



War Economies, Fracture Lines and Permanent Emergency

The Red Sea Arena is a region defined by contest and disorder. It's at risk of becoming a shatter zone of intersecting fracture lines. The incipient peace and security order on the African shore has collapsed; none has been built on the Arabian Peninsula shore. There is not even an agreed agenda for emergency food security.

In the southern Red Sea the United States is at war with Yemen's Ansar Allah, known as the Houthis. There are wars in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan along with conflicts that could reignite in South Sudan and Yemen. Ethiopia and several of its neighbors are in an arms race with proxy wars of destabilization. The United Arab Emirates and Egypt are rivals seeking to dominate the Horn of Africa. Iran and its allies want to drive the US out of the region.

At the north-western edge of the Arena Israel is waging war against the Palestinians in Gaza.

Fifteen years ago, the umbrella of the Pax Americana stretched over the Red Sea Arena. Under its shade, the Gulf Cooperation Council states jointly secured the Arabian Peninsula. On the African shore, the United Nations, the African Union and Ethiopia shaped a complex multilateral peace and security order.

Like its Roman and British predecessors, the Pax Americana was a financial and military imperium with violently contested peripheries.

The winds of change across the greater Middle East strengthened and the US didn't want to, or couldn't, keep hold its umbrella in place. Across the Red Sea Arena today there are vortices of violence. The Pax Americana has shrunk to a military supply chain to Israel, along with expeditionary gunboats and a scattering of military bases. The GCC is divided. The African Union is a mere shell. The UN is reduced to a humanitarian provider.

The Red Sea Arena is also an arena for economic rivalries, in what is a new kind of conflictual, illiberal globalization.

On January 1, 2024, the existing five members of the BRICS club (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) were joined by Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, with Saudi Arabia deferring a final decision. It now calls itself the 'BRICS-Plus'. All today's new BRICS-Plus members are Red Sea Arena Middle Powers (RAMPs). Other states in Africa, Asia and Latin America are petitioning to join, but for 2024 at least

the club is BRICS-RAMP. It is not a coalition or a bloc. What its members share is that they want to rewrite the rules of the global economy and multilateral politics, from an illiberal codebook.

The BRICS-RAMP club doesn't offer solutions to conflict and humanitarian crisis, let alone injustice and lack of democracy. Alongside the selective use of multilateral principles and institutions by the US and other G-7 members, this is a formula for anarchy.

This paper explains the concept of the 'Red Sea Arena'. It examines how the arena is relevant to the contest between BRICS-RAMP and the Pax Americana, using in particular the frame of war economies and economic warfare. It also examines the rivalries and conflicts among BRICS-RAMP countries, and the emaciated, illiberal multilateralism that emerges. It concludes with the dire implications for the poorer countries of the Red Sea Arena.

The Red Sea Arena

The region spanning the Red Sea is an 'arena' in two senses. First, it's like a boxing ring in which champions are sent to spar with one another. The arena not a bloc, or a security community, but a deeply fractured, contentious part of the world.

Second, the arena has concentric circles. The inner ring is the nine littoral countries, from the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Eilat to the Bab al Mandab. The middle tier is nearby countries that don't have a coastline but have major interests in the sea—notably the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia, not forgetting Palestine. The third tier includes Iran, Turkey and Kenya. The outer circle is every country that has trade interests or naval bases in the Red Sea—which is just about every global power including the US, China, Europe and Russia.



The term 'Red Sea Arena' was coined in 2017 and picked up by diplomats seeking to pre-empt security threats across the adjoining regions. The shared plan was to convene a diplomatic forum that included all those with political, economic or security stakes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. One rationale was that maritime security could not be ensured without attention to onshore peace and stability. Another was that the Arab RAMPs, which were intervening actively Africa, should be respectful of the norms, principles and institutions of the African peace and security architecture. The hope was that the then-existing complex, layered,

variable geometry multilateralism of the Horn could be deepened with a human security agenda, enriched through civil society engagement, and widened to encompass the Arabian Peninsula.

