transits through the Red Sea,” without stating when they might resume.
- On December 15, leading container lines Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd [ordered](#) all ships owned or operated by the companies to cease their travel through the Red Sea after a spate of recent Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea. Maersk said its halt would be in place “until further notice.” On December 16, major shipping firms CMA CGM and Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) [suspended](#) all shipments through the Red Sea, and an additional seven shipping firms have since [paused](#) shipments through the Red Sea.

Why Is It Important?

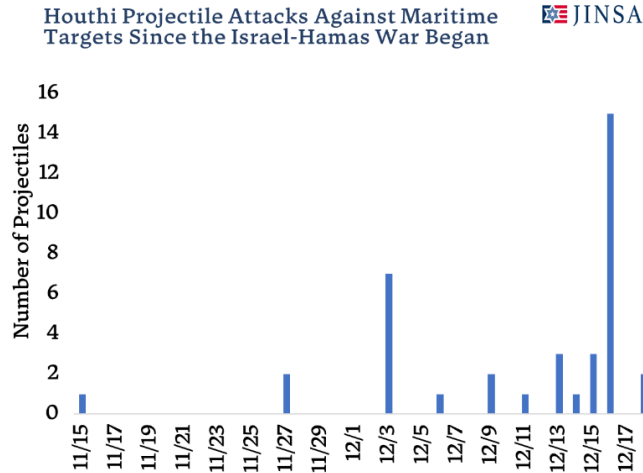
- Previously established, U.S.-led task forces with a mandate for international security in the Red Sea, such as Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 for security in the Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean and CTF 153 for Red Sea security, have been unsuccessful at deterring and preventing Iran-backed maritime attacks. Merely duplicating these past efforts is unlikely to yield a different result. Therefore, amid ongoing Houthi [threats](#) to global commerce and U.S. troops, the new Red Sea task force or individual nations will need to use military force to prevent Iran-backed Houthi ship seizures and maritime projectile attacks.
 - » According to JINSA data, since November 15, there have been at least 27 incidents of



Iranian

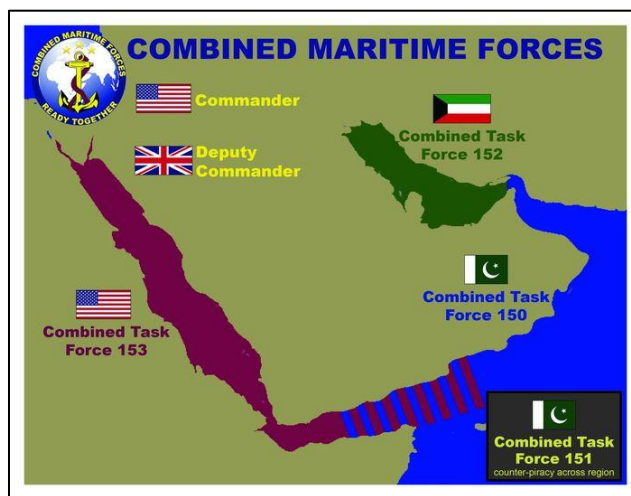
or Houthi maritime attacks on commercial vessels in Middle Eastern waters.

- » The 21 incidents of maritime aggression that the Iranian regime and Houthis have conducted in December alone surpassed the 20 incidents that had occurred throughout the rest of 2023.
 - Included in this maritime aggression, the Houthis have launched at least 39 projectiles at commercial, U.S. Navy, and foreign military vessels.



- These attacks have had a measurable impact on global commerce, with insurance premiums for commercial ships [skyrocketing](#) and major firms like BP and Maersk pausing voyages through the Red Sea indefinitely at great cost to global consumers.
 - » Within 24 hours of BP’s announcement that it was suspending shipments through the Red Sea, the British benchmark price for gas [rose](#) by roughly 14 percent, while the Brent benchmark for global crude oil prices increased by approximately 2 percent.
 - » According to Goldman Sachs [estimates](#), oil shipments that are forced to re-route and transit around Africa rather than through the Red Sea add about four dollars per barrel of crude oil on average, due to significantly increased voyage times and freight and insurance costs.
- Commensurate with longstanding U.S. policy, the Biden administration has [committed](#), in its most recent National Security Strategy, to “not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize freedom of navigation through the Middle East’s waterways, including the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al Mandab.”
 - » However, its failure to stop increasing Houthi aggression against Red Sea shipping, not only undermines the credibility of this commitment to freedom of navigation in the Middle East, but globally. Given the fungibility of credibility and deterrence, its failure to uphold freedom of navigation also undermines its other commitments, including to partners and allies globally.
- A naval task force in and of itself would not prevent or likely even deter Houthi attacks emanating from Yemen, given that the U.S. government has signaled a reticence to strike targets within Yemen.
 - » On December 6, *Politico* [reported](#), citing several U.S. officials, that the United States has elected not to strike Houthi targets for the foreseeable future. This is despite more than seven different incidents in the past month in which Houthi drones or missiles were intercepted while flying towards, or landed in close vicinity to, U.S. warships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

