Explaining Chinese Inaction in the Red Sea Crisis: A Foreign Policy Analysis

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Since November 2023, ships crossing the Red Sea have found themselves at risk of attacks from Iran-backed Houthi militants, attacks made in retaliation for Israel's ongoing war against Hamas (Cooban, 2024, para. 2). The Houthis, Shia rebels who have fought Yemen's government for almost two decades, are supposedly part of Iran's "axis of resistance" against Israel and the US (Hall, 2024, para. 4-5). This conflict has been considerably disruptive towards world trade. The Suez Canal, connecting the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, accounts for 10-15% of world trade and 30% of global container shipping volumes (Cooban, 2024, para. 5). In response, on January 11, US and UK forces launched airstrikes against dozens of targets across Yemen (Hall, 2024, para. 1). While the conflict has brought the US and many of its allies into the conflict, there is another major regional player whose attitude and actions (or lack thereof) should be considered: the People's Republic of China.

In this brief article, I seek to explain Chinese foreign policy regarding the Red Sea crisis. I will do so by taking a dual-prong approach: First, I will establish a baseline based on neoclassical realism and role theory; secondly, this analysis is expanded upon with more precise tools, namely the rational actor model, poliheuristic theory, Xi Jinping's operational code, and public opinion. Finally, using these theories, I will evaluate three foreign policy options for China. I ultimately conclude that China has chosen inaction because it maximises its opportunity to criticise the US, while the PRC also lacks any better alternative course of action.

Setting the Baseline

A baseline assessment is intended to provide a neutral starting point, free of bias, through an evaluation of the state's capacity and its public statements (Strong, 2024). This information is then filtered through the theoretical concepts of neoclassical realism and role theory.

According to Gideon Rose, through the lens of neoclassical realism, material power "establishes the basic parameters of a country's foreign policy" (1998, p.146). By focusing on a state's distribution of material power, we can understand how it may affect its goals and what it can achieve. The relative distribution of power shapes states' foreign policy (Taliaferro, 2006, p. 467), informing them of their capacity to exert influence and defend their interests. It also introduces the concept of time horizons, stressing how different variables are more or less important in the short, medium, and long term (Ripsman et al., 2016). While neoclassical realism is not a methodology from the foreign policy analysis toolkit—for example, neoclassical realists consider the international distribution of material power as the most important factor in foreign policy—it provides us with a solid ground for the baseline analysis while reminding us about the importance of extractive capacity and the impact of different time horizons. As neoclassical realist theories begin with the belief that every state's external behaviour is shaped by its power and relative share of material capabilities, that is where I will begin (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 56).

A few noteworthy countries border the Red Sea: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, and Yemen. To the north, the Suez Canal connects the Red Sea with the Mediterranean, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait connects it to the Gulf of Aden and Somalia. The Red Sea is a critical artery for global trade—economies rely heavily on the Red Sea for exports and imports (IMF & Oxford University, 2023). Should ships wish to avoid the Red Sea, they would have to navigate

around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope—which can add as much as two weeks to the typical East-West route (Cooban, 2024). It has been estimated that the journey via the Cape of Good Hope costs companies an extra US$1 million (Cooban, 2024). A heavy exporting nation, many of China's own containers pass through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal (Alterman 2024). This means that—although China itself is geographically very far from the region—the military conflict has a high likelihood of impacting the Chinese economy.

China is one of the world's top two economies, with an estimated GDP of US$25.684 trillion (The World Factbook, n.d.). An estimated 20.4% of the PRC's GDP in 2017 was from the exports of goods and services, leading the world in exports (The World Factbook, n.d.). According to the OEC, around 55.64% of China's crude petroleum in 2022 came from Middle Eastern countries (OEC, 2022), making the PRC relatively reliant on the region for its energy needs. Furthermore, according to the American Enterprise Institute, China has invested hundreds of billions of dollars into the Middle East, both as part of the Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative and outside investments (2023). While not directly relevant, it is still worth highlighting that Beijing successfully lobbied for Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates to join the BRICS bloc—strengthening their economic ties (Alterman, 2024).

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the world's largest military (The World Factbook, n.d.) and has the largest navy in the world with a battle force of over 370 ships and submarines (U.S. Department of Defence, 2023). Notably, China has a military base in Djibouti with an estimated 2,000 troops (U.S. Department of Defence, 2023; CIA, n.d.). The PLA Navy Marine Corps maintaining a presence there gives China the capacity to expand its military reach throughout Africa and the Middle East (U.S. Department of Defence, 2023). Finally, for over 14 years, the PRC has been part of counter-piracy efforts in the region, and in 2022, their scope expanded from escorting "Chinese-flagged vessels and vessels from the World Food Program to escorting merchant ships from other countries as well" (U.S. Department of Defence, p. 55).