The outer tier powers all agreed that maritime trade through the Red Sea was too important to be interrupted. But that consensus led to a narrow, military conception of security, as manifest in the flotilla, organized by the European Union, patrolling the waters of the Gulf of Aden to combat pirates.

No Red Sea Arena forum was constituted. Instead, the Gulf monarchies meddle in the affairs of their weaker neighbors. Conflicts in Sudan and Yemen are treated as standalone problems out of their wider contexts. Rather than demilitarizing the Red Sea, a range of powers joined the scramble to militarize it. And in 2024, the US is taking military action to enforce freedom of navigation, on a very expansive reading of a UN Security Council mandate and with little regard for onshore stability.

The BRICS-Plus Challenge to the United States

The BRICS-Plus isn't a coalition or a bloc. Its members have different interests and divergent strategies, and at times they directly clash with one another. They are best seen as a club, initially formed out of a shared desire to champion state-led economic development, whose members have since discovered more mutual interests. They all prefer interstate ties organized to protect sovereign entitlements from the disturbances of political and economic liberalization—we can call this 'illiberal globalization.'

The original club members all resented the way in which the role of the US dollar as the global currency limited their financial options, exposed them to US financial intelligence and associated pressure tools, such as targeted sanctions, and—most galling of all—made them share in the burden of paying for America's war debt.

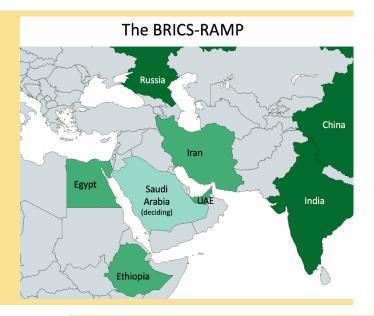
The US was insensitive (to say the least) to how the rest of the world resented its control over global financial instruments and its readiness to use those instruments to disadvantage, ostracize and punish others. Indeed, it's likely that the US believed its own rhetoric about the common benefits of dollarized globalization and failed to see the patterns in its own tactical weaponization of financial tools. The Treasury's equivalent of a nuclear weapon was the confiscation of Russian reserves following the invasion of Ukraine. The other BRICS members saw this as a warning: all were vulnerable to the weaponized dollar.

But the BRICS club cannot break the dollar's supremacy for now. Indeed China—by far the biggest economic player—would face serious economic damage if it were to do so, because it owns so much US debt. Instead, the BRICS countries seek to lessen dependence on the dollar without breaking the international financial and trade system while building the foundations of a separate, insulated trading and financial system out of range of Washington's financial artillery. Sanctions imposed unilaterally by the US are a

tool that brings diminishing returns as the ever-increasing list of targets band together to trade among themselves.

China's strategy is to secure its economic future in a post-globalized world, by seeking direct or indirect control of key commodities and infrastructure. Other BRICS members, including the new RAMP countries, think in much the same way.

- Oil remains the single most important global commodity. The BRICS-RAMP countries are trying to break the oil-dollar link by denominating oil transactions in a basket of other currencies.
- Several BRICS-RAMP countries also seek to control key minerals needed for the post-carbon economy (cobalt, copper, graphite lithium, manganese, and nickel).
 Gold belongs in a category of its own because it is also a global currency. Russian and Emirati interest in Sudan and the Sahel is connected to gold.
- Food production and supply systems are seen as a pillar of national security. Different BRICS-RAMP countries have diverging, even conflicting interests in the organization of the global food regime, but all want more national control. The current global food regime may break without an alternative in prospect.
- Data and its infrastructure may be to the coming century what oil was for the last: the crucial resource underpinning the economy. The US and its allies (notably Taiwan, the dominant manufacturer of microchips) have stolen a march on all others. China is hoping to challenge the US in the digital space race.
- China and the UAE lead the BRICS-RAMP club in strategically investing in trade infrastructure. China's Belt and Road Initiative was supposed to connect it to Europe, thwarted by the Russia-Ukraine war. The UAE seeks to be a maritime superpower in the western Indian Ocean through owning ports.



The strategy of resource and infrastructure control has two inherent tensions.

One is that the BRICS-RAMP countries are competing with each other in the scramble for resources, infrastructure and market share. It can be a zero-sum game.

