

Maritime Military Complex in the Northwest Arabian Sea

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ABSTRACT

The Gulf subcomplex and the Horn Proto-complex are struggling with the idea of Westphalian statehood in the face of various Islamic groups, which came into being at the end of the 19th century. The idea of nationhood and an Islamic identity took shape to counter the imperial states and the Ottoman Empire. Neither of the two ideas came together as one that would bind the people together. On the other hand, the division of states as a prize at the end of the First World War was accepted by the rulers who stood to gain from it. Although the area primarily comprises post-colonial modern states, it is riddled with powerful premodern elements of clan, tribe, and religion (Buzan and Waever 2003: 187). As in many places, the insecurity of the ruling elites significantly shaped the region's security dynamics.

Keywords: Maritime Military, Arabian Sea.

INTRODUCTION

Taking a leaf from the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the region seems to be discovering itself after half a millennium (Ibid: 187). The region's importance for extra-regional powers is well understood due to its natural resources and the East-West connection it offers. The disparity in wealth and an age-old disparate association between the Horn and Gulf states has created a unique set of challenges and equal opportunities for cooperation.

The article aims to find objectivity in regional states' affairs and their dealings to establish a maritime connection between the two complexes. The seas, being a fluid and ungoverned space, enable free movement of goods and people. As the world continues to globalise, so do the maritime threats, leading to the growth of navies and naval infrastructure. The growth of regional navies and the influx of extra-regional navies have significantly impacted the region's security paradigm. The Regional Security Complex (RSC) on land consequently extends to the seas as maritime events influence those ashore and vice-versa. The sea's insular properties, as per Buzan's security theory, thus would have to be redefined.

The article explores the securitisation issues and how they have transformed the regional security debate. Further, the changing structural context of security, non-state actors, asymmetric threats, etc, will also be deliberated to assess the concerns of the states in the

region and those of extra-regional forces. Effectively, the article will focus on the operational contexts of RSC and how it extends into the maritime environment to form a Regional Maritime Military Complex (RMMC). Further, the influence of extra-regional powers in shaping the RMMC and how it can be a valuable tool in the security debate in the littorals of the Northwest Arabian Sea has also been discussed. A brief historical insight into the region since the advent of various civilisations is essential to understanding the dynamics of security underpinnings in the specified area.

Background

The civilisations of the North Arabian Sea littorals have been trading with each other since early times. Thus, close cultural, scientific, and linguistic linkages were formed within the North Arabian Sea's littorals. The sea route was safer and more economical, as it could carry larger loads in shorter time frames (Potts 2009). The region's importance in connecting the East with the West was one factor in the continued interest of various regimes, which established important economic and political establishments in the area.

The civilisations of Sumer, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia, followed by the Greeks and Romans, strongly influenced West Asia's people and culture. This fertile land along the rivers and vast expanses of dry land is also home to major religions and philosophies of the world (Soden Et al 2023). Further, the hostile environment, notwithstanding the civilisational or

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religious construct, ensured perpetual tribe and clan loyalties (McGinn 2018). Therefore, the people's and states' outlooks, perceptions, and actions are an extension of this legacy, further exacerbated by increased wealth. Trade in the Northwest Arabian Sea continued to flourish, notwithstanding the rise and fall of empires and religious movements, until the arrival of Europeans.

With Vasco da Gama's discovery of a sea route at the end of the fifteenth century, the Europeans found direct access to India and beyond, thus challenging the hegemony of the Arab traders. Trade between the littorals reduced significantly, and the monopoly of European naval power was established (Hancock 2021). Another significant event was the discovery of oil in West Asia towards the end of the nineteenth century. The protection of seaborne trade and the ability to influence events ashore ensured the presence of extra-regional powers in the Northwest Arabian Sea, and it is still so today.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Arab nationalism had started taking shape within the Ottoman Empire, owing to Arab awakening, Turkish imperialism, and encroachment of the Christian West (Britannica 2020). To defeat the Ottomans, the British promised the Arabs independence from the Ottomans. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 was the foundation for the post-First World War division of the Ottoman Empire, which left the Arabs disenchanted (Britannica 2022). The territories thus gained were divided between the British and French. While Syria and Lebanon became protectorates of the French, Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine came under the British mandate in the Gulf subcomplex. Similarly, Somalia, Djibouti, and Sudan in the Horn Proto-complex were divided among them. These cartographic creations, which did not consider the factors of tribe, clan, and religious sects, later became de facto borders of independent states and remain a source of conflict even today (BBC 2016).

