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Greetings, everyone. I'm Joel Rayburn, the director of the American Center for Levant Studies. Welcome to a new podcast series that our center is doing called The Phoenix Podcast. I'm here today with my colleague and chief Operating officer, Rania Kisar, but we're also joined by a very special guest we're excited to host today. Admiral Gary Roughead, is one of the most distinguished sailors in the US Navy over the last half century. He capped a 38 year career in the US Navy as the Chief of Naval Operations from 2007 to 2011. Before that, he was the commander of the Pacific Fleet, and before that he had a variety of assignments in surface fleets in the US Navy, including very pertinent experience in both the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean. Today, Admiral Roughead is, among other things, a distinguished military fellow at the Hoover Institution. And we're very pleased to have what I think is going to be a very timely perspective from one of our nation's leading naval experts. Admiral Roughead, welcome. I know you're there on the coast of Maine. So we appreciate your perspectives on other bodies of water that are of interest to the United States today. But thank you very much for your time today.

Well, Joel, thank you. And I look forward to our discussion.

Well, to start it off, of course, the question that's on everyone's minds is the current crisis in the Red sea area, the Bab el Mandeb which has implications but geopolitical implications. It has global economic implications and is wrapped up into what is what appears to be an intensifying conflict across the Middle East between the Iranian regime and its many proxies. Israel on another side and now the United States is involved with our ground forces and our naval forces now coming under assault by Iranian proxies in particularly the Houthis based in Yemen. How do you see the way that this Red sea crisis and the problem with the Bab El-mandeb and how has the Red sea region evolved over the past several years? How did we get to the point where it's in a crisis that I think a lot of people weren't ready for?

Yeah. you mentioned, Joel, I've been a follower of events in the Middle East for decades. I've operated there and obviously have a naval perspective that I like to put on it. And when I think about the situation and what I call the maritime Middle East, I go back to a great line in a Ernest Hemingway novel when he was talking about, how did someone go bankrupt? And he said in two ways, gradually, then suddenly. And I think as we look over the last couple of decades, there's been a change in the maritime Middle East that you we've seen the deteriorating security environment, particularly in Yemen. And if you want to look specifically at the Red sea this has been fueled by Iran and Iran's use of proxies, Iran's funding of proxies, Iran's providing weapons to proxies, Iran providing what I would call operational advice and mentoring to the proxies. And, Iran has has kind of looked out on, on the waterways of the Middle East. the Houthis in particular, have been able to acquire weapons. And money. and recently we've seen where some of those financial flows have been been choked off. But then suddenly the big recent catalyst that has sparked a very different approach on the part of the Houthis is October 7th and Gaza and the Houthis affiliation with Hamas and support of Hamas and their opposition to Israel.

And I believe that this has all been part of a coordinated move that Iran is behind. There's very little doubt in my mind that that's the case. I think the other aspect that has gotten us to this point is we have not really paid a lot of attention to this maritime Middle East that I keep referring to. You know, we've been in the Middle East for a couple of decades at war. Those have been perceived largely as land wars and land campaigns. And when we did think about the maritime Middle East, it tended to be about the Persian Gulf, the Straits of Hormuz, maybe the North Arabian Sea and some of the smuggling activity that took place there. And then, of course, we've been focused on Somali pirates. So that's kind of looked at it. And I think that what really is required is for countries that have an interest in the security of the Middle East. And also, as we're seeing, play out in the Red sea, an interest in global maritime trade that we need to think more broadly about the maritime space in the Middle East. And I view it as the eastern Mediterranean extending into the Red sea, North Arabian Sea.

And what I would call the Indian Ocean approaches, because these are the sea lanes that really connect, countries of Asia, the Middle East and Europe and North America and even South America. And what we're seeing now is that the Houthis have been able, with some very limited weapons capabilities to be able to disrupt those flows because of some of the risks to shipping that pass through that area. And it's a significant amount of shipping, particularly container traffic. They have been able to disrupt it, incurring great costs as companies divert their shipping around the southern tip of Africa. And I think the response is really a reaction. It's not a strategic approach to how do we as a body of nations that are interested in the flow of commerce and stable, secure, safe sea lanes? How do we contribute to making sure that those are maintained? Um, you know, it's very easy to look at the number of ships in a Navy and say, well, this Navy is that big or this Navy is, you know not that large. But when you talk about having ships in the Red sea or the Persian Gulf or North Arabian Sea, in the case of the United States, you almost have to say it takes me five ships to have one there all the time.

and so when you start doing that math, you realize, you know, how how challenging that can be in the case of some of the European navies, maybe they can get away with having three ships to have one there because the way the ships operate, you have one coming, you have one going, you have one in maintenance, you have people being trained. And so you have to think about the size of the force in that way. I think that Operation Prosperity Guardian is, um, is a good reaction. but I think there's going to be a challenge because of the size of navies today. Um, and the massive flows of commerce that goes through that area, although much of that has stopped. So you know, I think that's a long answer of saying that over time I think we've become a bit distracted. We have not thought about the importance of sea lanes. We kind of take maritime commerce. Granted, we go into a store and we see things that are on the shelves, and we don't realize just how all of that movement takes place and what it means to secure the sea lanes. we can talk a little bit more about some of the reactions. but I'll leave the questions to you.

