

The Red Sea – Neglected Nexus

CDR Hubert Mróz, POL (CSAG/CCJ5)

MAJ Essa Almansoori, UAE (CSAG/CCJ5)

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

Key Points

- The Red Sea region is a neglected nexus by the US, but not by others such as China, Russia and Iran.
- The importance of the Red Sea region must be viewed through the lens of increasing Chinese investments (45% in the port areas) and noticeable plans to expand Russia's footprint.
- Multipolarity allows the region to select the best partner of choice, tailored to its needs (not exclusive but inclusive), including EGY.
- In line with the trend of increasing activity, there is a significant risk of disorder in the Red Sea region, including access to ABO.
- The international importance of the Red Sea region is evidenced by the visible military presence of world and junior powers.
- The "Triangle of benefits" – China, Russia and Iran can benefit from each other in the Red Sea region.
- There are several regional maritime security constructs, but they are not very successful.
- The restoration of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic ties with Chinese mediation could have both positive and negative implications for CENTCOM.
- Solution for FSO Safer is urgently needed and may be the first pillar of future regional cooperation.

Introduction

The strategic importance of the Red Sea basin, together with the Suez Canal, is obvious. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that the Red Sea region is a neglected nexus by the US, but not by others such as China, Russia and Iran. This neglect is primarily because it is a relatively calm area, and this is certainly due to global mutual interest in maintaining this status quo. This interest requires that the Sea Line of Communication (SLOC) be navigable through the Red Sea.

The importance of the Red Sea region should be seen through the prism of growing Chinese investment (mainly in the port industry), some evidence of Russian expansion, and the highest level of Iran-backed and Iran-orchestrated activities in a decade. All this makes the Red Sea region another direction from which the interests of the US and its partners could be affected. The CENTCOM AOR is therefore compressed by a multi-vector force, which in turn requires additional effort from CENTCOM and its partners (Figure 1).

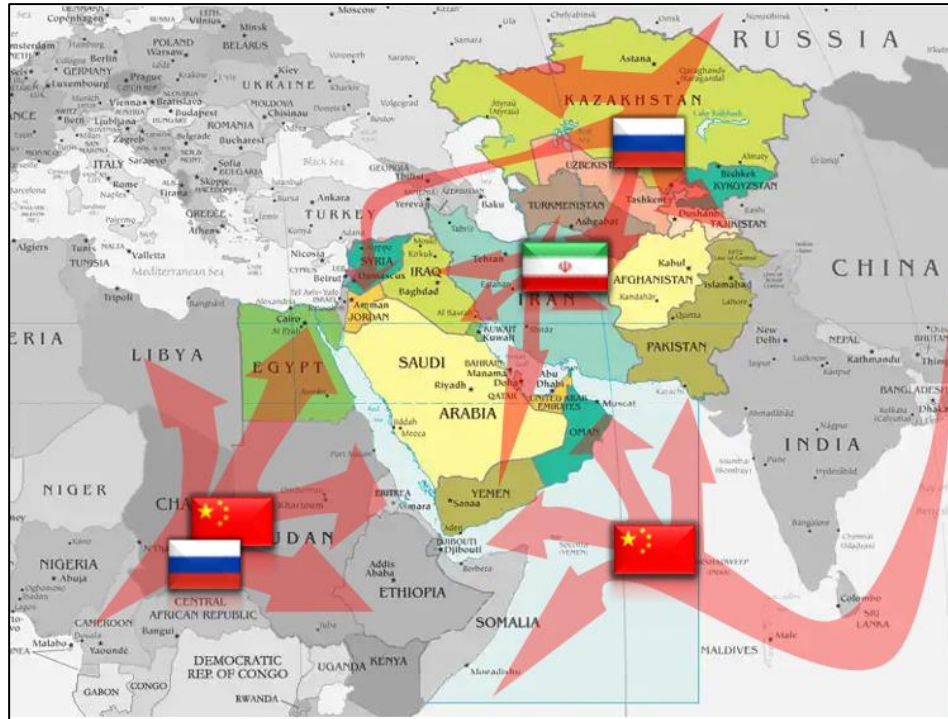


Figure 1. "CENTCOM encirclement".¹

In the case of the countries bordering the Red Sea, there is a phenomenon of multipolarity, which means that these countries can choose strategic partners best suited to their needs. This also applies to Egypt, which is particularly important for the US and CENTCOM due to its location in this part of the world.² With the growing interest by the superpowers and some regional and junior powers in the region (including the GCC countries, Israel, Türkiye, France, Italy and Japan), the region is being charged with significant military potential, which can lead to kinetic incidents due to misunderstanding of intentions or simply to oversaturation of this narrow basin with too many combat systems.³

The absence or ineffective presence of the US and its allies, as well as the simultaneous presence of China, Russia and Iran in the maritime region, may provide these countries with the opportunity to exchange the benefits of their capabilities and to represent their interests better than would be possible on their own. A scenario in which a Chinese-Russian-Iranian "triangle of benefits" occurs in the Red Sea region is possible and could be joined by others

¹ Source: CSAG.

² Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations", *Congressional Research Service*, July 13, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>, (accessed February 07, 2023).

³ Giuseppe Dentice, "The Red Sea: A permanent arena of interest for Israel", *TRENDS*, September 14, 2022, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/the-red-sea-a-permanent-arena-of-interest-for-israel/>, (accessed February 07, 2023).

in the future.⁴ At the same time, several regional initiatives on maritime security have been conceived, but their effectiveness is questionable.⁵

In line with the trend of increasing activity and interest, there is a significant risk of disorder in the Red Sea region, including access to ABO, undisrupted SLOCs, logistics hubs, food and water security and environmental issues, including the FSO Safer case.

Therefore, if remoteness continues, there is a risk that the stable status quo will falter.⁶

The Dragon's Tail over the Red Sea region.

Over the past two decades, China has established a significant economic presence in most African countries, providing tailored economic investment offers and a flexible political approach under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is constructed to help China enhance its global strategic influence by conducting some of the projects unilaterally or co-opting other countries into the initiative. Financing from western countries is usually conditional and impractical for poorer African countries. By comparison, China's financing strategy—combining grants, aid and loans (free or at low-interest rates) with a generous schedule of return, particularly on infrastructure projects, are an attractive option for African countries. China adopted a practical “all-inclusive” approach without any preconditions while dealing with political regimes/governments across Africa, unlike the Western countries, which prefer to deal with transparent and accountable democracies (*see also Chinese “5 x no” approach toward African countries in “Regional multipolarity” paragraph, page 8*).⁷ China has promoted itself as a peacemaker since participating in five UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and is the second largest donor to UN peacekeeping missions, including the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in South Sudan. Under the slogan “Lead by Example”, China is calling on the World Bank to allow its poorest borrowers to suspend debt payments.⁸

China has made significant progress in Africa under the BRI. On a bilateral bases, it has invested in 52 out of the 54 African countries (as of 2022). 49 of the 54 countries (over 90%) have already signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Geographically, 12 (out of 52) countries are in East Africa. The African Union has also signed an MoU on BRI cooperation with China. While MoUs are not legally binding, they formalize Chinese investments in the country, with due acknowledgment from the local government. This facilitates the investment process for Chinese companies in these countries. Moreover, signed MoUs may pave the way for a legally binding agreement.⁹ An illustrative example of the Chinese power of “customer appeal” is Benin, whose president has asked local

⁴ Stephen Blank, “Power in evidence: The international maritime rivalry in the Red Sea”, November 18, 2022, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/power-in-evidence-the-international-maritime-rivalry-in-the-red-sea/>, (accessed March 27, 2023).

⁵ Omar S. Mahmood, “Competition, cooperation and security in the Red Sea”, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), August 2019, <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docN93454BF0139925cc94bb5407d61cd515e453119261ccf9a0158c2cb8a6d3d54e0e72f4603e14>, (accessed February 16, 2023).

⁶ Stephen Blank, “Power in evidence: The international maritime rivalry in the Red Sea”, November 18, 2022, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/power-in-evidence-the-international-maritime-rivalry-in-the-red-sea/>, (accessed March 27, 2023).