After the Second World War, the increasing costs of controlling and running the territories gave way to independent states. Although states gained political independence, they depended on the colonial powers for technology and markets. This dependency heralded another wave of nationalism that sought to counter Western control and influence over resources and governance of the states, resulting in the nationalisation of the state's resources, like the

petroleum companies (Britannica 2022). The security dynamics of the region were further complicated by the birth of Israel, the Arab-Israeli Wars, the failure of the US Twin Pillar and Dual Containment policies, regime change in Iran, the emergence of non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas, the advent of the Petro-dollar, Iran-Iraq War, and continued influence of the colonial powers to support regimes. Coupled with Cold War dynamics and new regional political and security groupings, a bandwagoning emerged to stabilise the region.

Post-Cold War, the occupation of Kuwait and the wars thereof to evict Iraqi forces and remove Saddam Hussein, Iran's quest for nuclearisation and efforts to dominate the political landscape, piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and China's influence and assertion have played a significant role in shaping the security debate. At the same time, the fall from grace of the Horn states and Yemen after the disintegration of the USSR contributed to the region remaining in flux and conflict. Between 1989 and 2014, the region remained relatively calm compared to some other parts of the world (Pettersson and Wallenstein 2015: 536-550). However, it remained central to security discussions worldwide. The region's importance can be narrowed down to its holding almost 50% of the world's proven oil reserves and 40% of the gas reserves. Coupled with this, the investment by the states has ensured a high production ratio of the world share (BP Statistical Review 2020: 15-22). As per 2019 estimates, about 21% of global oil consumption passed through the Straits of Hormuz (Barden 2019), and over 40% of container ships passed through the Gulf of Aden (UNCTAD 2014: 34). Further, according to 2018 estimates, 6.2 million barrels of crude, condensate, and refined petroleum passed through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Barden 2019). Therefore, any disruption in the production or supply of oil and gas in the region will affect the world markets instantly. The regional economies also are highly dependent on oil and gas exports by the sea route.

The emergence of piracy in the Horn of Africa around 2005 invited the involvement of new players, in addition to the traditional extra-regional players, in the Northwest Arabian Sea. Extra-regional navies have complicated the security paradigm for some states, whereas others view them as a natural extension of their regime. Consequently, the littorals have invested in modernising their defence

mechanisms to protect their trade and territorial claims, with some states' spending being one of the highest in the world compared to their GDP (Sheikh and Mark 2017).

Notwithstanding their economic priorities, the region's littorals have been pursuing military build-up, especially the Navy and Air Force, which has geopolitical connotations. The most obvious reason is to possess sufficient conventional deterrence. Although the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) signed a defence pact wherein the signatory states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman) agreed to collective defence, there have been differences of opinion and insufficient strength to ward off any threat (Wahba 2017). Among the various reasons for investing in the navy, the foremost is safeguarding the state's national interests, including those offshore. The size of the navy and the type of platforms have primarily been dictated by the assets a state intends to protect, length of coastline, area of operation (close to coast, long-range deployment for anti-piracy, threats envisaged), safeguarding Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), self-defence, preclude coercion and maintain the balance of power. Furthermore, the navies have significant constabulary and benign roles, which can be used for political advantage and diplomacy (Masters 2024). The increase in the size of Iran's Navy can also be attributed to the presence of extra-regional powers.

The control of this maritime environment is of salience to the regional and extra-regional powers, which has resulted in high tension and conflict-related actions. Consequently, the security concerns of the states in the region are an amalgamation of economic, political, demographic, environmental and military factors, and so are the areas of convergence and divergence.

