

THE UNITED STATES' STRATEGIC CULTURE IN HANDLING THE RED SEA CRISIS THROUGH OPERATION PROSPERITY GUARDIAN

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Abstrak. A country's foreign and defense policies are often shaped by its strategic culture, which encompasses national values, security agency principles, and historical perspectives. This study examines how the United States employed its strategic culture—characterized by a maritime vision, core national values such as equality, freedom, human rights, democracy, and liberalism—in formulating and executing Operation Prosperity Guardian to address the Red Sea crisis. The crisis, caused by the Houthi group's attacks, disrupted global trade and conflicted with U.S. values. Despite a year of operational efforts, the campaign did not yield a significant reduction in Houthi attacks, indicating limited long-term success. This qualitative research analyzes the underlying causes of this outcome by identifying four critical shortcomings within the U.S. strategic culture as applied in the operation. Through in-depth analysis, the study aims to provide a renewed understanding of how strategic culture influences policy formulation and implementation, highlighting the need for more nuanced integration of cultural factors to improve operational effectiveness. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers seeking to enhance strategic approaches in complex conflict environments.

Keywords: Red Sea Crisis; Operation Prosperity Guardian; Maritime Security; Strategic Culture; and The United States.

INTRODUCTION

The Red Sea Crisis is a term that refers to the events that occurred on October 19, 2023. In this incident, the Yemeni armed group, the Houthis, attacked and blocked commercial ships crossing the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, especially ships that were indicated to have proximity or even came from Israel. The US, which openly declares its closeness and alignment with Israel, is also a victim of the Houthi attacks. The Houthi group itself is a Zayidiah Shiite Islamist group that is trying to gain domestic support in order to occupy the Yemeni government that has been experiencing a civil war for a long time, namely between the legitimate Yemeni government and the Houthis. In addition, the Houthi attacks are also aimed at supporting Palestinians who have long been oppressed by Israel and Western powers. The Houthi offensive has led to the disruption of 30 percent of global trade as commercial ships have opted to avoid the Red Sea and turn to cross the Cape of Good Hope. These trajectory changes have a negative impact on both the economy and the environment due to the distance traveled, the amount of fuel consumption and emissions, and the increased risk of pirates. As a result, the price of products reaching consumers has increased due to increased shipping costs due to supply chain disruptions caused by Houthi attacks.

In response to the Red Sea crisis, the U.S. sought to protect global supply chain stability through the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian. The U.S. is not moving alone, but it is engaging countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Spain, France, Bahrain, Seychelles, Singapore, and Sri Lanka to ensure maritime security, especially openness and freedom from the Red Sea (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Through these operations, these countries provide assistance such as shipping ships, troops, information, technology, and others to carry out tasks such as attack prevention, patrols, crew rescue, Houthi supply chain breakdowns, and others (Garamone, 2023). The operation is conducted with a collective security approach, in which the US coordinates partner countries so that they can contribute to protecting maritime security and supporting freedom of navigation for any ship of any country. The US protection effort departs from its strategic culture and maritime vision. The U.S. values that underpin Operation Prosperity Guardian prompted the U.S. to stop Houthi attacks. However, the lingering Red Sea crisis that is still ongoing at least until the end of 2024 indicates the weakness of this operation, including those of the US.

Abaad Studies (2024) assesses that there are three weaknesses of Operation Prosperity Guardian, namely the lack of support from regional countries, miscoordination between the US and member countries of the operation, US miscalculation of the Houthi and Iranian threats, and the failure of the US to link this operation with the Yemen unification process. Meanwhile, Estelle Denton-Townshend (2024) assesses that Operation Prosperity Guardian signifies the existence of an international system based on the preferences of major power countries. Jonah Carlson (2024) added that the US has a foreign policy, including a military strategy that is too dictatorial, causing the Houthis to carry out various attacks in the Red Sea. Some of these studies indicate that this research topic has been discussed before. However, there has been no research that addresses the link between Operation Prosperity Guardian, the Red Sea crisis, and the U.S. strategic culture. The author will try to touch and provide new

discussions related to the topic of US foreign policy, especially in Operation Prosperity Guardian and the Red Sea crisis.

Prior research has analyzed the strategic dimensions of U.S. foreign and defense policies in maritime security operations. Abaad Studies (2024) identified key weaknesses in Operation Prosperity Guardian, including limited regional support, coordination challenges with partner countries, and miscalculations regarding Houthi and Iranian threats. Denton-Townshend (2024) discussed the operation within the framework of major power preferences shaping the international system, while Carlson (2024) critiqued the U.S. military strategy as overly dictatorial, exacerbating regional tensions. However, none of these studies explicitly link Operation Prosperity Guardian with the underlying U.S. strategic culture or explore how this culture shapes both the operation's formulation and its shortcomings. This research fills that gap by providing a nuanced analysis of U.S. strategic culture—including maritime vision, national values, and historical experiences—as a determinant factor in the successes and failures of Operation Prosperity Guardian, offering a fresh perspective on the interplay between cultural frameworks and policy outcomes in complex conflict environments.