⁷ Lokanathan Venkateswaran, “China's Belt and Road Initiative: Implications in Africa”, *Observer Research Foundation*, August 24, 2020, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ORF_IssueBrief_395_BRI-Africa.pdf, (accessed December 07, 2022).

⁸ Chris Devonshire-Ellis, “China's 2021 Progress Across The African Belt & Road Initiative”, *Silk Road Briefing*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/01/12/chinas-2021-progress-across-the-african-belt-road-initiative/>, (accessed February 07, 2023).

⁹ Ibid.

company 'Petrolin' and French giant 'Bolloré' to withdraw from a major railway infrastructure project linking Benin to Niger in order to make room for China.¹⁰ China has signed agreements worth US\$11 billion with Mali to finance two cross-country railway projects to link the inland to the coast. Meanwhile, in May 2017, Sao Tome and Principe switched allegiance from recognizing Taiwan to accepting the "one-China policy."¹¹ In recent years, as China's presence in Africa has grown, nations have turned their backs on Taiwan one after another. Eswatini is the only African country that has resisted China's pressure and continues to refuse Chinese investments. It remains Taiwan's only ally in Africa.¹²

China's expansion on African follows five trends. First, China is investing in ports and port areas along the coastline from the Gulf of Aden through the Suez Canal towards the Mediterranean Sea. These include Port Djibouti (Djibouti), Port Sudan (Sudan), Port Said-Port Tewfik (Egypt), Port Ain Sokhna (Egypt), Zarzis Port (Tunisia) and El Hamdania Port (Algeria). The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has built its first overseas military base in Djibouti, which has been operational since 2017. In line with China's dual-use approach, China could use its influence over these ports for economic (transport of raw materials, finished goods and labor) and military (surveillance and blockade of overseas and deep-sea maritime traffic) purposes to serve its strategic interests.¹³ Second, China is using its connectivity projects to link its industrial and energy projects in the Africa hinterland with the infrastructure projects along the African coast. For instance, an oil refinery in the north of Sudan is located close to the railway line connecting Port Sudan and Port Dakar (Senegal). An industrial park in Ethiopia is located near the Addis Ababa-Adama Highway, which is connected to the Addis-Djibouti railway line, which connects to the port of Djibouti. This enables China to use the maritime route to transport raw materials such as phosphate, copper, cobalt, gold, iron ore, cocoa, bauxite, coal, lithium, steel, granite and marble back to the mainland, and finished goods and Chinese labor to Africa.¹⁴ Third, China claims that its investments are tuned to local needs, in line with its leadership's oft-repeated "win-win model of cooperation". Unfortunately for African countries, it is only partially accurate. While most of China's projects in Africa are in the infrastructure sector, it is mainly Chinese companies that benefit from the projects as contractors. Moreover, despite China's projects being executed in consultation with the local governments, the bidding processes for these projects are opaque and bribes are often paid to local officials. Consequently, the local population only occasionally benefits and only after the projects are completed. As many of these projects require access to key natural resources, residents often must relocate, which causes discontentment and human trauma amongst the local population. Furthermore, connectivity projects, largely due to their nature of covering geographical distance, invariably result in environmental alterations or encroachment upon already existing human habitation (resettlement).¹⁵ As of 2022, only around three percent of Chinese projects in healthcare and education will directly benefit the local population. The country has undertaken such projects only in three African countries: Seychelles, Ghana and Comoros.¹⁶ Fourth, China has been successful in building transnational projects in Africa only where there is either a deficit or a vacuum in strong governance across countries.¹⁷ Fifth,

¹⁰ Agence France-Presse, "Benin president taps China for controversial railway - dismissing bids by local and French companies", *South China Morning Post*, March 23, 2018, https://www.scmp.com/news/world/africa/article/2138516/benin-president-taps-china-controversial-railway?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article&campaign=2138516, (accessed December 07, 2022).

¹¹ Maxandre Fortier, "Taiwan Facing the Loss of Diplomatic Allies", *Network for Strategic Analysis (NSA)*, June 6, 2022, <https://ras-nsa.ca/taiwan-facing-the-loss-of-diplomatic-allies/>, (accessed March 27, 2023).

¹² Larry Madowo, "eSwatini - Taiwan's last friend in Africa", *BBC News*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46831852>, (accessed March 27, 2023).

¹³ Lokanathan Venkateswaran, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Implications in Africa", *Observer Research Foundation*, August 24, 2020, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ORF_IssueBrief_395_BRI-Africa.pdf, (accessed December 07, 2022).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

China has achieved little success in working with third-partner countries on specific projects in Africa. For instance, of all its projects in the continent, it has only entered into a trade agreement worth US\$14 billion with Spain, for investments in the Democratic Republic of Congo and is working with Italy on a water diversion project in Chad and on the construction of Puntland Airport in Somalia.¹⁸

Chinese investment in Africa is already a cause for concern. Some of the local people have suffered from losing their farms and houses, the lack of local employment or low wages and harsh working conditions.¹⁹ China's environmental neglect has raised many objections, and some of its projects have been halted (e.g., in Kenya, Cameroon, Chad and Ghana). Local fishermen are protesting China's investment in the country's blue economy, among other reasons due to understanding the risks of the investment and knowing how China has devastated fish populations in Chinese fishing areas, as well as noting that China is taking over local fishing areas for its own exclusive use.²⁰ There is growing awareness in African countries of a Chinese debt trap. China has provided 30 percent of Ethiopia's total new public external debt and 90 percent of new bilateral debt over the past five years. In just two years, Djibouti's public external debt has increased from 50 percent to 85 percent of its GDP, which is the highest for any low-income country. Much of this debt consists of government-guaranteed public enterprise debt and is owed to one of the Chinese Banks. It is estimated that China has provided nearly US\$1.4 billion to large-scale investment projects in Djibouti, equivalent to 75 percent of its GDP. Several projects are on the verge of implementation, with no indication, despite a warning from the International Monetary Forum (IMF), that new borrowings will be limited to projects that generate sufficient revenues to meet debt-servicing requirements.²¹

The massive Chinese investments in Africa require security guarantees from host countries or the presence of their own military capabilities in the region. China is not willing to rely completely on such guarantees, especially from countries where there is a deficit or vacuum in terms of strong governance. As a result, China's military presence in the region is growing (e.g., Djibouti).²² The question is to what extent the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army allow it to cover such a huge area of operations as Africa, and to what extent it fits into the idea of a "benefit triangle", where China, Russia and Iran can mutually support each other and fill gaps in the coverage of the region's ability to operate outside from their home soil. To what extent is such an effort of extensive engagement possible for these three countries today, considering their own problems on their own borders: the Taiwan issue for China, the war with Ukraine for Russia and the "Holy War with the decaying West" for Iran.

The Bear's Paw over the Red Sea region.

One of the main reasons for Russia's interest in the Red Sea region is its strategic location. Control over the Red Sea region would provide Russia with greater access to these markets, which are connected through the Red Sea SLOC, and enhance its geopolitical influence in the region. Moreover, it would protect its own shipping and be able to exercise greater control over the flow of goods and resources through the area. Also, Russia has historically close

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Britt Collins, "China 'stealing' Africa's fish", *News Africa*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.newsafrika.net/world/china-stealing-africa-s-fish>, (accessed December 07, 2022).

²¹ Rachel Savage, Martin Pollard and Yew Lun Tian, "Analysis: China debt restructuring policy under scrutiny as more countries demand relief", *Reuters*, September 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-debt-restructuring-policy-under-scrutiny-more-countries-demand-relief-2022-09-08/>, (accessed January 10, 2023).