Regional Security Complex

The regional security dynamics of the Middle Eastern RSC were exceptionally strong and deeply rooted in the character of local politics and history, which is why it was considered an RSC (Buzan and Waever: 186-188). The heart of the problems lies in the centuries-old rivalry between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam. With the birth of Iran as the Islamic Republic and its ideology propagated by the Revolutionary Guards, other states, especially Saudi Arabia, feel threatened (CFR InfoGuide 2020). Saudi Arabia and Iran now are the principal actors, and there exists an

unnerving cold war between the two. Their proxy wars all over the region are another reason for the discomfort of the smaller GCC states.

The onset of the Arab Spring and Iraq's downfall has only aggravated security concerns among the Sunni Kingdoms. Coupled with this, the littorals of the Northwest Arabian Sea have varied economic prowess, which only at times aligns itself with their geographic and demographic size. The regimes in the rentier states have evolved to protect their dominion at all costs. The wars have damaged the security situation in the region, and the power is shifting to the GCC. The GCC, despite its size, has exerted phenomenal influence in the Horn states, especially in their ability to broker power (Potter 2011: 66). Though not a part of the Gulf subcomplex, the Horn Proto complex is more closely related to the Gulf than other regional complexes. Both complexes are riddled with intertwined security issues that have global ramifications. Consequently, US policies framed for the Gulf have impacted the Horn states in equal measure.

The security of the Gulf states had been the preserve of extra-regional powers since the 19th century. The British, followed by the US, provided security to the monarchies. The protection offered by the US and other like-minded nations has helped shape the security discourse within the states. The military build-up in the region has consequently accentuated the political discourse, its economic dimension and social construct (Ibid 82). The deterrent effect of the US and its various alliances in the maritime dimension has brought overt peace in the region. However, the undercurrents of their presence have not been unnoticed by the politico-religious lobby in the regional states.

The West's continued involvement since the colonial period has been cited as the prime reason for the Red Sea states hostility towards them. The leaders were but props erected by the superpowers, leading to deep-rooted schism between the various groups within the states. The common binding factor against the colonial masters was religion, which became intrinsic to the socio-political movement. Over time, these fault lines have manifested in state and non-state support for terror outfits (Ulrichsen 2015: 117).

Whereas the GCC was formed to keep Iran and Iraq at bay, it has seen a paradigm shift in its internal dynamics due to Saudi dominance, leaving states to

find relief mechanisms. Bahrain is the most willing partner of Saudi Arabia in the GCC as it depends on her for economic, internal and military security. At the other end of the spectrum lies Qatar, which is running high on the dividends brought in by its gas business. Qatar shares these large gas deposits with Iran and wants peace to continue to sustain its economic growth and chart an independent course. It has also made peace with the Islamists and other outfits to insulate itself (Ibid: 135). UAE and Saudi Arabia used a similar ploy and invested in the authoritarian regimes of Omar Hassan al-Bashir and, subsequently, the military in Sudan to contain the Islamists. Omar also benefited from cosying up to Iran, which he later had to let go to remain in the good books of the GCC (Shay 2011: 54).

The GCC also had an arrangement with Iraq, which, under Saddam, was the bulwark between Iran and the GCC. After his fall, Iraq came under significant influence of Iran, view its oppressed majority Shia population. Iran's influence thus extended its tentacles into the wider region (Hunter 2010). As Iran's influence encircled the GCC, Turkey, in cohort with Qatar, started making inroads into the Horn states. Alarmed by these machinations, the UAE and Saudi Arabia tried to put down the Houthi rebellion and install a favourable government. While the Saudis remained engaged with the Houthis, the UAE withdrew to protect its small territories and shipping business, which came under attack. These ideological differences prompted the GCC to expel Qatar from its folds, which unwittingly helped Iran consolidate its position with Qatar, further alienating the GCC (Al Jazeera 2020).

While the Straits of Hormuz constrained Qatar, Oman has used its geographic location to its advantage by keeping its doors open to all and professing peace. She is the only one who has gotten the GCC and Iran to get their points across to each other. While Oman, sitting just across the Straits of Hormuz, has made peace with Iran, UAE and Kuwait, due to their proximity, must be deliberate in their actions. UAE also has a significant economic stake in Iran, allowing the latter to bypass sanctions and use its ports and financial institutions (Coville 2019). Having realised the potential of trade in the East-West corridor, the UAE has invested in port infrastructure at home, in Yemen, and in the Horn states. Djibouti, one of the beneficiaries of such investment, did not find a

favourable business proposition from the UAE, so she turned to China (Chaziza 2021).