This study aims to examine the extent to which U.S. strategic culture influences the formulation and implementation of Operation Prosperity Guardian to address the Red Sea crisis. It seeks to identify the specific weaknesses embedded within U.S. values that have affected the operation's effectiveness and to understand how these cultural factors shape foreign policy decision-making in a maritime security context.

The findings are expected to provide policymakers and scholars with deeper insights into how strategic culture affects the efficacy of multinational security operations. This understanding can contribute to more culturally informed, balanced, and adaptive policy frameworks that enhance cooperation and stability in maritime conflict zones like the Red Sea, ultimately improving global trade security and regional peace.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design with triangulation as the core methodological approach. Triangulation involves cross-verifying and combining multiple sources of data, references, and perspectives to ensure a comprehensive and credible analysis (Bachelor Print, 2022). The research relies primarily on secondary data, including official documents from government agencies, historical archives, previous research findings from both governmental and non-governmental institutions, international legal texts, and relevant media reports. This diverse range of data sources allows for an in-depth understanding of the subject matter from various angles and helps to mitigate potential biases inherent in any single data source (Keegan, 2009).

The population of data consists of all available textual and documentary sources related to Operation Prosperity Guardian, the Red Sea crisis, and U.S. strategic culture in foreign policy implementation. Since the research focuses on qualitative analysis rather than quantitative measurement, the sampling technique is purposive, selecting documents and materials that

are most relevant and rich in information to answer the research questions. The research instruments comprise content analysis frameworks and discourse analysis tools that facilitate the interpretation of language, narratives, and meanings conveyed by actors involved in the operation (Luo, 2019). To ensure validity and reliability, the triangulation method is rigorously applied by cross-checking facts and interpretations across multiple data sources, which strengthens the consistency and trustworthiness of the findings.

Data collection follows a systematic procedure of gathering documents and archival materials from institutional repositories, public databases, and credible online platforms. The collected data are then organized and analyzed using qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo or Atlas.ti, which assist in coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis. Discourse analysis techniques are employed to explore the underlying meanings, ideologies, and strategic narratives embedded in the texts. This dual approach—triangulation supported by discourse analysis—provides a robust framework for interpreting how U.S. strategic culture shapes the formulation and outcomes of Operation Prosperity Guardian, enabling nuanced insights into the complex socio-political dynamics at play.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Birth of Operation Prosperity Guardian from the U.S. Maritime Vision and Strategic Culture

Operation Prosperity Guardian was born out of the U.S. maritime vision and U.S. strategic culture. There are two things that are closely attached to the U.S. maritime vision, namely Alfred Mahan's thinking and freedom of navigation. Meanwhile, the strategic culture of the operation reflects US values in the form of maintaining order, freedom, equality, liberalism, democracy, and human rights, upholding American exceptionalism, and the belief of the US as a good actor who always eradicates crime. In addition to these values, the U.S. has several other beliefs that influence the formation of these operations, such as the use of military force to overwhelm the enemy, U.S. optimism in winning battles and spreading its values, U.S. preference for quickly addressing problems, the availability of various options for U.S. approaches to war, and others. Not only that, but the U.S. experience in safeguarding maritime security and values in relevant agencies also has a similar role. Therefore, in the next section, the author will explain the role of these three things that are part of the US strategic culture behind the formulation and implementation of Operation Prosperity Guardian.

The overall U.S. maritime vision is influenced by Alfred Mahan's thinking which emphasizes the magnitude of maritime power as an essential element for maintaining maritime security, securing or even controlling trade routes, and expanding U.S. influence in the international arena as a hegemon power that upholds American exceptionalism (Leorocha 2022). This means that maintaining maritime security can help the country in achieving its national interests both in terms of security and economy. Therefore, in order to maintain, supervise, and control trade routes, a country must demonstrate its naval strength with the presence of fleets in various regions, strong naval bases spread across various countries, and have foreign

and economic policies that support maritime power. Mahan's thinking is reflected in the vision and mission of The Department of the Navy which emphasizes the presence of the US Navy in various regions to maintain dominance and deter threats, including actions that are not in line with US values (Marines, 2017). One of the areas where the US navy is located is the Strait of Hormuz in the Red Sea, which is an important strait for global trade, but the fragility of the Middle East with national and regional conflicts has made the US deploy its navy there even since 1987 in Operation Earnest Will to protect the US-flagged Kuwaiti tanker from Iranian attacks (Snow, 2019). In addition to deploying its navy, the US also has several shipbases in Middle Eastern countries such as Bahrain. The existence of the base makes it easier for the US to maintain maritime security in the Middle East as happened during Operation Prosperity Guardian when Bahrain coordinated with the US to deploy US ships to prevent Houthi attacks (Ebrahim, 2023).

