The "Devil's Triangle" of the Global Economy:
Maritime Chokepoints and the New Geoeconomics of Sea Power

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Abstract

The security of global maritime trade is increasingly shaped by the interaction of three interconnected strategic maritime corridors: the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Black Sea. Rather than representing isolated theaters of conflict, these maritime chokepoints form a single geostrategic system whose disruption would have cascading consequences for international trade, energy security, and geopolitical stability. The recent Houthi declaration of a naval blockade against Saudi Arabia demonstrates that maritime coercion has evolved into a sophisticated instrument of geoeconomic competition, capable of producing strategic effects disproportionate to the military capabilities of the actors involved.

The Emergence of the "Devil's Triangle"

Contemporary geopolitical analysis often examines maritime crises individually. Yet the strategic reality suggests that the international system should instead consider the emergence of what may be described as the **"Devil's Triangle"**—a geopolitical arc extending from the Strait of Hormuz through the Bab el-Mandeb to the Black Sea.

These three maritime spaces constitute the principal intersection between global energy production, maritime commerce, and the strategic interests of the Euro-Atlantic community, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. Any sustained disruption within this triangle would not simply affect regional security but would reshape the architecture of global trade.

The issue is therefore no longer the security of individual chokepoints. It is the resilience of the global maritime system itself.

Bab el-Mandeb: The New Center of Gravity

The Houthi announcement of a "naval embargo" against Saudi Arabian shipping signals more than another episode in Yemen's civil conflict. It represents an expansion of Iran's broader strategy of maritime pressure by employing proxy forces to challenge freedom of navigation while avoiding direct interstate confrontation.

Bab el-Mandeb has become a strategic force multiplier.

Connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and ultimately the Suez Canal, it constitutes one of the world's indispensable Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). Approximately one-tenth of global seaborne trade and a substantial portion of Europe's energy imports transit this corridor.

Saudi Arabia had previously sought to reduce its strategic dependence on the Strait of Hormuz through the East-West Pipeline, allowing crude exports to reach Red Sea terminals without traversing Iranian-controlled waters. However, should Bab el-Mandeb become equally vulnerable, this strategic redundancy effectively disappears. The result is the transformation of a regional security challenge into a global economic vulnerability.

Maritime Coercion Without Sea Control

Recent developments demonstrate a fundamental transformation in naval strategy.

Neither Iran nor the Houthis possess command of the sea. Nevertheless, they have demonstrated that complete naval superiority is no longer a prerequisite for producing strategic maritime effects.

Through the integrated employment of unmanned aerial systems, anti-ship missiles, naval mines, fast attack craft, and information operations, relatively weaker actors can generate sufficient uncertainty to alter commercial behavior. The objective is not necessarily the physical destruction of merchant vessels but the erosion of confidence among shipowners, insurers, and maritime operators.

Modern maritime strategy increasingly targets perception rather than attrition.

Higher war-risk insurance premiums, crew safety concerns, longer voyages around the Cape of Good Hope, and disruptions to just-in-time logistics can collectively impose economic costs that exceed the direct military effects of limited attacks. Strategic success is therefore measured by economic disruption rather than naval victory.

The Geoeconomics of Maritime Chokepoints

The security of maritime chokepoints has evolved into a central component of international political economy.

The Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Black Sea collectively influence global inflation, energy pricing, supply chain resilience, food security, and financial market stability. Pressure on one corridor rapidly transfers stress throughout the global logistics network. Simultaneous instability across multiple chokepoints creates cumulative rather than additive strategic effects.

This interconnectedness transforms maritime security into an economic imperative.

The international community is therefore confronting not separate regional crises but an integrated contest over the world's principal maritime arteries.

Implications for Europe and Greece

For Europe, maritime security is no longer a peripheral defense issue but an essential element of economic resilience.

For Greece, whose merchant fleet remains among the largest and most influential globally, freedom of navigation represents a vital national interest rather than an abstract legal principle. Greek shipping connects the Indo-Pacific, the Red Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and European markets, making the stability of these maritime corridors indispensable to both national prosperity and European strategic autonomy.

The Eastern Mediterranean consequently acquires renewed geopolitical significance—not merely as a regional maritime space but as the western gateway to the emerging "Devil's Triangle."

This reality reinforces Greece's strategic role as a provider of maritime security within NATO and the European Union and highlights the need for enhanced naval cooperation among democratic maritime powers.

Strategic Conclusions

The principal strategic question is no longer whether a single maritime chokepoint can be contested. That precedent has already been established.

The critical issue is whether multiple interconnected chokepoints can simultaneously become instruments of geopolitical coercion.

Should the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Black Sea remain under sustained pressure, the international system would enter a period characterized by chronic strategic uncertainty, persistent supply-chain disruption, and recurring energy instability. Such an environment would fundamentally alter the geoeconomics of globalization.

History demonstrates that powers controlling maritime passages shape far more than naval movements. They influence commerce, diplomacy, financial markets, and ultimately the strategic choices of nations.

The preservation of freedom of navigation therefore extends beyond naval operations. It has become a defining test of the credibility of the rules-based international order.

The strategic competition unfolding today is not simply over control of sea lanes. It is over the governance of globalization itself.