Managing Security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden
The Red Sea Council and the Prospect of Multilateralism
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Geopolitical tension is growing around the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden – two of the world's most strategically important waterways. Not only do conflicts and security threats in the broader region spill over into the maritime sphere, the US, China, and Russia have increased their military presence. Despite the high density of stakeholders and security issues, the region has long lacked a multilateral institution designed to address common challenges and manage diverging interests. However, in February 2020, the eight coastal states signalled a will to claim regional ownership of maritime security by creating the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (hereafter: Red Sea Council, RSC).

International actors such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN), as well as numerous policy analysts, all promote regional multilateralism as a solution to security tensions in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area. In its strategy for the Horn of Africa, the EU pledges that it "will support cooperation, dialogue and peaceful settlement of disputes around the Red Sea and offer privileged relations with regionally-owned initiatives such as the Council of Arab and African States on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden" (Council of the European Union 2021). In August 2021, UN Chef de Cabinet Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti mentioned "strengthening security in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea" as one example of the UN's support to regional initiatives in maritime security (United Nations Secretary General 2021).

Regional cooperation may indeed offer important potential benefits, such as mediating interests in regions characterised by power asymmetries, building stabilising institutions, and creating a clear interlocutor for external actors (Vertin 2019). According to Luigi Narbone and Cyril Widdershoven (2021, 5), "without stringent regional security and economic arrangements, the risk of new multi-layered conflicts may be high". In a piece for the Africa Report, Oraib Al Rantawi (2020) argued that "[i]f a multilateral structure is to be established, it is critical that ownership of that structure remains in the hands of the Red Sea countries themselves – across coasts".

As desirable as regional cooperation might be in theory, it takes much more than setting up an organisation on paper for expected benefits to emerge. According to Julia Gray (2018), out of all international organisations, "10 percent are essentially dead, and nearly 38 percent are zombies", that is, formally alive but dormant in terms of mandate fulfilment. Are conditions present for the RSC to play a future role in managing maritime security, or is it rather predestined to become yet another zombie organisation? To tackle this question, this memo considers four sets of factors that scholarship has identified as central for the development of regional multilateralism elsewhere (see, e.g., Kelly 2007; Mansfield and Solingen 2010). Thus, after a brief introduction to the Red Sea Council, the memo proceeds to assess what political and economic factors, as well as the degree of regional identity and the role of external actors, can tell us about the prospect of multilateralism in the region.

THE RED SEA COUNCIL

The launch of the Red Sea Council followed a period of intensified interactions between the countries bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Saudi Arabia has invested politically, economically and militarily in the Horn of Africa, and African Red Sea states, in their turn, have joined the Saudi-led military coalition fighting the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Formalising neighbourly relations in a regional organisation thus appeared timely.

After an initial consultative meeting in December 2018, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti expressed that the creation of an entity for cooperation and coordination was "part of the liability they are shouldering to provide security at this water course" (Saudi Press Agency 2018). In February 2020, these countries, now joined by Eritrea,

signed the RSC's foundational Charter in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. This was a non-trivial step in an area without prior formal regional institutions, where there is an extensive presence of external actors and intense geopolitical competition. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan described the purpose of the new organisation as intensifying cooperation "so that we can deal with any risks or challenges facing our region, and work to protect the security of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden" (quoted in *Arab News* 2020). However, three years later, the RSC has left few concrete traces of its existence, and there is no indication that this level of ambition is within its reach.

One fundamental complicating factor is that, despite strengthened links between the Arab and African littoral states around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, these states are far from alone in having a stake in maritime security governance. The region has an immense strategic value, which largely stems from the centrality of these waterways for international trade. The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden link the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean, providing a shortcut for trade between, on the one hand, Europe, and, on the other, Asia, the Middle East and East Africa. A majority of the trade in goods and commodities between the economic hubs of Europe and Asia passes here, as well as much of the energy exports from the Gulf region. When, in 2021, the gigantic container ship, *Ever Given*, was stuck in the Suez Canal, it showcased how reliant world trade is on the narrow water passage. The Russian war against Ukraine has added further importance to these passages, whose smooth operation is crucial for European countries to succeed in diversifying their sources of energy import.

The RSC was formed in a security environment characterised by geopolitical tension and competition. In recent years, the rivalries and wars of the broader Middle Eastern region have proliferated into the maritime domain of the Red Sea, with Yemen as the epicenter. Domestic political turbulence, border conflicts, and the war in Tigray have strained neighbourly relations on the African side. Uncertainty about the US's role in the region, together with the growing ambitions of other non-regional powers (especially China and Russia) has further added to geopolitical tension.

As this memo further discusses, the complex web of stakeholders present around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is both a rationale for, and an obstacle to, building a multilateral security architecture. On the one hand, by joining multilaterally in an organisation such as the RSC, coastal states sought to counter the trouble-sparking influence of external actors and take their own command of maritime affairs. On the other hand, countries without their own direct access to the sea do not approve of being passive bystanders, as they are influenced by how the maritime space is regulated.