The PRC is not only a significant global power with a high position in the international system, but it also has a high share of the world's material capacity. Some of China's interests are in the impacted region, and considering that the PRC has a strong navy, stationed nearby, and with prior experience navigating the area, we would expect China to have a vested interest in taking action. According to Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, while extractive capacity matters more in the medium term, we expect individual perceptions to have the greatest influence over the short term (2016)—this leads me to the second key theory: role theory.

Role theory strengthens the neoclassical realism lens by highlighting how decision-makers' actions are shaped by a nation's historical and cultural roots and public opinion (Cantir & Kaarbo, 2012); and, according to Yudan Chen, role theory works well with Chinese thought (Chen, 2016). National role conceptions represent what decision-makers think the appropriate role their country should play in the international arena is—what decisions, commitments, rules, and actions their state should take (Demirduzen & Thies, 2021; Holsti, 1970).

China has made very few statements or moves in the region, especially when considering how many investments, economic interests, and military presence the country has in the Middle East. Although the Houthis have stated that Chinese ships will not be targeted, attacks on international shipping would still directly and indirectly harm Chinese interests (Zhao, 2024; News Desk, 2024). The PRC has piggybacked on global statements of concerns—it has not condemned Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, there is no Chinese diplomatic proposal to address any element of the crisis in the region, and instruments of diplomacy have not been used (Alterman, 2024, para. 16-17). The majority of Chinese government statements have focused on calling for parties to use intergovernmental institutions to negotiate a solution under a veiled criticism of US-led military operations against the Houthis (Gan, 2024)—Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin stated that the PRC was "concerned" and urged "the cessation of attacks and harassment against civilian ships" and that "all parties […] stop fuelling the tensions" (Bloomberg, 2024, para. 2). Wang further stressed this point by highlighting how the PRC believed that the UN Security Council had never authorised the use of force by any country on Yemen or the surrounding waters (Foreign Ministry, 2024).

A statement in March by Liao Liqiang, the Chinese ambassador to Egypt, may give us an indication of the government's perspective on the PRC's role in the conflict—stating that "the US stance on the Gaza war had seen its 'moral image decay', while Arab nations had welcomed Beijing's role in 'upholding justice'" (Zhao, 2024, para. 16). In

Wendt's typology, China could be considered to be playing the role of friend to Arab nations but the rival to the US (McCourt, 2011)—but China's lack of action hardly makes it a friend. Holsti's more detailed role types serve as a more accurate framing for China's perceived role, conceiving themselves as some form of aspirational independent mediator (1970), providing an alternative to the US-led world system. Specifically understanding the PRC's mediation role to be held up in contrast to the US allows the mediation role to coexist with the idea of China being a rival to the US and a friend to Arab nations.

These points lead to one conclusion: Although China has the material capacity and incentive to act to protect its investments in the region, its role as a rival to the US prevents it from joining the airstrikes, which would legitimise US military action. Legitimising the US's airstrikes would put into question the PRC's status as an independent mediator in the region. As the Houthis have stated that they will not be attacking Chinese vessels, the PRC may feel like its interests are less at risk than the US does.

There are, however, limitations with this baseline that render this conclusion as overly simplistic. It fails to account for why the PRC would risk significant material interests in the region simply to not legitimise the US, and it does not consider enough how domestic, historical, and ideological variables may be constraining the state's actions. This is all without going into further detail about the shortcomings of neoclassical realism and role theory.

Toolkit for Further Analysis

The rational actor model (RAM) and its assumptions are often critiqued for being built on unsustainable assumptions and holding decision-makers to aspirational standards by ignoring studies on the impact of psychology, cognition, and/or organisations on decision-makers (Alden, 2017; Smith et al., 2016). After all, humans are not rational decision-makers, so how can a model that requires a rational decision-maker be reliable?

I agree with the criticisms on RAM in its purest form—individuals do not have complete freedom of action, nor may they necessarily fully analyse their options or have access to all information (Drake, 2000). I will be relaxing RAM's assumptions. Bounded rationality recognises that decision-makers have incomplete information and cognitive limits, settling for the "good enough" solution (Hoefer, 2011, p.69). Poliheuristic theory goes further and suggests that decision-makers use several (poly) cognitive (heuristic) shortcuts to reach their decisions, and the theory views decision-making as divided into two successive phases: first eliminating politically unacceptable options and then following closer to rational choice theory utility maximisation (Morin & Paquin, 2018). Lastly, Bueno de Mesquita highlights in their research that ideal outcomes under RAM can still be shaped by personal preferences independent of national interests, as RAM is a guide on how an individual tries to prioritise and achieve said goals and not a way to define the goals themselves (2018). This leaves us free to utilise other tools in conjunction.

