

Forum: Disarmament Commission

Topic: Governing the Use of Military Force Against Commercial Maritime Shipping in the Red Sea–Gulf of Aden Maritime Corridor

Chair

Introduction

The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Passage is one of the world's most crucial maritime corridors, linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This route is essential for trade among Europe, Asia, and Africa, enabling the transport of goods, energy, and humanitarian aid. More than 10% of global trade, 20% of all containers, nearly 10% of oil shipments, and 8% of liquefied natural gas pass through this waterway. With most world trade moving by sea, protecting this corridor is vital to the global economy.

As the importance of this region has increased, so have the security risks. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, piracy was a major concern, but today the threats have evolved. The current conflict in Yemen has allowed some armed groups to gain access to advanced weapons, such as anti-ship missiles, drones, and explosives delivered by remote-controlled boats.

As attacks on commercial ships have become more frequent, many countries have sent naval forces to protect shipping and keep trade routes open. Taking military action in such a busy area brings up complex legal and humanitarian issues. While international agreements like the UN Charter and UNCLOS offer guidelines for self-defence and maritime security, applying these rules can be challenging when faced with new threats like missiles and drones that weren't imagined when the laws were written.

Even though there are international laws about the use of force and safety at sea, stopping the spread and movement of current naval weapons is still a real challenge. Many treaties are quite general and don't have strong means to prevent advanced weapons from reaching armed groups at sea. For this reason, there is a growing focus on worldwide cooperation and better regulation of weapons transfers across the world's oceans.

This topic is closely tied to the AMMUN theme of "Moderating Morality" because countries must find a balance between protecting trade and humanitarian ships, while also making sure civilians aren't harmed and tensions don't escalate further. Clearer use of international law—especially the ideas of necessity and proportionality—can help save lives and keep the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden corridor open for global trade.

Definition of Key Terms

Proportionality

Proportionality is an idea that suggests that military power should be applied to a necessary degree of danger. The concept focuses on reducing the loss of civilians and any other additional damage that may happen in the process.

Proliferation

Proliferation is the fast spreading of weapons, military equipment, or hazardous substances to multiple countries or military organisations. In this topic, proliferation denotes the rapid spread of advanced naval weaponry to non-state actors operating in the Red Sea.

Interdiction

Interdiction is a process that involves the inspection, stopping, and prevention of any suspicious ships, goods, or weapons that are considered illegal. Naval forces often conduct interdictions to stop any unlawful transfer of weapons.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is the authority of a country which allows it to manage its own territory and its water zones without interference from other nations. Any military activity should take into account the sovereignty of coastal states.

Non-State Actors

Non-state actors are individuals or organisations that operate independently from a recognised government. They may include armed groups, militias, criminal networks, or pirates. In the Red Sea, some non-state actors have used advanced weapons to attack merchant vessels.

Maritime security

Maritime security involves the protection of ships, port facilities, their cargoes, and the people on board from any danger such as piracy, terrorism, military attacks, and smuggling. Maritime security is important because it makes certain that the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden remain accessible for international shipping.

Freedom of Navigation

Freedom of navigation is the freedom of merchant ships of all nations to pass through international waters free of any unauthorised interference. The freedom of navigation is an internationally protected freedom of passage.

Rules of Engagement (ROE)

ROE is a term used in the military to refer to regulations governing the use of force by soldiers in the course of a mission. The objective of ROE is to help ensure that military operations conform to international laws.

General Overview

The issue combines maritime security, international law, arms control, and the protection of civilians. Earlier international action in the region focused mainly on piracy off the coast of Somalia. Since November 2023, however, merchant vessels have faced armed attacks involving missiles, drones, and uncrewed surface vessels. Member States have responded through naval patrols, interceptions, and defensive operations. These responses must protect freedom of navigation while observing sovereignty, necessity, proportionality, and the limits placed on the use of force by international law.

The issue of regulating the use of force regarding maritime commercial shipping in the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden maritime corridor has acquired prominence in the last decade due to increasing development and the number of attacks on merchant ships in the region. The Red Sea-Gulf of Aden maritime corridor is one of the most important shipping lanes in the world, linking Europe, Asia, and Africa via the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. As the UN reports, some 10% of global trade, 20% of global container traffic,

nearly 10% of seaborne oil, and about 8% of liquefied natural gas (LNG) travel annually through this corridor. The corridor's importance to international trade means even slight disruptions might cause greater costs, delays in the transportation of goods, and financial consequences worldwide.

For many years, piracy was one of the most serious maritime threats in the region, particularly off the coast of Somalia. Pirate groups boarded vessels, detained crews, and demanded ransom payments. This prompted cooperation among Member States through operations such as EU NAVFOR Operation Atalanta and Combined Task Force 151. According to the European External Action Service, reported attacks fell from 176 in 2011 to four unsuccessful attacks in 2018, showing that coordinated patrols and defence measures contributed to a major reduction in piracy. Following the escalation of the conflict in Yemen, a different threat appeared as armed groups began using anti-ship missiles, drones, and uncrewed surface vessels against merchant shipping.