The second is that the whole point of investing in strategically positioned ports and trans-continental railroads and pipelines, is to profit from global trade—especially with Europe and America, still the biggest markets.

In many fields, the US and G-7 and the BRICS-RAMP countries remain not only interdependent but also complementary. The global food supply regime is one of these. The BRICS food security agenda is limited to agricultural development and food systems management. It actively engages with the WTO, FAO and development banks. Humanitarian action by its members is limited to ad hoc gifts, either bilaterally to countries in need, or to UN agencies such as the WFP.

More problematically, the US Navy remains the dominant force policing the world's sea lanes. The US spends more than \$40 billion annually on this, 0.2 percent of its GDP, an order of magnitude higher than the global average. China, India and Europe rely on this capacity, though notably it was the European Union that took the lead in protecting ships from pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden. China, Japan, France and Italy all have naval bases in Diibouti.

Emaciated Multilateralism

A decade ago, the peace and security architecture for the Horn of Africa was a complex, multi-layered hybrid system centered on the African Union, United Nations and InterGovernmental Authority on Development, backed by the US and European Union, with the League of Arab States, East African Community, China and Russia in complementary roles. It was a variable geometry structure, its instruments and mechanisms applied differently to different security, peace, cooperation and humanitarian challenges. About 40 percent of the world's peacekeepers were deployed in the region. In Yemen, a very rudimentary replica of this emerged when it became clear that a negotiated settlement was necessary to the civil war.

The global norm-based multilateral peace and security architecture never had a truly firm foundation because the US and its allies had violated its foundational principle in Iraq in 2003 and misled Africa and Russia over Libya in 2011. The Trump Administration was contemptuous. Israel never considered itself bound by its rules.

Nonetheless there was potential for a stronger consensus across the Red Sea Arena on the direction of travel. Governments on both shores could readily have agreed that they needed a standing mechanism for conflict prevention and management in the 'shared space' of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The Gulf Cooperation States would have accepted to join collective discussion on the norms and practices of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). The BRICS club was seeking to influence or co-opt multilateral trade and development organizations, including the development banks and the FAO, that were adjunct members in the peace and security agenda.

However, any proposal to include human security issues or involve civil society in the Red Sea Arena agenda was never going to win support among Arab states.

Overall, the BRICS-RAMP club has no discernible doctrine or strategy for multilateral action in the peace and security sphere. Like the US, its members are selective in when

and how they seek to use the UN Security Council and other mechanisms, and when and how they seek to circumvent or sabotage them. While some western countries genuinely espouse liberal principles in international fora, the BRICS countries rarely do so, and the RAMPs never do so.

The shortcomings of the BRICS-RAMP approach are seen in how club members try to manage their own disputes.

The expansion of the BRICS to the Red Sea Arena has multiplied disputes, rivalries and conflicts among the club members. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have disputes with Iran. There's rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over numerous issues, including Yemen.

An illuminating case is Ethiopia's eccentric foreign policy. On the very day of its accession to BRICS, Ethiopia violated a cardinal rule of international law, with a surprise announcement that it planned to recognize Somaliland, the self-declared Republic in northwestern Somalia, in return for leasing a naval base on the Gulf of Aden. The BRICS did not make a joint statement. Several club members including China, Saudi Arabia and the UAE publicly opposed Ethiopia. Egypt, another new member, is orchestrating a coalition of neighboring states to oppose Ethiopia. Across the Red Sea Arena, different club members are arming opposing sides in the regional conflict.

Disputes such as this are to be expected among members of any inter-state organization. But the BRICS-RAMP club has no institutionalized procedures for resolving political conflicts. China and India may negotiate bilaterally. China facilitated the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. China, India and Egypt are seeking a diplomatic resolution of the current Red Sea shipping crisis. But the club itself has nothing akin to an informal 'security council.'

As mentioned, the US, other G-7 members, and the BRICS-RAMP countries are all selective in how they utilize UN mechanisms on issues of peace, security, justice and humanitarian action. With a few notable exceptions (such as South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice), the latter do not invoke liberal norms or utilize international legal mechanisms.