POLITICAL FACTORS

Multilateralism essentially strives to establish a cooperative umbrella that exceeds simple least-common-denominator outcomes determined by the individual preferences of participating states. Yet, states are central to any multilateral project: "they are regarded as the constitutive elements of the multilateral system and it is their interrelations that determine the form and content of multilateralism" (Van Langenhove 2010). This holds especially for cooperation with a security dimension, which tends to be intergovernmental; that is, based on the agreement of constituent members. This section discusses three political factors that help us grasp the status of interrelations between RSC members: shared interests, regime types, and power asymmetries.

Shared interests

Some basic level of shared political interests is a fundamental, necessary, but not in itself sufficient, factor enabling multilateral regional cooperation. At the same time, multilateralism is a method for mediating diverging interests within a defined scope. According to neo-functionalist theory, cooperation stagnates when shared interests are weak; it takes a leap forward – spilling over into new areas – when core interests converge and it benefits initial priorities (Haas 1958).

There are several security threats that the coastal countries in the area have, in principle, a shared interest in countering. Naval mines and missile attacks undermine free passage on the waterways, clearly a priority for all coastal states. Iran has amplified its presence in the southern Red Sea, as seen in its intensified activities in the Bad Al-Mandab and the emergence of suspected spy ships. Grey-zone maritime antagonism between Iran and Israel has occasionally culminated in attacks against both Iranian and Israeli ships in the Red Sea (see Nadimi 2021). Furthermore, terrorist attacks have for many years been a recurrent security problem in the region. According to the Global Terrorism Database (2021), the eight RSC countries together suffered 5968 incidents between 2015 and 2019. At sea, the smuggling of drugs, arms, and coal (see Magdy 2022) fuels the financing and escalation of conflict. Piracy (although at present low), and human trafficking are other examples of maritime security issues that defy national borders. In addition, maritime cyber threats, such as "[threats to] shipping lines, remote seizure of navigation systems, hacked controls of oil pipelines, and severed undersea cables that would affect up to half

of the world's internet access" are gaining traction (United States Institute of Peace 2020, 12). Finally, there is the looming threat of an environmental disaster, with possible security implications. A concrete example of this threat is the mooring of a floating storage and offloading ship, *Safer*, which is currently rusting along the coast of Yemen.

Issues such as those described above are contenders for showing up on the agenda of a security-oriented regional organisation such as the RSC. The goal to ensure free waterways in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is especially important as a potential anchor around which cooperation could take form. However, having such a core shared interest is but a starting point for the emergence of regional multilateralism. Frictions in other policy areas, or troubled relationships between regional leaders, risks undermining cooperation efforts even when interests in principle converge.

The presence of prior armed conflict often implies enduring interest divergence and is a known obstacle to building security-oriented multilateral cooperation (Swanström 2004). That there are no recognised ongoing armed conflicts *between* any of the members of the RSC is thus a good sign for the organisation. However, the region suffers from long-running internal conflicts, whose consequences spill over national borders to affect the region as a whole. Moreover, ongoing severe conflicts in Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia, as well as instability in Egypt (see Council on Foreign Relations 2022) likely restrict the capacity of these states to contribute to regional institution building. Of these conflicts, the Yemen war has had the most significant impact on the maritime space, including attacks on ships in the Red Sea as well as the laying of sea mines that impede navigation near the Strait of Bab Al-Mandab (Al-Madhaji 2020). All of the RSC states have joined the Saudi side in the war in Yemen, with Sudan's even deploying thousands of troops to the war zone, and Eritrea allowing its territory to be used for military operations (Hokayem and Roberts 2016). The littoral states' unified stance on Yemen can be seen as a spearhead example of concrete regional security cooperation under Saudi lead.

At this still early stage of attempting to formalise cooperation in the RSC, strong convergence of interest between Riyadh and Cairo is likely more decisive than streamlining the preferences of all eight littoral states. In the years preceding the launch of the RSC, Riyadh and Cairo met on several occasions to discuss ways forward for regional cooperation. The contours of the RSC that were presented in January 2020 reflected the Saudi model of a formal security-oriented organisation rather than Egypt's idea of a less hierarchical multi-issue organisation (Vertin 2019, 17).

Without a clear and consistent commitment from Saudi Arabia and, at a minimum, Egypt's acceptance of the Saudi vision, the RSC will have trouble getting anywhere. Although they share a similar basic strategic outlook on regional security affairs, at present their priorities differ. Saudi Arabia focuses on challenges on the Arabian Peninsula, not least the war in Yemen, and the perceived threat from Iran. Egypt, on the other hand, emphasises issues in North Africa (e.g., Libya) and the Mediterranean as well as the question of Israel/Palestine. Moreover, Egyptian financial dependence on Saudi Arabia may complicate the possibilities for cooperation. Due to its historical status as the pre-eminent regional power, Egypt is reluctant to accept a role as a junior partner to Saudi Arabia. Thus, a key factor for the future of the RSC is that Saudi Arabia and Egypt settle on their respective roles in regional affairs. This entails sorting out the above-mentioned ambiguities in their relationship, and clearly committing to head in the same direction.