²² Alex Vines, Jon Wallace, "China-Africa relations", *Chatham House*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/01/china-africa-relations>, (accessed February 24, 2023).

ties with many Middle East and Africa countries and could see its military expansion in the Red Sea region to strengthen those relationships and expand its sphere of influence in the region.²³

Russia has tried to expand its military presence in the Red Sea region. In 2017, Russia signed an agreement with Sudan on the establishment of a naval base on the Red Sea and has since been increasing its military capabilities in the region.²⁴ This has caused concern among other countries in the region, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who fear that Russia's growing presence could upset the regional balance of power. In the end, the agreement was not finalized, due to internal unrest in Sudan, including the overthrow of the president and the lack of approval by Sudan's legitimate parliamentary chamber.²⁵ With the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Sudan on 8 February 2023, the file for the establishment of a Russian naval military base in Sudan was reopened.²⁶ The event was a perfect example of multipolarity phenomena in the region, as it has raised a lot of confusion and discontent between the countries of the region on the one hand and between the countries of the region and the Western countries on the other hand. Minister Lavrov's visit coincided with a visit of six officials from the US and the EU to Sudan. The 25-year agreement permits basing of up to four warships, including nuclear-powered ships, and the presence of up to 300 soldiers. With both parties' consent, the agreement can be extended for another 10 years, and the number of troops may be increased.²⁷ Russia gave the impression that the base had already started and that, because of the agreement, Sudan had already received Russian ships and exclusively Russian warships in 2019. However, this was not entirely true, as Sudanese ports were receiving ships and crews from many countries, including US Navy and European ships, based on other existing international agreements.²⁸ Nevertheless, Russia is trying in every possible way to infiltrate the Red Sea, looking for logistical and legal loopholes and errors on the one hand, for alliances with Turkey and others and pressure on the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, on the other, as well as exploiting and complicating matters.²⁹ What Russia can probably offer to Sudan is the physical protection of the Sudanese Transitional Military Council and protection of the chairman – Sudan's de facto head of state, Mr. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan himself.³⁰ These may explain the presence of elements of the Russian military company (the "Wagner Group"). Russia's policy is either to freeze conflicts or to drive more wedges to complicate Africa's internal continental affairs, as both methods ensure further demand for Russian interference in Africa. "Wagner tends to target countries with natural resources that can be used for Moscow's objectives – gold mines in Sudan, for example, where the resulting gold can be sold in ways that circumvent Western sanctions," said Catrina Doxsee, an expert on

²³ Charlie Mitchel, "Russian Navy set to gain stronghold on Red Sea", *The Times*, February 12, 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russian-navy-set-to-gain-stronghold-on-red-sea-xf5ggc0rb>, (accessed February 24, 2023).

²⁴ Amy Mackinnon, Robbie Gramer, Jack Detsch, "Russia's Dreams of a Red Sea Naval Base Are Scuttled—for Now", *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/15/russia-sudan-putin-east-africa-port-red-sea-naval-base-scuttled/>, (accessed February 24, 2023).

²⁵ Tariq Al-Jazouli, "Russian flirtation and military infiltration into the Red Sea via Sudan", *Sudanile*, February 14, 2023, <https://sudanile.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D9%8E%D8%B2%D9%8E%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%8B%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84/>, (accessed February 24, 2023).

²⁶ Grzegorz Kuczyński, "Lavrov Visits Sudan to Conclude Red Sea Naval Base Agreement", *Warsaw Institute*, February 13, 2023, <https://warsawinstitute.org/lavrov-visits-sudan-to-conclude-red-sea-naval-base-agreement/>, (accessed February 15, 2023).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jeremy Binnie, "Russian Navy ships continue to visit Sudan", *Janes*, May 05, 2021, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/russian-navy-ships-continue-to-visit-sudan>, (accessed February 24, 2023).

²⁹ Grzegorz Kuczyński, "Lavrov Visits Sudan to Conclude Red Sea Naval Base Agreement", *Warsaw Institute*, February 13, 2023, <https://warsawinstitute.org/lavrov-visits-sudan-to-conclude-red-sea-naval-base-agreement/>, (accessed February 15, 2023).

³⁰ Nima Elbagir, Barbara Arvanitidis, Tamara Qiblawi, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Mohammed Abo Al Gheit, Darya Tarasova, "Russia is plundering gold in Sudan to boost Putin's war effort in Ukraine", *CNN*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/29/africa/sudan-russia-gold-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html>, (accessed February 15, 2023).

Wagner at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.³¹ If the confusion about Russia's military return to Sudan is true, it means that the Russian fleet has moved closer to the countries of the Middle East and to the strategic outskirts of Suez. Furthermore, for the first time, the Russian military presence in the Red Sea is being strengthened, as are attempts to infiltrate North Africa and strengthen its military and security presence there.³² This makes the region an arena of confrontation between Russia and the West. Sudan will be the first African country on the Red Sea coast to allow the establishment of a Russian naval military base on its territory. Out of diplomatic sensitivity and to avoid legal considerations, Russia deliberately uses the name "Logistics Centre".³³ However, justified by the escalation of the situation in Africa, the logistics center could easily turn into a military base, just as the Russian Tartous base in Syria has done.

For Russia, access to Eritrea could be an alternative to the pending entrance to Sudan, as a diversification of strategic options for Russia's functioning and expansion in the Red Sea region. Most of the other reasons for Russian attention to Eritrea seem to coincide with those dictating its interest in Sudan: access to natural resources (*Eritrea is known to have significant mineral resources, including gold, copper and zinc*), strategic position in the Horn of Africa, strengthening Russia's position regionally and internationally, securing Russian strategic regional interests, monitoring the movements of strategic competitors in the region, and controlling strategic points in the region. In return, Eritrea can gain from a reduction in international isolation (*potentially Eritrea can count on the Russian veto in addressing UN sanctions against Asmara in the field of human rights and regional policies in the Horn of Africa*), protection of the ruling regime and access to Russian weapons.³⁴

On 10 January 2023, Eritrea signed a memorandum of understanding with Russia, linking the Eritrean coastal city of Massawa with the Black Sea naval base Sevastopol. The agreement, apart from Eritrean support to Russia at the UN against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, reflects the developments of the Eritrean-Russian rapprochement in recent years, as evidenced by the visits of officials from the two countries. This agreement allows Moscow to exploit the Eritrean port of Massawa as a prelude to the establishment of a new Russian military base in the Red Sea near the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a step that the Russian government has always sought diligently in recent years.³⁵ The Russian presence enhances the region's competition with many international powers, which can be considered a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the countries of the region can benefit from this competition through increased investments and economic and financial aid for them. On the other hand, the jostling of forces towards the Horn of Africa could lead to an increasing militarization of the region, which will reinforce regional instability there. Unluckily for African countries, the second option may prove more likely, and the US may find it

³¹ By NEWS WIRES, "US pressures allies to expel Russia's Wagner mercenaries from Libya, Sudan", *FRANCE 24*, March 02, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230203-us-pressures-allies-to-expel-wagner-russian-mercenaries-from-libya-sudan>, (accessed March 11, 2023).

³² Ibid 30.

³³ Grzegorz Kuczyński, "Lavrov Visits Sudan to Conclude Red Sea Naval Base Agreement", *Warsaw Institute*, February 13, 2023, <https://warsawinstitute.org/lavrov-visits-sudan-to-conclude-red-sea-naval-base-agreement/>, (accessed February 15, 2023).

³⁴ Abdullah Salam, "Eritrea and the struggle for influence. Strategic depth on the Red Sea", *7al*, January 26, 2023, <https://7al.net/2023/01/26/%D8%A5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B0-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%82-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%84/abdullah/news/> (accessed February 15, 2023).

³⁵ Martin Plaut, "Eritrea and Russia sign memorandum linking Russia's naval base with Massawa", January 18, 2023, <https://martinplaut.com/2023/01/18/eritrea-and-russia-sign-memorandum-linking-russias-naval-base-with-massawa/>, (accessed February 15, 2023).

difficult to force Eritrea to withdraw from its agreement with Moscow, as it did with Sudan last year (*mostly due to President Afwerki's anti-Washington approach*).³⁶

Finally, it should not be ruled out that Russia's increased influence in the Red Sea region could be part of a larger strategy to promote the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and position it as a viable alternative to the shipping routes currently being used to transport goods between Asia and Europe, including the routes being developed as part of China's BRI. Having influence over the Red Sea region, and taking advantage of regional unrest, Russians can intentionally discredit the Suez Canal and stigmatize the entire region with instability, with the aim of distancing investments and reducing development processes, and then monopolizing Western and non-Western investments and loans to launch the NSR.³⁷ At the moment, the war in Ukraine and its economic consequences for Russia, including sanctions imposed on Russia, have severely curbed such ambitions for a while. Nevertheless, the NSR has the potential to significantly reduce shipping times and costs for goods transported between Asia and Europe, as it provides a much shorter route than traditional shipping routes crossing the Suez Canal. By increasing its presence in the Red Sea region, Russia may be seeking to create new opportunities for trade and investment that could help to promote the NSR as a viable alternative to existing shipping routes. This could potentially diminish the importance of the BRI for some countries in the region, although given the scale of China's investments in the initiative and Russia's current problems, it is unlikely to surpass the BRI.

