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Europe's Nightmare: The 52nd Meridian Challenge

Keeping the Trade and Transport Links between
Europe and Asia Open to Western Alignment Traffic

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Foreword

The 52nd Meridian East, a line of longitude running south through Russia, Iran, the Persian Gulf, the mouth of the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, is severely exposed to influence by countries opposed to the West, including Russia, Iran, and China (what we term the Counter Alignment). It is also a proxy for understanding the wider threats to Europe-Asia connectivity from the perspective of the Western Alignment, those nations broadly in favour of the current US-led world order.

In this paper we demonstrate how Counter Alignment countries have built up significant influence along the 52nd Meridian, giving them the potential to turn this into control of Europe-Asia transport routes. If Counter Alignment control of these routes was achieved then it would lead to enormous strategic harm to the political, economic, and defence interests of the Western Alignment by cutting or impeding Europe-Asia trade, supply chains, and military movement. Such control might also threaten the cohesion of the bloc because of the differing national responses it would generate. Keeping Europe-Asia transport routes open to Western-Alignment traffic, including and especially in the event of a conflict, is the 52nd Meridian Challenge.

About the Adarga Research Institute

Adarga is a British AI software leader. Its Research Institute produces data and artificial intelligence driven research on the most important geopolitical and technological issues of our time, employing a unique synthesis of expertise, technology, and proprietary data models to deliver in-depth analysis.

Our mission is to produce research that will better illuminate the geopolitical and emerging technology landscape, in order to support more effective decision making.



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01. Executive Summary

1.1

What is the 52nd Meridian Challenge?

The 52nd Meridian East is a line of longitude that runs south through Russia, Iran, and the Indian Ocean. In the north it bisects the Eurasian landmass, and therefore dominates all land and air traffic between Europe and Asia, including European access to Central Asia. Further south, it passes near the mouths of two of the most important waterways for trade, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The Meridian then heads down through the Indian Ocean, across which four fifths of world trade flows.

Almost all trade and military traffic flowing between Europe and Asia has to cross the 52nd Meridian East. Understanding who controls transit across Meridian is not only vital because of its geography; it also serves as a proxy for wider connectivity vulnerabilities relating to the influence and control over Europe-Asia transportation routes by Russia, Iran, and China.

We define these three countries as being part of a Counter Alignment of nations that position themselves as standing contrary to the West. By analysing how Counter Alignment countries are building influence and control along the 52nd Meridian East, we demonstrate how Europe-Asia connectivity has become a major geopolitical vulnerability for the West and its allies (the "Western Alignment").

The 52nd Meridian Challenge is therefore how the Western Alignment can keep Europe and Asia connected in terms of trade and military needs, including and especially in the event of a conflict.

1.2

Compromising Connectivity Between Europe and Asia, Both Now and in the Future

Connectivity between Europe and Asia has already been impacted because of Russian and Iranian influence and control, and in several major ways.

First are the restrictions placed on Western Alignment airlines on overflying Russia, which have been in place since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This has handed Chinese, Middle Eastern, and other non-Western Alignment airlines (which are not banned) with a distinct commercial advantage.

Second is the disruption to shipping thanks to attacks by Iranian-sponsored Houthis on Western Alignment shipping transiting the Red Sea; only 1 out of 84 attacks analysed in this paper were on Counter Alignment ships.

Third is the realisation that connectivity between Europe and Central Asia is now strategically compromised, as

Russia and Iran could cut off all practical access if they wanted to. This casts a significant shadow over the investment that the EU been making into this commodity-rich region, and puts at risk Europe's importation of goods like oil, gas, uranium, and wheat.

The challenge of keeping open the transportation links between Europe and Asia is being made more difficult by increased Chinese influence over vital choke points.

Beijing already has a naval base at the mouth of the Red Sea, giving it the potential to disrupt shipping there (even if there are nearby US and French military facilities). There are signs that Egypt, guardian of the Suez Canal, is moving more into China's orbit, for example its recent accession to the BRICS organisation. There are suspicions that many of the ports it has built on the East coast of Africa are "dual use" and could be used by the People's Liberation Army Navy such as in times of conflict. Compounding these potential vulnerabilities is the emerging threat to Western Alignment shipping transiting around the Cape of Good Hope. BRICS member South Africa is moving more into alignment with China and Russia, as evidenced by recent naval drills between the three countries off the South African coast. China is also establishing strong influence over island nations in the Indian Ocean, such as the Seychelles and the Maldives.



1.3

Longer Term Risks and Mitigations

The longer-term impact of increasing Chinese influence over the 52nd Meridian East is substantial. First, it is clear that the Counter Alignment could turn its influence over major choke points into control, thus denying them without a fight to the Western Alignment. This includes the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and (assuming South Africa continues its current political trajectory), the Cape of Good Hope.

Given China's reliance on trade, with Europe being one of its main trade partners, it is unlikely to support a blocking of Europe-Asia connectivity except for in the event of a sharp deterioration in relations such as a conflict with the US and its allies. If China did coordinate on this with Russia and Iran, then the implications for the Western Alignment would be severe.

- All military planning that assumes the unopposed movement of assets between Europe and Asia would be undermined.
- Notwithstanding any sanctions placed, trade and supply chains between Europe and Asia would be interrupted. As was seen during COVID, this would have a critical impact on European economies, as well as potentially on social and political cohesion.
- Politically, the potential for the loss of trade and supply chain links to Asia might encourage some governments, for example in Europe, to reconsider their support for the US in event of a conflict with China, thus weakening the position of the US and its closest allies.

We propose the following mitigations to these risks.

- Western Alignment governments need to consider how they can keep open the transit of military assets between Europe and Asia in the event of a conflict with China.
- Western Alignment governments and companies need to consider how to deal with a mass interruption of trade and supply chains between Europe and Asia in the event of a conflict. This may involve finding new suppliers (most likely from North America), or mass stockpiling.
- Western Alignment governments need to work together to better engage with the countries of the Indian Ocean at the political, economic, and defence levels so as to push back on Chinese influence.
- Western Alignment governments should engage with India to support the upholding of international norms of navigation and trade in the Indian Ocean.
- The Chagos Islands deal should be reconsidered so as to make the British and American military presence in the middle of the Indian Ocean shipping lanes more permanent.
- The EU to make immediate contingency plans in case of being cut off from Central Asian imports, and to publish them to help the private sector prepare for such an event.
- The EU and NATO to work together on finding mitigations to the risks associated with the cutting off of Europe-Asia connectivity, to lessen the chance of individual countries being picked off by China with the promise of continued access to trade and supply chains in the event of a conflict.



02.

Introduction

The 52nd Meridian is a line of longitude that runs from the Barents Sea in the north, down through Russia and the Caspian Sea, briefly touches Kazakhstan, and then rolls into Iran. From there it heads south through the Persian Gulf, across the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, and heads past the entrance to the Red Sea. From there it plunges straight down the Indian Ocean, between Madagascar to the West and Mauritius to the East, before ending up in Antarctica.



