



Does the Yemen Conflict Show the Future of the Marine Corps?

Description

WORLD : In the five months since the beginning of the Israeli-Gaza war, the Houthi group in Yemen has undertaken strikes against ships transiting the Red Sea; in response, the United States and allies have conducted retaliatory air strikes.

While the episode marks the latest American use of force in the Middle East, the military exchanges will resonate in the Indo-Pacific. The Marine Corps has wholly reshaped itself for conflict with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Pacific, but the outcome in the Red Sea will determine whether this was wise.

Last September, the Houthi movement marked the ninth anniversary of its seizure of power with a parade showcasing its military in the capital city of Sanaa. Like other non-state forces, the Houthis are an irregular force that relies on state forces, the Houthis are an irregular force that relies on asymmetric methods—especially missiles and uncrewed aerial vehicles. The arsenal on the parade grounds that day, however, evinced an unexpected level of sophistication.

The procession featured a combination of known and newly unveiled cruise and ballistic systems capable of carrying warheads weighing between 100 and 500 kilograms for both ground and maritime strikes. The fleet of uncrewed combat aerial vehicles possessed explosive, fragmentation, and penetrating warheads.

According to a 2024 Defense Intelligence Agency report, the missile and uncrewed vehicles provide the Houthis with the ability to strike targets at ranges of 2,000 and 2,500 kilometers, respectively. At the time, observers feared Houthi military improvements would complicate regional diplomacy.

The next month, the Houthi leadership declared its solidarity with besieged Palestinians in Gaza and began targeting Israeli ships in the Red Sea. By December, Houthis expanded the target list to include all international commercial shipping bound for Israel.

On January 26, the Houthis launched its first attack on a U.S. Navy warship. On February 19, the Houthis shot down an American uncrewed aerial vehicle.

On March 6, a Houthi missile strike on a commercial ship resulted in three fatalities, the first since the attacks began. According to the Red Sea Attacks Dashboard, the Houthis have undertaken approximately 50 attacks since October 19.

Initially, the United States responded by intercepting missiles and UAVs, and organizing a multi-national coalition to patrol the waterway.

Then, on January 11, the United States led partners in undertaking its first retaliatory air strikes by bombing sixty targets at sixteen different locations. Since then, the United States has launched more than forty strikes against Houthi targets.

Nonetheless, retaliatory strikes have not deterred the Houthis. After a decade of a punishing war with Saudi Arabia and coalition partners, the Houthis are a battle-hardened and resilient fighting force.

Mentored and armed by Iran, the Houthis have developed indigenous arms manufacturing, robust logistics and smuggling networks, and deception tactics, including the use of decoy targets, false electronic emitters, and physical concealment. Similar to Hamas, the Houthis rely on underground hideouts to store weapons and survive air attacks.

In general, the Houthis simply provide few targets for retaliation. The Houthis do not maintain large arms caches and their weapons are hidden in urban areas. The group launches its missiles and UAVs from trucks that fighters immediately drive away.

Where the lethality and resilience of elusive irregular fighters on an austere landscape wreaking havoc on a globally critical waterway has aggravated the West, the United States Marine Corps has found inspiration.

In March 2020, the Marine Corps declared its future force would similarly be small, mobile, lethal, and undetectable light infantry teams on remote islands engaging hostile navies with anti-ship missiles and UAVs—for all intents and purposes, a Title 10 Houthi force.

The transformation initiatives—Force Design 2030—is designed to return the service to its naval expeditionary origins, an imperative demanded by the proliferation of precision-strike and persistent sensor capabilities in general and the ascent of the PRC in particular.

To inform its transformation, the Corps has formulated the concept of a Stand-In Force to confront the enemy below the threshold of war and ensure friendly ingress to contested areas. In essence, a Stand-In Force will turn the anti-access/area denial strategy on its head.

To this end, the Corps has begun redesignating ground regiments as Littoral Regiments. The converted units comprise 1,800 to 2,000 Marines in three main elements: a combat team organized around a long-range anti-ship missile battery; an anti-air battalion with air defense, surveillance, and early warning; and a logistics battalion.

The Corps has concurrently reduced the number of infantry and artillery units. Most controversially, the service has eliminated significant elements of its force structure and equipment, particularly its armored battalions and tanks and aviation squadrons and aircraft.

A robust intellectual debate has been underway in defense media since its announcement, but the current clash in the Red Sea introduces the following, more urgent questions:

If the U.S. deters and severely diminishes the Houthis as a regional threat, would the outcome invalidate the Marine Corps' transformation goals? Alternatively, if the Houthis persist and outlast American air strikes, would that outcome validate the service's goals?

Fortunately, the answer to the former has already been provided by the Commander-in-Chief. When asked whether the airstrikes were working, President Biden bluntly responded, "Are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they gonna continue? Yes."

The president's rare honesty may have unmasked the futility of American foreign policy, but it did not certify the Marine Corps' redesign. What works for the Houthis against the U.S. in the Red Sea will fail the Marines against the PRC in the western Pacific.

Most obviously Yemen is not an island and, as such, provides a rear area to which the Houthis can retreat; in the Pacific, the Marines will have no rear to which they can retreat.

Even if one considers the 58,000 square miles of Yemen under Houthi control an "island" surrounded by equally sea and desert, the mountainous topography sustained the group amid the 24,000 air raids launched by Saudi Arabia between 2015 and 2022.

In contrast, the Solomon Islands, an archipelago whose alignment the U.S. deemed worthy of diplomatic competition vis-à-vis the PRC, is just over 11,000 square miles—across 1,000 islands. Stand-In Forces is an apt moniker since Pacific islands will only provide Marines room to stand in place and little room to maneuver.

Furthermore, the Red Sea may be critical to global trade, but it is only incidental to America's national security. The U.S. can only dispatch so many forces before it risks becoming vulnerable to a second crisis. In contrast, the PRC deems the western Pacific integral to its national security and would likely employ a "Powell Doctrine with Chinese characteristics."

The PRC has not waged war since 1979 and whatever circumstances have finally prompted it to use its military for the first time in decades will probably be deemed existential.

So, if the PRC discovered Marines in a given atoll potentially impeding its movements, it will probably not hesitate to expend an overwhelming number of its advanced missile arsenal to ensure their elimination.

To its credit, the Marine Corps critically examined the precepts of the National Defense Strategy and the challenges posed by the proliferation of advanced technologies and rise of the PRC and conceived of a transformation in line with the tradition of adaptability and innovation that have been the service's hallmark. Nevertheless, the engagement in the Red Sea will illuminate the way forward to a course correction for America's indispensable crisis-response force.

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