

Neutralizing the Houthi Threat: A Strategic Blueprint for the Red Sea and Beyond

By: Eric Navarro

The United States stands at a strategic crossroads in the Red Sea. After years of strategic drift, the Trump administration confronted the Houthi threat decisively through sustained military operations from March 15 to May 6, 2025. Yet, while U.S. strikes inflicted damage, they failed to eliminate the threat. The cost of each U.S. munition—when measured against the Houthis’ low-tech but high-impact arsenal



—exposed a stark asymmetry. This imbalance, together with political considerations, likely influenced President Trump's decision to halt the strikes after the Houthis temporarily paused their maritime attacks. That pause ended on July 6–7, 2025, when the Houthis struck two Greek-managed bulk carriers and launched a ballistic missile attack against Ben Gurion Airport in Israel. In short, the Houthis reminded the world that they remain committed to achieving their strategic objectives through violence.

These latest Houthi attacks underscore that defeating the group requires more than short-term tactical gains but a comprehensive, integrated strategy. Such a strategy must target not only the Houthis’ military capabilities but also their financial networks, political legitimacy, and external support systems. Anything less will allow the Houthis to regroup and rearm. Iran will continue to exploit the Houthis as a proxy to destabilize the region, even as near-peer rivals like China expand their foothold in the global commons. At stake are the United States’ credibility, regional stability, and the free flow of global trade.

The Red Sea is vital to U.S. interests and the broader international order, serving as a strategic nexus linking Europe, Asia, and Africa. Nearly 15 percent of global trade transits the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. With every ship the Houthis attack, every insurance premium they inflate, and every trade route they divert, malign actors accrue power at the United States’ expense. History exposes how vulnerable this corridor is. The Somali piracy crisis of the early 2000s nearly crippled regional trade and compelled costly multinational interventions. Today’s threats are even more acute, as Iran and China actively seek to exert influence over these critical chokepoints.

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The economic fallout from Red Sea instability extends far beyond Yemen. Global shipping firms are already rerouting vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, adding weeks to transit times and driving up costs. These longer routes inflate energy prices, disrupt supply chains, and strain European, Asian, and American economies. Insurance premiums for Red Sea shipping have also surged. If the Houthis' threat to these vital routes persists unchecked, global inflationary pressures will intensify and undercut economic recovery. Such pressures will weaken U.S. and allied resilience against competitors such as China. Securing the Red Sea is therefore not only a regional imperative but also essential to global economic stability and U.S. strategic competitiveness.

Given the global implications of Red Sea instability, the time of half-measures is over, especially in the wake of the recent 12-day Israel-Iran conflict and the Houthis' renewed hostilities. In this new geopolitical environment, Washington must pursue three clear objectives: eliminate the Houthi threat permanently,

stabilize Yemen through a decentralized yet unified governance structure, and secure freedom of navigation in one of the world's most critical maritime corridors. Achieving these goals will require a sustained campaign of coordinated military, economic, political, and informational power, planned for at least 15 months.

This timeline is deliberate, designed to align with U.S. domestic political realities. With the midterm elections approaching in November of 2026, the Trump administration faces a rapidly shrinking window to act. A comprehensive campaign must secure the Red Sea under the leadership of the United States and allied regional partners, preferably before American voters head to the polls. The goal is to stabilize the Red Sea before electoral shifts can undermine the operation. While public sentiment matters, it cannot substitute for resolute leadership. Too often, U.S. politicians behave like weathervanes, swayed by political winds. In this case, U.S. policymakers must pursue a strategy that fully reflects the stakes, comprehends domestic and geopolitical realities, and accepts the necessary risks to secure U.S. interests in the Red Sea.

To achieve its security objectives in the Red Sea within a 15-month timeline, the United States must pursue a strategy divided into three main phases:

1) Immediate actions (0–5 months): A surge in mass drone coverage and strikes. Conduct sabotage missions and execute cyber operations. Enforce maritime exclusion zones without compromise. Launch global strategic communications campaigns. Engage the private sector to harden commercial shipping operations.