Not only focusing on trade routes and self-interest, the U.S. maritime vision as implied in the vision and mission of The Department of the Navy also always voices the "freedom of navigation" for each nation's ships. The U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Department of Defense define freedom of navigation as the right for U.S. ships, including their warships, to navigate in international waters and peacefully transit. The strategic culture of the US military indicates that its naval and air fleets have the same freedom of navigation as commercial vessels without having to ask permission from the country that owns the waters it crosses (Xiaolu, 2023). Freedom of navigation has also been regulated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the US has always emphasized to countries to always comply with the law. The combination of freedom of navigation with Mahan's thinking implies that the U.S. presence in international waters will protect global trade routes so that countries can avoid threats and engage in export-import activities without fear so that everyone who benefits from trade can prosper. When there are parties that threaten freedom of navigation, the US will not hesitate to destroy them, including in the Red Sea. Through this, the US has reflected some of its national values, namely that the US must be an example and model in maintaining freedom and order at sea.

Freedom of navigation as a universal principle has been championed by the US. The principle of freedom of navigation itself has existed since the 17th century to secure the movement of people and goods by sea from attacks by colonial ships (Naval History and Heritage Command, 2020). This principle was adopted by some of the founding fathers of the United States, such as John Adams and James Madison to protect its commercial and naval vessels in international waters from naval interference by the United Kingdom, France, and North African countries due to heated political tensions, debates over trade restrictions, and economic competition between the countries involved. Then, in World War 1, the U.S. initially acted as a neutral country and President Woodrow Wilson voiced the protection of ships coming from neutral countries. However, the voice of the principle of freedom of navigation was ignored by the British and Germans which led to an attack on the Lusitania. In the end, the principle of freedom of navigation was used by the US as a justification for involvement in World War 1. Wilson's advocacy was continued by his successors such as Franklin Roosevelt in

World War 2. Then, Jimmy Carter continued by initiating Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP), which is a proactive US initiative to prevent claims by one country against other countries' waters aggressively (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2024). The U.S.'s historical experience in fighting for freedom of navigation makes the U.S. have a sense of responsibility to be involved in securing the Red Sea from Houthi attacks to ensure maritime security, especially for countries not involved in conflicts in the Middle East.

Operation Prosperity Guardian was initiated by the United States Department of Defense (DoD). The institution focuses on providing direction from the Operation Prosperity Guardian policy, building the justification and narrative of the operation, encouraging the commitment of the operation member countries, and ensuring the conformity of policy formation with the interests of the state (Gordon, 2023). DoD has several basic values, such as duty, integrity, ethics, honor, courage, and loyalty (Mattox, 2013). These values are formed based on US national values that make the DoD maintain its integrity in being responsible for protecting national security from threats while respecting human rights. In addition, there is a culture of strategy making by the US, especially related to security and defense, which encourages the US to respond quickly to a problem both domestically and internationally because a time-consuming strategy will make the problem bigger (Moore II, 1998). The DoD's core values of U.S. national values prompted the agency to formulate the Operation Prosperity Guardian policy. This can be seen from the DoD's efforts to help carry out the U.S. role as a global leader with a sense of responsibility to uphold integrity and international law as a U.S. international commitment, apply sovereign respect and loyalty to partner countries affected by the Houthi attacks, and proactively prevent the continuation of the Red Sea crisis.

Although Operation Prosperity Guardian was initiated by the DOD, it was specifically under the leadership of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM plays a role in the preparation of the strategy for the implementation of operations after knowing the direction from the DoD. As an agency under DoD, CENTCOM itself has three priorities, namely preventing Iranian aggression, countering extremist organizations, and competing with China and Russia strategically (United States Central Command, 2023). These three factors influenced the formation of Operation Prosperity Guardian to demonstrate the presence of the US, especially in taking preventive action against the Houthis as allies of Iran and organizations labeled as terrorists by the US and an opportunity for the US to show that it can move faster in dealing with a problem in the international order than its rivals. Then, by explicitly mentioning the parties that pose a threat to maritime security such as Iran, China, Russia, and armed groups such as the Houthis, the US implicitly narrates that maritime security will always be threatened by undemocratic parties. This proves the Denton-Townshend (2024) argument regarding the international system based on the preferences of great power states. This means that the US sees the Red Sea crisis as an attempt for the Houthis and Iran to replace Yemen's democratic system of government and change countries' preferences away from democracy. In addition, the US is also of the view that non-democratic countries under the leadership of a regime that is said to be authoritarian that they always prioritize strengthening internal power and control of resources through aggressive and militaristic means without paying attention to the impact

on the disruption of cooperation between countries.

