

Houthi missile attacks a paradigm shift in security threat to shipping



Vessels transiting the Red Sea in face of Houthi attacks are strongly advised to disable AIS transponders and ensure vessels have no US, UK or Israeli links.

Marcus Hand | Apr 16, 2024

A panel representing shipowners and naval forces shared their experiences around transiting the Red Sea at the ReCAAP Anti-Piracy and Sea Robbery Conference 2024 during Singapore Maritime Week.

Akash Mittra, Director HSEQ for Teekay Shipping (Singapore) described what is happening the Red Sea as “changing the paradigm” in terms of the security threat to shipping.

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“In the past, we've never had missiles and drones attacking the vessels, and that's not normal. The defences which BMP5 advocates are sufficient to deter piracy, and they're really very good,” he told the ReCAAP conference.

However, when it comes to missile attacking a vessel such as a loaded Suezmax tanker there is really very little room to manoeuvre especially in the Bab el Mandeb Strait. “There is a very limited number of things our vessel or its Master can do in such a situation,” Mitra said.

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Col Ng Xun Xi, Commander MSTF for the Republic of Singapore Navy, agreed missile attacks by the Houthi are well outside of the security threats commercial shipping is used to dealing with. “So, I think the shipping industry is used to piracy attacks and you have security teams on board to deal with these kinds of threats.”

Col Ng said the weapons used Houthi in the attacks are “not run of the mill normal missiles” and are very long range and highly capable. “Even we were shocked that the Houthis used them on commercial ships for the first time.”

While successful attacks have hit the headlines Col Ng said that the vast majority of unsuccessful attacks by the Houthis, an estimated 95 – 98%, went unreported in the press. He said that in his view the coalition forces had done a good job defending commercial ships.

Many shipowners such as Teekay have decided to stop transiting the Red Sea altogether opting to take the much longer route around the Cape of Good Hope. The last Teekay vessel transited the Red Sea in January this year under the protection of Operation Prosperity Guardian and another vessel around 70 miles astern was attacked by the Houthis during this voyage.

Mitra said that the tanker owner would continue to divert vessels via the Cape until there was a guarantee “nothing will happen to us”.

Container line [CMA CGM](#) has taken a different view and some of its vessels continue to transit the Red Sea. RADM Jacques Riviere, Head QSSE Asia Pacific for CMA CGM, said they constantly adapt the threshold as to whether an individual vessel should transit via the Red Sea.

So, what should a shipowner or operator do if their vessel really needs to transit the area?

A clear message was to turn off AIS transponders. RADM Riviere said he was surprised that he understood that even until recently 90% of ships transiting the Red Sea had their AIS turned on. "When you are shooting at somebody, if you are blind, it's very difficult to hit the target," he said. But if the target is carrying a light saying "I'm here, my name is" it is much less difficult.

The advice was echoed by Col Ng, who said they understood from US Navcent that, "The targeting function of the Houthis is mainly from the AIS. That's where they get the source of the position of the ship, and indeed you are giving away free information to be targeted."

There are still other ways in which ships can be targeted, but turning of AIS makes it more difficult.

Owners should also comply with the Houthis demand not to send any vessel that is connected with Israel, the US or the UK. Searches should be conducted on the ship databases on the internet as inaccurate information can be used by the Houthis to wrongly target a vessel. "We don't send ships that have been seen as American, UK or Israeli even though we know we know, because they belong to us that they are not connected," RADM Riviere said.

Even then CMA CGM had a vessel called the APL Detroit targeted simply because of its name even though it had no links to the US whatsoever. "You don't need to think about what is logical from your data, but what is logical from their [the Houthis] point of view," he cautioned.

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