Figure 1: The 52nd Meridian East

The briefing uses the 52nd Meridian East as a proxy for understanding how Europe-Asia connectivity is being increasingly influenced and controlled by countries now aligned contrary to Western interests. We explore

scenarios where influence and control of the line is being increased, and examine what this means for the countries of the Western Alignment and broader international strategy.



For the purposes of this briefing, we use the definitions pioneered by Adarga in the understanding of the newly emerging global order. With US hegemony gone, the world has split into three different alignments:

- **Western Aligned Countries.** These are the countries that are in effect in the “US camp” and broadly aligned to what has traditionally been known as The West. Their main intent, broadly speaking, is to see the continuation of the current US-led world order.

Western Alignment countries include the US and its NATO allies; the “Indo-Pacific 4” of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea; and other states that have a vested interest in retaining current US-led international norms and rules.

- **Counter Aligned Countries.** These are countries considered to be adversaries by the US, and which are actively seeking to disrupt or transform the US-led international order through strategic alignment with one another against US interests. This includes six that were defined as “foreign adversaries” by the Trump Administration, a definition that has not been rescinded. The six main Counter Alignment countries are: China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela.
- **Unaligned Countries.** This comprises countries which do not fit into the above two categories. This includes India, which has not yet committed fully to either the Western or Counter Alignments. Note that it is distinct from the ‘Non-aligned Movement’ of the Cold War, and includes countries which pursue partnerships with both the US and China, such as Saudi Arabia and Brazil.



03. Why the 52nd Meridian East Matters

In terms of the current geopolitical tension between the Western Alignment and the Counter Alignment, the 52nd Meridian East is probably the world's most important line of longitude. It bisects Eurasia, and thus dominates all land and air traffic between Europe and Asia. Further south, it passes near the mouths of two of the most important waterways for trade – the Red Sea and Persian Gulf – and goes through the Indian Ocean, across which four fifths of world trade flows. No other line of longitude has as many geopolitical choke points along it, particularly for trade, making it a useful proxy for understanding how Counter Alignment countries are increasing their ability to disrupt traffic vital for Western Alignment interests.

3.1

Why Europe-Asia Connectivity is Important

3.1.1 Europe-Asia Trade and Economic Exchange

Europe and Asia are heavily intertwined economically. In 2022 the trade in goods between the EU and ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) surpassed €252 billion, and EU-China trade in goods was more than €857 billion.^{1,2} The EU is Japan's third largest trade partner, and South Korea's third largest export market.^{3,4}

The UK has recently tilted towards the Indo-Pacific and is increasing its economic presence there, for example its joining of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade group.⁵ Asia is already important economically, with UK-ASEAN trade in 2022 alone worth £46.5 billion.⁶

There is significant foreign direct investment between Europe and Asia too, with the EU being a major investor, including foreign direct investment stock of €400 billion just in ASEAN.⁷

Europe's supply chains are also rooted in Asia, something that caused difficulties in the time of COVID. Although efforts have been made to reduce the risk of Europe's dependency on Asia, in particular China, it still exists; for instance, Chinese, South Korean and Japanese batteries still account for over 95 per cent of the Electric Vehicle batteries in the European market.^{8,9}

3.1.2 Access to Central Asia and Connectivity by Land

All land traffic between Europe and Asia must cross the 52nd Meridian. This includes both the Northern and Middle Corridors, trade routes that connect Asia (principally China) to Europe. The Northern Corridor heads mainly through Russia; the Middle Corridor traverses the Black Sea and the Caucasus to the Central Asian steppe and beyond to China.

Although these land Corridors are much less important for international trade than sea trade (about four fifths of global trade is transported by ship), they do offer an alternative if sea traffic is disrupted.¹⁰ The Middle Corridor also provides access to the countries of Central Asia, something of strategic importance to Europe.

The EU has "significant stakes" in Central Asia, according to the European External Action Service. And in August 2023 the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs chair David McAllister stated that "Central Asia is a strategically important region for the European Union".^{10,11} To highlight this, the first-ever EU-Central Asia leaders' summit happened in April 2024.¹³ The EU's interest lies in the fact that the region is an important source of imports into Europe, particularly in raw materials; Kazakhstan, for instance, is a major source of oil, gas, uranium, and wheat.¹⁴ In return, the EU is an important export market for Central Asia, a major source of FDI, and an important geopolitical alternative to the former colonial power, Russia.¹⁵



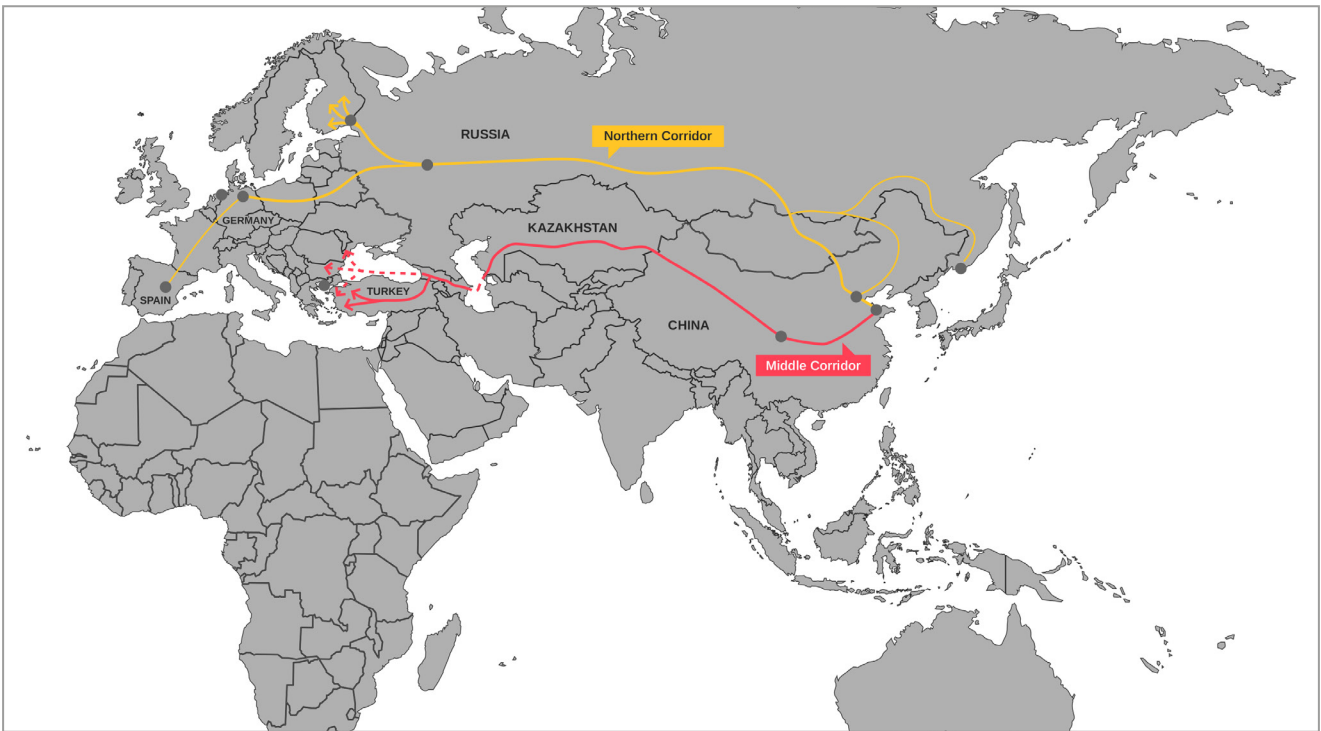


Figure 2: The Northern and Middle Corridors

3.1.3 Connectivity by Air

By far the quickest way to fly between Europe and Asia is over the 52nd Meridian East. Until the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, any flight between Europe and Northeast Asia would have almost certainly involved flying over Russia, but as discussed below this is now not an option for Western Alignment planes.