In international relations, there is a paradigm of liberalism that is also embraced by the US in this regard, which argues that democracies have less potential to create conflicts because of economic dependence on each other. The labeling of non-democratic actors as a threat to security shows the strategic culture of both CENTCOM, DOD, and others that the U.S. often faces battles with the principle of "good versus evil" to uphold morality and the law. In the U.S. strategy culture itself, the absence of a definitive adversary and a collective threat makes it difficult for U.S. defense agencies to direct its policies, so the existence of such adversaries gives the U.S. priority, a greater defense budget allocation, and a reason to develop defense technology. This means that the Houthis and other parties that raise international problems are made antagonists by the US. The label of antagonist comes from the thinking in US political culture that states that war is the product of bad guys (Moore II, 1998). The evil of the opponents faced and the constant optimism in the US strategic culture to win battles make the emphasis on military power justifiable (Gray, 1984). However, keep in mind that the US has always maintained that the use of military force is a last resort and is only done if it helps them uphold US values in the world (Moore II, 1998).

One of the other values of US liberalism is that it seeks to continue to promote a democratic and liberal international order despite having to pay attention to profit-loss calculations. The U.S. strategic culture encourages them to be a kind of knight to create peace by upholding morals that are in line with the values they consider right. However, this action must be carried out in accordance with the capabilities of the US so as not to cause economic losses. However, the value of liberalism in the US strategic culture justifies the use of military force in the event of a conflict that disrupts peace, cooperation between countries, and democracy in the international system (Dueck, 2006). Therefore, through Operation Prosperity Guardian and other similar policies that use military force, the US justifies this to resume global trade with the establishment of an international order based on democracy.

Since February 24, 2024, the Houthis have launched at least 48 attacks. The attacks are used as a narrative for the US to show how evil the Houthis are. Moreover, as time went by, the Houthis attacked ships that passed through the Red Sea indiscriminately, not just Israeli-affiliated ships, so this was not in accordance with the Houthis' claims. The attack threatened the lives of commercial and marine crew members serving in Operation Prosperity Guardian. One of them is an attack aimed at ships such as the "Galaxy Leader" and others that took dozens of crew members hostage (Kuoman, 2024). Meanwhile, hostage taking itself is an act prohibited in Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, so in other words the Houthis have committed human rights violations and international law (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This act of human rights violation was used as a justification by the US to fight the Houthis and restore their terrorist status. The US itself views itself as a party that always prioritizes human rights in the world through its foreign policy. Not only that, according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, Daniel B. Shapiro, the Houthi attack also caused delays in the delivery of humanitarian aid, such as food and medicine aimed at Sudan, Ethiopia, and even Yemen (Vegun, 2024). As a country that regularly provides humanitarian aid to other

countries, the Houthi attacks have angered the US and added to the justification for the Houthi resistance.

Human rights violations by the Houthis in carrying out attacks and hostage-taking are not in line with the values that the US believes in, especially freedom. Therefore, the U.S. has always voiced that the purpose of Operation Prosperity Guardian is to uphold freedoms for the affected countries. In addition to the US constructing that the Houthis' actions are not in line with the principle of freedom of navigation that has also been recognized in the law of the sea (UNCLOS), the Houthi actions are considered by the US to make commercial ships not free from fear, not having the freedom to carry out economic activities, and not having dignity as human beings when they are taken hostage and shot victims. With Operation Prosperity Guardian, the US is trying to protect the crew so that they can sail freely. Through the presence of US ships such as the USS Theodore Roosevelt, USS Dwight Eisenhower, USS Gravely, USS Laboon, USS Mason, and other technologically advanced ships along with the ships of partner countries, the US tries to convince countries involved in trade to be able to trade as usual without fear that their income and the welfare of their people will be disrupted (Times of Israel, 2023; Misra and Shumaker, 2023). The U.S. culture itself also encourages them to deploy sophisticated militaries because they highly value and protect the lives of individuals, especially the U.S. society as a form of human rights protection.