Cognitive approaches argue that any form of the RAM is not an appropriate methodology for understanding the decision-making process because rationality does not hold up during periods of stress (Oneal, 1988). This argument has not always held up in studies, which sometimes show that decision-makers made the best response in times of high stress—for example, the Truman administration showed great creativity in its responses to Cold War crises (Oneal, 1988). Instead, scholars like Adomeit have argued that RAM is the most appropriate procedure for the analysis of risk-taking in international politics (1982). Thus, I will not be considering pure cognitive approaches in this paper.

However, considering the strong presence President Xi Jinping has in Chinese politics, I will be including President Xi's ideology and operational code. A leader's belief system reflects what kind of leader they are and what type of a state the country will be—if they harbour revisionist ambition and have a pessimistic view of the world, the state is more likely to become a revisionist power (Feng & He, 2017, p. 25). Originating from Alexander George's article, an operational code consists of a leader's philosophical and instrumental beliefs, connecting the external and internal world's impact on decision-making (1969). The former covers how the leader views the world (e.g., what the 'essential' nature of political life is), and the latter how to respond to the world (e.g., how the goals of action would be pursued most effectively) (George, 1969). Operational codes are weakened by many of the same drawbacks of other psychology-based approaches—they are an 'at-a-distance' approach and thus require a lot of speeches and

statements to analyse, and when working in translation, these may have translation errors and lose cultural contexts. Furthermore, China's foreign policy decision-making has a pluralistic tendency, so Xi is not the only individual of note in China's decision-making process (Feng & He, 2017).

Lastly, while perhaps controversial due to the nature of the Chinese state, I will also be briefly looking at the public narrative and how it impacts the context for the decision-makers. As I will show, it is possible that public opinion is restraining the options the Chinese government can take—not because the public may demand a certain course of action, but because of the ideological narrative the state is trying to maintain. From an FPA perspective, we know that how central decision-making units interpret both domestic and international constraints and opportunities will affect foreign policy (Darwich & Kaarbo, 2019). There are a few things of note when considering the role of public opinion on foreign policy in this case study: General issue salience is not important when there's a clear majority in favour of a policy, public opinion rarely affects specific policy decisions, and most research on the role of public opinion has been conducted on either the US or liberal democracies (Risse-Kappen, 1991; Holsti, 1992). Furthermore, it is argued that in countries with stronger state institutions with greater control of the policy-making processes, the public's role is weaker (Risse-Kappen, 1991). While these seem to suggest that public opinion analysis is a poor tool to use in China, I argue that many scholars are not aware of the intricacies of the domestic Chinese foreign policy scene. Namely, the increasing role of nationalism and avoiding a repeat of the 'century of humiliation.' As Suisheng Zhao stresses in their research—while the Chinese government was able to control popular nationalism's effect on Chinese foreign policy before 2008, it has since increasingly found itself willingly dictated by popular nationalist calls (2013). The government is increasingly responsive to public opinion in matters of foreign policy to distract the populace from tensions at home (Zhao, 2013). Therefore, despite potential shortcomings, I argue it is still worth considering the role of public opinion over the Red Sea crisis due to the US's presence in the Middle East and Chinese popular and political belief that the US is trying to suppress China's growth (U.S. Department of Defence, 2023).

Given the general silence of the Chinese government on the situation in the Red Sea, groupthink and bureaucratic politics will not be the most practical approach. China's inaction and lack of statements will impose significant limitations and difficulties on the tools that are used. This is also why I am taking a rational actor-based approach, for these models thrive in cases where little documentation is available (Drake, 2000).

Understanding China's Options

A few possible courses of action for China in the Red Sea can be identified. Due to the limitations of this paper, I will only be looking at the three main possibilities: first, using military force to protect Chinese interests in the region (namely Chinese commercial vessels); second, using diplomatic tools to apply pressure in the region; and third, steping back and not engaging with the situation.

Option 1: Using military force to protect Chinese interests

This would follow a purely realist worldview, accepting that in the end, one needs to use military force to achieve one's goals. As seen in the baseline analysis, China does have material interests in the region (investments, BRI projects, and heavy use of the Suez Canal), so it would not be a large feat of logic that the PRC may opt to use military coercion against the Houthis. US Department of Defence reports have noted that the PLA and PRC have shown "greater willingness to use military coercion—and inducements—to advance its global security and development interests" (U.S. Department of Defence, 2023). The US-led mission, Operation Prosperity Guardian, is such a response.