Well, I'm interested before we go into into the US and allied and coalition reaction to the international response. could I ask, in your experience in Dealing with the Iranian regime both as a political entity, but also but as a navy, as a state, as an adversarial state, really, that has two navies. how do you view them as a naval power in terms of what are they trying to accomplish? I think because of course, their actions predated October 7th. I mean, certainly it's it's bound up in that. what in your experience with the Iranian regime on the water, what have they been trying? What what are their objectives on the water?

Their objectives is to prevent this is my view, to prevent the US and like minded countries that depend and support, the flow of commerce and trade to prevent the US from being able to assure that I think and several Iranian leaders recently have said that their objective is to push the US, out of out of the area. They want to be the dominant country. They want to be able to control the sea lanes, and they want to be able to extend their influence, across that region that I think spans from the eastern Mediterranean all the way to their eastern border. So I think that's what they want to do. And when you look at the Iranian forces and you talk about the Iranian navy, the Iranian navy is really quite sad. the, you know, they've they've recently sent one of their frigates into the Red sea, the Alborz, that ship is over 50 years old. Yeah, a 50 year old ship is a very tired ship, and it does not have that much capability. I would also say that the resources that are provided to the Iranian maritime forces that the number two priority is the Iranian navy. It's the Revolutionary Guard that is getting the resources that is calling the shots. And so that's why you're seeing what I would say are some of the asymmetric forces, you know, for example, when you're in the Persian Gulf, you have a lot of small craft that are flying around.

I think that or small boats with very rudimentary weapons on them. but now we've also begun to see and I think the Houthis are a case in point where we're drones are now coming into the inventory. Right. But it's still quite asymmetric. the fact that they're shooting some anti-ship ballistic missiles at some of the commercial ships. And there's one recently a French ship that was fired upon. So you're beginning to see some of these unusual weapons

being applied. and that presents a different type of scenario that people have to be able to counter. so as far as the Iranian navy goes, I'm being kind when I say it's a sad navy but the Revolutionary Guard Navy, I think we're beginning to see some of those tactics and systems moving from the Persian Gulf into the Red sea in the hands of the Houthis. And so I think that's how it's changing. And so how do you deal with that? I think the ships that have been operating there, the navies that have been operating there have been successful in knocking down some of the the weapons that have been fired.

a lot of the missiles have missed the mark. obviously one of there was a Maersk ship that some Houthis tried to board the other day and three of the four, as I read the press were were eliminated. and so, you know that I think that's an effective defense, but, you know, the term that I always fall back on, is that defense is not 100%. And in order to really take care of the problem, I think you have to go to where the source of these weapons are being generated from the supply lines. You know, the terms that we use in air defense in the Navy is that it's better to shoot the archer than the arrow. And so, you know, you can continue to bat away these weapons that are being fired at you. but I think you have to get to the location from which they're being fired. You have to look at the supply chains that supply those weapons to the facilities on the coast of the Red sea. You have to look at how the command and control is taking place. And I think you also have to look at who are the leaders that are coordinating these operations.

Yeah, I agree with you. I mean, defense is necessary, but defense is something different than deterrence. And it seems pretty clear that neither the Houthis nor the IRGC are deterred, from conducting this campaign against international shipping. I would second your observations about, Iranian ambitions, across the region. It seemed to me for a long time that on the land they had an objective to reach across the northern Middle East and establish an access from Tehran to the Mediterranean to be able to have a land bridge as Qasem Soleimani, established it to be able to project power from east to west across the northern Middle East and thereby to be able to disrupt or control the traditional lines of communication and trade between Turkey and the Arab world, between the euro, the euro zone and the Persian

Gulf. So between the markets and the euro zone and the energy producers in the Persian Gulf. And then it seemed to me that with the establishment of the IRGC, support of the Houthis in Yemen, that was a matter of sort of a double envelopment. If the northern ground line of communications if that was the northern pincer, then it seems like the the Houthis were a southern pincer sort of double envelop the Arabian Peninsula is how it is, how it seemed to me. And I don't think, you know, we haven't really been alive to that development over the last decade and a half.