This year and in the years to come, fierce competition will exist between international actors in the Horn of Africa region as a "proxy theatre" for crisis resolution in other strategically important regions, with the potential to exacerbate political and security instability in the region.

Iranian entrenchment in the Red Sea

For Iran, the urgency to intensify its engagement with the Red Sea region arises from both external and domestic issues, including the need to evade international sanctions debilitating the Iranian economy, the imperative of expanding its alliances, and the ambition to build strategic depth in one of the world's most militarily important region. However, rapidly changing political developments have often thwarted Iranian diplomatic efforts in the region, and Iran's internal problems have forced a shift of effort from the ambitious to the most pressing issues. Nevertheless, under the current government (President Ebrahim Raisi), Iran has visibly sought to revitalize the importance of establishing a strategic presence in East Africa.³⁸

To keep threats to the Islamic Republic of Iran away from its borders, the Iranian regime may already have developed a doctrine that includes both strengthening of the country's military capabilities and maintaining a comprehensive network of relations with like-minded foreign partners, including state and non-state actors. With regards to the latter, the Red Sea region is of particular importance to Iran in terms of confrontation with the West, especially Israel, and thus strengthens the position of the Iranian regime.³⁹ A presence in the Red Sea would enable Iran to be a focal point for carrying out jihad and combat missions against Western Powers. From the Red Sea, Iran can more easily facilitate weapons deliveries to Iranian-backed proxies such as Palestinian Hamas against Israel. It can also

³⁶ MOI-ERITREA, "Takeaways from President Isaias Afewerki's Interview", *Tesfa News*, February 13, 2023, <https://tesfanews.net/takeaways-from-president-isaias-afewerki-february-2023-interview-part-1/>, (accessed February 15, 2023).

³⁷ Paul Stronski, Nicole Ng, "Cooperation and competition", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_331_Stronski_Ng_Final1.pdf, (accessed February 15, 2023).

³⁸ Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, "Iran and the Horn of Africa: The Stakes and Hurdles of Building a Strategic Foothold", *Gulf International Forum*, February 16, 2023, <https://gulifif.org/iran-and-the-horn-of-africa-the-stakes-and-hurdles-of-building-a-strategic-foothold/>, (accessed February 18, 2023).

³⁹ Ibid.

train and provide logistics to the Houthis to threaten Saudi Arabia and to send messages to the US and their allies in the region, like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq. At the same time, it would enable them to exchange roles and relieve international pressure. Being able to operate close to critical maritime choke points such as the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, Iran is better placed to exert pressure on the US and its allies to disperse their military effort.⁴⁰ Iranian interests are easily understood by East African regimes, and paradoxically, US sanctions could unite countries that share the same threat, including Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan (although US sanctions against Sudan were lifted in 2021, the specter remains). To further strengthen its position, Iran can be the leader in supplying weapons to conflict areas in African. The Ethiopian regime was already supplied by Iran with weapons, military equipment and drones against the Tigray forces.⁴¹

In this context (to support the Houthi rebel group in Yemen), Iranian warships used the Eritrean Port of Assab. Anti-smuggling operations have identified a regular pattern of Iran's involvement in smuggling deadly aid to Houthi rebels. Most of the seized ships with contraband weapons for the Houthis are stateless fishing vessels with Yemeni crews intercepted along a historically identified Yemeni Iranian sea route, used to smuggle illicit goods. Also, Somali and Yemeni ports are hotspots for ship-smuggling networks.⁴²

According to Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz (2020-2022), Iran's maritime activity in the Red Sea is the most significant in a decade. Iran is methodically based in the Red Sea with a dedicated maritime task force and an anchored mothership (MV Saviz – an Iranian cargo ship used to serve as a floating base for IRGC forces off the coast of Yemen). In recent years, Iran and Israel have been accused of engaging in a naval “shadow war,” in which vessels linked to each nation were attacked in a series of tit-for-tat exchanges. In recent years, Iran has been accused of seizing international tankers and attacking vessels (including the use of limpet mines).⁴³ Notably, Iran has repeatedly attempted to illegally seize unmanned US surface vessels.⁴⁴

The Horn of Africa is characterized by a rapidly evolving political landscape where today's enemies can still become tomorrow's partners. It is likely that Tehran will seek to take advantage of the frictions in the region to find suitable entry points and retain some influence on political developments. Apparently, the Iranian regime understands that its military presence in the Horn of Africa will prevent the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden from becoming an “anti-Iranian lake”. However, limited financial resources, the recent intensification of protests in the country, and ongoing tensions along the Iranian borders may prompt Tehran to temporarily shift its efforts from East Africa region to more urgent ones.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Iran will ever abandon the Red Sea once and for all, given its strategic importance to Iran.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Banafsheh Keynoush, “Iran to remain a key partner for Ethiopia in the Tigray conflict”, the Middle East Institute MEI@75, January 2022, <https://mei.edu/publications/iran-remain-key-partner-ethiopia-tigray-conflict> (accessed February 28, 2023).

⁴² Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, “Iran and the Horn of Africa: The Stakes and Hurdles of Building a Strategic Foothold”, *Gulf International Forum*, February 16, 2023, <https://gulif.org/iran-and-the-horn-of-africa-the-stakes-and-hurdles-of-building-a-strategic-foothold/>, (accessed February 18, 2023).

⁴³ Emanuel Fabian, “Gantz: Iran's maritime activity in Red Sea is ‘most significant’ in a decade”, *The Times of Israel*, July 5 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gantz-irans-maritime-activity-in-red-sea-is-most-significant-in-a-decade/>, (accessed February 27, 2023).

⁴⁴ Heather Mongilio, “Navy Blocks Iranian Attempt to Steal U.S. Surface Drone”, *U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE*, August 30, 2022, <https://news.usni.org/2022/08/30/video-navy-blocks-iranian-attempt-to-steal-u-s-surface-drone-in-persian-gulf>, (accessed January 12, 2023).

⁴⁵ Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, “Iran and the Horn of Africa: The Stakes and Hurdles of Building a Strategic Foothold”, *Gulf International Forum*, February 16, 2023, <https://gulif.org/iran-and-the-horn-of-africa-the-stakes-and-hurdles-of-building-a-strategic-foothold/>, (accessed February 18, 2023).

Iran and Saudi Arabia announced a warming of relations in recent times. A special meeting was held (on March 10, 2023) between representatives of these two countries in Beijing, in which the Chinese side participated as mediator.⁴⁶

Some commentators point out that it was a brilliant move by China and Iran to undermine the Saudi-American and Saudi-Israeli normalization of relations. It helps Tehran out of isolation and undermines U.S. and Israeli efforts to build a regional coalition against Iran, which is on the brink of obtaining nuclear weapons (e.g., *Mark Dubowitz, CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Washington*).⁴⁷ Aluf Amos Yadlin, former head of military intelligence under Prime Minister Netanyahu's previous government, said the warming of Saudi-Iranian relations should be a wake-up call for the US and Israel. Mr. Yadlin noted that Israel should abandon the reforms — which critics call an attempt to subordinate the courts to the government and triggered mass protests on the streets of Tel Aviv (March 2023) — and move closer to President Joe Biden to forge strong Israeli-Saudi ties and jointly solve issues over Iran's nuclear program.⁴⁸

China's intentions in mediating the Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement are likely to be complex and multifaceted, reflecting its economic, strategic and geopolitical interests in the Middle East region. This could have similar significance in the Red Sea region, where Sino-Saudi relations are of great importance as China plays a crucial role in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan.⁴⁹

The restoration of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations with Chinese mediation could potentially have both positive and negative implications for CENTCOM and its AOR. On the one hand, a reduction in tensions between KSA and Iran could contribute to the promotion of stability and security in the Middle East, which could be seen as a positive development from CENTCOM's perspective. The agreement also offers hope for more durable peace in Yemen, widely seen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. If this new opening between Iran and KSA is to be meaningful and effective, it must also address concerns about Iran's nuclear program. A more stable and secure region would benefit US interests, including maintaining the free flow of oil and protecting US allies and partners in the region. If tensions between KSA and Iran are reduced, the need for US military engagement in the region could diminish, leading to a reduction in the US military presence in the Middle East. Additionally, China's role in mediating the agreement could be seen as a challenge to the US influence in the region, particularly if China is perceived as playing a more significant role in promoting stability and security in the Middle East and the Red Sea region. Notably, President Xi Jinping recently proposed an unprecedented plan for a broader high-level summit between Iran and the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council in Beijing in 2023. Shortly thereafter, Tehran expressed its support for the proposal.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Phil Stewart and Michelle Nichols, "Analysis: China role in Saudi, Iran deal a tricky test for U.S.", *Reuters*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-role-saudi-iran-deal-tricky-test-us-2023-03-10/>, (accessed March 13, 2023).