When it comes to concrete policy, there is rarely a perfect match between the interests of different states that participate in a regional organisation. In consequence, states have to be ready to compromise for institutionalised regional cooperation to gain practical relevance. As proposed in a report from the United States Institute of Peace (2020, 10), the Red Sea arena can be thought of as "a Venn diagram in which regional risks and opportunities intersect with country-specific risks and opportunities at identifiable points". One of the country-specific characteristics that shape the extent and direction of regional cooperation, the regime type of the member states, is discussed below.

Regime type

The domestic political dynamics of member states contribute to defining the scope and character of cooperation: "states that create regional organizations transfer part of their principles, behaviors and mechanisms of action from the state to the international level" (Grabowski 2020, 199, referring to Haas, 1961, 366–367).

Research has traditionally seen formal international cooperation as an affair between democracies. Authoritarian states tend to not trust one another, are not accustomed to complex decision-making that requires compromise, and lack domestic accountability that enables credible international commitments (see literature review in Mattes and Rodríguez 2014). However, a growing literature on "authoritarian regionalism" has observed that despite these characteristics, authoritarian states also engage in formal regional cooperation. However, authoritarian leaders, so it is argued, will have regime survival as their utmost

priority even as they engage in cooperation with other states (see Debre 2021). This means that cooperation between authoritarian states serves to boost the stability of authoritarian regimes, rather than to promote their democratisation (see, e.g., Stoddard 2017; Russo and Stoddard 2018).

Moreover, if authoritarianism is combined with state fragility, "then regional security efforts are more likely to turn on the suppression of internal dissent than interstate conflict management" (Kelly 2007, 218). Identity discourses, whether secular or religious, may provide a "legitimizing framework" for such essentially self-regarding efforts (Harders 2016, 42).

All members of the RSC are authoritarian countries. Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Eritrea and Jordan are all considered stable closed autocracies, whereas Yemen, Egypt, and Sudan have fluctuated between fully closed autocracies and approaching the category of electoral autocracies over the last decades (Varieties of Democracy 2022). Whereas none of the RSC countries is close to being a liberal electoral democracy, the states are highly diverse in terms of regime stability. The Fragile State Index ranks Yemen as the most fragile country in the world, directly followed by Somalia. Sudan ranks 7th and Eritrea 18th, whereas Egypt comes in 42nd, Djibouti 48th, and Saudi Arabia 95th of the 179 indexed countries (The Fund for Peace 2022). Although the reasons for weak statehood vary between the countries, the existence of competing social contracts, such as the tribe or the clan, are known to have impeded state-building, or catalysed state collapse in, for instance, Somalia and Yemen (see Bar 2020).

State fragility influences the prospects of regional multilateralism, since regimes that worry about being overthrown tend to agree only to sovereignty-preserving cooperative practices (see Swanström 2004; Barnett and Solingen 2007). Given that security matters are at the core of sovereignty, delegation of power to the regional level is especially unlikely in this domain. In addition, difficulties in implementing policy are inherent to fragile states, which characteristically lack procedures and institutions with sufficient capacity to do so. Hence, even if countries manage to agree on regional policy, there is an overarching risk that it is never put into effect.

In sum, the pattern of regime types around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is one of predominantly authoritarian states, some of which are highly fragile. This combination makes progressive, democracy-promoting regionalism highly unlikely to emerge among these countries. Rather, what can be expected is that a few powerful states – for the RSC, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in particular – will set the agenda in a way that reflects their national priorities. In the best case, these priorities will align with, or at least be acceptable to, those of less resourceful members. Smaller states may even consciously trade their votes against potential benefits in their relationships to more powerful counterparts.

Power asymmetries
A third, interrelated, political factor is the distribution of power between members of a regional organisation. Whereas power asymmetries may facilitate the initial launch of regional cooperation, enduring asymmetries risk complicating efforts to build an effective, inclusive and non-hegemonic multilateral security organisation. Only if sophisticated interest-mediating institutions are in place can multilateralism even out the power asymmetries between participants. As Van Langenhove (2010) puts it: "[m]ultilateral relations between states are not a game in which all players have equal rights and duties." This means that the pre-existing distribution of power will shape the scope and content of regional multilateralism.

There are pronounced power asymmetries between RSC members in both military and economic terms. As mentioned above, Saudi Arabia and Egypt both strive for regional leadership in the Red Sea area, reflecting their economic and military dominance. Apart from Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are the only major economic and military powers among the littoral Red Sea and Gulf of Aden states, and the only ones with substantial naval capabilities.