The US involvement in the Red Sea to enforce order, which is one of the values of the US, can be seen in three ways, namely prevention, surveillance, and ambushes directed at the Houthis. In carrying out preventive measures, the US and partner countries are trying to anticipate Houthi attacks on commercial vessels and implicate US encouragement for the Houthis to comply with the freedom of navigation stipulated in UNCLOS. Then in terms of surveillance, the US conducts patrols such as in the Bab el Mandeb Strait by sending ships equipped with radar to monitor potential Houthi attacks (Lagrone, 2023). The information captured by the radar will be exchanged between fellow member states to facilitate coordination (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2024). Finally, the US and partner countries are also working together to ambush ships carrying supplies for the Houthis and disrupt their supply chains. This action can be justified by the US because it is considered an act of upholding the rule of law and resistance to authoritarian groups that not only oppress the people affected by the Red Sea crisis, but also the Yemeni people themselves whom the US considers to be part of the victims of the Houthi actions. Moreover, outside the framework of Operation Prosperity Guardian, the US together with the UK took the initiative to attack the Houthi headquarters in Yemen on January 12, 2024 in the hope that the Houthi power could decline (Commerford & Gardner, 2024). The three efforts to enforce order are in accordance with the strategic culture of the US military, especially the navy which prioritizes the dominance of modern technology and weapons in destroying the enemy and winning conflicts as quickly as possible (Mahnken, 2006; Marines, 2017). In addition, the US also always encourages the adherence of every actor in the international order to international law and the rules-based international system.

The value of American exceptionalism is seen in Operation Prosperity Guardian even

though the U.S. does not include this value in the narrative it constructs. American exceptionalism influenced the U.S. to show rival countries such as China and Russia that the U.S. was different from the two countries because they could respond quickly to supply chain disruptions through Operation Prosperity Guardian. When carrying out the operation, the US criticized China for tending to be passive in the Red Sea crisis (Colley, 2024). In fact, China responded to the Red Sea crisis with a diplomatic approach, namely forming a peace agreement with the Houthis even though the agreement ended in the end and then the US again criticized China's way of diplomacy with the Houthis. This means that the US believes that its way of handling the Red Sea crisis is better than China's diplomacy. This is evidenced by the success of making the Houthi offensive drastically reduced by the end of 2023, saving around 1,500 ships, and preventing oil spills (Times of Israel, 2024; McLean, 2024; Ryder, 2024). The claim of success departs from the sense of responsibility of the US to help solve the Red Sea crisis, especially since they are a country that has always voiced freedom of navigation. Not only do they feel responsible for maintaining security in the Red Sea, but they also become security integrators, which encourage cooperation between partner countries to prioritize collective security there (Naval History and Heritage Command, 2020). In addition to China and Russia being far from the Red Sea region, the US also wants to show Iran as a major power in the region that US power should not be underestimated. In other words, if there are parties in the Middle East that the US considers trying to destabilize the region and cannot be diplomatically invited by the US, then the US will attack them just as the US attacked the Houthis.

The value of equality has always been held by the U.S. because they believe that everyone is created equal as written in The Declaration of Independence. In particular, the U.S. believes in equality of opportunity, that is, everyone has equality in obeying the law, finding work and income, and competing without discrimination. Departing from the value of equality, the US also builds a narrative that the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea do not comply with the law and do not support equality of opportunity because of discrimination against Israel and ships that are targeted for trade and income. The advocacy of equality for countries and the emphasis on the superiority of US power as its strategic culture in Operation Prosperity Guardian were carried out by policymakers as part of their political strategy in maintaining the status and influence of the US in the international arena (Snyder, 1977).

All of the national values and U.S. maritime vision that underlie the policymakers' narrative in the formation and implementation of Operation Prosperity Guardian are the foundations that ensure the operation and the results achieved. Although the operation managed to save about 1,500 commercial vessels and significantly reduced the number of Houthi attacks by the end of 2023, the same positive results were not seen in the development of the operation (Diakun & Meade, 2024). In 2024, the decline in Houthi attacks will not be as significant as the one that occurred at the end of 2023. As a result, the number of commercial ships passing through the Red Sea and the Bab el Mandeb Strait did not increase again as it did before the Red Sea crisis. Specifically, the number of commercial vessels passing through the Bab el Mandeb Strait has never exceeded 200 per week from March 4, 2024 to November 3, 2024. In

fact, in November 2023, the number of ships crossing the region reached more than 500 per week (Diakun & Meade, 2024). We could argue that such less satisfactory results come from the war tactics used on the ground, but also from the strategic level. In addition, keep in mind that both the US and the Houthis can claim and deny each other's successes in attacks on each other. Apart from that, through this study, the researcher wants to evaluate what are the challenges of the strategic culture that are used as a narrative to formulate Operation Prosperity Guardian.

The Challenges and Evaluation of the U.S. Strategic Culture in Operation Prosperity Guardian

There are four weaknesses in the implementation of the US strategic culture that are challenges in the implementation of Operation Prosperity Guardian. First, the U.S. relies too much on military power without being balanced by diplomatic efforts. Second, the U.S. seems to be pushing too much for the existence of an international order that suits its preferences without paying attention to the context of where the policy is implemented and the long-term strategy. Third, there is a dilemma between the US's desire to be a knight and the importance of maintaining regional stability. Fourth, the U.S. overemphasizes the promotion of its national values in Operation Prosperity Guardian without balancing it with rational profit-loss calculations.