Right. And I think to that Joel, you know, we've taken so much for granted when it comes to international commerce that we don't realize just how integrated these supply chains are. I think, you know, Covid gave us a sense of how integrated they were and we adjusted to those supply chains, but now we're dealing with someone who's trying to interdict those supply chains. And causing prices to rise, causing shipping networks to be disrupted. So, you know, I think it's so important that we begin, as I said before, to look strategically and to look economically at what is happening in the region and being able to put that into context, that the countries that have interests in trade, in commerce, in the lawful use of the sea that we need to get serious about our maritime obligations and the requirements and what that really means for the countries that are interested in it.

It's also seemed to me that the Iranian regime, in particular, seems to have a strategy of trying to blackmail their way into being treated as as a great power. they've looked at some very vulnerable areas where they can do that. I think Rania has something to add.

Good morning. And thank you, Admiral, for agreeing to do this with us. We really appreciate your time. And thank you, Joel, for agreeing to take over the moderation and hosting of this very important seminar. I just wanted to go back with you, Admiral, to one thing that you said that caught my attention is that our response has merely been a reaction. And in my research, I noticed that we in 2005, we kind of did operations where we went and targeted the main base of where these missiles were coming from. Do you think that what the operations that we did in 2005 were effective

then? Do you think they they are still effective now? Do we not need to come up with a different kind of tactic where we can ensure that these let's say, weeds will not grow out again and conduct the same terror over and over? Yeah.

I do think that they were effective. They tended to change the behavior to adjust the reaction. But what we really need to think about now is how technology has provided different options for an adversary. but I still believe that simply having a purely defensive posture is just not going to get the job done on as long as the weapons are flowing to the Houthis and as long as they have sanctuary from which to operate and deploy the weapons against legitimate commerce. I think that this will continue to go on and so, uh, it I think it's a much more complex environment. Back in 2005, there was the more traditional base from which things operated. Now you have very small systems that can be employed, which means that they can be spread out over greater distance. They can be moved more quickly. And so this is why I think it's important that we take into account intelligence, the command and control where the leadership is and really look at trying to shut that capability down because, as I said, defense is not 100%. And, we've been successful to date. as far as as no significant damage to ships, or or loss of, of life among seafarers.

But, you know, we we need to think of this as a long term, long term challenge. And I do believe that, Iran has, kind of sees this as bolstering its stature, on the global stage, particularly among those of like minded, people. And, and it also, you know, has caused, the US and others to be diverted from other things that may be happening in the world. for example, you know, we're probably spending more time in the news focused on the Red sea and what is happening there. Then, we were on Ukraine even a few weeks ago. Yeah, we have Taiwan elections that are coming up in a couple of weeks. you know, we see very little in, in US press about those elections, but those are quite consequential for the Western Pacific and the countries in the western Pacific and our allies in the western Pacific. So Iran has been able to really, you know, distract global attention from other areas that require us to be very mindful of.

So, Admiral, if you're putting yourself in the shoes of you know, US national security leaders now or allied national security leaders, what steps would you take? obviously, I mean, the approach that it needs to be a coalition or an alliance, approach to the problem. It needs to not just be a tactical one of defense through the Bab al Mandeb. But what are the strategic steps that you would take if you were if you were in that position?

Yeah. Well, the first thing I would say is those positions are very hard. And it's easy, you know, for someone on the outside to is not privy to all of the information and all the intelligence to be able to, you know, to be the armchair quarterback. But I do think it's important to, really bring countries that have maritime capability together. the prosperity Guardian does that. But I think it's important for countries to be able to devote more maritime resources to the area. I would like to see, more involvement on the part of some of the Asian navies because they have significant commercial responsibilities but those navies, too, have been quite small, but they're very good, you know, for example, Japan even though it's called a maritime Self-Defense force, it's a superb navy. Absolutely superb. Same with Korea. Same with Singapore. I would like to see India play more of a role because they have very significant interests in the Middle East, from energy to employment. And so I think it's important to do that. But coalitions are hard because you have to deal with what are the national interests, what are the national ramifications. how how do you agree to support other countries? when, perhaps a ship of your flag is transiting through the area you know, where do your priorities lie? These are complex things. But I do believe that it is important to enhance expand the coalition and, and to have some very serious discussions about, addressing the shore based locations from which these weapons and the Houthi terrorists are operating from. I'm hopeful that that maybe the events of the other day where the Houthis lost some of their fighters, that maybe that will give them pause, but that still doesn't eliminate the drones and the missiles and and other things coming out the ships.

As a sort of military technical matter, the kind of campaign that you're talking about, which would be more than just defense, more than just escort, but a proactive, kind of campaign to try to restore deterrence. Do we have an existing coalition structure that could take that mission on? Are we talking about would it require so far and the kind of participants that you're talking about, East Asian countries, India and so on. Is there already an existing coalition structure that could be an umbrella for that kind of operation, or are we talking about having to stand up something new?