Saudi Arabia is the regional economic giant, with a GDP that is larger than that of all the other states in the region put together. In 2021, the GDP of Saudi Arabia was almost three times as big as Egypt's, the second largest economy of the region, and about 20 times the size of Jordan's, the third largest economy (IMF, WEO 2022). Saudi Arabia also dominates regional military expenditure, with between 80 and 90 percent of the total official military spending in 2021 (SIPRI 2022). Whereas Saudi Arabia spends over three times more than second runner-up Egypt, the latter might fare well in a comparison of actual capabilities. An old military power run by officers, Egypt has about 440,000 active military personnel and Saudi Arabia about 255,000. These are the second- and third-largest forces, respectively, in the Middle East and North Africa (after Iran). This may be compared with estimated troop numbers of ca 200,000 in Eritrea, 105,000 in Sudan, 100,000 in Jordan, 40,000 in Yemen, 14,000 in Somalia, and 10,000 in Djibouti (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2022ab). Next to the national troops, sizable military missions from the African Union and the United Nations are active in Somalia and Sudan.

The capabilities of the navies and coast guards differ significantly between Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the one hand, and the other five countries, on the other. Sudan, Eritrea, Jordan, and Djibouti have no principal surface combatants at all, but about a dozen patrol and costal ships each. Somalia and Yemen both lack the capacity to operate militarily at sea. Egypt has arguably the largest naval capacity – with 18 surface combatants, 73 patrol and coastal combatants, about 17 amphibious ships, 23 support vessels, 14 ships for mine warfare, and 8 attack submarines, as well as a large coast guard. The naval capacity of Saudi Arabia, in terms of quantity, is somewhat less; in contrast to Egypt, Saudi Arabia has no submarines (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2022a). However, not all Egyptian and Saudi vessels can operate in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden at the same time. Egypt and Saudi Arabia also have coastlines on the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, respectively, where their navies need to be present.

In sum, the political factors suggest that security-oriented regional multilateralism faces several hurdles in this region. The RSC countries do have a shared general interest in keeping the waterways safe, but they may not agree on how to achieve this. In view of pronounced military asymmetries, security-oriented cooperation can be an opportunity for states with low defence capacity to 'piggy-back' on, especially, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. However, this also means that several RSC members are, feasibly, either too weak or too occupied with internal conflicts to be able to contribute substantially to any regional security activities.

Economic interdependence

Economic interdependence has long been considered a primary driver of regional multilateralism, especially in Europe (Gleditsch 2002). Beneficial economic exchanges may, over time, facilitate not only cooperation in economic affairs, but also spill-over and incite security-oriented cooperation. In line with the traditional liberal hypothesis, economically interdependent states would be disinclined to enter into conflict with one another, and may therefore be inclined to commit to collective security-favouring policies. Economic and security regionalism have, indeed, been presented as "tightly linked" (Mansfield and Solingen 2010).

As noted above, the birth of the RSC took place in a context of increasing interactions between the Eastern and Western flanks of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Saudi Arabia looks westwards, towards the Red Sea region, envisioning itself as "an integral driver of international trade and to connect three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). This involves

investments in "cross-border infrastructure projects, including land transport projects with Africa through Egypt"; the construction of Neom, a futuristic city on the Gulf of Aqaba, close to Egypt, Israel and Jordan; and the transformation of Red Sea islands into tourist destinations. However, the regional economic and financial structures are sharply hierarchical, and inter-state relations are correspondingly asymmetric in terms of trade and capital flows. Most states in the region are heavily dependent on Saudi Arabia and Asian, European and American states for capital, goods and economic development.

To draw a more detailed picture of economic ties between countries in the region, the following passages present data on trade exchanges, foreign aid, and remittances from migrants.

Limited intraregional trade

In terms of trade, the region is not particularly integrated. International Monetary Fund (IMF DOTS 2022) data on merchandise trade indicates that most states in the region are more dependent on external actors for import and export of goods and commodities than on each other. In 2021, the share of intraregional trade relative to total international trade is thus low in all states: 3 percent in Saudi Arabia, 5 percent in Somalia, 6 percent in Eritrea, 10 percent in Egypt, 14 percent in Djibouti, 16 percent in Yemen, and about 20 percent in Sudan and Jordan. In comparison, Sweden exports 52 percent and imports 68 percent of all its goods from other states in the EU (European Union 2022).

The intraregional trade that does occur revolves around Saudi Arabia. In 2021, the Saudi Kingdom was the largest trading partner of Jordan (14 percent of total trade), the second largest trading partner of Egypt (8 percent) and Yemen (16 percent), and the third largest trading partner of Sudan (11 per cent). Trade between Saudi Arabia and Egypt increased significantly in 2021, suggesting a potentially growing interdependence between the two contenders for regional leadership. Saudi Arabia's role in the trade of Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia is not quite as important, but was still among their largest trading partners in 2021 (IMF DOTS 2022).

Aid

The OECD (2022) lists all countries in the region, except for Saudi Arabia, as recipients of Official Development Assistance (ODA). Yemen and Somalia are among the most aid-dependent countries in the world (World Bank 2022). The United States is the biggest ODA donor to the region, followed by the EU institutions and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Saudi Arabia is the only major

donor among the states in the Red Sea region; Egypt and Yemen are particularly large recipients of Saudi foreign aid. According to Saudi statistics, between 2011 and 2021, Saudi provided about 13 billion USD to Egypt, primarily through budget support, and 10 billion USD to Yemen, mostly humanitarian aid (King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre 2022).