Iran, on the opposite side of the Gulf, has been successful in making the GCC states insecure with its large military and political ideology that it expounded into the Gulf and Horn states. Its desire to possess nuclear weapons has made the security gambit even more complex, with the haves trying to dissuade and punish those who aspire. The deterrence achieved by possessing such weapons has been one of the root causes of various campaigns and economic sanctions imposed on the states in the region under study by the US and its allies.

The US and allies may be present in the region to assuage the GCC's fears regarding the conventional threat posed by Iran; however, the threat from their own people and radical elements that have made the region their home is something that the extra-regional players do not want to be overtly involved with. Thus, the monarchies clamped down harshly on internal dissidents and encouraged the Horn states to partake in similar action (Britannica 2024).

The authoritarian despots in the Horn states led their citizens into abject poverty, which helped the spread of radical thought and the establishment of bases by its proponents. Migration, another fallout of poverty, has been exploited by the radicals to spread their ideology and violence to the neighbouring states. Antisocial elements have also capitalised on this phenomenon for all types of trafficking and smuggling. Another consequence of the dismal poverty manifested as piracy in the sea areas off the Horn (Ehteshami and Murphy 2011: 191).

As pirates ran amok and covered large parts of the Arabian Sea, the region returned to world radar, leading to an influx of extra-regional navies to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The presence of the navies almost removed the threat of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and brought stability to the region by actively engaging various Combined Task Forces (CTFs) (Jakobsen 2023). The primary role of the CTFs operating in the seas surrounding the Arabian Peninsula is policing, protecting the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and gathering intelligence. As physically interdicting the large number of vessels transiting the area is impossible, economic warfare at sea continues to be enforced by the CTFs. This coercion provided another justification for Iran to

indulge in a proxy war with its neighbours and those supporting the GCC.

Iran's support for Islamists in the Middle East, especially the GCC, and the free movement of radicals from across the Red Sea have been slowly influencing the socio-religious fabric of the GCC states. These voices have been calling for changes in the state's behaviour, especially removing extra-regional militaries from their lands. Further, Iran championed the idea that the security of the seas should be the charter of the littorals. Although the monarchies had earlier heeded calls for the removal of Western forces, post Arab Spring and a crackdown on hardliners in GCC states, especially in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE, the discourse has vastly changed, bringing other Western forces to the region (Voice of America 2023). The monarchies silenced the protestors with various incentives as they could have challenged the regime's legitimacy. The slew of measures aimed at increased participation of people in state building and a significant role for women may also have been initiated to change the social fabric towards harmonising with the rest of the world. The educated younger generation, which has access to vast information through the internet, TV channels and social media, is likely to accept the change compared to the previous generations (Abdullah 2012). Whereas these measures may have assuaged the regimes at home, the political and military threat from Iran and its proxies in the region is ubiquitous.

Regional Maritime Military Complex

The definition of security in the classical sense of the world has seen a paradigm shift and now includes the economic, political, demographic, environmental and military dimensions (Buzan and Waever 2003: 38). An examination of the security construct within states wherein 'security' was considered a concept and economy, military, society, and politics as variables point towards maintaining status quo control of the regime as the prime driver for the security debate in the littoral. Accordingly, the Northwest Arabian Sea regimes have securitised the threat from these elements to suppress the movement brewing within their states.

The threat from violent non-state actors and proponents of change within the state, along with economic interdependence and military threats, has simultaneously become a part of the security stratagem. These threats have compelled the GCC

states to concentrate the deployment of their navies in the Persian Gulf. However, these measures are dwarfed by the multitude of threats and the resources that Iran has been able to commit. To protect their trade, exhibit resolve to uphold international order and honour the security arrangements, the US and its allies have committed significant military resources to the region's security. They are left with little manoeuvring room but to deploy their forces all along the Arabian Peninsula (Ardemagni 2023). The extent of US deployment also points towards its failure to achieve any strategic success in the area. Conversely, Iran has exploited the power vacuum the pirates and the Houthis have created to its advantage while retaining the initiative. In effect, the interdependence of states within the geopolitical arena and those without are driven by complex predicaments, obscure strategies, and orthodox beliefs.