⁴⁷ ks/kg By Reuters, „Normalizacja stosunków Iran-Arabia Saudyjska. "Genialny ruch ze strony Chin i Iranu", *TVN24*, March 12, 2023, <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/normalizacja-stosunkow-iran-arabia-saudyjska-genialne-uderzenie-ze-strony-chin-i-iranu-w-stosunki-usa-i-izraela-z-arabia-saudyjska-6819149>, (accessed March 13, 2023).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Aadil Brar, "Aligning Saudi's Vision 2030 with Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative is raising alarm bells in US", *The Print*, December 12, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/aligning-saudis-vision-2030-with-beijings-belt-and-road-initiative-is-raising-alarm-bells-in-us/1261173/>, (accessed Mar 3, 2023).

⁵⁰ Summer Said, Stephen Kalin and Benoit Faucon, "China Plans New Middle East Summit as Diplomatic Role Takes Shape", *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-plans-summit-of-persian-gulf-arab-and-iranian-leaders-as-new-middle-east-role-takes-shape-357cfd7e>, (accessed March 13, 2023).

Regional multipolarity

Multipolarity in the Red Sea region, and especially regarding the countries on the east coast of Africa, means choosing the best strategic partner i.e., the one that best suits the needs of the country. It also means that such a country wants to associate with more than one partner, including partners with radically different interests or adversaries in strategic competition, such as the US and China. China with its “5 x no” approach over Africa has a significant advantage over the US.⁵¹ For the US, on contrary, a partner must conform to US values and principles, including the promotion of democracy, human rights, transparent and legitimate governance, and it must be assured that US aid is used for its intended purpose and does not contribute to corruption or embezzlement of public funds.⁵² China has no such restrictions and does not raise difficult issues or interfere in the internal affairs of these countries.

Multipolarity in East African countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia is expressed in several ways. These countries are forming strategic partnerships with other regional and international actors to strengthen their influence and power in the region. For example, Saudi Arabia has formed alliances with Egypt and Sudan to counter Iranian influence in the region.⁵³

East African countries engage in economic cooperation to promote their economic development and reduce their dependence on external actors. For example, Djibouti has developed close economic ties with China, which has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in the country.⁵⁴

Many East African countries have established military bases or allowed other countries to establish military bases on their territory to protect their strategic interests and project power in the region. For example, in 2017 Saudi Arabia announced plans to build a military base in Djibouti (although no start date was declared as of April 2023⁵⁵) to support its operations in Yemen.

The Red Sea region is characterized by conflict and instability, with various countries and non-state actors vying for power and influence. These conflicts have contributed to a complex network of alliances and rivalries among countries of the region. Some East African countries play a role in mediating conflicts in the region and promoting stability. For example, Ethiopia has played a key role in mediating conflicts between South Sudan and Sudan.⁵⁶

Multipolarity can have both positive and negative effects on these states. On one hand, it can provide opportunities for cooperation and collaboration among states working on common challenges and pursuing shared interests. On

⁵¹ Chinese “5 x no” approach toward the African countries: 1) **no** interference in African countries’ pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions, 2) **no** interference in African countries’ internal affairs, 3) **no** imposition of China’s will on African countries. 4) **no** attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa, and 5) **no** seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation with Africa. Source: Liangyu, Xinhuanet, “China’s “Five-No” Approach Demonstrates Real Friendship Toward Africa: Kenyan Analyst”, *Xinhua*, September 06, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/06/c_137447556.htm, (accessed March 3, 2023).

⁵² The 2022 National Security Strategy.

⁵³ Sarah Almkhtar, Karen Yourish, “Old, New and Unusual Alliances in the Middle East”, *The New York Times*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/30/world/middleeast/middle-east-alliances-saudi-arabia-iran.html>, (accessed March 10, 2023).

⁵⁴ Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Sarah R. Collins, “China’s Engagement in Djibouti”, *Congressional Research Service*, September 4, 2019, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11304.pdf>, (accessed March 10, 2023).

⁵⁵ CIA, The World Factbook, February 27, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/djibouti/>, (accessed March 10, 2023).

⁵⁶ Belete Belachew Yihun, “Ethiopia’s Role in South Sudan’s March to Independence, 1955 -1991”, *University of Florida*, November 2013, <https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/168/Yihun-2013.pdf>, (accessed March 10, 2023).

the other hand, opposing views or multiple strategic partners can also lead to challenges and tensions. East African countries could find themselves caught between competing powers such as the US and China, courting for influence and power in the region, and consequently pay the price of staging such a competition in their own country.

Regional alternatives to support US military operations.

In line with the trend of increased activity and/or interest, there is a significant risk of disorder in the Red Sea region, including access to ABO and logistics hubs for US military operations in the Red Sea region.

The Port of Jeddah is a key port in Saudi Arabia and is often used by the US military for its operations in the Red Sea region.⁵⁷ The port has modern facilities and infrastructure that can accommodate a variety of cargoes, including military equipment and supplies. In addition to its location on the Red Sea, the Port of Jeddah is also well connected to transport networks, including rail and road links to neighboring countries. This makes it a convenient hub for the movement of goods in and out the US. However, there may be situations where alternative ports need to be considered due to operational or security reasons. Not to mention that China's COSCO already owns a 20% stake in the Saudi container terminal in the Port of Jeddah.⁵⁸ In such cases, ports like Port Sudan, Aqaba Port, Port Tewfik and Port of Berenice could be potential alternatives for US forces operations.

The well-established Egyptian port of Berenice on the Red Sea deserves special attention. The port has a state-of-the-art infrastructure and facilities capable of handling a variety of cargoes, including military equipment and supplies.⁵⁹ In addition, Berenice is strategically located near the Suez Canal, a key shipping route for trade between Asia and Europe. The Port of Berenice could be a suitable alternative for the Port of Jeddah for US military operations in the region and provide a safe and efficient gateway for the transport of military equipment and supplies. Port Sudan is a major gateway for trade in East Africa and has modern infrastructure capable of accommodating large cargo ships. The port also has good access to transportation networks, including rail and road links to neighboring countries.

The Jordanian port of Aqaba is an important commercial hub for the region and has modern facilities capable of handling a variety of cargoes. It is strategically located at the northern tip of the Red Sea and has good access to the main international shipping lanes.

The Egyptian port of Tewfik at the northern end of the Suez Canal is an important hub for trade between Asia and Europe. It has modern facilities capable of handling a variety of cargoes, including military equipment and supplies.⁶⁰

Militarization of the Red Sea Region.

The international importance of the Red Sea region is well demonstrated by the visible military presence of the world powers, most dramatically on the Horn of Africa side (Figure 2). The simultaneous presence of many armed forces in

⁵⁷ The White House, "The Jeddah Communique: A Joint Statement Between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia", July 15, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/15/the-jeddah-communique-a-joint-statement-between-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>, (accessed February 12, 2023).

⁵⁸ Dale Wainwright, "China's Cosco takes 20% stake in Saudi container terminal", *Trade Winds*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.tradewindsnews.com/ports/chinas-cosco-takes-20-stake-in-saudi-container-terminal/2-1-960255>, (accessed February 12, 2023).