As armed attacks against commercial vessels increased, several Member States deployed naval forces to protect merchant shipping and preserve freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Although these deployments can help protect civilian vessels, they also raise questions about when force may be used and how that force should be regulated. International law permits self-defence in certain circumstances, but any use of force must stay necessary, proportionate, and consistent with the UN Charter and other applicable rules. The involvement of non-state actors along with the use of advanced weapons makes these principles more difficult to apply consistently.

Subtopic 1: Proliferation of Advanced Naval Weapons

One of the main problems is the growing availability of advanced anti-ship weapons to non-state actors. As opposed to traditional pirate groups, some armed organisations possess anti-ship missiles, aerial drones, and explosive uncrewed surface vessels that can strike merchant ships from a considerable distance. These attacks may occur without direct contact with the targeted vessel, making threats harder to detect and giving naval forces less time to protect crews and passengers.

The conflict in Yemen has created conditions in which advanced military equipment can be supplied, smuggled, or transferred to armed groups. Existing conventional arms-

control measures regularly focus on legal transfers between states. Although instruments such as the Arms Trade Treaty and UN arms embargoes also address diversion and illicit transfers, enforcement remains difficult because weapons may move through covert supply routes and weakly monitored coastal areas.

Subtopic 2: Legal Limits on the Use of Military Force

Threats to commercial shipping may require Member States to respond quickly. However, deciding when and how to use military force creates legal and political challenges. Freedom of navigation is protected in international law, while military operations must also respect coastal-state sovereignty and avoid unnecessary escalation. Governments must therefore balance the protection of civilian vessels with their obligations under the UN Charter and the law of the sea.

The UN Charter and UNCLOS provide important rules concerning self-defence, freedom of navigation, and maritime jurisdiction. However, states may disagree over how these accepted rules apply to attacks carried out with anti-ship missiles, drones, and explosive uncrewed surface vessels. Differences in legal interpretation, rules of engagement, operational coordination, and jurisdiction can therefore delay or complicate a unified international response.

Subtopic 3: Monitoring and Preventing Illicit Weapons Transfers

International instruments such as the Arms Trade Treaty, UNCLOS, and UN arms embargoes contribute to arms control and maritime security. However, there is no single international system dedicated to monitoring the transfer and deployment of every emerging naval weapon used by non-state actors against merchant ships. Existing agreements establish important duties and principles, but implementation depends heavily on national authorities, intelligence sharing, inspections, and cooperation between states. Monitoring of weapon transfers is especially complicated due to the enormous size of international waters and lack of effective supervision in this area. In addition, differences between national regimes and a lack of implementation of international agreements make arms control less effective. With the development of new advanced naval technologies,

improving monitoring systems and establishing international regulation of these technologies would become necessary.

Major Parties Involved

The Houthis

With the backing of Iran, this Yemeni armed group employs anti-ship ballistic missiles, drones, and gunboats against ships in support of Palestinians in Gaza. The use of these attacks has impacted international business and brought about issues with the spread of advanced naval weaponry systems by non-state actors. While the Houthis may not be a member of the United Nations, they play an important part in understanding maritime security and arms control.

The United States of America (USA)

The USA has been at the forefront of multinational navy missions to protect merchant shipping through the Red Sea. Also, it has been actively engaged in thwarting attacks on merchant ships and enforcing sanctions concerning Yemen.

The Republic of Yemen

The Republic of Yemen is a major party because the attacks are closely connected to the conflict within its territory and are carried out by the Houthi movement, which controls Sana’a and significant parts of the country, including areas along the Red Sea coast. Yemen’s internationally recognised government is also responsible for cooperating with the United Nations, enforcing relevant sanctions, and dealing with weapons smuggling. Any long-term solution therefore depends on Yemen’s political stability, control of its coastline, and participation in regional maritime-security efforts.

The United Nations (UN)

The United Nations is a major institution in the international legal system governing the use of force and maritime security. Through the Security Council, it has adopted

resolutions concerning attacks on commercial vessels, emphasised freedom of navigation, and supported measures to maintain international peace and security. The UN Charter continues to guide Member States when deciding whether and how military force may be used in response to threats against commercial vessels.

Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)

The Combined Maritime Forces is a multinational naval partnership based in Bahrain that coordinates maritime-security operations across important shipping routes. Its task forces include CTF 151, which focuses on counter-piracy, along with CTF 153, which focuses on security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Operation Prosperity Guardian was established under the CMF framework and led through CTF 153. CMF is therefore a major party because it brings together naval forces from several states, supports information sharing, and directly contributes to the protection of commercial shipping in the corridor.

Timeline of Events

Date	Event
1982/12/10	UNCLOS was adopted and opened for signature, establishing a broad legal framework for maritime rights, jurisdiction, and freedom of navigation.
2008/12/8	The European Union launched Operation Atlanta to protect vulnerable shipping and help suppress piracy off the coast of Somalia.
2009/1	Combined Task Force 151 was established as a multinational task force with a counter-piracy mandate.
2014/9/21	Houthi forces took control of Sana’a, deepening the conflict in Yemen.
2015/4/14	The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2216, imposing an arms embargo on designated individuals and entities connected to the conflict in Yemen.
2023/11/19	Houthi forces seized the commercial vessel Galaxy Leader in the Red Sea, marking the beginning of a wider series of attacks on merchant shipping.

