

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

The Red Sea – Neglected Nexus Change

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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.

1. **Subject.** The Red Sea – Neglected Nexus.

2. **Purpose.** This paper presents CSAG’s perspective on the current challenges in the Red Sea region. It focuses on the long-lasting phenomenon of regional stability and provides arguments on the possibility of disrupting the status quo, as well as recommendations on preventive measures. The paper will be followed by a CSAG strategy paper of the same title with detailed analysis.

3. **BLUF.**

The strategic importance of the Red Sea basin and the Suez Canal is obvious. Nevertheless, CSAG has developed the theory that the Red Sea area is a neglected nexus by the US but not by the others including China, Russia, and Iran.

- a. This neglect is primarily because it is a relatively calm area, and this is certainly due to worldwide mutual interest. This interest requires that the Sea Line of Communication (SLOC) be navigable through the Red Sea.
- b. The importance of the Red Sea area 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 Iranian presence in a decade.
- c. Multipolarity creates an opportunity for the region to choose the partner best tailored to its needs, including Egypt. At the same time, regional security constructs are ineffective (including Djibouti Code of Conduct – DCoC, and the Red Sea Forum).
- d. 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, undisrupted SLOCs, logistics hubs, food and water security, and environmental issues, for instance the FSO Safer case).

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

4. **Argumentation.**

a. **“CENTCOM encirclement”.**

China's growing dominance in the region, Russia's presence, and the highest intensity of Iran-backed and Iran-orchestrated activities in a decade make the Red Sea region another direction that may affect US regional interests, as well as those of US partners. Consequently, the CENTCOM’s AOR

can thus be seen as being squeezed between a “multi-jawed machine vice” (see figure no. 1), which then requires additional CENTCOM effort. Paradoxically, US sanctions may also unite countries that share the same “menace”, meaning China, Russia, and Iran, with some African countries such as Eritrea and potentially Sudan (even though US sanctions against Sudan were lifted in 2021, the specter remains).

