

The security of maritime routes



Unresolved security issues and the formation of alliances are likely to characterise geopolitics in the Red and Mediterranean Seas and the Arabian Gulf in 2020, write Dalal Mahmoud and Ahmed Kandil



Expectations this year indicate that in the future the security of maritime routes in the Middle East – the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, particularly its eastern side, and the Arabian Gulf – will see more conflicts.

Developments in the areas surrounding these routes in 2019 produced structural changes in the geopolitical environment, given the strategic importance of these routes for global navigation, especially for oil, in addition to the overlap between the regional and international dimensions in the powers affecting them.

The changes that occurred in 2019 may lead to future security arrangements that may affect these maritime routes. The maps of cooperation and competition in the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf are still being formed. The scene is different in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Turkey is pushing for an escalation to impose its interests in the region, while most of the coastal states in the region and the major powers agree on their interests.

In general, the security arrangements in the three maritime routes are related one way or another, due to the balance of power between the forces active in the region (regionally and internationally), with different levels of influence and priority for each. The three maritime routes have the utmost importance for Egyptian national security, which means the expansion of its scope in the Red and Mediterranean Seas and the Arabian Gulf.

Red sea: different security arrangements

It is difficult to examine the structure of security arrangements in the Red Sea in 2020 in isolation from the significant variables the region has seen.

The first of these is the political transformation in the Horn of Africa, which resulted in an Eritrean-Ethiopian *rapprochement* that came in tandem with the two countries embarking on multiple internal reforms through which foreign competition has been used to further security and investment in the region, whether between the Gulf states or the major powers, especially the US and China.

The continuation of the conflict in Yemen is a second variable affecting security in the Red Sea region and the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, especially with the escalation of the role of the Houthi rebel group as a proxy for Iran in threatening Saudi interests after the escalation of the Iran-US crisis in 2019.

Security issues are expected to remain unresolved in the absence of a stable system of security in the Red Sea region in 2020 due to multiple factors, the most significant of which are:

- The diversity of regional security arrangements: There are two main projects providing proposals for security arrangements in the Red Sea, one of which is the establishment of the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in the beginning of 2020.

The council consists of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, Somalia and Eritrea. It seeks joint cooperation to enhance the security of this important maritime route, but it is expected that it will encounter obstacles from some countries, especially those that have been excluded from it, such as Ethiopia and Israel. The inability to coordinate with the International Alliance for the Safety and Protection of Maritime Navigation (IASPMN) to secure navigation in the Gulf region and the Gulf of Aden is also a potential hindrance to activating this council.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development Initiatives, presented by the African Union in 2017 and revived in 2019, was not fully accepted or approved due to Egypt's reservations. Israel and Eritrea are excluded from both projects, which makes them an impediment to both. It is expected that this conflict, based on the fundamental interests of some countries, will continue, as Egypt affirms its focus on the security arrangements for countries overlooking the Red Sea (which means the exclusion of Ethiopia).

Meanwhile, Ethiopia has insisted that since historically it falls in the Horn of Africa, it has to be part of any arrangement. Therefore, it is likely Ethiopia will be supported by some major powers looking favourably on Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, but this support will not enable them to impose security arrangements that the main powers in the region reject.

- The relative difference in US policies: The US has focused on arrangements to secure navigation in the Arabian Gulf, after its efforts to create a broad strategic alliance in the region extending to the Red Sea decreased, which it had tried to form more than once through what was known as the Arab NATO. The situation is expected to continue throughout 2020.

The US Trump administration has been achieving its goals in the Gulf without this alliance, and even if there is a goal to expand arrangements for securing navigation from the Arabian Gulf to the entire Red Sea, it will be in the medium or long term. This, however, will also hinge on some conditions, perhaps the most important of which are the success of current arrangements in the Arabian Gulf and the re-election of Donald Trump as US president later this year.

- The unresolved Yemen conflict: The conflict in Yemen increases the difficulty of establishing new security arrangements in the Red Sea, as the Houthi attacks against the Arab Coalition and on Saudi soil, and the group's involvement as an influential party in the Iranian crisis, coupled with the deteriorating humanitarian and economic

conditions in Yemen, are all factors that indicate the continuation of the conflict at the entrance to the Red Sea.

- The nature of Chinese engagement: China is expected to increase its political and security interactions in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa to expand its trade within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, in which Africa occupies great importance. It is what drives China to secure its trade and oil passing through the Red Sea, starting from the Mediterranean and to the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

It is possible China will increasingly participate with regional countries in security efforts, without offering its own vision of security arrangements in the Red Sea. China may seek to extend cooperation prospects with regional countries affecting this maritime route, especially the African countries, as it realises the US restrictions on expanding its security relations with the Gulf states.

- Stability in the Gaza Strip: Security in the Gaza Strip is not expected to worsen to the extent of threatening the stability of the Red Sea region. The Palestinian group Hamas is unlikely to carry out effective hostilities against Israel.