The use of military force in carrying out deterrence measures against the Houthis in the Red Sea is a positive thing to increase the credibility of the deterrence so that the Houthis are not expected to dare to attack after seeing the presence of sophisticated US ships. This is referred to as deterrence by denial which is commonly used by countries in conducting sea patrols to monitor trade routes from potential threats of pirates, illegal fishing, and maritime terrorism. In addition, military power can also be useful for deterrence by punishment, which is the threat of counterattack on a larger scale if the opponent dares to attack. Based on the implementation of Operation Prosperity Guardian, the US has carried out two types of deterrence. However, to carry out comprehensive deterrence actions, a country cannot rely only on military means because diplomacy is also a way to increase the credibility of deterrence and create long-term solutions. Meanwhile, the U.S. is not considering the idea as the U.S. seeks to create retaliation or punishment against the Houthis and Iran. Similar things also happen in other parts of the world, namely the South China Sea when the US always tries to increase its naval presence there in order to threaten and punish China (Khan and Bano, 2024). Thus, the lack of diplomacy as the first way to resolve the Red Sea crisis does not fit with the US narrative of using military force as a last resort.

The U.S. reluctance to consider diplomacy with the Houthis is based on its antagonistic label against the Houthis. The group, which is considered "evil" and "others," cannot be trusted by the U.S. because they continue to violate peace treaties as happened when the Houthis attacked Chinese ships after a peace treaty was made and when the Houthis continue to seek a forced takeover of Yemen's government. The US considers the Houthis to have a habit of rejecting or violating compromises, forcing the US to provide them with sticks in the form of

attacks from US navies and partner countries through Operation Prosperity Guardian. In fact, providing guarantees to opponents through diplomacy in deterrence actions such as Operation Prosperity Guardian is also an important element to persuade opponents not to attack. This can actually be done by the US by providing several incentives (carrots) to the Houthis and every party in Yemen so that unification can be realized immediately by paying attention to inclusivity. As a result, the Houthis' reasons for attacking in the Red Sea could be reduced and allow commercial ships to sail more safely. The unwillingness of the US to diplomacy with the Houthis has made it unable to provide incentives and guarantees to the Houthis, giving the group more reasons to attack. The excessive US emphasis on military power is instead seen as strengthening and prolonging the conflict. This was seen after the US and Britain carried out attacks against the Houthis on Yemeni soil and outside the framework of Operation Prosperity Guardian. The attack by the two countries succeeded in overwhelming the Houthis, resulting in an increase in the number of commercial ship voyages through the Bab el Mandeb Strait for 2 weeks. After that, the US and British attacks actually burned the Houthis' enthusiasm to attack again in the Red Sea. As a result, the number of commercial vessels sailing in the Bab el Mandeb Strait is likely to decline until the end of 2024 (Diakun & Meade, 2024; Gard, 2024). On the other hand, Operation Prosperity Guardian and deterrence actions in general aim to prevent attacks and change the behavior of opponents.

Although the authors argue that the U.S. is overemphasizing military power, it does not mean that the military presence in the Red Sea is unimportant. This can be seen when China began to deploy its navy in the region to protect its commercial vessels from Houthi attacks after a peace agreement between the two sides was reneged upon by the Houthis (Mongilio, 2024). In fact, China initially did not consider the Houthis a threat so they did not place their navy in the region. The importance of the military presence in the region is not only shown by the example of the Chinese case, but the change of deployment of various US navies such as the USS Theodore Roosevelt, which was originally based in the South China Sea, succeeded in pressuring the Houthis to find other ways to attack Israel. There are various reports that the Houthis began to shift their attacks from commercial vessels to direct towards Israel in mid to late 2024 (Goldenberg, 2024; Gritten, 2024). On the one hand, it shows that the US ships are undermining the Houthis' focus on attacking commercial vessels which has the potential to reduce the number of attacks in the Red Sea. On the other hand, Gard (2024) projects that Houthi attacks in the Red Sea will not decrease significantly in the near future as Houthi attacks in the Red Sea are likely to stabilize throughout 2024. This means that the author argues that a military presence in the Red Sea to overcome the crisis could have a positive impact, but it would be good if the US also balanced it with diplomatic efforts.