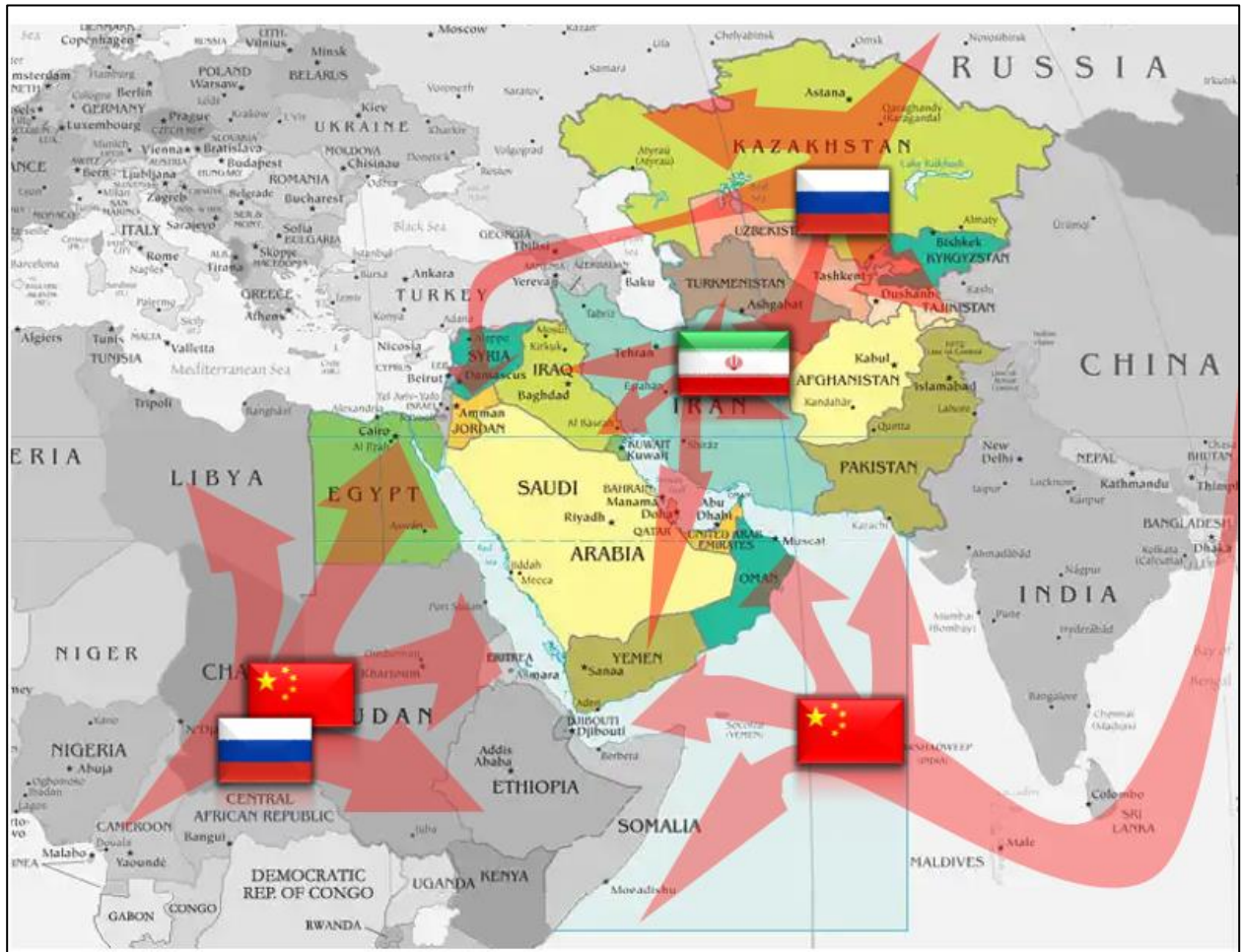


Figure 1. “CENTCOM encirclement”.

b. **Militarization of the Red Sea.**

The international importance of the Red Sea region is demonstrated by the visible military presence of its strategic competitors (see figure no. 2), most dramatically on the Horn of Africa side. The presence of so many global actors in such a narrow zone, and the resulting militarization under the pretext of protecting commercial interests, raises the specter of an additional third layer of competition – an external one, next to internal developments on the western side of the Red Sea

(as the first layer) and rivalries exported from the Arabian Gulf (as the second layer). More importantly, militarization poses a risk of interference, misinterpretation, and miscalculation, which may lead to incorrect water and airspace management and the misuse of weapons systems.