Migration and remittances

Most of the regional economies are dependent on remittances from abroad. This applies not only to Somalia, especially, but also to Yemen, Jordan and Egypt (World Bank 2018). Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Jordan and Egypt, are sources of remittances, including to other states in the Red Sea region.

In 2020, Saudi Arabia was the third-largest source of remittances and host of international migrants in the world (UN DESA 2020). In 2021, 12 million foreigners, the majority from South and South-East Asia, lived in Saudi Arabia (General Authority of Statistics, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2021). Saudi authorities do not publish country-specific data on the migrant population, but the UN estimates that more than 1.6 million citizens from the region lived in Saudi Arabia in 2015, about 730,000 Egyptians, 580,000 Yemenis and 182,000 Jordanians (UN DESA 2015). Unknown numbers of Somalis, Eritreans, and Sudanese have also worked in the kingdom. Egypt, Yemen, Sudan and Jordan receive substantial remittances from migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. In 2017, inflows from Saudi Arabia represented a large share of total remittances to Yemen (60 percent), Sudan (almost 50 percent), Egypt (40 percent) and Jordan (25 percent). Data on Eritrea and Somalia is unavailable (World Bank, 2018).

Notably, Egypt, a former economic centre of the Arab world, has become financially dependent on foreign actors, such as Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, including Jordan. In 2017, Jordan was Egypt's third largest remittance-sending country, after Saudi Arabia and the UAE, contributing about 1.3 billion USD (World Bank, 2018). Figures on Egyptian migrants in Jordan vary between 200,000 and 1.2 million (Abdelfattah 2019). Whereas Egypt is a net receiver of remittances, it also hosts a population of about 9 million migrants. A majority of these people come from the Red Sea region: 4 million Sudanese, 1 million Yemenis, 600,000 Saudis, and 200,000 Somalis (IOM, 2022).

Economic interactions between the countries in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are growing, but in highly asymmetrical ways and with a leaning towards investments, remittances and aid, rather than trade. Broad or evenly distributed interdependence of the kind that could facilitate regional cooperation within this group of countries does not yet exist.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia's financial leverage implies that it has a lot to offer less advantaged countries willing to engage in Saudi-led initiatives. If economic interdependence is not yet a starting-point from which multilateralism can grow, the prospect of *future* economic gains with the regional hegemon may spark commitment to cooperation.

REGIONAL IDENTITY

Regional organisations do not emerge between just any constellation of countries, but those that belong to 'a region'. Next to the political factors earlier discussed, regions are formed around geographical and cultural commonalities. Over time, regional cooperation may, in turn, contribute to strengthening regional cohesion. Thus, regions come into being through institutionalisation, just as some level of like-mindedness is a prerequisite for cooperation to take off in the first place (see discussion in Börzel 2011, 19). A degree of identification with the region is important for regional arrangements to gain popular legitimacy. Especially if a regional organisation gets involved in matters that have traditionally been seen as within the domain of domestic affairs, recognition of the regional level's authority is vital.

The RSC Treaty signatories, as of January 2020, included all the coastal states with direct access to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, with the exception of Israel. Thus, the grouping started out by defining itself geographically around the sea. The strict delineation of the membership circle to countries *on* the Red Sea has, according to Vertin (2019, 17), been especially important to Egypt. Making the RSC a club exclusively for coastal states effectively shuts the door on Ethiopia, with which Egypt has an ongoing dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

As noted by Fawn (2009, 16), "[m]any regions, and especially those better-known and considered successful, use geographical markers". Processes of region-making have unfolded in other maritime areas, for instance the Black sea (Tsantoulis 2009, 243) and the Baltic Sea, where the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) was formed with the sea as its explicit point of reference.

There is a high degree of linguistic, religious and cultural coherence between the countries of the Council. Only four of the Red Sea countries are included in the World Values Survey: Egypt, Yemen, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. All four are placed in the African-Islamic cluster of "The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map" (World Values Survey 2022). This cluster is characterised by traditional and survival

values, as opposed to secular and self-expression values. More detailed survey items from the Arab Barometer (2019, 2022), where Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, and Jordan took part in 2018-2019, and Sudan, Egypt and Jordan in 2021-2022, add to this picture of relative value coherence.

Arabic is the official language in Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen; and a recognised national language in Eritrea. A shared language may not only in itself be an element of a regional identity, it is also practical for any organisation intending to discuss joint security problems, negotiate measures to solve these, and produce written policy.

In all Red Sea and Gulf of Aden countries except Eritrea, the majoritarian religion is, by a large margin, Sunni Islam. Yet, the dominance of Sunni Islam harbours internal diversity and tensions, which may convolute any potentially catalysing role for religion. In Yemen, the epicentre of insecurity in the Red Sea region, sectarian polarisation between the Sunni majority and the Shia (Zaidi) minority has fuelled the civil war (Al-Muslimi 2015).