However, multiple analyses by scholars on Xi's operational code have shown that the Chinese leader prioritises cooperative strategies (I-1) despite viewing the political universe as less friendly than it had been previously (P-1) (Yang et al., 2017). The operational code shows low confidence in the ability to shape historical outcomes or predict the political future (P-3, P-4, P-5) and has generally exhibited great caution (I-3) (Yang et al., 2017). This indicates that China is "likely to take a status quo approach to the international system" unless significantly confronted, and with a high risk-aversion, it is more likely not to seek confrontation and avoid single tactical modes unless there are

no alternatives (Yang et al., 2017, p. 599). Xi prefers cooperative strategies and is a more decisive leader who seeks 'soft approaches' to achieving his foreign policy goals (Feng & He, 2017, p.31). Given that option 1 would be a 'hard approach,' and there are other alternatives available, this downgrades option 1's chances to be considered.

At this stage, it is worth delving into what China has been doing diplomatically in the Middle East, as well as Xi's Global Security Initiative (GSI), which had been advertised as "Chinese solutions and wisdom for solving security challenges" (Gan, 2024, para. 38). It was Xi's call to the international community to "build a world with lasting peace, universal security and common prosperity" (Han, 2023, para. 1). In March 2023, China made international headlines as it brokered a peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a feat many considered impossible, and the PRC was able to elevate themselves as the country that could help bring regional security where the US had failed to (Alterman, 2024). The tone of achieving what the US could not, or highlighting US inadequacies, is prominent. At the start of the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict, China maintained the same line as its regional partners, Saudi Arabia and Iran, "[condemning] Israeli aggression, [calling] for a negotiated settlement […] and held conferences and summits to express their collective opposition to the conflict" (Figueroa, 2024, para. 1). Yet these ideals of China's role in the Middle East began to crack with the Houthi attacks as Iran has an unquestionably close relationship with the Houthis and Saudi Arabia has suffered protracted and costly conflict against them (Figueroa, 2024). For China, siding with one side will isolate the other and put the March agreement at risk.

Furthermore, military action would go against the public narrative. Chinese state and state media have taken up a 'root cause' narrative—in Chinese-language sources, the expression *biao ben jian zhi* (□□□□, "treating both the symptoms and the root cause") is used, implying that the Gaza conflict (the root) needs to be resolved first before being able to solve the Red Sea conflict (Hompot, 2024). In a January 30th statement, Wang Wenbin explicitly framed the Red Sea conflict as a Gaza spillover and delegitimised the US intervention for not having a UN Security Council mandate (Xinhua News, 2024; Hompot, 2024). Multiple Global Times articles have explicitly critiqued the creation of the US-led military operation, and that if the US would support a ceasefire in Gaza, the Red Sea conflict could be resolved without military intervention (Yang, 2023; Chen, 2024; Hompot, 2024). Some Chinese-language sources have used this conflict to give a more overarching critique of the US's approach to Middle Eastern affairs, implicitly or explicitly claiming that China has a more "holistic and far-sighted approach" that will bring more "stability and prosperity to the region" than the US's military-heavy approach (Xiong, 2024; Sun, 2024; Hompot, 2024, para. 8). The anti-US rhetoric that shapes a lot of Chinese strategic discussion is strong in public discussion of the Red Sea crisis—a political context that forces the Chinese government not to act like the US.

Lastly, both the Houthis and the Yemeni government have reassured Chinese officials that Chinese ships can cross the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean without fear of attack, having reportedly met with "Mohammad Abdul Salam, the spokesman and chief negotiator for Yemen's National Salvation Government (NSG), and 'reached an understanding' about safe passage through the Red Sea and beyond" in exchange for China providing unspecified political support to Yemen in the UN Security Council (Zhao, 2024; News Desk, 2024, para. 1-2). China, quite simply, does not see as much of a direct threat from the Houthis as the US and UK do.

China sees the US as its principal strategic challenge, and that concern trumps everything else—its desire to delegitimise and undermine the US in the region means that it cannot do the same as the US and take military action against the Houthis (Alterman, 2024). Joining the US coalition would strengthen the US position as a regional hegemon, weakening China's in turn. Furthermore, as it is going against the public narrative, it is a politically unviable option. Even if this was an option at the start (which is questionable, considering Xi's operational code and interests), under poliheuristic theory, this disqualifies option 1.