No, I think that the coalition structure is there. The the real challenge are the political and matters of national interests and rules of engagement that, you know, I mean, the command and control, how navies operate together that works well. But you also run into the situation where some countries, you know, do not want to be part of an international coalition unless it's led by the UN. Others may say, well, we'll participate, if it's an EU, mission and not a NATO mission. So the politics of this, I think, are the hardest and those are decisions that individual countries have to come to grips with, but rather than say, well, it's just too hard. I think it's important to look, particularly when you're dealing with coalitions, is to not look at what a coalition partner can't do, but rather to look at what they can do and then build the plans and build the work from that. Um, but it's it's largely, in my opinion more of a political than a technical and an operational issue because we've operated as coalitions and within the Middle East, we have an excellent structure. Now, the other aspect is, The contribution of forces. And that's something that I think if countries are interested in enhancing security on the sea lanes and getting commerce flowing as freely and as efficiently as possible, then that's going to require more forces in the area.

There are a lot of people now it seems like very rightly the danger that China as an adversarial power, as at least a very, you know, sharp elbowed competitor poses to the United States, this is something that the that across the US and other countries have been taking on board over the past six, seven, eight years. And then there are a lot of strategists who call for a radical prioritization, I'll say, of national security interests and application of resources who view investments or expenditure of resources or attention or

bandwidth outside of the Pacific theater and not really just not the even the Pacific theater, but the subset of it between China and Taiwan as a distraction and as a something that will hurt, US and allied interests vis a vis the China problem. How do you see it in terms of the relation, the relationship between the problems that we're talking about, the maritime Middle East and the problem of China further to the East?

Yeah, I'm well, I, you know, my view is that what we're actually dealing with in the Red sea has a lot to do with Asia because of commerce and shipping coming from there. And so, you know, there are a lot of Asian interests. Indeed, there are Chinese interests involved in this. but I think that, you know, we have too often looked at. you know, the, the Taiwan issue or the Persian Gulf issue and now we're looking at the Eastern Mediterranean and Gaza and we really need to think in terms of how do we the US and our allies and like minded countries, how do we think about this broader strategy for Eurasia and how do we want to play it? Because it's interconnected technologically. It's interconnected with commerce and I think we our strategy needs to look more broadly and not simply move from one crisis to the other. it should be about securing of sea lanes and. by the way what we're seeing happen in the Red sea, what would be a similar situation if China decided to disrupt the South China Sea.

And so, again, you know, we we need to think more broadly about how we want to respond, what should the resources be that are applied. And and we can't be simply jumping from, from one to the other and I think that what we have in Eurasia and I know, you know, we were together at a session at Hoover not too long ago and what we're beginning to see, I refer to it as the as the old empires are stirring again. You have China, you have Iran, the Persian Empire, you have Russia, Russian Empire. And, you know, maybe you could even talk about Turkey and the Ottoman Empire. But there's a there are changes taking place in Eurasia that I think we need to step back and look at, How do we address the problems, how do we align common interests with countries that want to see a peaceful and prosperous region, big region that I'm talking about? and we have to begin to look at it more broadly.

The Houthis, it's kind of extraordinary, the Houthis. They are relatively low tech. I mean it's there is tech involved there. There's drone technology, there's missile technology, but it's relatively low tech on the scale of military technology. and it's an asymmetric type of type of threat. it's kind of extraordinary that we're in a situation where a force like that is demonstrating the ability to shut down one of the world's strategic waterways and the main maritime route between that connects Asia, the economies of Asia and the economies of Europe. It's extraordinary. Do you think that that on our side, the US and our major allies, are we institutionally postured to be able to counter that kind of threat? not just in the current crisis, but kind of kind of going forward. do we have the kind of technological. do we have the kind of countermeasures, for example, do we have the kind? Are we are we working on institutionally, the kind of, capabilities, resources, etc. that we would need in order to counter that kind of threat? I mean, what would and in the land warfare sphere, what we learned was that if we run into a conflict where we demonstrate that we don't have that kind of institutional capacity against an asymmetric threat, then we will see that kind of asymmetric threat multiply in other theaters. What are your thoughts on that especially especially coming from your, your very pertinent background as the guy who was in charge of that the development of those kind of capabilities for the Navy at a crucial time. Yeah.

