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Assessment of tomorrow

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Naval drills in the Gulf of Oman - China's open support for Iran's destructive strategy

Iran, China, and Russia's joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman finish today and according to their participants, they should look like an allied routine, not happening for the first time.

The naval drills at the entrance to the Persian Gulf are the sixth in a row since 2018 and might be interpreted as well-established training for the naval forces of the 3 partnering armies.

However, nothing has been routine or usual in the marine zone surrounding the Arabian Peninsula over the last half-year.

"Marine Security Belt 2024" drills have been ongoing since last Tuesday, with more than 20 combat ships, including a Chinese guided-missile destroyer and a Russian guided-missile cruiser.

They take place in an area the size of Kuwait (about 17,000 square kilometres) and include live ammunition.

The participating armies' announced objective is "strengthening maritime cooperation and safeguarding regional peace and stability."

An attempt to counterbalance the Western coalition

Regardless of the euphemisms that generally precede the military actions of the 3 allies, their drill is a response and an attempt to counterbalance the actions of the Western allies against the pro-Iranian Houthis in Yemen.

The direct connection of the current exercises with the allied action against the Houthis was disclosed at the beginning of February, just one day after the first attack of the US-led coalition on the positions of the Houthis in Yemen.

The commander of the Iranian Navy, Rear Adm. Shahram Irani, announced at the time that Iran would host joint naval drills with Russia and China "by the end of the year."

"This exercise will be carried out with the aim of protecting the security of the region and common interests", said the Iranian admiral, condemning the first allied attack on Houthi positions, which happened only a day before.

> The gathering of allies in the conflict zone supports Tehran in its unprecedented pressure on international shipping along the most frequent traffic corridors

These are the first military manoeuvres by the 3 partners since the outbreak of the crisis in the Red Sea region last October. Since then, the Houthis have carried out attacks on 61 ships, firing more than 400 missiles and drones.

The gathering of allies in the conflict zone supports Tehran in its unprecedented pressure on international shipping along the most frequent traffic corridors.

Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea zone are the principal point of Iran's strategy to put decisive pressure on Israel to stop its military action against Hamas in Gaza by threatening the interests of Israel and its partners.

Russia follows its partners without reservation

Since the outbreak of the crisis, Iran's Russian and Chinese partners joined for the first time, giving Tehran new energy to persist in supporting Houthi actions.

Russia, like Iran, also has a clear interest in conducting naval manoeuvres in the Gulf of Oman. It deployed its ships from the Pacific Fleet to the Middle East.

Moscow must not jeopardise its alliance with Iran, as a crucial supplier of weapons for its invasion of Ukraine and meeting Tehran's desire to demonstrate the balance of power in its own backyard was not an issue.

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Also, in this case, Russia seeks to further strengthen its partnership with China as the most influential supporter of its military operation in Ukraine.

While Iran and Russia's motivations are expected, the manoeuvres in the Gulf of Aden are significant for China's position on the Middle East's multi-layered crisis, notably the disruptions in the Red Sea.

China is no longer part of the solution

Beijing was a crucial factor that could put pressure on Iran and its Yemeni allies to stop attacking merchant ships. Washington's aspirations were similar. They wanted to strengthen China's influence over Iran to prevent attacks in the Red Sea.

The crisis in the region was also one of the topics of the talks between US State Secretary Antony Blinken and the head of Chinese diplomacy Wang Yi in Bangkok last January.

However, the participation of Chinese forces in joint exercises with Iran in the conflict zone, as a demonstration of counterbalance to the presence and actions of Western allies in the region, diminished hopes for Beijing's constructive role in resolving the crisis.

China is one of the most affected by the disrupted navigation through the Suez Canal, given that 40% of goods from Asia to Europe pass through the corridor. In addition, its companies signed agreements on investments of about $15 billion in energy projects in the Suez Canal Economic Zone last October.

The naval drills with Iran indicate that Beijing does not want to confront one of its two biggest oil suppliers, from which it has tripled purchases in the past 2 years.

China decided to regard military confrontation with the West as a more significant interest than normalising the transport of goods to its wealthiest markets

Even though it buys nearly 90% of Iran's oil production, China has been cautious after Iran's threats last January to cut supplies unless the price increases.

The arrival of its fleet for drills on the Iranian coast in the Gulf of Oman demonstrates that China does not wield significant influence over Iran's regional strategy even though China's massive economic impact on Tehran would suggest otherwise.

China's open support for Iran's destructive regional policy is becoming harder to conceal despite its declared dissatisfaction with the escalation in the Red Sea zone.

Beijing will continue to rely on assurances that the Houthis will not attack its ships in the Red Sea region. However, that assurance is not enough for the largest carriers of Chinese goods, which mostly bypass the corridor and burden Chinese manufacturers and carriers with longer voyages.

China has prioritised geopolitics over its economic interests in the Middle East. It decided to regard military confrontation with the West as a more significant interest than normalising the transport of goods to its wealthiest markets.

This could be a risky strategy for its positions in the Middle East because such strong support for Iranian interests (the Houthis)

cannot be to the liking of other Chinese partners in the region, primarily Saudi Arabia.