Combined with geography and narratives of a shared history (Vertin 2019), the linguistic and religious factors add up to an Arab identity, which is, to some degree and with the exception of Eritrea, shared by all the littoral states. The weak level of institutionalised regionalism in the Arab world has long been a riddle to scholars, given these shared attributes and the historical experience of pan-Arabism (e.g. Barnett 1996). When it comes to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, there are three reasons why regional cooperation will have trouble drawing on any pan-Arab political vision. First, most Arab states do not border on these seafronts. The "imagined Arab community" (Harders 2016, 35) is clearly much bigger, and has its epicentre elsewhere. Second, over time, pan-Arab visions in the wider region have largely been replaced by Islamist and nationalist narratives and ideologies. Third, Eritrea is not usually considered an Arab country.

In sum, although crucial building blocks of regional identity exist in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area (cultural affinity, language, religion), there is hardly a strong specifically *littoral* identity that the RSC can straightforwardly build on. In theory, a regional organisation could be a springboard for such an identity to mature in the long run. However, for this to be possible, the division of labour between the RSC and initiatives with partly overlapping memberships would first need to be clarified.

Overlapping initiatives
There are several other cooperation initiatives that tap into adjacent regional identities. So, for instance, all RSC states are members of the League of Arab States (LAS), except for Eritrea, which has been an observer at the League since 2003. Likewise, all, except for Eritrea, are part of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC). Moreover, the military alliances, the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMAFT) and the Saudi-led Yemen coalition, are examples of defence cooperation involving countries in the region. The main initiator of the RSC, Saudi Arabia, is the leading member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Other GCC states, especially the UAE and Qatar, also have strong interests in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area. Back in 2007, Yemen was in negotiations to join the GCC, and in 2011 a prospective Jordanian membership was also up for some discussion. However, GCC membership for either Yemen or Jordan remains unlikely in the foreseeable future.

There are also an increasing number of overlapping organisations on the Western flank of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. During the last decades, African countries have organised multilaterally in the continent-wide African Union (AU), as well as in a number of sub-continental organisations, including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), on the Horn of Africa. In 2019, IGAD launched a Taskforce on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, mandated to "develop shared norms, common goals, and strategic coordination. . . with a view to enhancing coordination, and multilateralism in the Red Sea arena" (IGAD 2022). Since then, the taskforce has held a number of "National Consultative Meetings" and at least four joint sessions (IGAD 2021). Moreover, in January 2020, just days before the RSC Treaty was signed, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea jointly proposed the creation of a new organisation for peace and security, the Horn of Africa Cooperation (HOAC) (see Henneberg and Stapel 2020). This was a remarkable step for three neighbours with a history of troubled relationships. However, similar to the RSC, HOAC has a long way to go to leave an actual imprint on regional affairs.

Finally, the Gulf of Aden members of the RSC (Djibouti, Somalia, Yemen) also belong in the Western Indian Ocean zone, where other potentially competing institutions for maritime security exist. Somalia and Yemen, for instance, are both members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

In sum, there is a myriad of arrangements with a potential stake in governing the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, but with little concrete progress towards building a regional security architecture with real-world impact.

Rather, the existence of multiple cooperation initiatives with overlapping memberships presents an opportunity for countries to 'forum shop', that is, pick and choose between commitments; which risks leading to reduced organisational effectiveness (see Panke and Stapel 2018).

External actors

Finally, the outcome of regional cooperation is not entirely in the hands of the participating states, but is influenced by how stakeholders external to the organisation act. Yet, assuming ownership of regional affairs is the ideational core of many regional projects. Attitudes toward external involvement are therefore predestined to be ambivalent.

External actors can facilitate or impede regional cooperation in different ways. One basic aspect is that regional security cooperation is often dependent on external funding. The African Peace and Security Architecture is a case in point: it is largely funded by the European Union, despite efforts to increase the degree of self-financing from African Union member states (Hellquist and Hallqvist 2020). For the RSC, Saudi Arabia is likely to be a leading financial contributor, adding to a perception that the organisation is a Saudi project, but perhaps reducing the risk of external dependency. External actors may also facilitate regional cooperation in non-monetary ways. Simone Ruiz and Valentin Zahrnt (2016, 57–58) highlight the following five roles (i): offering incentives, for instance trade and cooperation agreements with regional organisations, (ii) treating the region as one, (iii) supporting institution-building, (iv) coaching on good regulatory practice, and (v) building infrastructure. However, external actors may also play the contrary role, if the external actor chooses to operate through bilateral channels despite the existence of a regional structure.