Option 2: Using diplomatic tools to actively pressure Iran and coerce the Houthis into ending their attacks

This is the option the US has been pressuring the PRC to take. US national security advisor Jake Sullivan urged China to use its "substantial leverage with Iran" and stressed that this was "not the first time [the US has] called on China to play a constructivist role" (Gan, 2024, para. 17-18). While experts disagree on what terminology to use to describe the Iran-Houthi relationship, the two share some form of 'strategic partnership' and share the same anti-US geopolitical agenda (Hompot, 2024). However, this, first of all, assumes China has significant sway in Iran. While it is

true that China purchases the majority of Iranian oil, is a key supplier of weapons, and has proposed a variety of projects to enhance bilateral cooperation, most of the oil is bought illicitly by private 'teapot' refineries weary of breaching US sanctions (Figueroa, 2024)—China's own economy is under a great deal of stress and may not be able to ignore the discounts Iranian oil suppliers offer or afford to cut themselves off from Iranian oil (Figueroa, 2024; Gan, 2024). Lastly, China has not followed through with the promised investments (Figueroa, 2024). From a more rationalist and neoclassical realism perspective, China simply does not have the capacity to enforce such coercion on Iran, and therefore on the Houthis.

Furthermore, considering that China has already been granted free passage through the Red Sea, it would simply lose face with regional partners and go against its narrative that the Israeli-Gaza conflict is the root problem if it chooses to 'punish' Iran or Yemen. It would go against Xi's GSI and the Chinese 'wisdom' it is supposed to represent, putting the March 2023 Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement at risk. Media coverage has so far avoided putting any blame on Middle Eastern countries, focusing instead on blaming the US for fanning the flames. Instead, in an article originally published on Guangming Daily Online, Middle East expert Sun Degang explicitly criticises the US for not engaging in dialogue with the Iran-backed groups in the region (Sun, 2024).

Option 2 does not necessarily clash with Xi's operational code, if softer diplomatic tools are used, but it would not be the president's first choice due to his preference to maintain the status quo. It has been reported by news agencies citing Iranian sources that Chinese officials had asked Iran to help rein in the Houthis; however, this has not been mentioned or confirmed by Chinese officials (Gan, 2024). China does not seem interested in pressing the matter further or using harder tools.

Regardless, China does not have the capacity to influence Iran to stop financially supporting the Houthis. It helps us understand why China has tried to, lightly, bring the topic up with Iran but not pursue it further. Given that the expected payout for such an approach is low, this option would not rank highly under rational choice utility maximisation.

Option 3: Not engaging with the conflict in the Red Sea

This leaves us with the final option I will be considering: that the PRC does not engage with the conflict in the Red Sea further. Through their public statements and "root cause" narrative, Chinese decision-makers have already shown that they believe the maritime conflict will only be resolved after dealing with the Israel-Gaza conflict. They have already been promised safe passage by the Houthis. Lastly, Option 3 also aligns with Xi's operational code. As stated previously, Xi is unlikely to seek confrontation unless there are no other alternatives and will stick to whatever the status quo is, and the PRC is not being directly confronted.

Inaction does come with its risks—it does not eliminate the fact that China may suffer indirect economic repercussions, or that other regional partners in the area (namely Egypt) may wish that China was more proactive in the conflict. In the long run, depending on how the conflict progresses, China risks damaging its regional partnerships or being seen as a "paper tiger" while the US does the heavy lifting (Gan, 2024, para. 31). But, in the short term, China has a lot more to lose than gain by being proactive, as discussed in the previous two options, so when considering what China can do through the lens of utility maximisation, inaction is the most effective action.

Conclusion

At the start, I stated that China, despite having the capacity to act, was playing the role of a rival to the US and an independent mediator in the Middle East, meaning it could not step in militarily and support the US military effort. Further analysis shows that the issue is a bit more nuanced, but generally in line with the outcome of the baseline analysis.

I considered three potential courses of action for the PRC. Option 1, had it even been considered, would have been eliminated immediately due to it being a politically unviable option. Option 2, while a possible choice, would not have ranked highly due to China's poor capacity to coerce and being at risk of being an unviable option if it had been

forced to use stronger diplomatic tools (such as economic sanctions). This really leaves the PRC with one choice: option 3, to not engage with the conflict in the Red Sea. China has little to gain and a lot to lose by becoming a more active player in the Red Sea conflict. Considering China has largely been piggybacking on other state's responses and have very few independent statements, we must be aware that we do not really have a clear window into what decision-makers are thinking. Nevertheless, this analysis gives a better understanding of Chinese foreign policy.

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