If the whole 52nd Meridian East was blocked to Western Alignment aircraft, then this would require flights to head either over the Arctic or to over the Atlantic and via North America; both of these options are far more expensive in time and money.

3.1.4 Connectivity by Sea

The 52nd Meridian East is critical for sea travel. 30-40% of all trade goes through the Red Sea, which opens out close to the line; so does the Persian Gulf, through which flows 25% of the world's oil and a fifth of its LNG.¹⁶ Overall, 80% of all trade sails across the Indian Ocean, the majority crossing the environs of the 52nd Meridian.¹⁷

3.1.5 Military Connectivity

A number of countries in Europe have major military dependencies that lie the other side of the 52nd Meridian East. The UK has a number of defence hubs, such as Brunei, Kenya, Oman, and Singapore, that are only accessible in a timely manner (in other words, without heading there via North America) via the 52nd Meridian. France has a number of overseas departments, regions, and collectivities – including Mayotte, New Caledonia, and Réunion - that militarily depend on quick support from Metropolitan France. The US also relies on Europe-Asia connectivity for its military purposes, and US ships regularly use the Suez Canal.¹⁸



3.2

The Strategic Importance of the 52nd Meridian to the Western Alignment

In short, whoever controls the transit of the 52nd Meridian East has the ability not only to dominate the flow of world trade, but also to severely curtail direct contact between Europe and Asia.

The problem for the Western Alignment is that this line of longitude is now under the influence and partial control of core members of the Counter Alignment, namely Russia and Iran. What's more, China is building up its influence along the Meridian further south.

Unless the Western Alignment takes specific preventative action, then there is the possibility that Counter Alignment countries will have a strong position of influence along the 52nd Meridian and thus potential control over the transport routes between Europe and Asia. If this were to happen then the strategic consequences would be immense.

04.

The Nature and Effect of Counter Alignment Influence Over the 52nd Meridian East

How does Chinese, Iranian, and Russian influence along the environs of the 52nd Meridian translate into control of transit across it?

4.1.1 Influence and Control over the Land Routes

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has not seen the Northern and Middle Corridors blocked to EU-China trade. There has though been a transformation of the patterns of trade along these routes. In the first half of 2023, flow along the Northern Corridor dropped by 56%, while that in the Middle Corridor grew by 77% in terms of tonnage.¹⁹

The increased popularity of the Middle Corridor ignores its strategic vulnerability: all land and air routes across the Meridian on the Eurasian landmass have to pass through Russia or Iran, or territory dominated by them. In theory it is possible to head from Turkey to Georgia to Kazakhstan, but this heads across the Caspian Sea. As Russia has the biggest fleet on the Caspian, it has military control of this route too.²⁰

The consequences of this are stark. First, that all EU-China overland trade depends on the routes being kept open by Russia and Iran. Second, that European access to Central Asia (and vice versa) is already strategically compromised. Russia and Iran could cut off access tomorrow if they wanted to. (An alternative route through Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is all but impassible, at least for now.) As the Middle Corridor ultimately connects the People's Republic of China with Europe, such a move by Russia and Iran might create tension with China given China's reliance on the route for trade. But as we discuss later, it would probably be done in conjunction with Beijing given the strategic nature of a decision like this. Moreover, the circumstances in which Beijing might consider such action would already involve a severe deterioration of China-Western relations, for example conflict over Taiwan or the South China Sea.



4.1.2 Influence and Control over the Air Routes

As with the land, so with the air. Until 2022 most air traffic between Europe and Asia flew over Russian or Iranian airspace. Both countries are now problematic for air travel.

Flying over Iran, especially following the eruption of hostilities between Israel and Hamas/Hezbollah since October 7th 2023, carries risks that many airlines don't want to take. To highlight this, no notice to airlines was given by Tehran when it launched a missile attack on Israel on 1st October 2024, forcing more than 80 flights to frantically reroute.²¹ These risks aren't theoretical, as the downing in Tehran of a Ukrainian 737 in 2020 showed.^{22 23}

Restrictions over the use of Russian airspace are the biggest problem. In response to Western sanctions, Moscow has now banned most Western airlines from its airspace, including planes from North America and most of Europe.²⁴ Airlines from countries aligned to the West, such as Singapore and South Korea, have voluntarily

stopped flying over Russia.²⁵ This has had a meaningful impact. Finnair flights between Helsinki and Tokyo, for example, used to travel through Russian airspace for 3,000 km. Now banned from flying over Russia, Finnair has adopted a new route over the North Pole. While passengers might be excited to take it, the reality is that the route takes four hours more and requires 40% more fuel, making it environmentally and financially much less sustainable.²⁶ British Airways has (temporarily at least) stopped flying between London and Beijing, and Virgin has stopped flights to the Chinese Mainland altogether.^{27 28} In the meantime, airlines from China and the Middle East (including Turkey, a NATO member, with no ban from Russian airspace and free from the subsequent expense), are able to outcompete the Western Alignment competition.^{29 30} This blow to their competitiveness may be an existential threat for some.

By understanding the 52nd Meridian as a proxy for wider connectivity vulnerabilities, we can see how Counter Alignment influence over air routes has been translated into control - control that is being exerted to the detriment of the Western Alignment.

