

Houthi Red Sea Crisis Rages On as US Admits Its Impotence and Begs China to Help

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The Financial Times reported that, over the last three months, Washington has repeatedly asked Beijing to pressure Iran into curbing the Houthi rebels. Both the White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony Blinken reportedly talked about the matter with their Chinese counterparts. Sullivan is even flying to Thailand [to discuss the issue today with China's foreign minister Wang Yi](#).

According to Iranian diplomatic sources [quoted](#) by Reuters yesterday, Chinese authorities have urged their Iranian counterparts to help curb [Houthi attacks on ships traveling through the Red Sea](#). One such anonymous official said: "basically, China says: If our interests are harmed in any way, it will impact our business with Tehran. So tell the Houthis to show restraint". The anti-Israel Houthi operations have disrupted a key trade route between Europe and Asia – one that is also largely used by Beijing. Some ships have been re-routing to a East-West route via the southern tip of Africa – one that is much longer and thus costs more.

China is clearly well-positioned to mediate the crisis. In 2021, Beijing and Tehran signed a 25-year cooperation agreement, for one thing. Iranian-Chinese relations are far from perfect, however: since 2021, Chinese firms have invested merely \$185 million in Iran, while committing to invest billions in Saudi Arabia, Iran's main rival (Riyadh and Beijing signed their own strategic partnership agreement in December 2022). On the other hand, in the context of American sanctions, last year, 90 per cent of the Iranian crude oil exports went to Chinese oil refiners, according to data from trade analytics firm Kpler. Having several alternative suppliers, Beijing in turn does not heavily depend on Iran for crude oil: it amounts to only 10% of the former's imports. Its diplomatic influence in the region was

made evident last year when it [helped broker](#) the Saudi-Iranian [rapprochement](#), which was a historic event in itself.

The Chinese thus have a lot of leverage in the Middle East, for sure, but Iran is an emerging power of its own – already in 2018, Benjamin Miller, a professor of International Relations at the University of Haifa's School of Political Science, [argued](#) Tehran had emerged (in the post “Arab Spring” world) as the Middle East's “dominant power”. Such description is even more defensible today, in light of [recent developments in the Pakistan border and the Levant](#).

The Persian nation can certainly exert pressure on the Houthis, when needed, and does so. It would be far-fetched and basically wrong, however, to assume that, being an “Iranian proxy”, the Houthis will simply dance to Iran's tune, automatically. With regards to such decision-making, in any case, the Iranian authorities in Tehran must also take into consideration principled ideological deliberations – not to mention the interests of key regional partners and concerned parties in the Levant, including the so-called axis of resistance. Beijing in turn, although defending its interests, will not overuse its leverage: its deputy permanent representative to the UN, Geng Shuang, has consistently described the ongoing crisis as a result of Israel's war against Gaza, while criticizing the US for further destabilizing the region.

On January 14, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi had in case already called for an end to attacks on civilian vessels in the Red Sea (without mentioning either Iran or the Houthis), so as to maintain the international trade order and its supply chains. Being the world's largest trading nation, China is tremendously affected by any shipping disruption in such a key trade route. This makes the American request to Beijing seem even odder with regards to what might have driven it. For one thing, it can certainly be interpreted as a kind of a humiliating gesture of weakness. In a way, Washington basically begged its main geopolitical rival to restore order in a situation the former cannot solve.

It would make much more sense, from an American perspective, to pressure its Israeli ally into de-escalating the crisis. The Jewish state, after all, has “long been the leading recipient of U.S. foreign aid, including military support”, as Council of Foreign Relations' members Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow write in their [article](#). Since its founding, it has received, according to the two experts, “about \$300 billion (adjusted for inflation) in total economic and military assistance.”

US secretary of state Antony Blinken has called on Israel to take measures to avoid civilian casualties (in Palestine), but despite such words, American money keeps flowing to Tel Aviv. And the Houthis crisis keeps getting worse.

In a candid [admission](#) of impotence (dressed up as practicality), US President Joe Biden last week, when asked whether the American airstrikes against the Houthis in Yemen were working, had [this](#) to say: “when you say ‘working’, are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they going to continue? Yes”. As US journalist Seymour Hersh [puts it](#), “American presidents tend to overreach when they believe they are facing down communism or terrorism”

To sum it up:

China has their own interests in the maintenance of the Red Sea's trade order (regardless of any American request), but Beijing won't put too much pressure to “rein” the Houthi issue, as it sees the situation as being mainly a direct spillover effect of the US-backed disastrous

Israeli military campaign in Palestine.

Iran is the emerging power in the Middle East, but it does not possess absolute control over its regional “proxies”, the Axis of Resistance including many different players and the issue of Palestine being a [polarizing cause](#) that [inflames](#) and drives several actors. Although Tehran can’t ignore China, it cannot ignore all of those considerations either.

By resorting to asking the Chinese to help curb the Red Sea crisis, the US shows weakness and attests to the failure of its foreign policy, as an [overburdened, declining superpower that](#) should [exercise restraint](#).

Israel, in turn, must be internationally pressured, in a consistent way (including the financial realm), and by the US also, to show restraint in Gaza and the West Bank. Its globally condemned [ethnic cleansing campaign](#) there (which caused Israel’s “[secret war](#)” with Iran to escalate) is the root cause of crises in the Red Sea and elsewhere.

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