No, I think that, you know, we are, on the path of developing the capabilities to deal with these new and evolving threats. The challenge that we have is how quickly can we get from solution to fielding. And I know that, you know, you'll read a lot in the in the trade press in Washington about needing to speed things up, but I think the technology is there. we just need to move more quickly on getting it fielded. But as in all things, warfare evolves and I think that, we need to also be thinking about what is the next thing that that could be coming. and you know, for example, the question I have is we've seen, The Houthis use missiles, they've used drones, they've used their small boats. but we're also seeing, for example, Ukraine using very different types of capabilities. And they've been able to push the Russians to the to the

eastern end of the Black Sea. You know, a country that essentially doesn't have a navy left has been able to control the Russian Navy in a very in my view, very significant and impressive way. So, you know, those are the types of things that I think we're going to continue to see. We need to continue to look at how quickly we can develop solutions, get them out and employ them. But I think the other point, Joel, that you mentioned is You know, a lot of the solutions are simply not technical, but they're political. And these are hard political decisions that can unsettle a region. And I know that our leadership is working, you know, through that. But there's a technical component, there's a political component. And then with the other countries, there's also the coordination that would have to take place.

Rania, you go ahead.

Admiral, I have a question to you exactly about the political component of what's going on. Recently, we saw that Abdullahian, the foreign minister of Iran, saying that he received calls from the United States asking Iran to force the Houthis from stopping or force the Houthis to stop their attacks in the Red sea, and that the response was, you cannot ask someone to refrain from entering into a war when you are into this war yourself. I want you to please help us understand the political complexity of what's going on. And, see, in the Arab world, in that region, people think that when the United States sends a message like this, it's a sign of weakness. So and they don't understand that it's actually basically the last straw of diplomacy. And the Iranians are always and concurrently using that kind of propaganda to show strength, to show force. And it's all a lie. We all know that. That's why I smiled a lot when you said that their Navy was sad. I totally agree with you. After I did the research that I needed to do, I thought that it was serious in the beginning when they sent those two destroyers. But then I realized that one of them was made in 1968 and the other one was bombed by us in 1982, as Joel told me. So that was hilarious. But the question is, yes, you are correct. It is all about politics. Iran is not getting the message. Or rather, it doesn't want to get the message. Or what is Iran's political objective out of this? And what should we do about it?

Yeah, my view is I think Iran got the message. It's just that they choose to continue to sow disorder in the region, to distract us, distract others, impose a cost on Western interests and as I mentioned earlier, their leaders have stated that they want the US out of there. And, and you know, that that is the card they want to play. I think we need to decide how we're going to continue to posture ourselves in the region, how we're going to operate. But most importantly. How we're going to be able to, um, restore the, the normal, normal commerce and peaceful activity in the region and to be able to push back on bad actors like Iran and to do it in conjunction with countries that have the same interests as us.

So, Admiral, I you have a working memory and an institutional memory as well of a similar problem, from the late 80s, the tanker war. Mhm. How does this current situation and the things that it's pointing to, not just in terms of the local crisis, but, but the broader strategic posture, how does it feel to you compared to the tanker war?

Yeah. I mean, this is to me, this is a very different problem. orders of magnitude different, much more impactful on global commerce than the tanker war. I think that, again, it's also technically very different. You know, during the tanker war, we didn't have drones flying around. We didn't have anti-ship ballistic missiles. but just the volume of shipping that goes through the Red sea, and the cost that's being imposed by diverting it. This is this is a much bigger problem, one that requires a broader response with more countries involved and more political pressure, in my view, to be put on Iran and countries that, that can influence Iran. I'm very interested in the fact that as we're dealing with this as a nation, as a coalition, China, which has a strategic relationship with Iran I think they're probably not feeling a lot of the same activity. I know that they have one of their major shipping lines has diverted from the Red sea. I don't know if it's gone back again, but, you know, there are countries like China that I think could put pressure on Iran, that could put pressure on the Houthis and bring that to bear. It's a question of is that in their interest to do it? And as we talked earlier, I think that it's in the interest of Russia, China, Iran to keep us preoccupied and diverted from issues that they're having to deal with. So I do think that the diplomatic

effort, the political effort really needs to continue to be emphasized. But at some point the Houthis need to be compelled to stop.

Yeah. And it's interesting, we've been talking through this conversation about military matters and naval matters. But for any national security strategy to be effective, it has to include non-military means economic pressure, political isolation, informational activities and so on. I mean, I think we've seen surely one of the lessons that we as Americans, as American strategists need to learn in the post 911 period, is that you can't solve a strategic problem just through military operations. You there have to be there has to be a political strategy. And the political strategy has to actually be the main line of effort and a military strategy. Military activities need to support political objectives. So it's not enough just to have a tactical response, even if it's one to try to restore some sort of military deterrent in that local region. And, it's all for naught if you don't address the underlying political problem and you can probably make better headway or at least you'll make better headway if you combine military and economic pressures, in particular in this instance. And I don't see that happening so far.