Multilateral institutions that were already weak, such as the African Union, are vulnerable to being drained of their normative lifeblood. Their multilateralism can be described as illiberal or rudimentary, or metaphorically as emaciated (deprived of essential nutrients). The AU is currently in such an emaciated state and may yet be reduced further, to the status of a zombie (at once lifeless and impossible to kill).

This is a formula for several forms of disorder, including lawlessness, chaos (in the sense of a complex, multi-layered system), incommensurable narratives, and deliberate disruption.

New War Economies

The current intermixing of war, state rivalry and economics challenges political economists' vocabulary. Debt, monetary mechanisms, taxation and plunder are the principal instruments whereby states pay for wars. The term 'war economy' was most widely used for the command economies of industrialized countries under extreme pressure to mobilize finance and resources to fight a war or prepare for one. That applies today to Russia, Ukraine, Iran and Israel.

Since 2001, the US has run a unique kind of war economy, based on debt financing—something that only the country commanding the global reserve currency can do at scale. The decade of the 2000's was also the heyday of liberal globalization including electronic banking and the financialization of commodity trading, which provided the US with the toolkit for offensive financial warfare.

Since 2022, Russia has been trying to push BRICS from an economic club to a war economy alliance. Except for Iran, it's unlikely to go much further than specific trade deals for Russia's oil and wheat along with arms trading. But this nonetheless points to the direction of travel: the BRICS-US economic decoupling could yet become a world-wide economic war.

The Houthi attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea are a form of economic guerrilla warfare. Houthi missiles have come perilously close to sparking an outright war with the US, and the costs and dangers facing merchant shipping is posing a political conundrum for China, Egypt, India, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, all of which rely heavily on the Red Sea trade but oppose America's gunboat diplomacy. For them, America's 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' is not a policing exercise (as was the EU-led Operation Atalanta, against piracy on those sea lanes, and the EU's Operation Asipides, providing additional protection to ships in the same area) but a political intervention initiating hostilities against the Houthis.

'War economy' is also used for the intermixing of armed conflict, gangsterism and profiteering, which is seen in (among other places) Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, and increasingly in Ethiopia. Conflict systems that combine active hostilities with criminal collusion among armed actors morph into 'post-conflict' gangster kleptocracies. Both are forms of political marketplace in which loyalties are traded for material reward.

What all war economies have in common is that political authorities organize production and distribution by rationing returns to labor, capital and land. In other words, the state and other armed actors allocate rents because they control the means of violence. Industries and traders don't make profit but are rewarded with a share of rent.

Each of the different forms of war economy shifts the burden of hardship, in different ways, planned and unplanned.

The Cost to the Periphery: Permanent Emergency

Fifteen or ten years ago, during the late liberal globalization boom, many developing countries could benefit from rising prices for commodity exports, low interest rates, and Chinese infrastructural investments. The African countries of the Red Sea Arena could benefit because the global contestants were all ready to invest in their economies and security sector. Today the situation is very different.

- Debts run up for infrastructure and other costs are becoming due and countries cannot pay. Countries caught in China's debt traps may forfeit resources or real estate as they try to renegotiate their obligations. Higher interest rates and unforgiving lenders make matters worse.
- Capital flight to the US, illicit transfers to secrecy jurisdictions, pace-setting rates
 of return in tech, arms industries and hydrocarbons that are hard to match, along
 with perceptions of high risks in Global South countries, dry up investment in
 productive sectors.
- Oil and gas, minerals and gold, leasing military bases, and even large-scale land sales and transport infrastructure, bring in rents. The scramble by foreign investors and states encourages rentierism, especially when accompanied by payoffs to local elites. Renterism favors short-term political horizons.
- Rivalries among middle powers (plus Russia) directly or indirectly foster proxy
 wars. Private military companies proliferate. These rivalries impede multilateral
 mechanisms for resolving wars, either making them transactional and minimalist,
 or eviscerating them entirely.

In fragile states in the Global South, the combination of massive stress on public budgets, precarious livelihoods for the masses and high costs of essential goods, and corrupt autocratic politics, creates a crisis of state viability. This is a trap: those in power can only manage to stay in power, not solve their countries' crises. While leaders may provide a veneer of regime continuity, their citizenries face terrible costs.