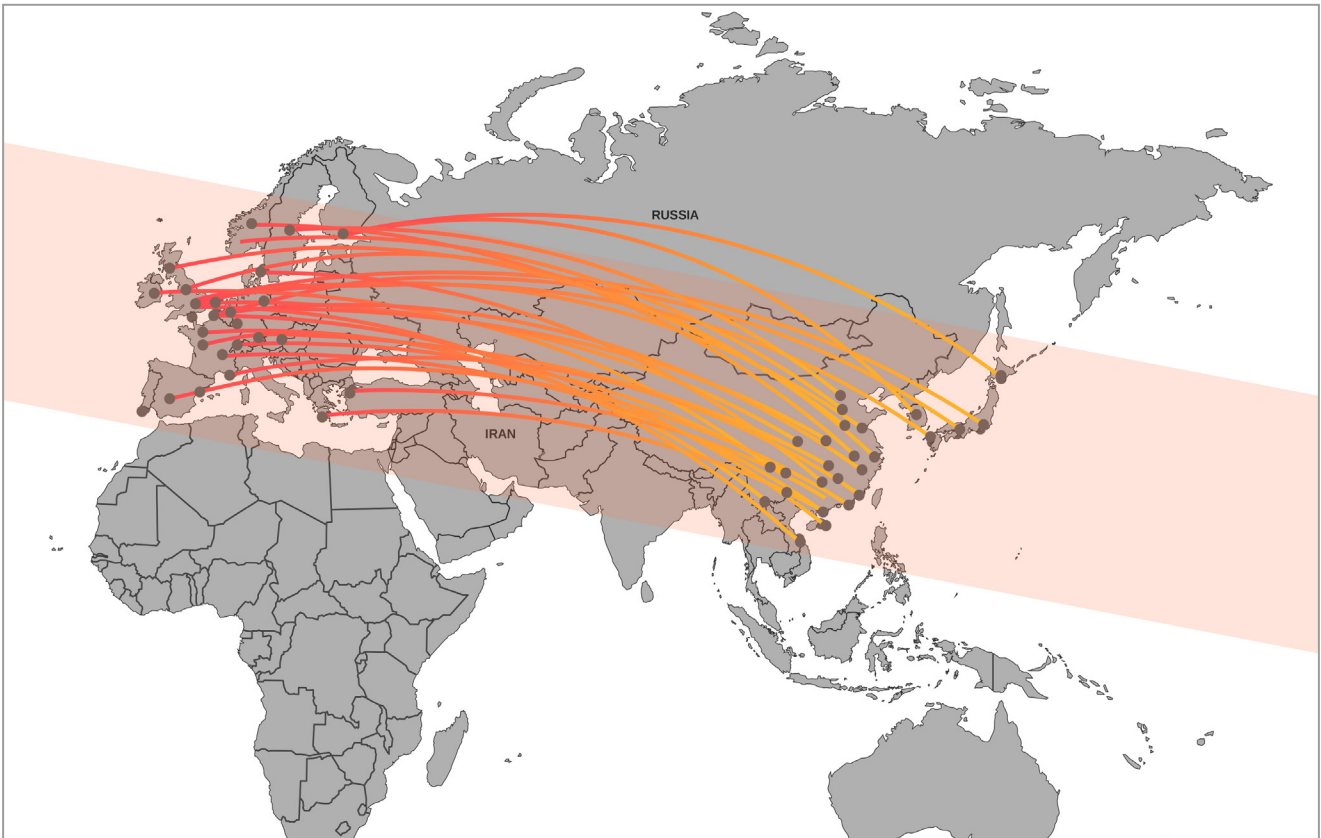


Figure 3: Main air routes between Europe and Asia pre 2022 (Indicative)



4.2

Influence and Control over the Sea Routes

4.2.1 The Persian Gulf and the Red Sea

Ships travelling through the Persian Gulf have long been targeted by hostile actors.³¹ Most disruption in recent years by Iran, and indeed Tehran, has often threatened to block the Straits of Hormuz to traffic as part of its ongoing rivalry with America and its allies.³² Given the strength of Iran's missile force and its fast attack craft, plus the historic use of mines in the area, it is likely that Tehran could follow through on these threats and actually block the Straits. Such is the importance of the route to the global economy, that the Western Alignment would most likely break any Iranian action quite quickly. Indeed, there is already a US, UK, and allied naval taskforce in the Gulf whose job is to keep the lanes open.³³ But no matter how quickly this was achieved, there would still be damage to the world economy. Unless Iran's assets are completely downgraded, then Tehran (supported by other Counter countries) would retain the capacity for disruption.

The Red Sea is particularly vulnerable at its mouth, which is known as the Bab el Mandeb Strait (or the "Gate of Tears"). On the Strait's eastern shore, the Yemen-based Houthis – sponsored by Iran – can and have attacked shipping. This has led to many ships being diverted around the Cape of Good Hope, adding 10-14 days to transit and extra costs in terms of fuel and insurance.³⁴

It isn't just the Bab el Mandeb Strait that has come under the influence of entities relating to the Counter countries. Three other complications for the Western Alignment have recently arisen.

The first concerns Egypt, guardian of the Suez Canal and long-term military ally of the US, which has recently moved towards the Counter Alignment. In January 2024, Egypt became a member of the BRICS* grouping, led by China and Russia, and President Sisi and President Putin (virtually) laid the foundation of a new Egyptian

*As of January 2025, the BRICS includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates

nuclear power plant that was developed by the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation.^{35 36} There are now reports that Cairo is considering buying Chinese J-10C fighters to replace its US F16s.³⁷ Such a move would mark a dramatic step for the Arab nation and pull it, defence-wise at least, more into Beijing's orbit. The shift towards Russia and China means that Washington now has less influence over the Arab nation; it also gives Russia and China more leverage over what goes through the Suez Canal, including Western Alignment shipping.

The second complication is Sudan, which is in the grip of a vicious civil war. Russia is a player in this conflict, having switched its support to the government troops (away from the Rapid Support Forces rebels).³⁸ If its backing leads to government success, then it will be likely granted a larger role in the country, giving it influence along Sudan's 750km Red Sea coastline. This would create more of a threat to Western Alignment shipping running through the seaway.

The third is Saudi Arabia. The country has had a strong relationship with the United States since its founding in 1932, and the relationship has survived severe challenges, like the 1973 oil embargo and the attack on 9/11 (which was primarily executed by Saudi nationals).³⁹ Despite this history, there are clear signs that Saudi's relationship with China is warming. Following the visit by Xi Jinping to Riyadh in December 2022, this has accelerated. The two countries have signed multiple cooperation agreements, including on technology and energy, and in 2023 Beijing announced the strategic coup of facilitating the rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran.^{40 41} Saudi has also been invited to join the BRICS, with the invitation being considered.⁴²

It is not certain that the realignment of foreign policy being driven by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman



will lead to Saudi Arabia moving fundamentally away from the US and into Beijing's orbit. What is clear is that there is now less US influence in the most important Arab country in the region, and one that sits astride both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

4.2.2 Contesting the Indian Ocean

Restricting sea-going transit in the environs of the 52nd Meridian is not limited to the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Further south, traffic across the Indian Ocean itself is at risk of being disrupted by the Counter Alignment, in this case because of China.

Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region is on the rise. Politically, a number of Indian Ocean nations have become much more friendly to Beijing in recent years. Africa, Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa, and Tanzania all now have a robust relationship with China, as evidenced by their participation in the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, Beijing's flagship diplomatic forum with the continent.⁴³ For many, this relationship has spilled into defence ties too. Mozambique, South Africa, and Tanzania have all conducted recent joint military training with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean.^{44 45}

Other regional nations have also moved more towards China. This includes the Maldives – whose relationship with their traditional ally, India, remains rocky - and the Seychelles, which hosts a large Chinese embassy and strong economic ties.^{46 47 48}

Economically, China is now the biggest trade partner for more than 120 countries, including most in the Indian Ocean region.⁴⁹ Beijing is also a major builder of digital infrastructure, such as 5G and broadband, and again this includes many countries in the region such as the Maldives, Kenya, and South Africa.^{50 51 52} The strength of China in trade and digital infrastructure provision – and the ability to withhold both to the detriment of these countries - gives it powerful structural influence over governments in the region.