And I agree with you, Joel, but I think at the same time, we can't neglect the fact that that our world moves and operates based on a maritime network of commerce, the likes of which you know, has never been seen in history before. Yeah. And the fact of the matter is that as long as there are going to be disruptors to that. That nations have to invest in the capability to assure that flow of trade and commerce on the world's oceans. And so even though you know, we've been talking and I've been stressing how important the politics are, particularly in coalition operations, the fact of the matter is that the that the oceans require nations to invest in capability to ensure the safety of commerce, and it will become more important in the future. As we begin to look at. For example, mining of minerals on the sea beds, you know, what does that mean for a nation? And what sort of maritime and naval capabilities should it have for that? And I would argue that in recent years, because of the lack of attention to the maritime space, many countries have allowed their naval capability to atrophy. And it's it's expensive and it takes a long time to build. But, I really do believe that what is needed in the

Maritime Middle East is the ability for countries that have interests in this maritime capability, in the maritime commerce and maritime interests be able to provide a persistent, credible, predictable presence that assures the safety of goods on the ocean.

Now. And what would you say, Admiral? to folks, particularly in the US right now who are saying, well, that. Yeah, yeah, I, we see what you're saying, Admiral. Sounds like there's an Asian interest there. Sounds like there's the national interest of Europeans involved there, but is there a compelling US interest? How would you explain it as what what is the compelling American interest in, particularly in this in this central region in the maritime Middle East?

Yeah. Well, one, I would say it's it's national prosperity. It's how much are we paying? when we go into a store and because of a disruption of some sea lane, whether it's the Red sea or the South China Sea, you know, the costs are going up, and when we want to be able to import for example, resources or export goods from the US, how efficient do we want that to be? And you know, we've we have and you would expect this coming from me that I think as a nation, we have kind of lost this sense that we really are a maritime nation. And we because of our, our of our privileged location of having two great oceans that isolate us and protect us, we still need to move things back and forth across those oceans. now our merchant fleet is significantly smaller than it ever has been. but we still have an interest in the goods and services that move, you know, on flags of other countries, and, and it's all about our prosperity, our economy. I think as we look at the future economy that will. Depend more and more on, on some unique minerals that that aren't in the US. You know, do we want to be able to ensure that those minerals can come to us to make the types of things that we need for for our society to prosper and to grow. So, you know, we we really have, I believe, lost the, the importance of this maritime commons. We tend to think in terms of maritime power as naval power. But we need to think about, you know, how dependent we are on the oceans and and seriously resource the capabilities that are required.

There's also a significant it's the commerce moving through the Red sea. the Bab al Mandeb Suez Canal is is quite significant. But there's also people don't think about the, the internet traffic actually the, the, the actual bandwidth of global internet capacity that runs physically, that physical infrastructure runs through the Red sea, runs through the Bible, Mandeb, and has to be maintained almost almost constantly. So it's also an information superhighway that's at risk from this physical maritime and land based threat.

Yeah, you're absolutely right. And this is another area that that I think need to be mindful of. And that's the protection of, of that cable infrastructure. You know, I often say that the internet swims with the fishes because, you know, in Washington where you get bombarded with PowerPoint slides all over the place, you think of the internet as a lightning bolt that goes up to a satellite and back down again. But the amount of information and money that flows over this seabed infrastructure is, is really quite significant. And can potentially easily be disrupted. And we've seen where some accidents have caused that to happen. I think it was during my time in the Navy, we there was a storm off the coast of Egypt where a ship's anchor pulled and disrupted one of the cables, and it was a significant disruption to that part of the world and their ability to carry out, legitimate commerce. And so, you know, again, this is where a nation needs to decide, what do we invest in order to be able to maintain and repair that increasingly critical infrastructure. So, again, all part of the maritime dimension that that I believe as a nation, we have to have a serious conversation about.

And speaking of Egypt, you mentioned you mentioned Egypt. I want to touch just really quick. Rania has a has a comment, but just really quickly, I want to I want to touch on the implications for Egypt in particular of the decrease of Red sea traffic. if Egypt, you know, its economy is quite fragile. It's it's a major ally of ours and massively important ally and partner in the Arab world. And, if it loses, Suez Canal transit revenues over an extended period of time, that could be a very dangerous development for a major ally of ours there.

It would be huge. And I'm looking at numbers now in the in the press of 350 to 400 ships that have been diverted to go around the Cape. And, you know, my sense is I think it's about, what, \$600,000 to go through the canal?

Yeah. On average. Yeah.

