

The BRICS and the Red Sea crisis: Disunited, we dither

Kristian L. Nielsen

The BRICS's failure to present a united front on the Red Sea crisis is unsurprising given their multitude of conflicting interests and motivations.



Credit: Freepik

Introduction

The military confrontation between the US-led coalition and the Houthi movement in Yemen has made headlines in recent weeks. The Houthis have claimed their attacks on international shipping passing through the Red Sea are in support of Hamas in its war with Israel, and the movement has enjoyed the support of Iran. While Western powers have been

at the forefront of the international response so far, this commentary will consider the role of the BRICS.

The BRICS countries are generally able to unite in broad anti-Western statements and in an often-ill-defined wish to reform the systems of international political and economic governance. Yet, the group usually finds it far more difficult to unite on concrete action concerning major issues. The current conflict in the Red Sea is no exception, as several group members find themselves with starkly differing interests to protect.

BRICS divided

To get a sense of BRICS disunity, one need not look any further than some of the countries that joined at the beginning of this year. Egypt is hurting, as the crisis is already [costing it lucrative transit fees](#) (\$9 billion last year) at the Suez Canal, as more than half of international shipping has rerouted south of Africa. Transit revenue in January was [down 40%](#) from last year. Yet, partly out of concern about being seen as acting against someone who claims to be supporting Palestine, Egypt's powder remains dry for the moment.

Iran, on the other hand, is the main supporter of the Houthis, having supplied much of the group's arsenal of weapons. For Iran, the [Houthis are part of the 'Axis of Resistance'](#), and a key piece in Iran's bid to regional great power status, ranking with Hamas and Hezbollah as major allies. Iran itself has strengthened its cooperation with Russia, as the two jointly prop up the Assad regime in Syria and both countries are facing harsh Western sanctions. It is also the main supplier of crude oil to China.

Russia, as has been its wont in recent years, has had little regard for international rules and norms in this conflict either. Its anti-Western actions can often feel almost nihilistic, essentially seeking to burn down the house of international governance if that is what it takes. In the current context, however, it has taken the side of Hamas in its war with Israel and continues depending on Iran for support in its own war with Ukraine. Russia, moreover, is not itself very exposed to the fallout from interruptions to trade, and causing chaos in the shipping systems will mainly hurt others.

China is in a delicate position. It has been bandwagoning somewhat with Iran, presenting itself as a supporter of the downtrodden, and [talking up the crisis](#) as an expression of

Western aggression. At the January UN Security Council debate on the Red Sea crisis, Russia and China abstained from the final vote on the [resolution condemning](#) the Houthis' attacks, arguing that the resolution failed to mention a direct link to the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

Yet, China's longer-term interest in keeping the crisis festering is unclear. It depends heavily on trade with Europe and, thus, on the main sea lanes remaining open and safe. If shipping goes south of Africa, the price of Chinese products goes up; it is that simple. There have been plenty of calls, so far in vain, for China to take some responsibility for ensuring safety for shipping, as would befit a great power with a substantial stake in international trade. Chinese investments in critical infrastructure over the past ten years in the framework of the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) and the country's only overseas military base, in Djibouti, are also factors that may lead to some reconsideration. If Red Sea shipping permanently declines as a result of Houthi attacks, many costly Chinese projects may be rendered worthless. For the moment, though, [China prefers freeriding](#) on the US-led intervention.

India has, so far, been rather quiet and has not intervened directly in the conflict. Yet, the economic damage to India from the conflict continuing could be large. Approximately \$200 billion worth of [foreign trade is being affected](#), much of it very price-sensitive, as well as several key imports. India has posted [significant naval forces](#) close to the conflict zone as a possible preparation for greater involvement, as its leaders have increasingly spoken of their international responsibilities. Together with Egypt, India has the most to lose from continued conflict, and nothing at all to gain.

In the long run, one also has to wonder if Ethiopia will be on the side of the Houthis and Iranians. Having incurred the opprobrium of the international community for [striking a base deal](#) with the unrecognised state of Somaliland, it will surely be a bitter pill for Ethiopia to swallow, if the Houthis, and by extension, Ethiopia's BRICS partners, have made the Red Sea unsuitable for shipping operations by the time the base is operational.

Conclusion

For now, the BRICS are holding off on direct intervention. For Russia and Iran, the decision to support the Houthis is principled, as it is part of a wider campaign against Western

interests. China is caught between its anti-Western prejudices and its own economic interests. The temptation to play anti-Western spoilers is big, for now. India, on the other hand, may be inching towards intervention, which would suit Egypt well.

It is, however, easy to see circumstances in which China will come off the fence, as India is possibly already doing. The economic costs of continued conflict may become intolerable, as will the damage to China's already-shaky reputation as a responsible stakeholder in the global economy. Should that happen, and India and China join the intervention, BRICS states may find themselves on opposing sides. Little wonder the group finds positive leadership so difficult.

Kristian L. Nielsen is a research fellow at the Corvinus Centre for Contemporary Asia Studies (CAS), Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies.

All opinions expressed in this commentary are the author's and do not represent the views of CAS or the Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies.