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Dangerous environmental threats in the Western Indian Ocean

Background

During 2020 the COVID19 pandemic washed over much of the world and compelled governments to institute drastic measures to prevent and contain its spread. The said measures are probably the most restrictive and draconian in the absence of a state of war the modern world has ever experienced. The measures instituted also serve as a harbinger of the future as [follow-up waves](#) are expected. In the absence of a suitable vaccine to stem infections, further measures constraining and even preventing movement, trade and social interaction could well be on the horizon.

Overall, the international response to COVID-19 illustrates how a non-traditional security threat sparked [extraordinary security measures and international cooperation](#) to deal with a possible existential threat. One lingering question now arises: Could environmental matters also be elevated to a level where significant and even extraordinary national and international interests and responses are assembled to prevent and contain a devastating environmental threat to vulnerable societies?

Discussion

During August 2020 an oil tanker (MV Wakashio) stranded, broke up and polluted sensitive maritime areas on the east coast of [Mauritius off Pointe d' Esnay](#). The accident has probably created one of the [largest environmental disasters](#) in the Western Indian Ocean. The environmental impact not only damaged marine life and precious coral landscapes, but also beaches that sit at the heart of the tourism industry – an industry that largely underpins the greater Mauritius economy. From a national point of view, the oil spill holds dangerous security repercussions for Mauritius, but not in the familiar ambit of military and other armed threats, but [environmental in kind](#).

Environmental protection and sustainability of its ocean landscape and resources feature as a vital national interest for Mauritius as it underpins their blue economy, a way of life for many and a dependence by coastal communities to use the sea as a livelihood. Although often ignored or down-played by states amongst larger international stakeholders who have to do trade-offs between softer threats and hard military or dangerous armed foes, for Mauritius the absence of the latter allows for the threatening profile of environmental destruction to become clear with its deep [national, political, economic and social disruptions](#).

Traverse further north to the narrow straits of the Gulf of Aden where it meets the Red Sea off the port of [Hodeida in Yemen](#), a second environmental littoral catastrophic event is looming. [Ian Ralby](#) et al. outlined the dangers of the anchored, but decrepit oil storage vessel SAFER that is slowly rusting away with 1.14 million barrels of crude oil on board. Irrespective of the reasons why this looming disaster is not addressed in a sensible

way, the impact of the storage vessel rupturing or even exploding, [hold dire consequences for Yemen](#). Both dreadful and immediate livelihood consequences for Yemen's society are looming and from a residual risk point of view for the surrounding marine life as well. Yemen society suffers from the ongoing war between the Houthi faction supported by Iran and the Saudi alliance backing the Yemen government raging since 2015. The country also hosts a very large [refugee and displaced population](#) dependent upon aid flows by sea. It is improbable that such a large and vulnerable population can also deal with an oil-induced pollution and environmental catastrophe off Hodeida that could well block the main conduit for aid flows.

The SAFER and its large crude oil cargo off Yemen remain largely unattended bar a small technical team. The complexities are heightened as the overall safety and security of the SAFER are tied into the war on land between the Saudi Coalition and opposing Houthi faction as a [bargaining chip and leverage to settle agreements on ending the armed conflict](#) or instituting interim measures to move towards peace. Inherently the littoral threat became subjected to and impacted by the military threat. Subsequently little room is afforded to mitigate the growing marine-environmental dangers that could well hold existential repercussions for vulnerable societies in Yemen over the short and medium term. Some of the repercussions present as disrupted international aid flows to Yemen, irreparable damage to marine eco-systems and threats to the littoral zone and high seas environment of Saudi maritime interests to the north.

Summary

Taking stock of the two cases, the Mauritius oil spill focusses the attention upon the grave dangers that environmental pollution holds for smaller island states and their dependence on healthy and secure maritime domains. This calls for good maritime security and integrated, cross-sectoral oceans governance and maritime domain awareness. The latter includes functional or credible measures and capacity building to [prevent and contain potential environmental disasters](#), not only the familiar domains of piracy and transnational organized crime at sea plaguing sections of the Western Indian Ocean. The case of the SAFER oil storage platform off Yemen mirrors the quagmire of national and regional governance related lacunas that governments are confronted with when a non-traditional maritime security threat that endangers the environment and vulnerable coastal communities become entangled with more traditional military or armed violence. Here neither threat seems to be afforded room for mitigation to avoid larger catastrophic consequences for the environment and human security. The latter is visible in the vulnerabilities of Yemen society caught between a war on land and an impending environmental disaster off the country's western seaboard. In the case of Yemen, geo-political and military interests again seem to trump [possible environmental damage or devastation](#).

Further reading:

Soud, D., Ralby, I.R., Ralby, R., *et al.* A stalemate in Yemen jeopardises the future of the Red Sea. *Diplomatic Courier*. 28 October 2020. <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/a-stalemate-in-yemen-jeopardizes-the-future-of-the-red-sea> 03 November 2020.

Walker, T. & C. Bueger. Lessons for Africa from a devastating Mauritius oil spill. IPP Media. 19 August 2020. Available: <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/mauritius-oil-spill-potential-government-failures-should-be-investigated-expert/> 03 November 2020.

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