That begins to add up. And and it has to have an impact on Egypt. and not just on the fees but all of the, the associated business. That's right then. And, you know, moving things back and forth to ships and what have you. And I think that you know, in my view, I think Egypt probably has a very strong desire to get things flowing again, the way that they would like to see them flow. And shipping companies would, would like to see it as well, even though that's a high cost to go through the canal to divert around. the Cape of Good Hope is about an additional million dollars in fuel costs. Not to say additional time and time is money. So, you know, the the complexity of what we're talking about, the varying interests, I think need to be aligned to, to really be able to push back on the Houthi problem, but frankly, push back on the Iranian problem.

Yeah. And and creating a situation that is damaging to Egypt is probably not an inadvertent thing for the Iranian regime. That's probably actually one of the, one of the purposes of what they're doing. Yeah, I.

Would say I don't think anyone in Iran is losing sleep over the fact that Egypt is losing money on the canal.

Yeah.

Rania

Two years ago, they published the Iranian government, published an infographic that says those are the countries that are feeding the house of evil, Israel. And Egypt was one of them. Turkey was one. Jordan was one. And that was really interesting because they were showing it as a major key component of Israeli economy. The question that I wanted to ask you,

though is about what the Houthis are saying. So, sir, they keep on claiming on Arabic media, alleging that the only reason they are doing this is to help the Gazans receive some humanitarian aid or ceasefire. And we all know that they don't care. We know that they don't care. However, what I'm seeing on Arabic media is that these militants, these terrorists that have always been known to be terrorists, are now gaining momentum and they're becoming popular. And, they keep on claiming that it is only Israeli ships that they want to target, nothing else, none else, and that they only want to hurt the Israeli economy. What do you say to them? And what do you say to the Israelis about what you think they should do? And what do you say that here in the United States? How should this be tackled politically? Yeah.

Well, one, I would say the Houthis claim is untrue. you know, they're saying that they're targeting ships that are supporting Israel. The two most recent ones, based on the information that I've been able to glean, the Maersk Hangzhou was not trading with Israel. the CMA ship that had two missiles fired at it was not trading with Israel. Now, by extension, you know, are the Houthis saying they're targeting the shipping lines that other ships may be doing with? But the fact that they're claiming that they are only targeting ships that are bound for Israel is simply untrue. and but to your point, Ronnie, I think that what the Houthis are gaining from this is they're getting notoriety. They're probably able to have people, sympathetic to their cause give them more money. And I also think that they're making points in Tehran which will also feed the flow of lethal capability into the Red sea.

Admiral, one last one last question for you or just a, you know, an observation and then your thoughts on it. it's been it's somewhat ironic to see the Houthis and under with IRGC, support, disrupting and threatening other ports in the Maritime Middle East at the same time that they the Houthis and the IRGC seem to be operating in the port of Hodeidah with impunity. Mhm. with that, the pressure that's that's come at times against, who the presence and activities in the port of Hodeidah has been, basically relaxed, because of political dynamics outside the Middle East, including in the United States. and in addition to see the IRGC through its proxies, disrupting international shipping at the same time that the Iranians are

operating with, you know, quite a great deal of impunity, a ghost fleet of, by some estimates, 300 vessels that are illicitly moving Iranian oil, around the world in defiance of, US and international sanctions. What are your thoughts on that, on the juxtaposition of those two situations?

Yeah. I think what it reflects is a lack of and I've said this before, lack of awareness of how the maritime world works, what is legitimate, what is illegitimate, and the means to go about ensuring that the legitimate interests prevail. and that requires a political capability. It requires naval capability. And it also means that countries have to work together to shut down this, illicit activity. That's taking place again, I think the fact that the countries have come together with respect to the coalition and the Red sea is good, but I think we have to do more not just for the short term, but also for the long term because maritime commerce is not going to go away. Maritime security will continue to be a priority. and we, particularly as a maritime nation, need to look at the world through a maritime lens and draw others together to ensure that the prosperity that flows on the world's oceans continues to do so. And I see Rania has a parting shot here.

I always have the most important questions all the way towards the end because they just, you know, they come in my head. sir, do you think it's militarily? Do you think it's a good idea for Israel to be scattered in so many fronts right now as to what's happening in Beirut yesterday? should they get involved in the Houthi threats on their ships, or should they let the other coalition handle it? Isn't this something that is most important to Israel? Should the Arab countries help protect the maritime ships that are going to Israel, and why should they get involved? Why should the Arab countries or the Arab leaders decide, okay, we're going to go help the Israelis continue to receive their products from wherever they want. what should. you didn't tell me earlier. What should we here? What should the administration here do? Apparently they the Biden administration, with all the due respect, they continue to use the diplomacy tactic, which we all have seen in the last four years, has accomplished nothing but greater violence and more defiance. So what should we do here? And what should the Israelis do? And what is your

message to the Arab leaders? Why should they get involved in protecting the Red sea?

