

## IS THE WORLD HEADING TOWARD A NEW TORDESILLAS?

**In 1494, Spain and Portugal divided the world. Is the 21st-century global rivalry between the United States and China moving toward a similar geopolitical partition?**

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In 1494, an agreement signed in a small Castilian town became one of the most extraordinary diplomatic documents in modern world history. Known as the **Treaty of Tordesillas**, it drew an imaginary meridian across the Atlantic Ocean and divided the world between two empires. Lands west of the line would fall under Spanish influence, while those to the east would belong to Portugal. Even territories that had not yet been discovered were included within this diplomatic boundary.

The most lasting consequence of this meridian can still be seen today. Brazil, a vast country in South America, speaks Portuguese because the eastern bulge of the continent fell on Portugal's side of the line. Since the Earth is round, the opposite side of the boundary emerged in the Pacific. To address this, the two kingdoms signed a second agreement in 1529: the **Treaty of Zaragoza**. This treaty recognized that the **Spice Islands—today's Maluku Islands—** would fall within the Portuguese sphere of influence. For the first time in history, the world had effectively been divided between two meridians.

Today, of course, no one formally divides the world with a line on a map. Yet when global power balances are examined, many analysts argue that the geopolitics of the 21st century is producing similar **de facto lines of influence**. This time, however, the actors are not the Iberian kingdoms but the **United States and China**.

When we look at the strategic geography of the modern world, two major zones of competition stand out. The first lies along the **Middle East–Eurasia corridor**. At the center of this axis sits **Iran**, where energy reserves, land trade routes, and maritime chokepoints intersect.<sup>1</sup> Energy flows from the Persian Gulf, Central Asian transport corridors, and China's efforts to build overland trade networks under the **Belt and Road Initiative** place this region at the heart of global strategy. For this reason, some strategists describe Iran as the **"geopolitical hinge of the 21st century."**

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<sup>1</sup> **THE EURASIAN FRACTURE** -Institut du Bosphore  
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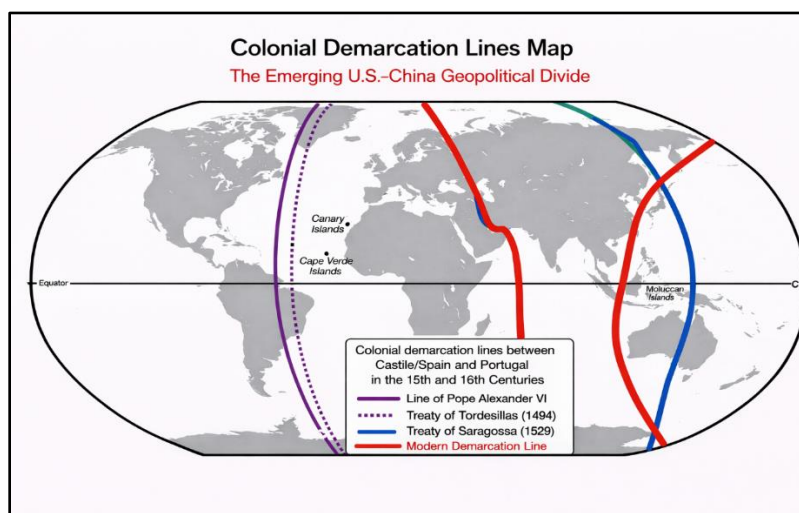
The opposite pole of this axis emerges in the **Pacific**. The core of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy lies in the island chain stretching from Japan to the Philippines. In particular, the **Taiwan Strait** and the **South China Sea** have become some of the busiest maritime corridors in the world. A large share of global semiconductor production is concentrated around Taiwan, while nearly one-third of global trade passes through the South China Sea.

For this reason, some geopolitical commentators draw a historical parallel between the **Tordesillas line of the Atlantic age** and the **strategic fault lines of the Pacific age**. In the 16th century, the world economy revolved around the **Spice Islands**. European powers launched expeditions to control the trade in cloves and nutmeg, seeking dominance over maritime routes. Today, the focal points of global competition have shifted to **semiconductors, energy transit routes, and digital infrastructure**. The commodities have changed, but the strategic logic remains strikingly similar.

Of course, the analogy has its limits. The world of the 16th century was simple enough to be divided between two empires. Today's international system is far more complex. The **European Union, India, Russia, and other regional powers** continue to play important roles in the global equation. For this reason, it is impossible to speak of a single modern **"Tordesillas line."**

Yet history sometimes produces unexpected echoes. Five centuries ago, a meridian drawn across the Atlantic symbolized the desire of great powers to control global trade routes. Today, competition over Pacific sea lanes, energy chokepoints, and technological centers raises a similar question: **Is the global balance of power once again drifting toward a logic of partitioning the map?**

History rarely gives definitive answers. But it does remind us of one enduring truth: wherever the heart of the world economy beats, the rivalry of great powers eventually converges there. In the 16th century, that heart lay in the **Spice Islands**. In the 21st century, it lies in the **narrow straits of the Pacific and the factories of silicon**.



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