An important consequence of this political and economic influence is the ability to build and invest in ports, which

China has done in a string of countries including in Kenya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania.⁵³ It is clear that some of these at least can be used by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) for so-called "dual-use" purposes. As a recent report by the Royal United Services Institute noted, "Chinese-funded ports are built to accommodate commercial trade, but can – with significant risks and complications – be flipped to military use as the depth and landing/docking zones are built to PLAN specifications.⁵⁴ This includes ports in the Indian Ocean, such as in Kenya.

This rise in Chinese influence is overshadowing the influence of Western Alignment countries in the Indian Ocean, not least in trade where China is now the major partner. However, Western Alignment countries have not yet lost military access, nor the capability to operate militarily there.

4.2.3 The British Indian Ocean Territory as a Key Asset

Key to the UK and US presence has been the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), which comprises the seven atolls of the Chagos Archipelago. The only inhabited island, Diego Garcia, has hosted an important US military base since the 1960s. Its port and logistics hub are used for the replenishment of British and American UK naval vessels; its airfield has been used for numerous conflicts, including Afghanistan and Iraq, and can support long range bombers; and it is an important communications hub, with its own subsea cable.⁵⁵

The importance of Diego Garcia rests on its geographic location. BIOT lies at the centre of the Indian Ocean, and so whoever controls it can dominate not only the sea lanes but also the surrounding choke points, such as the Malacca Straits, the Straits of Hormuz, and the Bab el Mandeb Strait.



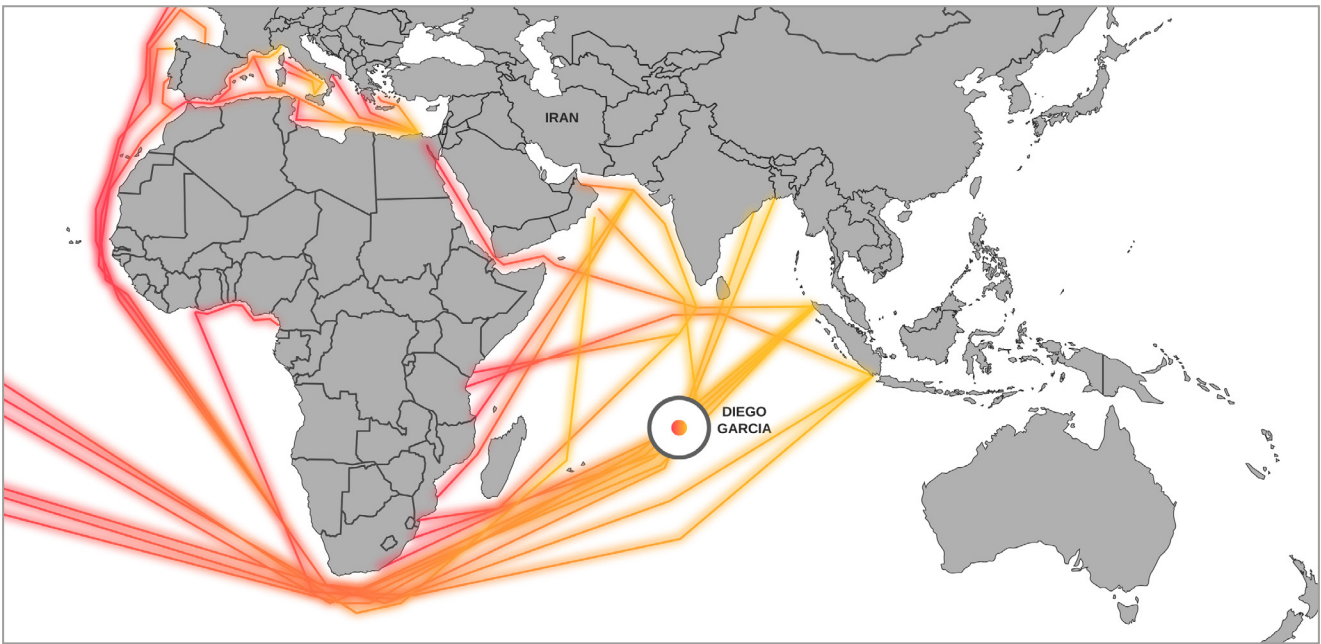


Figure 4: The position of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean shipping lanes⁵⁶

The problem for the West is that the UK has now decided to give the Chagos Islands to Mauritius. For a number of years Mauritius, which was granted independence from the UK in 1968, has claimed sovereignty over BIOT, despite the Chagos Islands being legally separated from Mauritius in 1965 and being more than 2,000km apart. The island state has long sought to gain control over the archipelago through the United Nations, and indeed a 2019 ruling by the International Court of Justice supported Mauritius and called for the UK to end control of the islands within six months.⁵⁷

The ruling – which was not legally binding – was ignored until October 2024, when the Labour government of Sir Keir Starmer announced that it would hand the islands over to Mauritius.

Officially, the base on Diego Garcia is being moved to a 99-year lease from Mauritius.⁵⁸ However, the act of giving away the Chagos Islands puts the US and UK military presence under considerable threat. As has been seen time and again, leases can be broken. It is not a stretch of the imagination to see how a British Prime Minister – “doing the right thing” - might cede the rights to the base at some point in the future, handing this over to Mauritius as well. The UK of all countries knows that territorial arrangements can be broken; Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, despite legally being held in perpetuity, were handed back to China in 1997.

Although there is no publicly available direct evidence, there are suspicions that China is behind, or at least supporting, the Mauritian bid.⁵⁹ In the US, the chairman of the United States House Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness, Michael Waltz, expressed fears in 2022 that if the UK were to fully vacate BIOT, then China might “take advantage of the resulting vacuum” and claim use of the base. This, he noted, “would be catastrophic to deterring [US] adversaries in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific”⁶⁰

Beijing has certainly been active in courting Mauritius. A free trade agreement between the countries was signed in 2019, and Chinese FDI in 2022 stood at \$1.5 billion. Investments in the country have included a China-built and funded dam opened to provide drinking water to the Mauritian capital, Port Louis, as well as roads, a stadium, and the new airport.⁶¹ It should though be noted that India too has close military and economic relations with the island, which is two thirds of Indian extraction.⁶² In February 2024 India’s Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, attended an opening ceremony with his Mauritian counterpart for a new Indian-financed airstrip and jetty built on Mauritius.⁶³

Yet India has struggled to stop China’s rise elsewhere in its own backyard. New Delhi’s recent efforts to build a military base in the Seychelles were denied, and in early 2024 – with the rise of Chinese influence there - it began to withdraw from the Maldives the small number of soldiers

it had stationed there to maintain and operate the rescue and reconnaissance aircraft it had previously donated.^{64 65}

It is entirely plausible that Beijing might use its increasing influence in Mauritius to encourage the island state to push for the military base to be closed to the UK and US. If this were to happen, then – as happened to the former British military facilities in Hong Kong - the People's Liberation Army would be waiting in the wings to take their place. Such an event would give Beijing strategic control of a base with the ability to oversee world trade, and therefore the world economy.