The GCC, although protected by the US, is faced with the conundrum of investing large amounts of money into its military as it finds US support waning and sometimes conditional. As most external threats emanate from the seas, the states have invested in augmenting their Navies, Air Defence and Air Force, notwithstanding the size of the economy or the availability of human resources. The states concurrently invested in the construction of platforms and developing maritime infrastructure to sustain the fleets. However, the amassing of maritime military hardware by the GCC has not been sufficient to present a credible deterrence against either the non-state actors or Iran, which has developed asymmetric capabilities of sea denial with mines, midgets, missiles and fast attack craft (Cordesman 2023). Further, Iran's ability to proliferate these systems to its proxies is a worrisome prospect for the GCC and all those dependent on the region for trade.

Effectively, all GCC states continue to rely on external support for their existence. On the other hand, Iran, possessing a large land area, ample resources, and an educated population, has been resilient in the face of war and sanctions. Iran has also exploited the differences within the GCC and has kept the pressure on the monarchies with its substantial military machinery and regional proxies. The US and others have realised that a complete victory over Iran will further aggravate the situation in the region, with dysfunctional Iran adding to the woes alongside Iraq and Syria.

The prognosis dictates that Iran needs to be constrained for the next few decades until the theocracy does not change its outlook. The US and other nations will have to remain committed to the Northwest Arabian Sea in the foreseeable future. With Iran feeling constrained, it may resort to unreasonable behaviour, which can only be countered by the presence of an asymmetrically large maritime force. The thaw in Arab-Israel relations is a welcome step for the larger Middle East; however, in the short term, it gives Iran another reason to malign the UAE (The Hindu 2023). It remains to be seen if others will welcome this warming in UAE-Israel relations as the states transition into a more globalised world.

The wealthy Gulf states, intending to contain the threat at the source of origin, attempted to modify the behaviour of the Horn States. Various political incentives and investments were attempted that aimed to support a favourable government to control the menace of non-state actors and radicals and protect the monarchies. The Gulf states have also mediated to resolve disputes between the Horn states to keep their neighbourhood peaceful. As the Gulf states got involved in Yemen and Sudan, the influence of the Gulf Subcomplex expanded into the Horn Proto complex across the Red Sea. Saudi, UAE, and Qatar accentuated the security dilemmas of the Horn states by playing favourites and investing in their militaries, economies, and dedicated naval access support facilities (Ehteshami and Murphy 2011: 31). The principal players of the Gulf have had a long and continued association with the Horn states. The two sides have, thus, become integral to each other's security discourse, obviating the maritime divide.

CONCLUSION

The geopolitical environment in the area under study has witnessed complex political, religious, military and economic contours since time immemorial. Smaller Kingdoms were amalgamated into larger ones, only to be splintered again as the power struggle continued. Post WWI, the Westphalian state system took root in the region and other parts of the world. The struggle, however, continued with few states trying to exert their influence in the affairs of the region and the wider world using economic, political, religious and military tools. Though once construed as a primary percept, the military dimension of security has been relegated as the last resort as states have

integrated into the world order and globalisation is well established.

Global interdependence is well pronounced concerning the region, as it holds a large share of the world's oil and gas reserves and well-established production facilities (BP Statistical Review 2022: 37). It also provides the shortest sea route between the East and the West. The region at the cusp of the communist USSR gained salience in the Western discourse during the Cold War. Post-Cold War, the security situation in the Persian Gulf was exacerbated by Saddam Hussain's fascism and after his removal by Iran and its proxies. Thus, world attention remained focused on the Persian Gulf and oil-rich Sudan, whereas Somalia and Eritrea were neglected. While Eritrea remained inward-looking with an autocrat at the helm, Somalia disintegrated and became lawless, resulting in rampant piracy.

Though the threat from piracy reduced significantly by 2012, the maritime forces continued to be deployed in the region to prevent piracy's re-emergence and dissuade other non-state actors from benefiting from the weak states lining the Horn of Africa. The ulterior motive may also have been to prevent China's inroads into regional affairs and to limit the influence of Iran in the maritime domain, which the West and GCC had not been able to achieve on land in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The US and the West have, thus, been drawn into the regional matters of the states to provide a semblance of balance.