When there's active war—as in Ukraine, Gaza and the Yemeni Red Sea coastline—the pressures on the political economies of the marginal countries become particularly acute. That's especially so for Yemen and the Horn of Africa, as the costs of imports shoot up, humanitarian operations are squeezed and the RAMPs provide guns and political money to their favored clients.



This creates permanent emergency in which countries are unable to mobilize the resources necessary for society to reproduce itself. The gangster-kleptocracy form of war economy becomes the only viable political form.

Five countries in the Red Sea Arena face simultaneous food emergencies this year. Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen are all facing national food crises or worse. In the past, when one country has been in such dire condition, at least some of its neighbors have contributed to a solution. This isn't the case now. The possibility of several hitherto separate vortices of humanitarian emergency merging into a perfect region-wide storm has no precedent.

There should be a common interest across all actors in all tiers to prevent stressed economies descending into food crises, and crises sliding towards famine. International food security agendas have yet to grapple with this. The world food summit agenda remains dominated by western agro-industrial conglomerates. The BRICS plus food security agenda remains one of state-led agricultural development. The humanitarian agenda is stuck in the budgetary vice of US-European spending, with the World Food Programme warning of a 'humanitarian doom loop' in which it has resources only to feed only today's starving, neglecting the larger numbers who will face starvation tomorrow unless assisted now.

Synthesis: Illiberal Globalization in the Shatter Zone

One perspective on the current global political economy is that it is retreating from global integration into rival blocs, geographically defined. Russia's war on Ukraine created a fracture line which soon split the world. Israel's war against the Palestinians created a second fracture. Friction along this line, for example with the US Navy's exchange of fire with the Houthis, is particularly explosive because there are no agreed rules for preventing escalation.



It might be more accurate to characterize the Red Sea Arena as a shatter zone where fragments are shifting in a chaotic manner. Given the number of actors, the turbulence and shifting coalitions, the posturing and militarism, the failures of communication and mutual understanding, there is a constant risk that jostling and brinkmanship will turn into a war of coalitions, and that an initially localized conflict could escalate.

The US administration has chosen to regard both the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza conflicts as Manichean struggles. It is waging proxy war with both, economically, militarily and ideologically. It is preparing for a similar contest with China. Even for a superpower, the practice of making enemies can be self-defeating. In due course, the US will be compelled to adjust, either to transcend the chaos or to become an opportunist dealmaker within it. The latter seems more probable.

Another perspective is that we are shifting from liberal to illiberal globalization. For many countries, the liberalism in liberal globalization was always a misnomer, because it was enforced at gunpoint and increasingly by financial weaponry as well. Illiberal globalization which is (to recap), international trade and finance organized to protect authoritarian states from the disturbances of political and economic liberalism. It goes hand-in-hand with illiberal multilateralism, which is interstate cooperation drained of liberal norms and principles. Under this perspective, there are contests of position within the US (and also in G-7 and European states) and among the BRICS-RAMP club members. These are intra-elite factional contests over how to organize capitalism and who will benefit. Factional groups in ostensibly antagonistic countries may have more in common across national lines than they have with their domestic rivals. It would not be difficult to envision a Trump II presidency cutting deals with Russia and Saudi Arabia, or the administration finding common ground with China. The US might come to share illiberal values with the BRICS-RAMP countries. It wouldn't necessarily be peaceful, and Washington would doubtless continue to use its full spectrum of economic, financial and military instruments, but with different allies and to different ends.

Political convergence among today's adversaries could be driven by ideology, strategic economic calculus, or simple bribery. Alliances might be opportunistic but collusion could be systemic. We could see a global elite consensus on turning world politics into a rentier marketplace run according to the rules of money and force. This would reconfigure current war economies among powerful states and entrench state precarity and permanent humanitarian emergency among the rest.

The crucible of these contests today is the Red Sea Arena. It may be a picture of the rest of the world tomorrow. The test of whether a minimal consensus will be possible is the humanitarian agenda.



Ambia is left to look after her daughter's children after she died. Oxfam East Africa, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

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