It is for this reason that the US would be unwilling to surrender Diego Garcia, despite the Biden Administration “applauding” the British government's decision.⁶⁶ The probable consequence of a surrender of the base's lease by a future UK government would be a US takeover to prevent it falling to China, even though it would create a diplomatic storm. Such an event would leave the UK with neither leverage nor permanent presence in the world's most important sea lanes.

There is, however, another European country with military bases in the Indian Ocean, either side of the 52nd Meridian. Unlike the UK, France did not give up the islands of Réunion and Mayotte, and today maintains a military presence on both islands.⁶⁷ There is a French base still in Djibouti, and there are also rumours that Paris intends to redevelop its former naval base at the northern tip of Madagascar.⁶⁸

France's presence in the Indian Ocean currently reinforces the US-UK presence on Diego Garcia, to the benefit of the Western Alignment. If and when the UK relinquishes the Chagos Islands facilities, then France's bases will ensure a European presence in the Indian Ocean whichever of the US or China is in charge of Diego Garcia. This would ensure that Europe isn't entirely cut out of the oversight of the sea lanes there, a vital position to have if Europe isn't forced to rely solely on the US for protection of the sea lanes there. In order for these bases to be effective, however, France needs to have access to them. As discussed, the Red Sea is increasingly under the influence of the Counter Alignment. The same is true for the only other way into the Indian Ocean from the West: The Cape of Good Hope.

4.2.4 Losing Access Around the Cape of Good Hope

Ever since the British captured the Cape of Good Hope in 1795, this route has been open to the UK and its allies – something that proved critical to Allied success in the World Wars. However, South Africa, a BRICS member, today leans much more towards China and Russia. Not only has it abstained from criticising Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine, but it has also joined Russian and Chinese forces in recent military drills.^{69 70} If Russia and China were granted access to South Africa's air and naval facilities, such as the former (until 1975) Royal Navy base at Simon's Town, then this would severely restrict Western Alignment shipping around the Cape of Good Hope for the first time in over two centuries. It would also severely compromise access to any Western military bases in the Indian Ocean.

4.3

A Summary of Counter Alignment Influence and Control of the 52nd Meridian East

At the northern end of the 52nd Meridian East, the land and sea routes are now controlled by Russia and Iran. This has strategically compromised the Western Alignment's access to Central Asia, and has also undermined Europe's wider connectivity to the rest of Asia. Their control is also having a direct commercial impact on Western Alignment airlines.

The sea lanes are more open, but this is changing. Transit through the Persian Gulf is already influenced by Iran, forcing the Western Alignment to protect its interests through military force. It would be possible for this influence to be turned into restrictive control if Tehran wished it, albeit probably only temporarily.



Access through the Red Sea is now a challenge for the Western Alignment, with the Houthis actively targeting its shipping. Counter Alignment countries are building their wider influence over the Red Sea. China already has a base in Djibouti; Egypt is moving more towards the Counter Alignment; Russia is building its influence in Sudan; and Saudi Arabia is loosening its ties to the US and improving those with China. The direction of travel of international influence indicates that the Counter countries will at some point be able to exert more control over who uses the Red Sea, which likely will be to the detriment of the Western Alignment.

The situation in the rest of the Indian Ocean is more fluid. The east coast of Africa, plus the Seychelles and Maldives, are moving more into China's orbit thanks to Beijing's economic and digital infrastructure investments, as forthcoming Adarga research will show. This gives China useful influence over the sea lanes, either indirectly (through their influence over Indian Ocean

countries), or directly through the People's Liberation Army (PLA) base in Djibouti and any other bases they might construct in the region. Chinese control over the Indian Ocean cannot be overwhelming as long as the bases of Diego Garcia and those of the French still exist; but the handing back of the Chagos Islands by the British government has severely weakened this position.

The Counter Alignment is increasing its relationship and influence over South Africa, and thus the Cape of Good Hope is now potentially in play. If China and/or Russia were able to project power around the Cape then this would present them with control over access to the Indian Ocean that would, if done in conjunction with control over the Red Sea, make access for the Western Alignment far more difficult. China, supported by Russia and Iran, would have the biggest single influence over the Indian Ocean since the days of the British Empire, when it was perceived as a British lake.