The US seems to be pushing too much for the existence of an international order that suits its preferences without paying attention to the context in which the policy is implemented. At a time when the US thinks that the aggressive actions of the Iranian-backed Houthis in the region are aimed at changing the international order, Operation Prosperity Guardian is being used as a way to maintain the US status quo. This view is also shared by Middle Eastern countries, except Israel and Bahrain. Although the Houthi attacks are considered to destabilize

the region, these Middle Eastern countries are of the view that Operation Prosperity Guardian is worsening the situation in the region and the conditions of the Gaza conflict (Abaad Studies, 2024). In fact, the US thinks that non-democratic actors are a potential threat so that the perspective of such regional countries makes the US a threat itself. They prefer to use less confrontational approaches such as naval dispatches to independently guard their respective countries' commercial vessels and push for a diplomatic resolution of the Gaza conflict. As a result, the majority of countries in the Middle East do not support the operation and complicate coordination between the member countries of the operation. If those countries agree to Operation Prosperity Guardian, then the U.S. will have more supply assistance, more naval bases to improve readiness for attacks, and better coordination.

In addition to the local context in the Middle East sense, Operation Prosperity Guardian's policy also pays less attention to the local context of Yemen as a Houthi country from which it originates. In the previous section, the author has mentioned that by paying attention to the option to help the unification of Yemen in an inclusive manner. This helps the US present long-term solutions in defusing conflicts in the region. The existence of Operation Prosperity Guardian and the label of "terrorist" on the Houthis made it difficult for Yemen to be unified. The US optimism in fighting the Houthis as "terrorists" with a large military force and based on US values which are universal good values makes the US have no strategic vision in the long term (Gray, 1981). In fact, one of the main goals of US foreign policy towards Yemen is to help bring them together. That is, the U.S. leaves the impression that it is great at planning wars, but pays little attention to strategies to alleviate or win the conflict as a whole.

The Houthis themselves have become a separatist movement in Yemen to fight for the injustice felt by the people of South Yemen. This injustice is present because of a sectarian conflict between the Yemeni government with a Sunni background and the Houthis as Zayidiah Shiites. On the other hand, the unification that the US has been trying to do so far is more pro-Sunni and this also encourages the Houthis to dislike the US (Robinson, 2023). Then, many Yemenis consider that in helping to unify and providing humanitarian aid to Yemen, the US implicitly imposes Western-style democratic values on Yemen. Coupled with Operation Prosperity Guardian which was also carried out by the US to defend Israel and the lack of US efforts in providing a two-state solution to the Gaza conflict, the Houthis are increasingly disliked by the US.

Based on the perceived injustice, the Houthis feel that they do not need to wait for Imam Mahdi to fight against injustice and tyranny so that their attacks in the Red Sea are carried out to uphold justice for the Palestinians and the Yemeni people whom they consider oppressed (Ardegmani, 2019). In fact, Operation Prosperity Guardian is also carried out to defend justice for the trade of affected countries. In other words, both the US and the Houthis are fighting for justice. However, the US does not realize that the two have different perspectives on the subject of justice. Thus, it is seen that when the US formulated and implemented Operation Prosperity Guardian, it did not consider the complexity of the differences and cultural uniqueness of the Houthi and the countries of the region. On the contrary, the US simplifies the culture of parties that do not align with them by calling them antagonists or "others". This

affects the effectiveness of the operation because strategic culture theory says that ignoring cultural differences in policymaking can result in ineffective and detrimental strategies (Johnson, 2020). Regardless of the complexity of the culture in which the Operation Prosperity Guardian policy is applied, it can be rooted in the values of liberalism that focuses on individualism so that the US tends to be more concerned with its own personality without regard for others (Huntington, 1957; Lee, 2008). In addition, the U.S. indifference to cultural diversity grew out of its "Manifest Destiny" tradition of introducing the U.S. way of life to people who had not embraced a similar way of life, even those people were said to be "infidels." This kind of thinking not only indicates that U.S. ideas, ways of life, and values are different from other countries, but it is also true that they feel that they can be universally applied. If the US does not learn to be aware of this insensitivity, then Johnson (2020) argues that this can be a weakness of the US and that it will be exploited by its rivals in geopolitical competition. In an effort to handle the Red Sea crisis, the US has been rivaled by China which managed to diplomatically with the Houthis and managed to cross the Red Sea safely for some time.

As previously explained, one of the strategic cultures of the US encourages them to be knights in upholding morals, especially related to democracy, freedom, and human rights. This can be seen in the role of security integrator that the US runs. In reality, the U.S. has not succeeded in mobilizing the countries of the region and even some member states of Operation Prosperity Guardian to help uphold the morals that the U.S. considers ideal. In particular, countries such as Spain, Italy, and France, which were originally member states of operation, have now withdrawn because they want a different approach, either independently or multilaterally under other cooperation frameworks. Then, the U.S. voiced equality for member states to engage in operations. On the other hand, the roles and contributions that must be carried out by member countries do not have certainty, so this is one of the drivers for countries to resign. This further demonstrates the absence of a long-term strategy from Operation Prosperity Guardian that is reactive to the Red Sea crisis.