Perhaps the biggest difference is between the two Palestinian parties (Fatah and Hamas). Assuming Israeli military operations renew in the Gaza Strip, it is unlikely they will affect Israeli relations with the rest of the Arab countries on the Red Sea, because there are stable ways of managing these relations.

- The expansion of terrorism in the Red Sea: It is expected that terrorism will become more active at the entrance to the Red Sea and in the Horn of Africa, increasing the influence of some organisations, such as the Al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Houthis in Yemen, although this may also increase international efforts to combat it in the region. The different priorities and interests of the active states may limit these efforts and reduce the chances of establishing stable security arrangements.

Security of navigation in the Arabian Gulf

BALANCING SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS: Securing maritime navigation in the Gulf depends on how stable the Arabian Gulf, the Sea of Oman, the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Bab Al-Mandeb are. The latter is an essential part of security arrangements in the Red Sea region, confirming the interconnection between the two regions.

In 2019, the Gulf witnessed an escalation of the Iranian crisis following the US sanctions on Tehran to push it to renegotiate its nuclear and missile programme. Since then, events have threatened oil navigation in these straits, which may worsen after the killing of Qassem Suleimani (commander of the Al-Quds Force in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard) in early January 2020. Perhaps the entirety of the scene has led to the presentation of clear projects to secure navigation in these areas, and the status quo may continue in 2020.

Clear security arrangements for this region depends on several factors, the most important of which are:

- The ability of the US to activate the IASPMN's Operation Sea Guardian: Washington was able to form this as part of international efforts to monitor the security of the main maritime routes in the Middle East.

Its official headquarters were inaugurated in Bahrain in November 2019, and it includes seven countries: the US, the UK, Australia, Germany, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Membership in the alliance is not expected to increase, despite the US push, in anticipation that Washington will employ it for its own interests, whether against Iran or others, or impose its vision of security arrangements in the Arabian Gulf.

- Security chaos under control in the maritime routes of the Arabian Gulf: It is expected that countries will secure their trade passing through this tense region themselves.

In the light of caution about US aims in the region, France is leading an initiative to include the forces of 10 European countries to monitor navigation and secure the Gulf. Russia has presented a collective security project that includes maritime routes in the Arab Gulf region, while Iran has proposed a security framework that brings it together with its Gulf neighbours without the intervention of non-Gulf states. Meanwhile, some countries are protecting their own ships, such as Japan.

Perhaps the result of this overlap between the proposed security frameworks will be a lack of confidence

among all the actors in these security arrangements and a state of security chaos that is nevertheless under control as a result of the absence of an agreed-upon security framework.

- Conflicting and balanced alliances in Gulf maritime security: As a consequence of the above, a number of countries are expected to cooperate to form an alliance to impose a specific perception of security arrangements in the Gulf maritime routes. This cooperation may result in the formation of two groups: one consisting of the US and countries that are members of the IASPMN, and the other consisting of Iran, Russia and China.

Although the latter group is not governed by a single coordination framework, its interests are consistent over Iran's non-isolation in the region and most importantly that the US does not single-handedly form and impose its security arrangements in this strategic region. This state of conflict and balance between the proposed security frameworks for maritime routes in the Arabian Gulf is expected to continue in 2020 due to the inability of the US to mobilise more parties, especially with the upcoming US presidential elections and the European avoidance of taking the side of the US.

- Potential threats to Gulf maritime routes: Tension and instability in the Gulf region resulting from the spread of protests in Iraq and possibly their spiralling out of control, not to mention the direct confrontation between Iran and the US, are expected.

These confrontations between Tehran and Washington may extend to the Gulf maritime routes, especially if Iran or any of its proxies target ships crossing these sea lanes to threaten the interests of the US and its allies. If Iran enforces this threat, this may prompt some European and Asian countries to join the IASPMN under the leadership of Washington.

In conclusion, the prospects for the stability of maritime navigation security in the Arabian Gulf region are increasing, not because of the existence of agreed-upon security arrangements between all the parties, but because of the state of parity and balance between international and regional powers that constitute two groups in opposition about visions for these arrangements.

The stability of the situation depends on whether the US-Iraq confrontation spreads from Iraq to the maritime routes.

Eastern mediterranean security: consensual alliances against Turkish escalation

Expectations about the security of the Eastern Mediterranean region in 2020 are inclined towards uncertainty. It is anticipated the region will witness accelerated developments, ranging from the exacerbation of security threats to the spread of terrorist groups, the influx of refugees and increased indicators of political and strategic cooperation among a number of countries in this region, in order to take advantage of gas discoveries or face common threats.

Perhaps the changes that the Eastern Mediterranean region went through in 2019 will increase the security tensions, especially with the Turkish escalation when Turkey agreed with the Government of National Accord in Libya to demarcate maritime borders in the absence of a regional security system, in addition to the intervention of several international and regional powers in the region.

In this context, the factors that may affect the future security arrangements in the Eastern Mediterranean during 2020 are:

- The Turkish policy of escalation: Ankara is expected to continue provoking the Eastern Mediterranean countries in 2020, whether about the disputed waters around Cyprus or in Libya, through escalation on five significant levels.

