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The UAE's "pivot to the Horn" strategy: power projection and maritime security

In the United Arab Emirates' global strategy, the Horn of Africa currently plays a pivotal role. Since Eastern Africa stands at the crossroads among continental Africa, the Gulf and Asia, it represents an unmatched lynchpin for Abu Dhabi's economic and security interests.

The direction is clear. In 2016, the Emiratis opened a permanent military base in Eritrea, at Assab (a strategic port since 1870, as Italy's colonial history shows): it encompasses an airbase, a deep-water port and a facility for military training. For the UAE, this is the first ever military base abroad. The federation has now been seeking to construct another military outpost in the area, at the port town of Berbera, in the unrecognized state of Somaliland, whose "parliament" has already passed the project. Since Somaliland is formally part of Somalia, Mogadishu contests such a choice.

Why the UAE look at East for military bases? First of all, the Emirati government has successfully strengthened economic ties with Asian regional powers for hydrocarbons, trade and post-oil investments, as the UAE-India partnership agreement testifies (signed on January 2017). As a result, the connectivity path implies long-term investments for security towards the Indian Ocean, in order to assure stability between rising interdependent sub-regional complexes.

Secondly, there is the "Yemeni factor". Emirati ground troops fight alongside the Yemen's regular army, especially to reconquer/secure Southern territories from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its offshoots. The military facility in Assab is fundamental for the Emirates' engagement in Yemen. It provides invaluable logistic support for operative purposes (as in the case of the Golden Spear operation in Western Yemen to regain Al-Mokha and Hodeida), as well as to enforce the naval blockade, so supporting patrol activities against Iran's arms smuggling directed to help the Shia faction. Moreover, the UAE trained and equipped at least 1500 Yemeni soldiers at Assab.

Thirdly, because of the civil war in Yemen, Bab el-Mandeb's troubled waters are more and more strategic for the Gulf region, both for national and maritime security, as well as for international trade: more than 3 million barrels of crude oil pass here every day. Even Saudi Arabia has been attempting to open, in Gibuti, its first ever military base outside the homeland (where already are present FR, USA, UK, PRC, JP and IT).. Amid the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, four military ships have been attacked by the Houthis so far: the last one, a Saudi frigate, was targetted off the Hodeida port, on January 30, 2017, by a remote-controlled drone ship. Two Saudi sailors were killed.

Therefore, freedom of navigation through the Bab el-Mandeb strait is an issue of rising concern for the Gulf states and their international allies, first of all the United States: Washington has just deployed here the USS Cole. The U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence released an alert warning to commercial

vessels regarding Yemen's rebels mining activity close to the Al-Mokha port, just re-conquered by the regular army.

Fourthly, such an unstable environment encourages the resurgence of piracy amid Aden's waters and the Somali coasts: on March 2017, a UAE-owned oil tanker was hijacked for ransom by pirates off the coast of Somalia, for one day, and diverted towards the port of Alula (semi-autonomous region of Puntland). In the region, this is the first ship hijacking episode since 2012.

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