Although the presence of the US and allies in the region have reassured the Gulf states of some peace, the Iranians are threatened by democratic Western secularism. Iran's abhorrence for Western culture is one of the foundations of the revolution, and they suspect that the continued dominance of the US in the region may wean their citizens towards embracing such practices. Iran has thus increased its political and military influence opportunistically to dissuade the states and people in the region. The US and other extra-regional forces have a limited role in the affairs of the region's sociopolitical issues as these present a far more complex problem than military security issues. The security environment in the region is not likely to change for the better, and the US and other navies will likely continue with their deployments and assertions.

Despite the overhang of extra-regional powers, RSCT establishes the reality of increasing competition/conflicts amongst regional states vying for a dominant role. This influence is further exhibited in the maritime realm as issues transcend boundaries. Although the manifestations of the RSC appeared after the Second World War (Buzan and Waever 2003: 188), the maritime dimension of the RSC emerged when Iran developed a strong navy and exerted its maritime claim during and after the Iran-Iraq War. While the RSC is defined by the inter and intra dynamics of the resident regional states with an overlay of external security forces deployed in the region, RMMC, on the other hand, has a strong overlay of extra-regional forces that also affect events on land in desecuritising the issues of RSC between the states in the Persian Gulf and in the Horn. The GCC and the US have come to realise that Iran, its policies and military cannot be wished away, and the lessons of Iraq point towards resolving the issues with less than war tactics. It also provides the US with the mandate to remain in the region for the benefit of GCC and Israel and play the role of a balancer and deterrer in regional politics. With various economic sanctions and military deterrence, the US and GCC aim to tire Iran with the hope that the regime crumbles under the pressure of its citizenry.

The RMMC in the area is thus characterised by a high degree of interaction between the states and is heavily influenced by extra-regional forces. The US dominates the RMMC as an extra-regional force, with Saudi Arabia and Iran being central regional figures. The salient issues that have shaped the RMMC in the region are the divide between GCC and Iran, political discourse within the states, state sponsorship to weaker states, state support to non-state actors, terrorist acts by militant groups and traffickers and the indulgence of extra-regional powers. Over a period, the international community's securitisation of the concern for the safety of mercantile marine led to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) mandate paving the way for the deployment of several navies to the Northwest Arabian Sea. The regional security complex thus transcended the sea barriers, and the maritime component of the complex, overshadowed by navies, can be considered to have merged the two Regional Security Complexes into one Regional Maritime Military Complex. In this scenario, the sea,

considered a barrier in the movement of threats in the RSC, has enabled the formation of RMMC.

The RMMC, in its present form, is likely to continue the status quo until there is a change in the parties' attitude in the struggle for dominance. The change in attitude in the present context would mean changing the outlook of the Horn states like Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan, as well as in the Persian Gulf of Iran and Saudi Arabia. As the US has become a party to GCC narratives in the Persian Gulf, the Horn states have also been enlisted by the Saudi and UAE to act in concert.

The RMMC is a typical case of an international system wherein regional structures exist in various forms. First, great powers intensely influence some areas and suppress local security dynamics. Second, there is an area where the interdependence is entwined in a manner that cannot be considered in isolation. Lastly, there is an unstructured region where most states are weak and focused inwards (Ibid: 51). Although the seas provide a certain amount of insularity to various regional structures/ complexes, maritime events influence events on land and vice versa. Maritime threats and transnational opportunities play a significant role in the littoral states' stance. The coercive ability of maritime affairs, in effect, influences state response to transnational issues in consonance with its neighbours.

The maritime domain, therefore, has had a substantial influence on the policies of the regional states. The maritime security issues and the numerous triggers for securitisation in the Northwest Arabian Sea transcend the Red Sea. They are not contained as separate entities insulated by the sea but act as one entity in the RMMC. As has been seen worldwide, maritime affairs have great unifying ability. Thus, the Northwest Arabian Sea, which is host to several issues, manifests itself as a Regional Maritime Military Complex.

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