2) Mid-term actions (5–10 months): Expand military and governance support to Yemeni partners. Accelerate trade diversion through alternative ports, intensify sanctions enforcement, and sustain diplomatic pressure on Oman. Operationalize decentralized governance models in liberated areas.

3) Consolidation actions (10–15 months): Transition maritime security responsibilities to regional coalitions. Complete critical infrastructure rebuilds. Secure international diplomatic recognition of a decentralized Yemeni government. Maintain relentless strategic communications pressure against the Houthis and their Iranian sponsors.

Each phase builds on the previous one. The first phase focuses on establishing initial conditions in the operational theater and shaping the strategic messaging environment. The second phase intensifies military pressure, particularly on the ground, with the goal of placing the adversary on the defensive. The third phase

establishes durable political, economic, and self-reinforcing security frameworks.

Each recommended action in this three-phase plan warrants thorough evaluation. Planners must first recognize that the Houthis respond only to force. Limited or arbitrarily halted airstrikes will neither degrade their operational capacity nor break their will to fight. A persistent and escalating military campaign must dismantle Houthi maritime strike capabilities, deny them sanctuary, and disrupt their command-and-control networks. U.S. and coalition forces must maintain a steady operational tempo, targeting ballistic missile launchers, drone production hubs, coastal radar stations, and maritime strike platforms. Preemptive operations must focus on blocking launches before they occur rather than retaliating afterward. Most critically, Houthi leadership must face relentless pressure—no safe harbor, no daylight, no ability to issue orders.

To pursue a more effective strategy against the Houthis on the ground without deploying substantial American forces, the United States must reassess its local partnerships. Washington should prioritize delivering direct, well-coordinated support to the most capable anti-Houthi forces—chief among them the Joint Forces along the Red Sea coast, led by Brigadier General Tariq Saleh, and the highly trained Giants Brigades. Military and tribal forces in Marib, under the leadership of the Chief of Staff, must remain a central pillar of resistance. Military and security forces in Hadramawt, Taiz, Mahrah, and Shabwah,

serving as platforms for logistical and manpower support, can further extend U.S. operational reach. Lastly, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces could play a decisive role on the central and northern fronts, provided their deployment aligns with U.S. national objectives.

These combat-ready forces are prepared to confront the Houthis, especially in Mokha, Taiz, and Marib. Political coordination makes their activation feasible without the need to forge broad unity across groups or coerce rival factions into cooperation. While fully unifying all military wings of the anti-Houthi coalition remains unlikely in the near term, targeted partnerships focused on specific fronts and objectives are feasible. This can be achieved by coordinating with members of the Presidential Leadership Council, such as Sultan al-Aradah and Tariq Saleh, while the president provides the necessary political cover.

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campaign. To create that momentum, U.S. and allied forces must act as force multipliers, augmenting the anti-Houthi coalition. With this objective in mind, special operations forces should execute sabotage missions against critical Houthi infrastructure, including underground storage sites and mobile launch units. Simultaneously, cyber operations must dismantle the Houthis' encrypted communications, targeting systems, and drone command networks. The aim is to paralyze Houthi systems, denying them the ability to coordinate maritime attacks, advance regional destabilization, or defend against anti-Houthi ground forces.

Unmanned aerial systems (UAS), such as the MQ-9 Reaper drone, must conduct persistent Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and strike missions, including the interception of maritime threats. Beyond the capable Reapers, swarms of low-cost quadcopters should blanket the Yemeni battlespace, denying the Houthi leadership's freedom of movement and operation. On the waterfront, unmanned surface vessels like the MARTAC Devil Ray and unmanned underwater vehicles such as the REMUS 600 must dominate maritime surveillance and interdiction operations. Unmanned ground vehicles should patrol key border regions and supply routes, restricting Houthi movement of weapons and personnel. Working in concert with allied forces, the United States can leverage these military assets to extend its reach, reduce risks to personnel, and overwhelm Houthi

defenses through persistent, multi-domain pressure.