- Previously established multinational task forces in the Middle East have been useful for intelligence-sharing and training. However, regional partner nations have rarely become directly involved in kinetic action against hostile state actors at sea. There is little indication that Operation Prosperity Guardian would be any different.
 - » The United States, as part of the CMF partnership, already helped stand up a task force with a mandate for international maritime security in the Red Sea in April 2022 with the [formation](#) of CTF 153. In addition, the United States had previously established CTF 151, a task force with a mandate to lead regional anti-piracy efforts.
 - » In addition to CTF 151 and CTF 153, the United States [participates](#) in CTF 150, which has responsibility for maritime security in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean; CTF 152, which is responsible for maritime security in the Arabian Gulf; and CTF 154, which is a maritime security training task force.
 - Each of CMF’s five combined task forces are led by participating nations on a rotational basis.
 - » The 38 member states of the CMF coalition are [not bound](#) by any military or political mandate, meaning that member states—including those in Operational Prosperity Guardian—will need to agree on the necessity of using force to deter or prevent Houthi attacks or risk being an ineffective and purely symbolic mechanism.
 - The United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced in May that it was [withdrawing](#) its participation from CMF, citing “ongoing evaluation of effective security cooperation with all partners.” The *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) at the time that UAE officials told the United States they were displeased by the inefficacy of American-led security efforts in the region.
 - » The United States is also part of CTF Sentinel, the operational arm of the International Maritime Security Construct, which is [comprised](#) of 11 countries. Only three member nations are located in the Middle East, and CTF Sentinel also has a limited history of use beyond joint training exercises.



Source: [U.S. Department of Defense](#)

- Despite the United States recently enhancing its force posture in the region, including deploying the USS *Eisenhower* carrier strike group to the Gulf of Aden this week and [deploying](#) the naval destroyer USS *Laboon* to the Red Sea on December 18, the U.S. deterrence against Iran and its proxies continues to suffer from a credibility deficit as evidenced by ongoing Houthi attacks.

- » As JINSA recently [noted](#), “the deployment of military forces is good but insufficient; what is needed is both capabilities and a clear demonstration of will, and right now Iran clearly questions U.S. will.”
- » VADM (ret.) John Miller, former commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, [said](#) in a recent JINSA webinar that an enhanced U.S force posture in the region “is supposed to show up as a deterrent” but “if it just shows up and you don’t use it, you’re not willing to use it, you have the situation we have today where we’re not deterring anyone.”
- » Indeed, failure to undertake publicly announced deployments might have done more to encourage Iranian aggression than any actual deployments have done to limit it.
 - During an escalation of Iran-linked maritime aggression in the Arabian Gulf over the summer, the Pentagon reportedly considered deploying U.S. Marines on commercial vessels. However, the operation did not move forward.
 - U.S. officials [told](#) *The Washington Post* on August 3 that the Marine deployment would be beginning as imminently as late August, but Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh [said](#) on September 7 that “there’s no plan right now for Marines to go on commercial vessels,” and [reiterated](#) on December 4 that Marines being deployed on commercial ships “did not happen.”
- As JINSA has previously [noted](#), historically, U.S. commitments to response to Iranian aggression—if backed up with credible threats of force—have yielded substantive changes to the Iranian regime’s behavior.
 - » In 2011-2012, Iran quickly backed down from its threats to close the Strait of Hormuz after the Obama administration [declared](#) a strait closure to be a “red line” and sent a carrier strike group through the strait.
 - » During the Iran-Iraq War, in 1988, the United States [used force](#) against Iranian naval ships that were harassing and attacking ships in the Arabian Gulf, including sinking an Iranian frigate, a missile boat, three speedboats, and two oil platforms. Iran ceased its malign naval activity after the strong U.S. display of force.
 - » As VADM Mark Fox (ret.), former deputy commander of U.S. Central Command, [observed](#) in a recent JINSA webinar, “what changed Iranian behavior in the 1980s? Well, we caught them mining and we sank a number of their vessels ... the U.S. and our friends need to be thinking a new and different way, and sometimes we should be taking actions that impose tremendous costs.”
- A task force involving regional partners presents strategic opportunities if they are willing to use military force against the Houthis and do not restrain other partner members from using military force.
 - » Given the shared interest among U.S. regional partners in upholding freedom of navigation in the region, galvanizing other actors to take a proactive role in the task force may be easier given the spate of recent attacks.
 - » It is not yet clear how Operation Prosperity Guardian will differ operationally from CTF 153, since they are both responsible for protecting the Red Sea. The limited membership in Operation Prosperity Guardian likely indicates that those who chose to join it are more willing to exert pressure on the Iranian regime and the Houthis.
- Either the task force or individual nations must be prepared to use military force if necessary, or the Houthi attacks on global shipping will continue, strengthening the perception that the United States and its partners are weak and lack resolve.

- » Regarding the erosion of U.S. deterrence against Iran, former U.S. Central Command commander Gen. Frank McKenzie [told Politico](#) earlier this month, “we’ve given [the Houthis] no reason not to continue [attacking],” and “there’s a fine line between avoiding escalation and inviting continued opportunities for Iranian and Houthi attacks, based on a perceived fecklessness on our part.”

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States should ensure that the new task force is capable of targeting the fighters responsible for attacks on maritime targets or does not restrict the ability of member nations to launch attacks independently of the task force.
- Either through the task force or on their own, the United States should work with partner nations to conduct strikes against Houthi fighters responsible for conducting attacks.
- The United States should stop signaling a reluctance to respond to Iran-backed attacks with force and should update its messaging around these attacks to better reflect its commitment to upholding the principle of freedom of navigation and convey a willingness to use kinetic action if necessary.