⁵⁹ Engy Mahmoud Helmy Awad, "Measuring logistics performance in ports", *World Maritime University*, October 31, 2021, https://commons.wmu.se/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2680&context=all_dissertations, (accessed February 12, 2023).

⁶⁰ Engy Mahmoud Helmy Awad, "Measuring logistics performance in ports", *World Maritime University*, October 31, 2021, https://commons.wmu.se/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2680&context=all_dissertations, (accessed February 12, 2023).

the Red Sea basin, including the US, China and Russia, can have significant consequences for the region.⁶¹ This presence in a relatively narrow area can increase the risk of tensions and misunderstandings between different countries and military actors. It can also lead to polarization, as countries and non-state actors are forced to choose sides in a global power struggle. The congested waters of the Red Sea are prone to a variety of maritime security risks, including smuggling and piracy.⁶² The presence of multiple military forces in the region, if coordinated, can help to mitigate these risks, but it can also increase the potential for maritime incidents or accidents.

The sensitive marine ecosystem of the Red Sea is already threatened by climate change and other human activities.⁶³ The presence of multiple military forces in the region can increase the risk of environmental damage, including oil spills or other pollution. More importantly, militarization poses the risk of interference, misinterpretation and miscalculation, which can lead to incorrect water and airspace management and the misuse of weapons systems. It is important that all parties involved engage in dialogue and work together to promote stability and security in the region, even if they are divided by strategic competition.

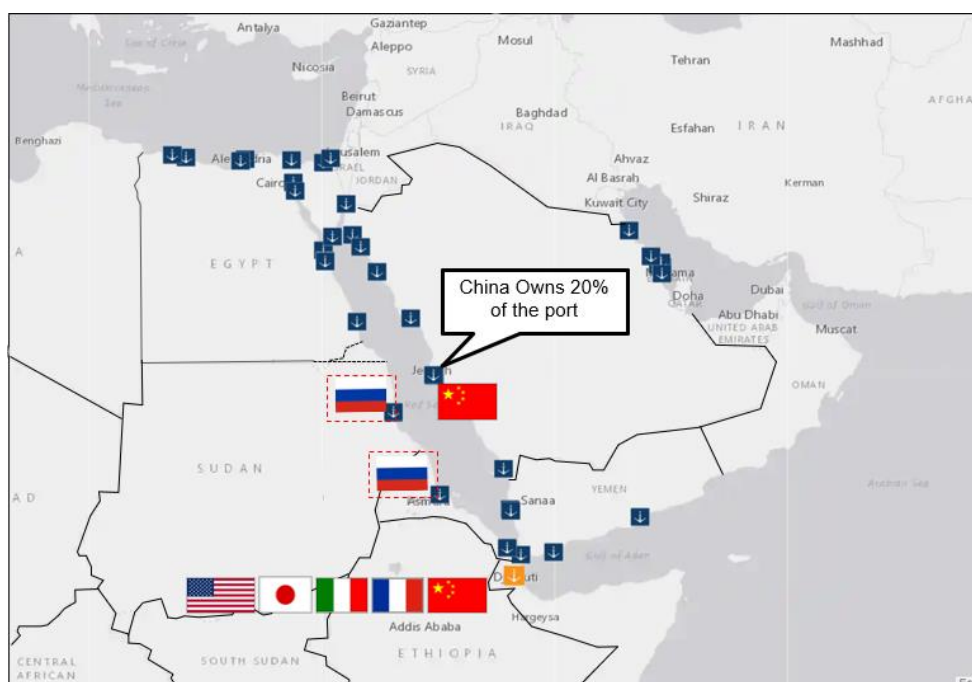


Figure 2. Militarization of the Red Sea region.⁶⁴

Jordan and Israel – the existential importance of the Gulf of Aqaba.

The Gulf of Aqaba, located at the northern tip of the Red Sea, is strategically important for both Jordan and Israel for several reasons: trade and economy, tourism and security. The port city of Aqaba in Jordan and the Israeli port of Eilat are both located on the Gulf of Aqaba, making it a key transportation hub for goods entering and leaving

⁶¹ Zvi Mazel "The Red Sea becomes a dangerous flash point", *GIS*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/council-red-sea-basin/>, (accessed February 12, 2023).

⁶² Charles W. Dunne, "The Complicated Nature of Red Sea Geopolitics", *Arab Center Washington DC*, October 27, 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-complicated-nature-of-red-sea-geopolitics/>, (accessed February 12, 2023).

⁶³ M. Fine, M. Cinar, C.R. Voolstra, A. Safa, B. Rinkevich, D. Laffoley, N. Hilmi, D. Allemand, "Coral reefs of the Red Sea — Challenges and potential solutions", *ScienceDirect*, January 2019, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S235248551830519X>, (accessed February 12, 2023).

⁶⁴ Source: CSAG.

both countries. The Gulf of Aqaba is also home to several oil terminals and pipelines, which provide vital energy resources to the region. Both Jordan and Israel have invested heavily in developing their tourism industries around the Gulf of Aqaba, which has become a major source of revenue for both countries. The Gulf of Aqaba is a key strategic location for both Jordan and Israel from a security standpoint. The two countries share a border along the Gulf, and both have a vested interest in maintaining stability and security in the region. The Gulf of Aqaba is also an important route for shipping and trade, making it vulnerable to piracy and other security threats.⁶⁵

The interruption or denial of access to the Gulf of Aqaba to Israel and Jordan would have significant economic and strategic consequences for both countries. The economic consequences would lead to increased prices, reduced trade and decreased financial growth. In addition, it could compromise their ability to defend their borders and monitor activity in the surrounding region. A disruption could have diplomatic consequences, as both Israel and Jordan would likely seek international assistance to address the issue and strain relations between the two countries, which have historically maintained close economic and security ties.⁶⁶

Undisrupted access to the Gulf of Aqaba underlines the importance of maintaining stability and security in the region and highlights the ongoing efforts of both countries to promote economic growth and development while addressing shared security concerns.

The Red Sea Triangle.

Particular attention should be paid to the coexistence of China, Russia and Iran in the Red Sea and how these countries can benefit from each other through cooperation and the use of certain capabilities. The China-Russia-Iran-benefit network or "The Red Sea Triangle" (Figure 3) and the congested waters of the Red Sea make an accentuated example of a system that can function on similar bases in other regions, including the Arabian Gulf, regardless of what serves the interests of the "triangle" or its individual "corners".

A practical way to illustrate how the triangle works is an example of Chinese Intelligence. According to Chinese doctrine and political leadership, it should be provided with all means and capabilities, for instance through its projects, mainly infrastructure projects, and by its assets including marching vessels and port cranes. Also, it can be assumed that every project manager, contractor and Chinese worker is in some way an intelligence-collecting asset.

⁶⁷

Chinese company COSCO already has a considerable track record of regional expansion. For example, the company holds a minority stake in the Egyptian Suez Canal container terminal and operates the CSP Abu Dhabi Port container terminal at Khalifa Port.⁶⁸ The value and efficiency of the COSCO's installations as a source of information is

⁶⁵ Noor al-Saleh, "Gulf of Aqaba: secure waterway in a turbulent region", *Diyaruna*, June 14, 2021, https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi/di/features/2021/06/14/feature-02, (accessed March 10, 2023).

⁶⁶ Dr. Joshua Krasna, "The Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty at 25: A Slightly Tarnished, but Still Important, Silver Anniversary", *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS)*, June 20, 2019, <https://jiss.org.il/en/krasna-the-jordan-israel-peace-treaty-at-25/>, (accessed March 10, 2023).

⁶⁷ Ryan C. Berg, "Combating Chinese Dual-Use Infrastructure: Bringing In the Private Sector", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/combating-chinese-dual-use-infrastructure-bringing-private-sector> (accessed March 10, 2023).