2023/12/18	The United States announced Operation Prosperity Guardian, a multinational maritime-security initiative under the Combined Maritime Forces and CTF 153.
2024/1/10	The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2722, condemning Houthi attacks on merchant and commercial vessels and demanding that they stop.

Attempts to solve the issue

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Date: 10 December 1982)

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) serves as the central legal instrument for regulating the use of oceans worldwide. This international agreement sets forth the rules and regulations concerning navigational freedoms, territorial seas, and jurisdictional questions. Moreover, it represents the legal basis for the security of commercial maritime traffic from possible threats in the maritime environment. The key issue here lies in the fact that the said international agreement was elaborated before the emergence of new challenges to global security, such as anti-ship missiles, unmanned naval drones, and explosive uncrewed surface vessels.

United Nations Security Council Resolution (Date: 14 April 2015) (Resolution Number: 2216)

Considering the heightened conflicts in the Yemeni Civil War, the UN Security Council passed a resolution known as 2216, which established an arms embargo on persons and entities related to the Houthi Movement. The goal was to decrease the number of weapons transferred to Yemen, as well as to weaken the armed groups fuelling instability in the region. While this measure helped to increase international efforts towards limiting weapon transfers, implementation of the arms embargo has proven to be difficult due to underground smuggling channels.

Possible Solutions

Subtopic 1

An approach to restricting anti-ship missile proliferation, naval drones, and explosive unmanned surface vehicles in the possession of non-state actors could be to increase the efficacy of existing international mechanisms for controlling arms transfers. While existing treaties such as the ATT, along with UN arms embargoes, do already restrict some conventional weapons, they fail to enforce their provisions due to the presence of illicit trafficking networks and lax regulation of arms transfers. States can improve information exchange, conduct maritime inspections in accordance with international law, and collaborate among customs authorities, naval forces, and international organisations to detect and stop the illegal transport of weapons at sea. Increasing the effectiveness of existing arms control mechanisms, rather than creating a new one, will guarantee its effectiveness while protecting state sovereignty and reducing the availability of advanced weapons to non-state actors.

Subtopic 2

The first possible suggestion for a solution is the creation of international guidelines on the use of military force for safeguarding commercial ships. Although the United Nations Charter and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provide rules on self-defence and freedom of navigation, there is a lack of practical guidelines on how states should use military force against attacks by non-state entities using advanced weapons systems at sea. This is something that could be done collaboratively by states under the aegis of the United Nations.

Subtopic 3

Another possible solution is improving cooperation between Member States and international organisations involved in maritime security, such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). The exchange of information and joint naval patrols will help improve maritime security for commercial vessels and avoid duplication of efforts. Moreover, there should be standardised procedures for handling cases where commercial

ships are attacked. An early warning system for ships sailing through dangerous regions should be developed. Improved cooperation between these organisations will result in increased maritime security without infringing upon international law.

Guiding Questions

1. How does your country regard the problem of employing military force in protecting commercial shipping?
2. Has your country ever engaged in naval or security operations in the Red Sea or Gulf of Aden?
3. How are the rules and procedures concerning the deployment of force by states in response to an attack on commercial vessels regulated in the United Nations Charter?
4. Do you consider that international law, in general, and UNCLOS, in particular, are adequate instruments for addressing the existing maritime problems? If not, what measures should be taken?
5. What is the position of your country with respect to supplying modern naval armaments to non-state actors?
6. How can the international community prevent the delivery of anti-ship missiles, naval drones, and other kinds of weaponry to non-state actors?
7. Is there a need to develop international standards for the deployment of military force in commercial shipping routes?
8. What should be the role of the United Nations in protecting commercial shipping and controlling the deployment of military force?
9. How can the IMO facilitate the improvement of maritime security?
10. What were the efforts made by your country towards ensuring the freedom of navigation and commercial shipping?

11. How can Member States enhance their cooperation without compromising state sovereignty?
12. What difficulties will your nation encounter when implementing greater arms control of highly developed naval weaponry?
13. How can you prevent attacks on merchant ships and reduce civilian casualties at the same time?
14. What are some potential solutions that your delegation can provide to enhance maritime security and international arms control?

Appendix

- United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) *https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm*
- United Nations Security Council Resolutions *https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/resolutions*
- United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015) *https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/792204*.
- United Nations Security Council Resolution 2722 (2024) *https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4038162*
- International Maritime Organization (IMO) *https://www.imo.org*
- United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) *https://disarmament.unoda.org*

- UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) – Review of Maritime Transport
  https://unctad.org/topic/transport-and-trade-logistics/review-of-maritime-transport
- European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) ASPIDES
  https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eunavfor-aspides_en
- Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)
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