A series of influential actors in the immediate Red Sea/Gulf of Aden area stand outside of the RSC. Israel, which has access to the Red Sea through the Bay of Aqaba and significant interest in the region, primarily related to Iranian activities, is not a member. However, reportedly, the possibility of Israel joining the RSC was raised at a top-level meeting between Israel and Sudan in January 2021 (Bassist 2021). Important steps towards diplomatic détente between Israel and countries in the wider region have been taken in the last few years, including the Abraham Accords and linked initiatives. In 2022, Israel conducted unprecedented military exercises with the United States, the UAE and Bahrain in the Red Sea, and approved the transfer of Tiran and Sanafir, two strategically located islands, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, possibly paving the way for normalisation of Saudi-Israeli relations (Ravid

2022; Reuters 2021). A similar threat perception and reports of a growing Iranian naval presence (Kubovich 2022) may incite further cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia in the Red Sea. Israeli membership in the RSC would still be highly surprising, especially given that the organisation has not moved beyond the drafting phase. Yet, if a future Israeli membership were to materialise, it could be a gamechanger for the RSC. It would complete the circle of littoral members, somewhat balance the Saudi dominance and likely increase the organisation's relevance in the eyes of the US and other external actors.

The delineation of membership to littoral states makes the RSC an unlikely forum for handling issues of broader regional relevance. The unresolved regional dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is one example. In February 2021, Saudi Arabian minister of African affairs, Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz Kattan, said that the RSC would host a summit on the GERD issue (*Ahram Online* 2021). However, this summit has not yet taken place. With Ethiopia standing outside of the organisation, the prospect that the RSC will play a constructive role regarding GERD is limited (see Custers 2021). At the same time, the fact that Ethiopia is not a member has been attributed precisely to its strained relationship with Egypt due to GERD (Custers 2021). Access to the sea is a major issue for Ethiopia, which is heavily dependent on trade in the Red Sea and has pushed for another multilateral cooperative track through IGAD/AU (de Waal 2020). Although landlocked, since 2018 Ethiopia has attempted to rebuild its navy (Olewe 2018, Malhotra 2020), and in June 2021 various online media reported an Ethiopian aspiration to establish a military base somewhere along the Red Sea (e.g., *Middle East Monitor* 2021; Gomaa 2021). However, the Tigray war appears to have stalled these initiatives. More importantly, the war has undermined Ethiopia's standing in the wider region, and likely weakened its possibilities to be accepted as a co-player in Red Sea affairs.

In its present constellation, it looks as if the RSC reinforces rather than alters the bloc politics of the Middle East. Some non-littoral regional powers are clearly uneasy with any Saudi-led regional initiative that could take on a military dimension. Whereas the UAE has welcomed the RSC (MoFAIC 2020), it is unlikely that Iran, Qatar and Türkiye will engage with the organisation. The "Sunni world" rivalry over regional order and influence has been exacerbated since the Arab Spring and affected Africa and the Red Sea region. The one side, led by Türkiye and Qatar, generally supported the Arab Spring and constituencies associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The other side, led by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt,

generally opposed the Arab Spring; they label the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation. In particular, Türkiye and the UAE, which support opposite sides in the politics of the Islamic world, have both stepped up their economic, political and military ambitions in the Red Sea region. Egypt, Somalia and Sudan, all located at the Red Sea, have been theatres of the intra-Sunni rivalry. Although tensions within the Sunni world have declined of late, non-littoral states with national interests and military bases in the region, such as the UAE and Türkiye, may counteract proposed multilateral frameworks if they do not clearly work in their favour.

Last but not least, non-regional external actors decisively shape the outlook for regional cooperation. During the Trump presidency, indications of a declining US presence opened up for numerous, partially antagonistic actors to position themselves in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area (Vertin 2019; see also Knopf 2018). Yet, the US has kept a substantial troop presence, and Narbone and Widdershoven estimate that "35 to 45 American warships transit the Suez Canal and the Red Sea each year" (Narbone and Widdershoven 2021, 12). The continued strategic importance of the region for the US has been further emphasised under the Biden administration. The president's visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2022 included attendance at the Jeddah Security and Development Summit, together with GCC countries, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq. On this occasion, Joe Biden declared: "We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia or Iran" (quoted in Barron et al., 2022). However, China, Russia, and Iran (among others) are already there, thus making the US one of several strategic partners available to countries in the region. Strategic competition between external actors will likely continue to shape relationships around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden for the foreseeable future. Recent US initiatives, such as the launch of the CTF-153 maritime task force, take place in, and will continue to shape, the strategic environment around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

After all, the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab al-Mandab are among the most important trade passages in the world, making whatever happens there a direct concern for countries near and far. Trade through these waterways is expected to further multiply in the coming decades. The vital importance of the passages for the world economy is also reflected in military engagements by external actors. Next to countries such as the US, France and Italy, which have long had a military footprint in the region, China and Russia are increasing their presence and activities in the maritime sphere.