⁶⁸ Aman Malik, "Saudi Arabia's PIF, Chinese firm buy into port operator", *The Capital Quest*, January 29, 2021, <https://thecapitalquest.com/2021/01/29/saudi-arabias-pif-chinese-firm-buy-into-port-operator/>, (accessed March 10, 2023).

undisputed, while at the same time it cannot be ruled out that further expansion is aimed at obtaining exclusive rights to operate the Suez Canal.⁶⁹

Allied Russia could be a beneficiary of Chinese resources. By associating with Russia, China's resources can also benefit Iran. In return, China can rely on Russia's assistance in dealing with issues that are difficult for China, in a way that China does not want to be identified with, especially in the eyes of the international community (for instance, the use of the Wagner Group). In other matters, China could also have access to Iranian capabilities (including Houthi militias or others), via Russia, and so on and so forth.

It is important to note that such cooperation and sharing of benefits- between China, Russia and Iran can have significant implications for the security and stability of the Red Sea region. This could lead to the transfer of military technology and expertise, the establishment of joint military bases and the formation of new security alliances that could challenge the existing order in the region. Moreover, this kind of cooperation could lead to a more assertive foreign policy by these countries, which could result in increased tensions and competition with other regional and international powers. It could also exacerbate existing conflicts and contribute to the proliferation of weapons in the region. Therefore, it is crucial for the US and partners to monitor and address any possible negative consequences of this China-Russia-Iran triangle. While there may be the idea of the "The Red Sea Triangle" between these countries, it is important to also consider potential competition or conflict of interests between them, to identify weaknesses and to develop measures to disrupt the connections within the triangle.

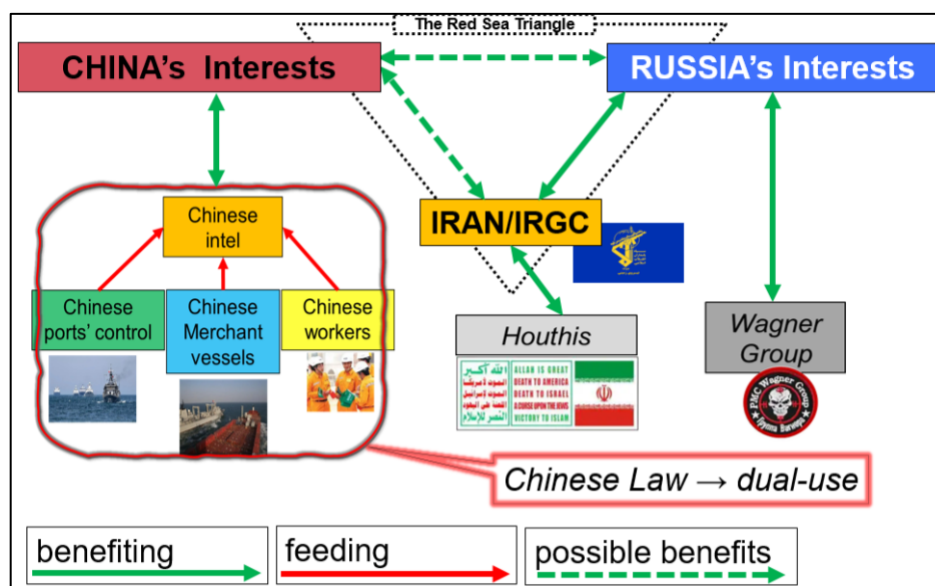


Figure 3. China-Russia-Iran benefit network.⁷⁰

Regional maritime security constructs and their challenges.

Recognizing that the safe passage through the Red Sea and the adjacent Gulf of Aden should not be taken for granted, several regional maritime security initiatives have been conceived, including the Djibouti Code of Conduct – DCoC (Figure 4) and the Red Sea Forum (Figure 5), with varying approaches and varying successes. In most cases, these initiatives face political and perceptual obstacles. A key feature that emerges is the membership of the

⁶⁹ Ehud Gonen, "China and the Suez Canal—Politics, Economy, and Logistics", *SpringerLink*, 06 January 2023, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-15670-0_2, (accessed March 13, 2023).

⁷⁰ Source: CSAG.

countries bordering the Red Sea in numerous and overlapping regional organizations, but none with a clear mandate for coordination across the maritime space.⁷¹ Very often, these member states have shared and overlapping priorities and few assets or resources to devote to maritime projects. The selection criteria for the participants may be a question. Regarding the Red Sea Forum, Eritrea did not attend, Israel was not invited, Ethiopia and UAE did not participate. The existence of outstanding internal disputes (e.g., the 2017 Jeddah Amendment of DCoC was not signed by Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea) could also complicate a coherent response to the Red Sea. Moreover, there are different perspectives on the threat posed by different states in the region. Mistrust and competition can undermine the effectiveness of any cooperative maritime arrangement, resulting in unhelpful outcomes such as duplication of efforts and exclusion of certain stakeholders. Hence, it may be useful to start with a small, limited mandate, and then expand it during cooperation as trust grows and usefulness is demonstrated. The identification of common risks and the provisions for sharing information on those risks can be a useful starting point for building trust in the short term and serve as a prelude to greater engagement in the longer term.⁷² Furthermore, to avoid unnecessary duplication of work, current cooperation mechanisms should also review existing arrangements and identify clear directions for cooperation. In addition, existing Red Sea organizations should clearly define the scope of their capabilities and responsibilities, while fostering cooperation with other organizations on a multilateral or bilateral basis.⁷³

Limited participation, weak implementation, a complex geopolitical landscape, limited trust and cooperation and evolving security threats are key factors that have contributed to the limited success of maritime security initiatives in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Better coordination between member states and intergovernmental organizations present on the western and eastern sides of the Red Sea is therefore essential for the development of a cooperation mechanism. The US can be a leader in bridging multilateral institutions and initiatives to minimize competition and promote mutually reinforcing efforts. The US can catalyze these efforts into concrete action. AFRICOM and CENTCOM can play an important role in multilateral military-to-military engagements that enhance diplomatic efforts to foster cooperation on shared maritime challenges. In addition, resources and experience can be drawn from existing constructs to avoid 're-inventing the wheel'.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Omar S. Mahmood, "Competition, cooperation and security in the Red Sea", Institute for Security Studies (ISS), August 2019, <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docN93454BF0139925cc94bb5407d61cd515e453119261ccf9a0158c2cb8a6d3d54e0e72f4603e14>, (accessed February 16, 2023).

⁷² Omar S. Mahmood, "Competition, cooperation and security in the Red Sea", Institute for Security Studies (ISS), August 2019, <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docN93454BF0139925cc94bb5407d61cd515e453119261ccf9a0158c2cb8a6d3d54e0e72f4603e14>, (accessed February 16, 2023).

⁷³ Omar S. Mahmood, "Competition, cooperation and security in the Red Sea", Institute for Security Studies (ISS), August 2019, <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docN93454BF0139925cc94bb5407d61cd515e453119261ccf9a0158c2cb8a6d3d54e0e72f4603e14>, (accessed February 16, 2023).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

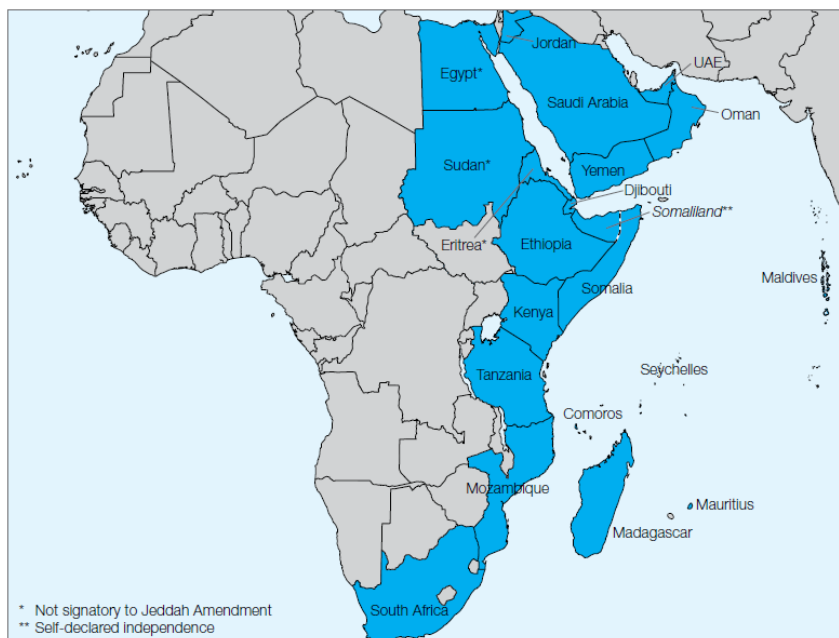


Figure 4. Djibouti Code of Conduct participants.⁷⁵



Figure 5. Red Sea Forum participants.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Omar S. Mahmood, "Competition, cooperation and security in the Red Sea", Institute for Security Studies (ISS), August 2019, <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docN93454BF0139925cc94bb5407d61cd515e453119261ccf9a0158c2cb8a6d3d54e0e72f4603e14>, (accessed February 16, 2023).