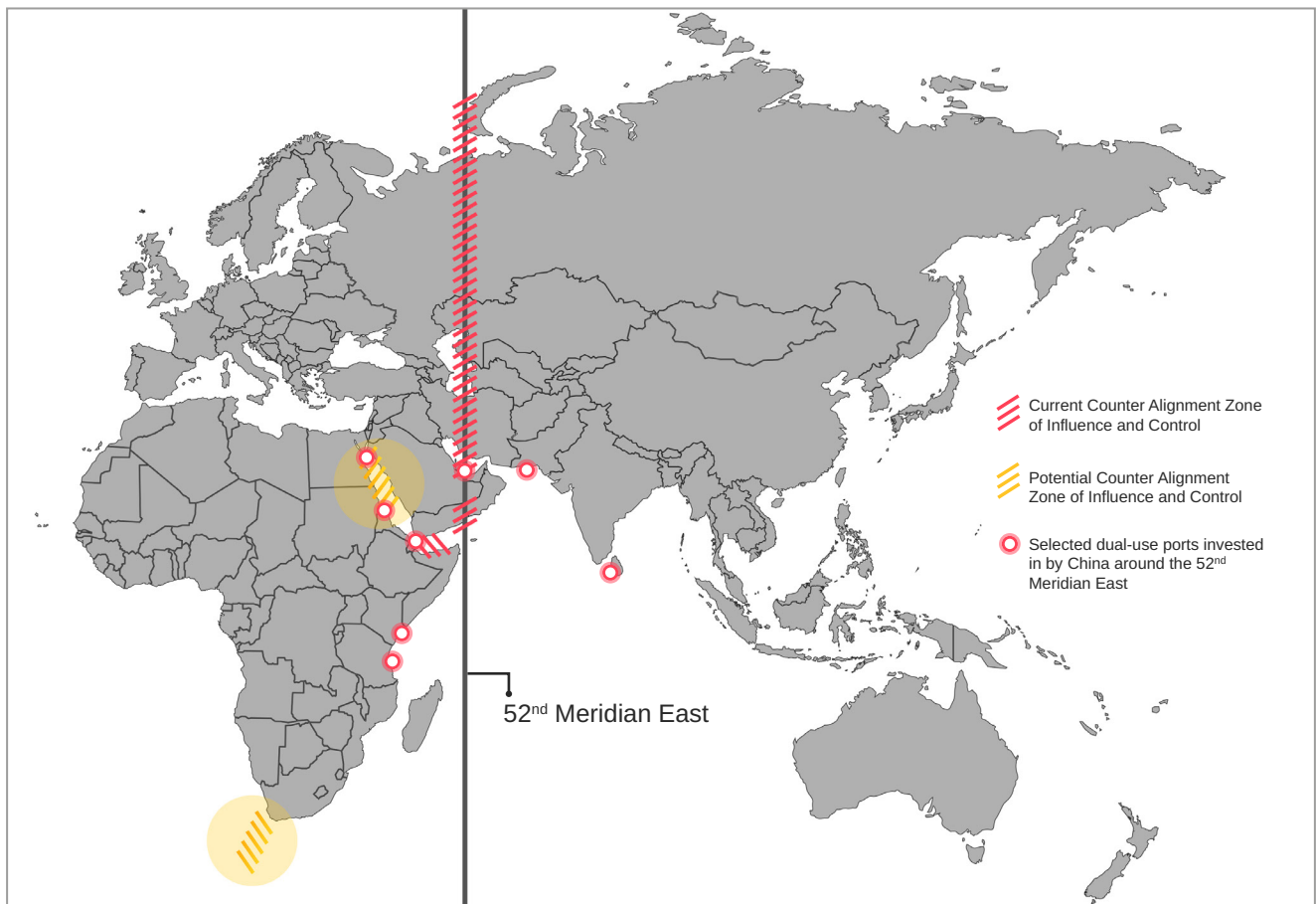


Figure 5: Actual and potential Counter Alignment zones of influence and control around the 52nd Meridian East

05.

How the Counter Alignment Might Act to Exert Control Over the 52nd Meridian and Interrupt Western Alignment Access

The analysis above shows how Russia and Iran already have the ability to influence and control transit across swathes of the 52nd Meridian East. The question is, under what circumstances would they do that?

5.1 Escalation Assumptions

There are three assumptions that underpin the answer to this.

First, that relations between China (and the Counter Alignment more broadly) and the US (and Western Alignment more broadly) continue to deteriorate. There is little evidence of a rapprochement between the sides, and such is the systemic nature of current Great Power competition that none is expected any time soon.

Second, that the Counter Alignment countries – by exerting control over the environs of the Meridian – would be using the line to target Western Alignment nations. China has a track record of picking off individual countries to get its way strategically, as it has done with the South China Sea confrontation over the Nine Dash Line.⁷¹ It is entirely possible that specific countries, or specific groups of countries could be targeted for punishment for their support of Ukraine or Taiwan, or some other “infraction”; the aim being to make others realise the costs of not supporting China and its fellow Counter countries. The fact that Russia banned European and North American countries only from its airspace rather than all Western Alignment countries (like Japan) shows how groups can be chosen for punishment and manipulation. Countries in the Western Alignment will recognise this risk; as such, some governments with more to lose from a closure of the 52nd Meridian – and who don’t feel so obliged to support the US – might choose to distance themselves from Washington. This would make them more amenable to supporting Chinese strategic goals (or at least make them less likely to support US attempts to push back on China), which in

itself would be a Counter Alignment victory for having created so much influence along the Meridian.

A third assumption is that the Counter Alignment countries would coordinate their action. It is important to note that these countries are not in formal alliance, and indeed there are plenty of points of friction between them that might make it hard to have a joined-up effort to block out the Western Alignment. However, things are changing, as shown by the Ukraine War. Iran and North Korea are actively supporting Russia in its war, and although Beijing denies it, Washington insists that China is offering active support to Moscow.⁷²

We thus assess as credible the ability for the Counter countries to coordinate action along the 52nd Meridian with the aim of disrupting the Western Alignment, even if this coordination were to be done without any published statement of intent. Proof of this possibility comes from Russia already closing off its stretch to Western Alignment airlines, but not to those from China. There is an argument against the Counter Alignment countries restricting access across the Meridian which is the impact on their economies from such a heavy disruption to trade. After all, it is likely that if the Counter nations were to block off the 52nd Meridian then they would likely suffer economically too.

However, the threat of economic damage is unlikely to dissuade them from doing so if they deem it strategically necessary. China, Iran, and Russia routinely put political and military interests above economic ones. Take as evidence Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine which has led to



economic sanctions that many experts believe is hurting the overall economy; or Iran's refusal to bow to Western sanctions so as to keep its nuclear and regional military plans alive, despite the crippling impact on the economy; or Xi Jinping's active efforts to reassert political control over the economy.⁷³ This also assumes that all economic pain would be shared by Western and Counter Alignment alike. Our analysis shows how it is Western Alignment traffic that is more likely to be interrupted by Counter country action. As Europe and Asia would still need to trade, Counter Alignment disruption could actually provide a commercial benefit to China and its partners if

the only vessels were operating were theirs, or vessels from Unaligned nations more friendly to China.

As such, it is likely that if efforts were made to block Western Alignment traffic across the 52nd Meridian, these would be taken with the economic and political consequences for Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran already accounted for. This means that they would likely be an extreme measure occurring in the context of serious deterioration of relations, for example conflict over Taiwan or the South China Sea.

5.2

Escalation Scenarios

As a result of the war in Ukraine, Russia has already cut the 52nd Meridian East to Western Alignment air traffic. It is thus credible that if Moscow had more influence elsewhere, such as along the coast of Sudan, then it would seek to further restrict Western Alignment movement, in this case shipping.

Likewise, Iran is attempting to exert control over Western Alignment shipping both in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea (the latter through its allies, the Houthis). There is an expectation that it would increase its attempts to deny the seas to Western Alignment shipping if the US increased the pressure, for example by supporting an Israeli strike on its nuclear facilities. While this control would likely be broken by the West, it would come at a financial and military cost. In terms of the air, Tehran has not yet banned overflights, but it would likely do so as part of any response to conflict with the US. Already many airlines are staying away from Iranian airspace because of the risk.

The biggest question for Western Alignment strategists is whether Beijing would ever use its influence and control to block Western Alignment shipping from transiting in the environs of the 52nd Meridian East.

Any attempt to do so would require China having the ability to do so in the first place. As the PLA Navy

becomes stronger – it is now the largest navy in the world - it is better able to move from “defence on the near seas to protection missions on the far seas”. A report by the MERICS think tank suggested that the PLAN's training for “strategic deterrence and counterattack” makes it more likely that it would deploy to maritime chokepoints “to create a precedent for stand-offs or seizures far from its shores”.⁷⁴ Thus, if Beijing felt that it needed to block off access through choke points surrounding the Indian Ocean then it would likely try to; and it would probably engage with other Counter Alignment nations to do so.

There are several scenarios where Europe-Asia connectivity might be cut off by the Counter Alignment, or at least heavily disrupted for the Western Alignment.