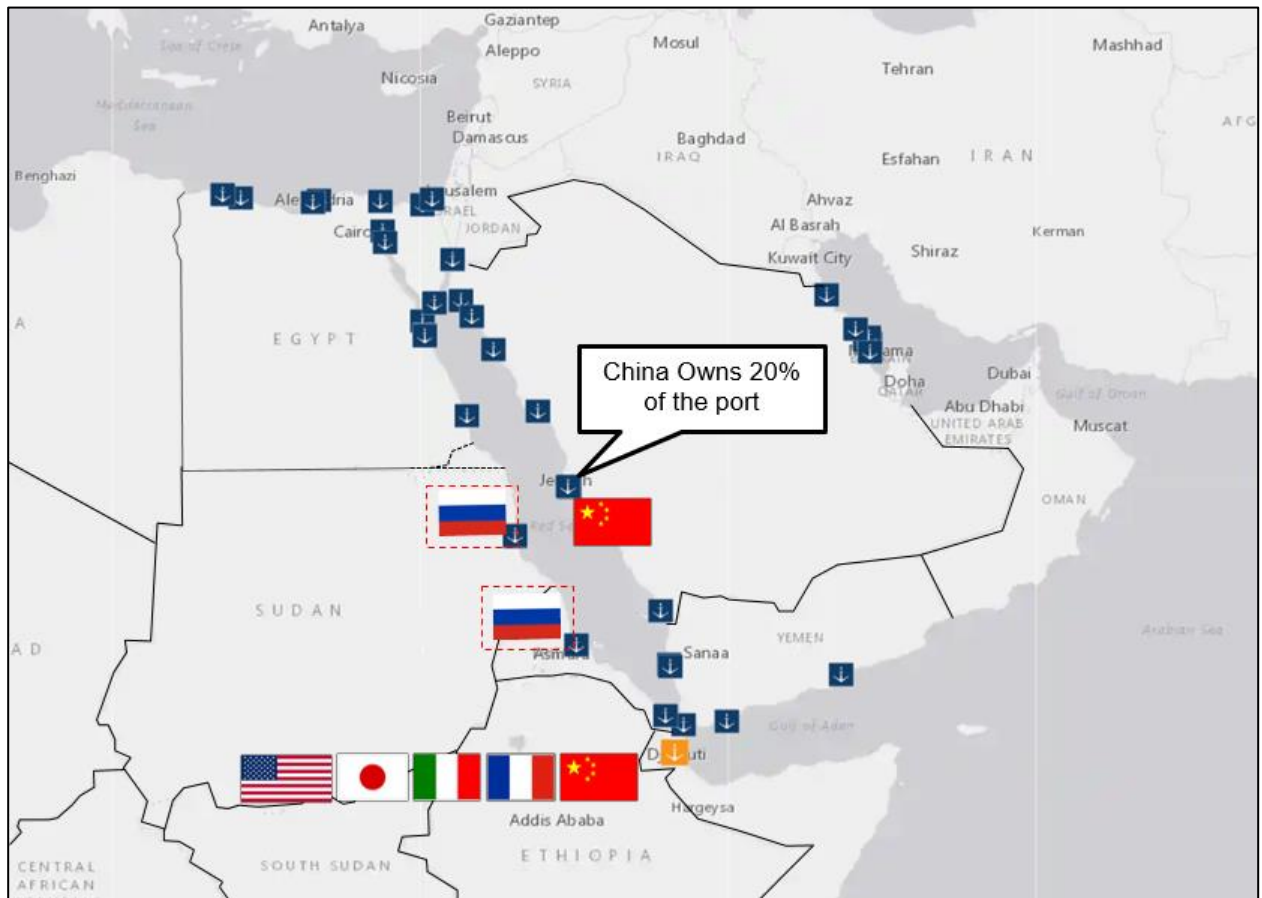


Figure 2. Militarization of the Red Sea.

c. **The China-Russia-Iran benefit network.**

- (1) CSAG believes that particular attention should be paid to the China-Russia-Iran Red Sea benefit network – the “Red Sea Triangle” as illustrated on the figure no. 3, and how these countries can benefit from each other through cooperation and the use of certain capabilities.
- (2) An example from Chinese Intelligence was used by CSAG to illustrate this idea. The arrows on the figure no. 3 represent the relationships between the three states, with the solid lines meaning that the information behind it is to be found in the open sources, and the dashed lines representing the assumptions made in CSAG.
- (3) According to Chinese doctrine and their political guidance, including dual-use, their Intelligence is to be fed by all means and capabilities, for instance, by their projects, especially in

infrastructure, and by their assets, including merchant vessels. It can also be assumed that every project manager, contractor, and every Chinese worker is, in a way, an intelligence-collecting asset.

- (4) 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 ways that China does not want to be identified with, especially in the eye of the international community (for instance, use of the Wagner Group). In other matters, China, through Russia, may have access to Iranian capabilities as well (including, the Houthi militias), and so on and so forth.