Another objective should be the aggressive enforcement of maritime exclusion zones around Houthi-controlled ports—Hodeidah, Saleef, and Ras Issa—to disrupt arms supply chains that support the Houthi war machine. Vessels breaching these zones must face immediate interdiction. Special attention should be paid to fuel container ships. The Houthis stockpile the fuel to power strikes and sell it on the black market. By striking the stockpiles, the United States could turn a key Houthi resource into a liability, substantially weakening the group's operational capacity.

While these military measures are expected to be effective, military action alone cannot dismantle the Houthi insurgency. A parallel political and economic offensive is necessary to isolate the Houthis and deprive them of the resources necessary for their survival. The Treasury Department, in coordination with regional allies, must expand sanctions that target Iranian shipping companies, logistics facilitators, and financial intermediaries that support Houthi smuggling operations. To this end, U.S. intelligence should prioritize mapping and dismantling illicit financial networks that operate through Oman, Lebanon, and East Africa.

Simultaneously, Washington must invest heavily in alternative ports like Aden, Mukalla, and Berbera to divert commercial shipping away from Houthi-controlled territory. Each rerouted vessel denies the

Houthis critical customs revenue and undermines their claims to political legitimacy. Trade diversion functions as a strategic tool. Moreover, investing in these alternative ports counters China's Belt and Road ambitions to dominate regional logistics and infrastructure. By aggressively obstructing China's efforts to displace the United States as the global hegemon, these investments function as an economic counterforce.

Diplomatically, the United States must place pressure on Oman to close its porous border to Iranian weapons smuggling. Although historically neutral, Oman's passive facilitation of smuggling now poses a direct threat to regional stability. Economic incentives and security cooperation can encourage Oman's compliance, but clear consequences must follow any failure to act. Quiet diplomacy backed by economic leverage remains essential. Should Oman continue to resist, the United States must be ready to assert its strategic objectives decisively.

Recognizing the U.N.'s chronic paralysis, the United States must lead an ad hoc maritime coalition—building on frameworks like Operation Prosperity Guardian—to secure international support for freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Waiting for consensus through moribund international institutions is bound to end in failure. Coalition partners should include Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and willing European naval powers.

Strategic victories are won both on the battlefield and in the information space. As

such, the Houthis must be delegitimized regionally and internationally. A sustained, aggressive information campaign should expose their atrocities, including the recruitment of child soldiers, deliberate targeting of civilian shipping, and diversion of humanitarian aid. Western, Arab, and global media outlets must relentlessly amplify this message. Policymakers should directly link the Houthis to Tehran's broader regional destabilization strategy and China's maritime ambitions. The Houthis must also be portrayed as a proxy force that threatens not only Yemen but the entire global economy. Numerous reports document Chinese malfeasance, including its establishment of illicit supply lines that provide the Houthis with weapons and advanced guidance systems for missiles and drones. Additional reports allege that a Chinese satellite imagery firm supplied geospatial intelligence to enable the targeting of U.S. warships and international vessels.

In this information environment, a broader strategic framing can galvanize wider Western opposition and motivate the private sector to demand decisive action. The private sector must engage proactively, particularly within the shipping and insurance industries. Structured working groups should develop industry-led defensive measures, advocacy campaigns, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms. Commercial stakeholders must recognize maritime security as a shared imperative.