In addition, the strategic culture of the US encourages them as a chivalrous figure to destroy the antagonist party quickly. This thinking comes from the idea that resolving conflicts quickly and using advanced technology prevents increased casualties and conflicts in the long term (Mahnken, 2006). However, there is a dilemma for the US to use great force and destroy the Houthis. On the one hand, the DoD argues that it continues to be committed to increasing forces to resolve the Red Sea crisis, thus demonstrating U.S. optimism rooted in American exceptionalism in ensuring that the Houthis abide by international law and democratic values as universal values. In reality, the US has not deployed its full force in Operation Prosperity Guardian because they do not want to disrupt regional stability (Garamone, 2024; Vergun, 2024). In fact, strategic culture encourages the US to overwhelm opponents with the magnitude of US military power (Moore II, 1998). The minimum US strength is considered by the Houthis to be a weakness so that the group is not afraid of the US and is determined to continue attacking (Abaad Studies, 2024). With limited power, the US has not been able to completely stop the Houthi offensive and the group is proud of this. If the US increases its

power and they still cannot overcome the Red Sea crisis, then the credibility of the US will be questioned. On the contrary, a U.S. victory by using full force could potentially disrupt regional stability and heat up rivalries between countries in the region. Not only is there a dilemma over the use of its own force, but the US also cannot ascertain the intentions and actions of Iran and other US rivals in the region in escalating the conflict in the Red Sea. The U.S. is an expert in technical planning in the face of war or conflict, but the security and threat dilemmas described present challenges for DoD, CENTCOM, and other policymakers.

The U.S. overemphasizes the promotion of its national values in Operation Prosperity Guardian without balancing it with rational profit-loss calculations. This means that the US is too eager to move on the basis of optimism and idealism in winning conflicts against antagonists and upholding rules-based international orders. In addition, the speed of the US in responding to the Red Sea crisis is also a matter of pride because it considers its actions to be ahead of its rivals, especially China. On the other hand, this speed actually leads to the haste of the US to get involved in the conflict which makes there a miscalculation in the calculation of profit and loss. The U.S. insistence on idealism rather than rationalism has resulted in unsatisfactory results. The US alone has spent more than US\$1 billion on Operation Prosperity Guardian with results that are not in line with what they expected because the number of Houthi attacks from January to September 2024 is unlikely to decrease (Diakun and Meade, 2024; Saballa, 2024). In fact, if we reflect on the actions of the United States in the early phases of the first World War, they had the option of not being involved in the conflict. The U.S. chose to be involved in the final phase of the first World War and this had a positive effect on its victory in the war and the enforcement of maritime security (Moore II, 1998). In the context of the Red Sea crisis, the US actually has many other approaches besides Operation Prosperity Guardian and the Houthi offensive in Yemen. However, the spirit of idealism driven by geopolitical competition made the US and its national values make the US choose to carry out Operation Prosperity Guardian. The policy of carrying out operations was the chosen option because of the strategic U.S. culture that encourages the resolution of problems as quickly as possible because U.S. security policymakers do not like a time-consuming approach. The reason for this dislike comes from their unwillingness to let a problem happen when they take the time to think about the right solution. Coupled with the basic values and strategies of the defense agencies involved, the U.S. moves quickly and even in a hurry.

Although the U.S. still faces some challenges in the implementation of Operation Prosperity Guardian in protecting global supply chains, it has made progress and made a good impact in deterring the Houthis from launching more attacks that could further disrupt supply chain conditions. As mentioned earlier, the US military presence has the potential to make the Houthis reduce the intensity of their attacks in the Red Sea. On the other hand, Houthi attacks are projected not to decrease significantly in the next few years. The security dilemma that occurs also plays a role in the calculation of the projection. Despite this, Operation Prosperity Guardian has restored the trust of some freight forwarders such as Maersk to restore its confidence to potentially resume operations through the Red Sea (Wehner, 2024). If Maersk resumes operations across the Red Sea and can inspire other shipping companies, then the

global supply chain will at least slowly recover.

CONCLUSION

Strategic culture significantly influences the formulation and implementation of Operation Prosperity Guardian, as evidenced by the integration of U.S. national values, maritime vision, historical experiences, and the collaborative values of related agencies in shaping the operation. These cultural elements not only underpin the operation's design but also serve as a rationale for policymakers in decision-making. While the application of strategic culture contributed to deterring Houthi attacks in the initial phase of the operation, several shortcomings emerged that limited its long-term effectiveness. The identified weaknesses include an overreliance on military power without sufficient diplomatic engagement, an excessive focus on imposing an international order aligned with U.S. preferences without adequately considering the local context and long-term strategy, a conflict between the U.S. aspiration to act as a global "knight" and the need to preserve regional stability, and a lack of rational cost-benefit analysis in operational planning. These limitations highlight critical areas for improvement in integrating strategic culture more effectively into foreign policy to enhance operational outcomes.

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