5.2.1 Scenario 1: Boiling the Frog

There are many shades of grey before a full conflict situation. These almost all involve the Counter countries incrementally increasing their influence along the land, sea, and air either side of the 52nd Meridian. The consequence would be for Western Alignment traffic to be slowly choked out, in the same way that their airlines are already excluded from flying over Russia. Again, as with the airlines, this would be to their economic disadvantage. This could be done in the following ways:



- Attacks along the Red Sea and Persian Gulf continue, targeting Western Alignment ships. This is already a significant problem for them: of the more than 85 Houthi attacks on shipping recorded between December 2023 and July 2024, only one was against a vessel linked to the Counter Alignment (it was registered in Hong Kong). All the rest were flagged either in Western Alignment countries like Norway and Greece, or in Unaligned nations with close ties to Western companies, such as the Bahamas or Panama.⁷⁵

- China has already shown it is capable of blocking sea lanes around Taiwan through military exercises, something it does to add geopolitical pressure to what it calls a renegade province. These exercises, for example those held in 2022, can and do disrupt shipping.⁷⁶ Holding drills near the mouths of the Persian Gulf or Red Sea, or around the Cape of Good Hope, could disrupt shipping and trade. If Chinese and Counter Alignment-linked vessels were supported through this by China (financially, or perhaps given more warning of disruption) then this might create commercial advantage commensurate with that now enjoyed by Counter Alignment airlines flying over Eurasia

The US and its allies would likely push back on any such actions. The question is, how hard? The exact nature of a US and allied response is beyond the scope of this paper, but it would certainly require the Western Alignment to have properly prepared for such scenarios in order to prevail. Beijing and Moscow are adept at using “greyzone” activities to achieve their strategic objectives without triggering war, and any attempt to aggressively counter them – for example, interrupting Chinese exercises that themselves were blocking traffic in a chokepoint – would be spun as US “imperial” aggression and so could politically damage the West. A nightmare situation for the West would be for control of access across the 52nd Meridian to fall into the hands of the Counter Alignment countries. We assess that this could be achieved incrementally and in a way that wouldn’t give the Western Alignment the “excuse” to push back. This would be of particular danger to Europe, which would see its connectivity with Asia become majority or entirely dependent on the Counter Alignment.

Heading West, access to Asia would be heavily influenced by the United States, again leaving Europe strategically exposed.

If the Counter Alignment countries were to increase their influence and control along the Meridian to a dominant degree, then this would be a threat to the US and allies with any potential conflict with China

5.2.2 Scenario 2: Conflict with the US

If a conflict erupted between China and the US and its allies, then we assess that the Counter Alignment would be able to close off Europe-Asia connectivity in the following ways:

- Through exerting pressure on the use of the Red Sea by Western Alignment shipping by using its influence over Egypt to block passage through the Suez Canal; encouraging, via Iran, attacks by the Houthis; encouraging Russia to use any influence it has in Sudan to disrupt traffic; perhaps even the PLA Navy mining the mouth of the Red Sea from its base in Djibouti.
- The Persian Gulf would also likely see an increase in attacks by Iran, perhaps using Chinese military support, ultimately trying to block all Western Alignment traffic from the seaway.
- China, in conjunction with Russia, would possibly attempt to use its relationship with South Africa to deploy forces near The Cape of Good Hope to support the denial of the route to Western Alignment shipping.
- China might also deploy forces to one of the dual-use ports on the eastern African seaboard to reinforce its presence there.

In addition, Western Alignment access to Central Asia would probably be shut off by Russia and Iran, and trade across the Northern and Middle Corridors subject to more control.

In sum, the Counter Alignment have the ability to significantly interrupt Europe-Asia connectivity. As their influence rises along the 52nd Meridian East and elsewhere, this ability will only increase.



06.

Implications for the Western Alignment of a Compromised 52nd Meridian

Counter Alignment influence and control over Europe-Asia connectivity, for example along the 52nd Meridian East, has significant implications for the Western Alignment:

1. All military planning that assumes the unopposed movement of assets between Europe and Asia needs to be reconsidered.
2. The Western Alignment's relationship with Central Asia is now strategically compromised. Notwithstanding the route through Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, access by the Western Alignment to the Central Asian republics now depends entirely on acquiescence by Russia, Iran, and China. This in turn means that there is no longer any certainty on exports of goods from Central Asia, which will have an impact on related sectors such as energy and food, especially for Europe. There is also no certainty of Central Asia as a market for Western Alignment exports.
3. The competitiveness of Western Alignment airlines and land/air trade carriers has been reduced in comparison with Chinese and other nation carriers. If Western Alignment shipping is increasingly targeted then their competitiveness might slide in comparison with Chinese and other carriers, if it isn't already.
4. Countries traditionally aligned with the US, but which have significant economic and political relations with Asia (including Central Asia), are likely to start to consider the possibility of diverging their alignment with the US as a way of mitigating the risk to their trade. This might include countries in Europe, who could see the US as more of an impediment given the EU's ambition to be connected to Central Asia.
5. Overall, Counter Alignment countries have much more influence over Europe-Asia connectivity, including on trade and military traffic. They have the ability to turn this influence into control, for example in the event of a conflict, as Russia is already doing with airlines. This puts the trade security of the Western Alignment, especially European, at potentially significant risk.

07.

Mitigations and Policy Recommendations

We propose the following mitigations to these risks.

- Western Alignment governments need to consider how they can keep open the transit of military assets between Europe and Asia in the event of a conflict with China.
- Western Alignment governments and companies need to consider how to deal with a mass interruption of trade and supply chains between Europe and Asia in the event of a conflict. This may involve finding new suppliers (most likely from North America), or mass stockpiling.
- Western Alignment governments need to work together to better engage with the countries of the Indian Ocean at the political, economic, and defence levels so as to push back on Chinese influence. But this has to be done in a smart way. Kenya is a case in point. It is officially one of the UK's global defence hubs, and important for forward training of British military personnel. Yet previous research by Adarga shows that China's influence in trade and digital infrastructure is so great that we note that Kenya's defence relationship with the UK is at risk of compromise by Chinese influence. If the Western Alignment only focuses solely



on defence relations to keep the Indian Ocean free from Chinese control, then it will likely lose, at least in the long run.

- Western Alignment governments should engage with India to support the upholding of international norms of navigation and trade in the Indian Ocean.
- The Chagos Islands deal should be reconsidered so as to make the British and American military presence in the middle of the Indian Ocean shipping lanes more permanent.
- The EU should make immediate contingency plans in case of being cut off from Central Asia commodities, and publish them to help the private sector plan. Where possible this should involve the identification of alternative suppliers. Where this is not possible, then stockpiling of critical commodities and goods should take place so as to dampen the impact of any action.
- The EU and NATO should work together on finding mitigations to the risks associated with the cutting off of Europe-Asia connectivity, to lessen the chance of individual countries being picked off by China with the promise of continued access to trade and supply chains in the event of a conflict

08.

Appendix: Technology and Data Used in this Paper

This paper was written with the support of Adarga's artificial intelligence platform, **Vantage**, which drew on Adarga's curated geopolitical dataset.

This dataset is composed of the following elements:

1. Publicly available quantitative datasets and data derived therefrom (such as IMF import and export datasets).
2. Publicly available unstructured data retrieved and processed via Adarga's Vantage product, such as government announcements, media reports, and research papers.
3. Datasets compiled by Adarga based on unstructured data of the kind noted in point 2 (such as frequency and nature of diplomatic engagements).

Adarga's AI software, Vantage, is designed to increase the speed, quality and depth of insight derived from huge volumes of information.



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