In 2020, Russia had already signed a contract to establish a base in Port of Sudan, in the Red Sea, the first Russian naval base south of the Mediterranean in the post-Soviet era. After months of speculation over the status of the contract, in late April 2021 it was announced that it had been suspended (*Altus Intel* 2021). However, discussions over Russian access to the Red Sea through Sudan have continued, with Sudan engaged in what appears to be a delicate balancing act between different external actors (*The Arab Weekly* 2021). As for China, it has built up a blue water fleet, increased naval deployment in the Indian Ocean, and established its first overseas military base, in Djibouti (Reuters 2017), close to the major U.S. base in the region. According to Narbone and Widdershoven, China works on "a dual approach which connects its East African anti-piracy activities with the setting up of naval and commercial ports in Djibouti and Sudan (Port Sudan)" (Narbone and Widdershoven 2021, 13).

Ever since the opening of the Suez Canal, in 1869, the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have had a special geopolitical importance. The density of external actors present in the area reflects this importance. In the current times of high global uncertainty and tension, both regional and non-regional powers will continue to position themselves strategically in the region. There is no realistic prospect that littoral countries will solely reign over these waterways, regardless of how the RSC develops. However, under favourable circumstances, the RSC could become a counterweight to the myriad of external actors, at best ensuring that legitimate local concerns have an impact on maritime policy.

Conclusion

For multilateral cooperation to stand a chance in a crowded and competitive geopolitical environment, several favorable circumstances would need to be present. Whereas the states of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have a shared interest in regional ownership over maritime affairs, the sharp asymmetries within the grouping as well as the pronounced vulnerabilities of some member states are hurdles for such an ownership to materialize. Despite the fanfare with which the RSC was launched, little has been heard of it in the three years that have passed since the gathering in Riyadh. This is already an indication that the life prospects of the soon three-year-old organisation are rather gloomy. Yet, it cannot be ruled out that multilateralism may overcome these obstacles and eventually develop to shape maritime security around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. For this to happen, three factors are decisive.

First and most importantly, any regional security architecture will depend on cooperation between Riyadh and Cairo. These two states dominate the region in both political, economic and military terms, a fact that will leave its imprint on any regional cooperation attempt. The flipside of this is that the organisation risks becoming a tool of Saudi Arabia, with Egypt as a contender, in which the concerns and preferences of the "lesser powers" are sidestepped. Perhaps, Saudi financial influence over Egypt could incite Cairo to buy into Riyadh's agenda. In addition, trustful personal ties between Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi could further facilitate policy coordination. Genuinely shared leadership to the benefit of the collective may, however, prove difficult, given the two states' differing security priorities and Egypt's reluctance to play second fiddle.

Second, regional cooperation will stand a greater chance at succeeding if it is clearly delineated around a few topics where the interests of members strongly converge. The substance and scope of any potential security-oriented activities emanating from the RSC remain to be seen. However, it is unlikely that the organisation will be able to deliver on the encompassing ambition that Saudi representatives initially communicated. By focusing on specific domains where there are concrete collective solutions that do not threaten the interests of external actors, the organisation can prove its relevance without biting off more than it can possibly chew. Piracy is sometimes brought up as such a domain (e.g., Narbone and Widdershoven 2021, 18), but it is nowadays a marginal issue. Other avenues that could be worthwhile to explore include information-sharing on different kinds of maritime incidents, coordination of existing coast-guard activities and support to building functioning coast-guard capacities across the region.

Third, without a strategy for accommodating crucial external actors, attempts at regional multilateralism in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden arena risk becoming toothless. Other regional institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN), the CBSS, the IORA, and even the EU, have all developed mechanisms for (selectively) including non-members in their processes, for instance by admitting states and organisations as observers. Given the significance of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden for world trade, it is unrealistic that only the countries with a border on the sea will take exclusive command of maritime security in the area. These waterways are de facto a 'global commons', with many regional and non-regional stakeholders. At the same time, the littoral states have legitimate concerns by virtue of their geographical proximity to evolving security (and environmental) threats. If the littoral states can find ways to speak with one voice, this will increase their possibilities to advance an agenda on maritime security that is responsive to local needs and priorities. However, for such efforts to be truly fruitful, they will need to happen alongside, rather than in opposition to, external actors. External actors, in turn, should maintain reasonable expectations concerning what an organisation such as the RSC will be able to deliver in the short term. Nonetheless, the EU and its individual member states, including Sweden, can potentially play constructive roles as interlocutors and, in the long term, as partners in building relevant mechanisms for maritime security. ■

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Map: Per Wikström, FOI.

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Endnotes

1. The League of Arab States, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America are examples of regional organisations largely made up by authoritarian-leaning states.

2. The Fragile State Index is published yearly by the U.S. think tank the Peace Fund, since 2019 together with The New Humanitarian.

3. All numbers have been rounded to the nearest 5000. For Somalia, the estimated troop size is highly uncertain due to poor data reliability and 'open doors' between armed groups, regional militias and state security forces. See CIA 2022.

4. There is no universally valid relationship between economic interdependence and the degree of regional cooperation (Börzel and Risse 2019). This does not mean that economic factors are irrelevant, but highlights that regionalism emerges from a complex and highly contextualised interplay between different factors.