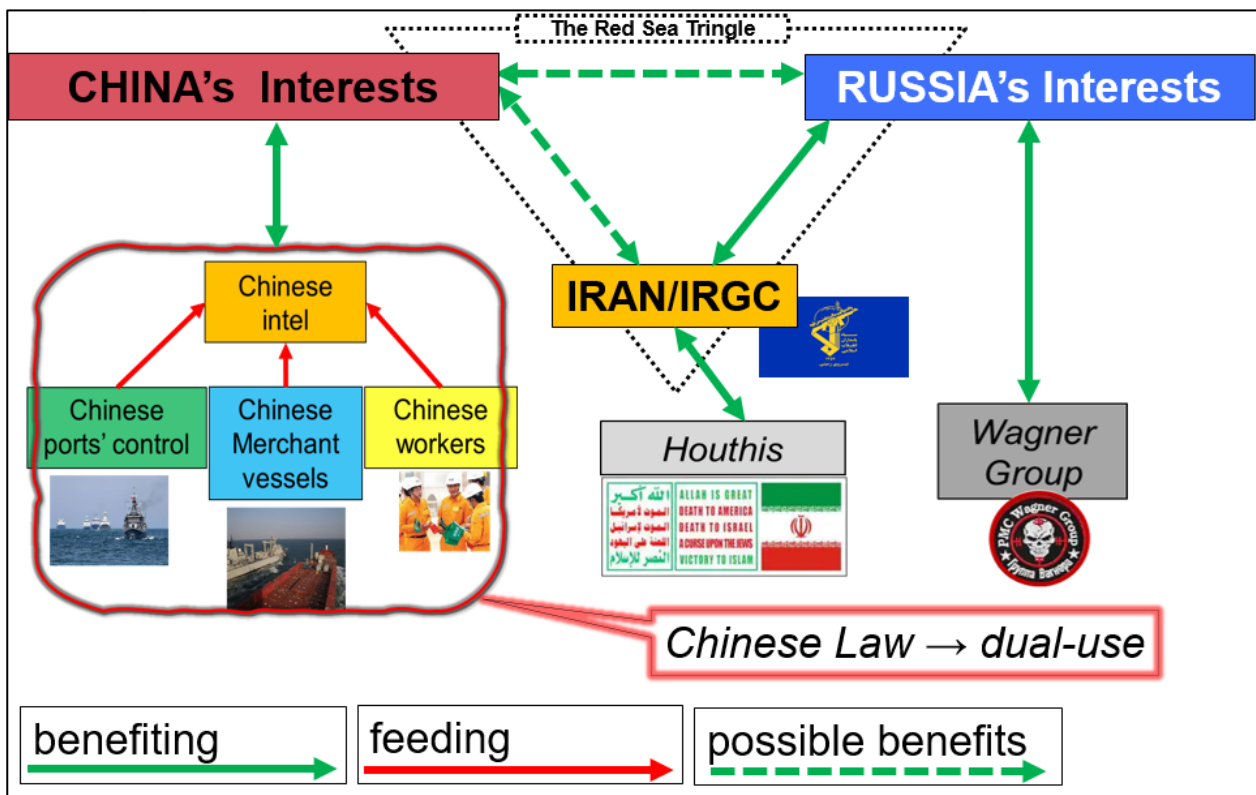


Figure 3. China-Russia-Iran benefit network.

5. **Recommendations.**

The recommendations fall into three categories: People, Partners, and Innovation.

a. **PEOPLE:**

Disclaimer: "In close cooperation with AFRICOM".

- (1) Establishment of a "Regional Fishing Control Center" using the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA) and/or Coastguard's expertise.
- (2) Utilize Sudani manpower for the Red Sea security construct(s).
- (3) Create an environment for a solution for FSO Safer (as the first pillar of future regional cooperation).

b. PARTNERS:

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- (1) Exploration of alternative ABO in the Red Sea region (e.g., in Egypt's Berenice Naval Base).
- (2) Exploit "large-scale" joint exercise platforms in the Red Sea (e.g., the "Bright Star" exercise).
Invite CHN and RUS as the observers, also to deconflict water/airspace management.
- (3) Use "By, With and Through Concept" for junior partners (NATO, EU, regional partners) in filling possible gaps (e.g., FMS and MIL-MIL Cooperation).
- (4) Act as a broker to reinvigorate regional security constructs.

c. 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 region to encourage deterrence of IRN by regional countries and by prioritizing current effort to the Red Sea by TF 59 (e.g., shadowing ops).
- (3) Integrate TF 59 capabilities to support TF 153.
- (4) Establishment of a database for dual-use ships transiting the Red Sea.
- (5) By establishing fishing center, promote fishery monitoring systems (the "blue box") to reduce possibility of malign activities in the area.