The first is continuing to promote the idea of the "Blue Homeland" at the top of the Turkish foreign policy agenda, seeking to impose Turkish control on an area of 462,000 km of coastal lands in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. The plan developed on 27 November 2019 when Ankara signed a memorandum of understanding to demarcate the maritime borders with the Libyan Government of National Accord headed by Fayez Al-Sarraj.

The second is the military harassment of ships of energy companies operating in the region surrounding Cyprus, the last of which was in mid-December 2019, when the Turkish navy forced an Israeli research vessel exploring for oil and gas with permission from the Cypriot authorities to move away from the island.

The third is the possibility of Turkish deployment of military forces in Turkish Cyprus and Libya. This was evident in mid-December 2019, when Turkey sent the first armed drone to Northern Cyprus, and the Turkish parliament authorised the government to deploy forces in Libya to counter the accelerated progress of the Libyan National Army to liberate the capital Tripoli.

The fourth is Ankara's continued violation by fighter planes and warships in the air and waters of countries such

as Greece and Cyprus.

The fifth and last is Washington's threat to close the Incirlik Airbase (in Turkey's southern city of Adana) and the Kürecik Radar Station (in eastern Turkey's Malatya) due to a new law adopted by the US Congress last December imposing sanctions on Turkey against the backdrop of the Turkish military operation in north-eastern Syria known as Peace Spring and the purchase of S-400 missiles from Russia.

Such policies indicate disagreements between Turkey and the Western powers, and Russia to a lesser extent, in the Eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, the European Union and the US, in addition to NATO, are likely to be more inclined towards the Egyptian, Cypriot, Greek and Israeli visions of the Eastern Mediterranean at the expense of Turkey.

On the one hand, energy companies such as the US Exxon Mobil and French Total are emerging as the biggest beneficiaries of gas-exploration projects off the coast of Cyprus, and they hope to do the same with Greece. On the other hand, it appears that the White House supports the Egyptian-Cypriot-Israeli plans to cooperate in the gas field and believes that it can contribute to reducing Europe's dependence on Russian gas.

There are several indications that support this trend, such as the condemnation by the EU and the US of Turkey last June because of its drilling operations to explore for gas off the coast of Cyprus. Brussels and Washington have waved new sanctions in the face of Ankara after its recent provocative measures in the region. That is not to mention Trump's approval of a new law in December 2019 to lift the decades-old ban on supplying Cyprus with weapons and not to deliver F-35 fighter jets to Turkey.

- The East Mediterranean consensus: The shifts led by Egypt, Greece, Cyprus and Israel to build agreements with their neighbours in the EU to export gas, led by the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum launched in Cairo in January 2019, are expected to face attempts to prevent them in 2020, especially by Turkey and the Government of National Accord in Libya, as part of Ankara's attempts to obtain a share of gas discoveries in the region.

This forecast, however, depends on other factors that may slow the pace of the regional conflict if the political settlement in Libya has taken a more effective path in the wake of the Berlin Conference or Tripoli has responded to the demands of the countries of the region and the Libyan national forces not to enhance security and maritime cooperation with Turkey.

Therefore, Turkey may continue to try to create a new reality aimed at destabilising the stability of power balances in the Mediterranean and to obtain additional advantages in negotiations on the demarcation of maritime borders and the drawing of the borders of exclusive economic zones in the future.

- Progress in energy cooperation arrangements: The year holds great opportunities for achieving energy cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, which may provide strategic and economic interests for its countries to support their security partnerships. These opportunities increased in the light of the launch of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in January 2019 in Cairo and Israel's launch of gas exports to Egypt in 2020 to liquefy gas in Egyptian plants before exporting it to European markets.

This is in addition to a similar agreement between Egypt and Cyprus, as well as a project to construct a sea pipeline from Israel to Italy through Greece to export gas to European markets signed in January 2020. Washington supports these opportunities, as evidenced by the multiple visits to the region by former US secretary of energy Rick Perry and his assistant Frank Fannon. Both attended the second meeting of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum in July 2019 in Cairo.

- Stability of the Libyan scene: Libya's stability may influence the security of the Eastern Mediterranean, but this stability is unlikely to come in 2020 in the light of the escalation of security and military cooperation between Ankara and Tripoli and the reluctance of the US to support Khalifa Haftar, leader of the Libyan National Army, which is receiving increasing support from Egypt, the UAE, France, Italy and Russia.

Foreign interference in the Libyan conflict will likely exacerbate, and further escalation in Libya may worsen the security situation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

However, this may also push the Mediterranean countries affected by the Libyan conflict and escalating Turkish policies to boost security and diplomatic cooperation, with the increasing potential for specific military operations to deter Turkey from its provocative policies in the Eastern Mediterranean, perhaps through NATO or cooperation between some European and Arab countries.

- Consequences of the Cyprus crisis: This crisis, which affects security arrangements in the Eastern Mediterranean, is not expected to witness a major breakthrough in 2020 in the light of the Turkish rejection of all peaceful solutions.

This enhances the continuing tension between Greece and