Tehran must understand that continued backing of the Houthis will trigger a broader U.S. campaign targeting Iranian infrastructure. Linking maritime security demands to nuclear diplomacy will leverage Washington's strength and increase the costs of Iranian intransigence. Public diplomacy should extend beyond Western audiences. Partnerships with Gulf allies must synchronize messaging through regional media outlets, countering Houthi propaganda and reinforcing the legitimacy of U.S.-led efforts to restore stability and prosperity. Military defeat of the Houthis remains necessary but insufficient: lasting stability requires empowering legitimate Yemeni actors to prevent their resurgence. The United States must significantly scale up support for the internationally recognized Yemeni government and vetted anti-Houthi forces like the STC and key tribal militias. This support should encompass advanced weaponry, intelligence-sharing, and logistics, conditioned on commitments to national unity and alignment with Western interests.

Washington must champion a decentralized government model for Yemen to avoid the mistakes that doomed previous governance efforts. Partitioning Yemen would likely fuel endless conflict, whereas decentralization offers a pathway to inclusion, stability, and effective self-rule without fracturing the state. Iraq and Afghanistan highlight the dangers of over-centralization. In these fragile states, highly centralized governments in Baghdad and Kabul struggled to navigate complex tribal, sectarian, and regional

dynamics, ultimately triggering instability and insurgency. By contrast, decentralized political models empower local authorities, foster shared ownership of governance, and reduce incentives for rebellion. In Yemen, decentralization would allow disparate ethnic groups and regions to exercise self-governance while preserving a unified national identity. This approach would prevent the Houthis from exploiting grievances or disenfranchising groups in ways that could ignite future insurgencies.

Reconstruction efforts must prioritize delivering visible, high-impact projects in liberated territories. Rapidly restoring port infrastructure, customs facilities, clinics, and transportation networks will create tangible economic alternatives to Houthi rule. International aid must be rigorously monitored to prevent diversion and corruption. Critics may raise concerns about escalation, mission creep, and regional backlash; while these risks are real, they remain manageable. Escalation can be controlled through calibrated strikes, clear rules of engagement, and consistent diplomatic outreach to regional partners. Mission parameters must remain tightly focused on maritime security and counter-Houthi operations, and avoid entanglement in Yemen's internal politics. Securing humanitarian corridors into liberated ports can mitigate the risk of a humanitarian crisis by enabling aid delivery while denying the Houthis leverage. Continuous coordination with Gulf allies, Egypt, and other stakeholders will minimize regional backlash and

ensure shared ownership of the campaign to defeat the group.

Another way to manage the escalation of risks is to adopt a hardline approach in future negotiations with Iran. The United States must insist that Iran cease all material support to the Houthis as a non-negotiable condition. Tehran must understand that continued backing of the Houthis will trigger a broader U.S. campaign targeting Iranian infrastructure. Linking maritime security demands to nuclear diplomacy will leverage Washington's strength and increase the costs of Iranian intransigence. In light of recent U.S. strikes on Fordow and other nuclear sites, this threat carries heightened credibility.

Beyond these mitigations, it is critical for the U.S. to recognize that inaction carries far greater risks. The Houthis are not merely a Yemeni faction—they are a strategic weapon wielded by Tehran against the global economy and a pawn in China's long game to dominate international trade routes. Treating them as anything less amounts to strategic malpractice.

A half-hearted campaign all but guarantees a cycle of temporary deterrence followed by renewed conflict. The likely result: a collapsed Yemeni state, an emboldened Iran, soaring global shipping costs, and the erosion of U.S. influence in a vital strategic theater. Worse, adversaries such as China will interpret the absence of U.S. resolve and competence as an open invitation to escalate aggression worldwide.

Given these strategic realities, the United States must recognize that defeating the Houthis is not simply desirable—it is imperative. The Red Sea is too critical, the Iranian threat too blatant, and China's ambitions too dangerous to accept anything short of decisive victory. Only a comprehensive, integrated, and sustained campaign, anchored in military dominance, political pressure, economic isolation, information warfare, and local empowerment, can deliver lasting security.

Such success demands resolve and a long-term perspective. The Red Sea cannot be left to chance—it must be secured by deliberate design. The United States must act decisively, persistently, and cooperatively to protect its broader security and economic interests.

Victory is a choice. The United States must choose it now.

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