Yeah. Well, I would say that to your the first part of your question, I would say Israel is quite busy right now with the challenges around its border regions. and so that's why I think it's appropriate for the coalition again, because this, the maritime case in the Red sea is not just about Israel. It really is global. And so I think that there's a the need for a global response. And I would argue that for the Arab countries, they are also extraordinarily dependent on the maritime environment, on maritime commerce, on the security of their maritime interests, whether that's their their energy facilities that are on the coast or you go in the case of Saudi Arabia, the desalinization plants that are so important to its economy. And so the the Arab countries have as much of an interest, perhaps even more of an interest in ensuring the safety, the security and the and the lawful use of the maritime space around their countries. And if that begins to unravel, then I think the Middle East would be insignificantly more turmoil than it currently is. And so, you know, this is not you know, a confined I can't think of any country that doesn't depend on the oceans. and so this is something that everyone should be focused on to return the legitimate use of the sea lanes and the oceans back into a, into a more normal state.

Admiral Gary Roughead. Thank you, for your time today. Thank you for your insights about the not just the the crisis in the Red sea but the implications for the broader geopolitical picture, the broader national security picture for the United States and its allies. And there's a lot of work to be done. it seems like, national security strategists, I think have been, whistling past the graveyard, a little bit, I think also your observation that the United States along with other countries have gotten complacent about the maritime domain. I think particularly that that seems maybe a product and this could be a conversation for another day the era of the post 911 era where where I think we got into an over, I mean, unnecessarily so for, for some time, but we, we, we went into a counterterrorism sort of strategic crouch and, and have been very slow to come out of it. I've been sort of shocked out of it by the emergence of China as a, as a competitor or as an adversary and then, a

European war on a scale that no one that people thought had been left behind in the 20th century.

And now we have a middle East crisis on our hands that's, reminiscent of anything in in the high days of the Cold War, 1973 and so on. But we appreciate your time here at the American Center for Law Studies and helping us in our in our followers, our, our audience understand these issues better. So thank you very much, sir. And I hope we can reprise this conference. There's going to be a lot there's a lot of, events that are going to emerge in the, in the coming weeks and months. So we hope to be able to return to you, maybe with some better news by that time, or maybe with worse news. I don't know, we could take bets today. but as Admiral or as Ambassador Crocker was always fond of saying, look on the bright side. no matter how bad things are today, they look better today than they're going to look tomorrow. Was his philosophy.

Well, Joel, thanks. No. Thank you. And, Rania, I thank you. And and I look forward to continuing the conversations. because it is important not just for our country, um, but also for the region and the future prosperity that that we have to pass on to the future generations. So,

I think your Presence and what you have to tell us is extremely important, not just to the region and the leaders in the region, but also to the people, the people in the region who, in the end, will be there when their, leaders are gone, they will continue to be there. There's a huge gap of understanding between us and them. They do not see us as a good people or as a good community. They see us as something totally different because this is the propaganda that they have been taught. And I think it would be amazing if you can come back to us and talk to them, talk to the Arab people, tell them how you see that we succeeded and how they could do it. What are our best practices? I think that would be a great bridge that we can build between us and them. But more importantly, sir, I want to just comment on one thing, and I know Joel wants to stay on time because you guys are military people, but we either revolutionists or the activist, we we stay up until wee wee wee hours in the morning, continue to talk. But, sir,

when the Biden administration came to power, the first thing that they did was de-listing the Houthis.

They still have not put them back on the designation list. They're still hesitant to impose stronger sanctions, and now they're forced to go into a military confrontation. Our Navy, for the first time had to engage with the Houthis little boats the other day because of the lack of a correct political decision. Can you please, before we let you go and promise this will be the last question, can you please tell the American administration, tell the American people what the Biden administration has done and what should be done? How can we quickly correct those mistakes?

Yeah. It has been bothersome to me for quite some time that the Iranian proxies are not feeling the pressure that's necessary to cause them to change behavior. I think that, you know, clearly, the time is, is past due that pressure has to be brought to bear to do everything we can to shut down the type of behavior that we're now seeing manifested in the Houthis. But that has always been there as a potential. And so I'm hopeful that there'll be political steps taken, there'll be economic steps taken. And then, you know, my sense is that we are now engaged with a force that has significant capability and military force needs to be applied, to make sure that that that behavior is, is, is not allowed.

Well thank you for that. That was that was a timely question. And I'm I'm glad we covered it. with that admiral and my colleague Rania, thank you very much. And, as if for the American Center for Levant Studies, as they say in the region that we study. Maslama. Maslama. Thank you. Until and until next time. Okay.

Thank you.

Thank you sir. Bye bye.