Solution for FSO Safer as the first pillar of future regional cooperation.

The FSO Safer, the decaying oil tanker that has been anchored off the Yemeni coast for several years, still poses an immediate environmental threat to the Red Sea. The potential solutions have been complicated by the unstable situation in Yemen over the years, making it difficult to access the tanker and conduct necessary repairs or unload the oil.⁷⁷ One of the greatest obstacles in sorting out the problem with the tanker were the Yemen Houthi rebels who used to use the FSO Safer case as a bargaining chip in negotiations or to persuade their “hated neighbor” – KSA and the “evil West”. However, in 2022 the Houthi movement signed an agreement with the United Nations to deal with the decaying oil tanker.⁷⁸ Ultimately, any efforts to work with the Houthis would need to prioritize the safety and security of all involved parties, as well as the protection of the environment and local communities. Furthermore, recent UN reports (March 2023) on the planned beginning of a “salvage operation off Yemeni coast” shed a light of hope for solving this long-standing human neglect.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, until the case is closed, the US could still play a crucial role in facilitating a solution to the FSO Safer. Resolving the FSO Safer issue would not only mitigate the immediate environmental risk but could also serve as a confidence-building measure and pave the way for future regional cooperation in the Red Sea. The US could leverage its role in resolving the FSO Safer issue to facilitate further cooperation and security initiatives in the region, working with regional partners to address shared challenges, threats and concerns about how to protect the ecosystem in the Red Sea.

Conclusions.

The United States has not entirely ignored the Red Sea region, but for several reasons it has not been as active in the region as other countries such as China, Russia and Iran. The US has traditionally focused more on Europe, the Middle East and East Asia, which may divert attention and resources away from the Red Sea region. The US may consider that the Red Sea region has limited strategic interests compared to other regions, as it lacks significant oil reserves and is not directly linked to US national security interests. The US may lack the resources and capacity to devote significant attention to the Red Sea region in the light of its other global commitments. The Red Sea region is situated in a complex geopolitical landscape in which multiple actors compete for influence and power in the region. This may make it difficult for the US to navigate and achieve its strategic objectives.

By contrast, China, Russia and Iran are becoming more engaged in the Red Sea region, each with its own strategic interests in the region. China sees the region as a key part of its BRI and has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in countries such as Djibouti and Eritrea. Russia, on the other hand, has expanded its military presence in the region, including establishing a naval base in Sudan. Iran sees the region as a key element of its efforts to expand its influence in the Middle East and counteract the influence of the US and Saudi Arabia.

The US can play an important role as a mediator or facilitator in building trust and understanding among regional actors and encouraging them to work together to address common challenges such as maritime security, terrorism and instability. This could be done by bringing together countries with similar security concerns to discuss shared challenges, facilitate joint exercises and training programs, or provide technical assistance and expertise for regional

⁷⁷ Margaret Besheer, “UN Buys Oil Tanker to Begin Salvage Operation Off Yemeni Coast”, *Voice of America*, March 09, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-buys-oil-tanker-to-begin-salvage-operation-off-yemeni-coast/6998041.html>,

⁷⁸ Ghaida Ghantous, “Yemen's Houthis agree U.N. proposal to offload decaying oil tanker”, *Reuters*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemens-houthis-agree-un-proposal-offload-decaying-oil-tanker-2022-03-06/>, (accessed December 27, 2022).

⁷⁹ Ibid 77.

capacity building. By reinvigorating regional security constructs in the Red Sea region, the US can help to promoting stability and security in the region, which is in the interest of both regional actors and the US itself. For instance, Sudan has a large population and a relatively well-trained military that could be deployed to provide additional personnel for maritime security operations. However, cooperation and coordination among the Red Sea countries would be crucial to ensure the effective integration of the Sudanese armed forces into the overall security framework. To assure this, the US can work with Saudi Arabia, which has a better understanding of Sudanese issues and is adept at dealing with the Sudanese government. Frequent multinational maneuvers in the Red Sea are one of the best ways to demonstrate commitment to the freedom of navigation. It is important to expand to multinational counter-autonomous systems and missile defense exercises with Arab Gulf partners and Israel.

The Red Sea is a vital fishing area for many countries in the region and the sustainability of fish stocks is crucial for the livelihoods of local communities and the regional economy. However, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a significant problem and better monitoring, control and enforcement are needed to prevent overfishing and protect the marine ecosystem. The European Fishing Control Agency (EFCA) has extensive experience in fisheries control and enforcement and could provide technical assistance and capacity building to establish a center supporting the development of regional fisheries management policies and strategies. The Coast Guard could also contribute to the center by providing expertise in the field of maritime surveillance and enforcement.

The Red Sea region offers junior powers the opportunity to step in. By supporting this, the US can maintain its influence and control in a given country or region, instead of ceding it to other great powers like China and Russia. By supporting these junior powers through arms sales, military-to-military cooperation and other means, the US can continue to exert its influence and ensure that its interests in the Red Sea region are protected. This could also help to counterbalance the influence of other great powers in the region and prevent them from gaining too much control or dominance.

Recommendations for US/CENTCOM.

"PEOPLE":

- 1) Establishment of a "Regional Fishing Control Center" using EFCA and/or Coast Guard Expertise.
- 2) Mediate and support democratic transition efforts in Sudan, as stable Sudan with Sudani manpower can play a leading role for the Red Sea security construct.
- 3) Create an environment to reach a solution for FSO Safer (as the first pillar of future regional cooperation).

"PARTNERS":

- 1) Convince additional countries to join Task Force 59, including Israel and Kuwait.
- 2) Exploration of alternative ABO in the Red Sea region (e.g., in Egypt's Berenice Naval Base).
- 3) Exploit "large-scale" Joint exercise in the Red Sea (invite China and Russia as observers to deconflict and to assure space management).
- 4) Use "By, With and Through Concept" for junior partners (NATO, EU, regional partners) in filling possible gaps (FMS, MIL-MIL Cooperation).
- 5) Act as a broker to reinvigorate regional security constructs.

“INNOVATION”:

- 1) Redraw boundaries between AFRICOM and CENTCOM’s AOR to improve efficiency (alternatively establish the Red Sea Working Group).
- 2) Use the Red Sea arena to encourage deterrence of Iran by regional countries (e.g., shadowing ops).
- 3) Integrate TF 59 capabilities to support TF 153.
- 4) Establishment of a database of dual-use ships transiting through the Red Sea.
- 5) By establishing a regional fishing center, promote fishery monitoring systems (the “blue box”⁸⁰) to reduce the possibility of malign activities in the area.

⁸⁰ The "blue box" device is a container tracking and monitoring system introduced by the EFCA to combat IUU fishing in European waters (implemented as part of the project called “The Blue Box Porbeagle VMS”). The blue box is a small, self-contained unit that can be easily installed in shipping containers and can transmit real-time location and other data to EFCA and national authorities via satellite. The device allows authorities to track containers containing fish products from their point of origin to their destination, ensuring that the fish are legally caught, properly labeled, and not subject to fraud. The blue box is seen as a powerful tool in the fight against IUU fishing, which is estimated to cost the global fishing industry up to \$23 billion annually and threatens the sustainability of fish populations and the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on fishing. Source: Ángela Cortina, “The BLUE BOX PORBEAGLE VMS Project has officially started!”, March 16, 2021, *Blue Porbeagle*, <https://blueporbeagle.eu/cooperative-of-fishing-shipowners-of-the-port-of-vigo-arvi-and-the-engineering-company-arxitec-critical-systems-participates-in-the-project-entitledblue-box-porbeagle-vms/>, (accessed February 12, 2023).