



Sudan: Cooperation with the U.S. at Russia's Expense

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In April, the Sudanese authorities ordered the suspension of the construction of a Russian naval logistics centre on the country's Red Sea coast. The project was a cause for concern in the U.S., the EU, Saudi Arabia, and NATO. The Sudanese did not want to compromise American support for the country's economic stabilisation, the scale of which gave the United States the advantage in its rivalry with Russia. The case also highlighted the growing regional importance of Sudan as it emerges from isolation.

In November 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a project to create a military logistic support base near Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast. It was to accommodate 300 personnel and enable docking of up to four naval ships, including those with nuclear propulsion. The land for the base was to be leased for 25 years. This would have been the first permanent Russian military base in Africa since the collapse of the USSR, changing the balance of power in the Red Sea region and challenging NATO's Southern Flank. However, the status of the Russo-Sudanese agreement remained unclear. It was based on an understanding with Omar al-Bashir, who lost power in 2019. The subsequent [government of Abdalla Hamdok](#) has been developing closer ties to the U.S. and the EU, so when Russia declared it would implement the agreement, the Sudanese chief of staff, Gen. Mohamed Osman al-Hussein, distanced himself from it. He informed that no decision had yet been made and that Sudan's sovereignty would not be compromised. At the same time, key decisions were made in the U.S. to normalise relations with Sudan. The two processes clashed in April this year when the Russians started importing equipment (e.g., radars) in an attempt to force the Sudanese authorities to agree to the base *fait accompli*. In response, the Sudanese side ordered a halt to these activities and a suspension of the agreement. Final decisions on foreign bases are to be made by the yet unformed parliament.

Russia in Sudan. Russia is strengthening its presence in Africa, [positioning itself as an alternative to the influence of the U.S. and EU countries](#). In November 2017, Bashir met with Putin in Moscow where he declared that he was

looking for support to defend against "aggressive" actions by the U.S. He then invited Russia to establish a base on the Red Sea coast. Soon after, reports of the presence of Wagner Group mercenaries in Sudan emerged. The Russian engagement followed a pattern similar to that known from the Central African Republic (CAR) in which the units support a leader who does not control his entire territory in exchange for easier access to natural resources. In Sudan, the resource is primarily gold. The oligarch, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who controls Wagner, entered the industry through his company Meroe Gold. In Sudan, he partnered with Mohamed Dagalo "Hemeti", the leader of the Darfur paramilitary militia Rapid Support Force (RSF), then Bashir's trusted man, who controlled much of the production. A Red Sea bridgehead would complete the gold and diamond export route from CAR through Sudan's Darfur. Another Prigozhin company, M Invest, actually representing the Wagner group, advised Bashir in repressions against demonstrators who had demanded his departure since the end of 2018 (in July 2020, the U.S. imposed sanctions on both Russian companies). The fall of Bashir undermined Russia's status as an important partner of Sudan, but "Hemeti's" joining the transitional authorities allowed it to maintain relations with their military part.

U.S. Towards Sudan. Since the 1990s, Sudan has been on the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism (SST) list, which made it politically and economically isolated. However, during the presidency of Barack Obama, the U.S. lifted the first sanctions, and the political changes following the overthrow of Bashir strengthened this course. In mid-2019, U.S. diplomacy played a key role in finding a compromise

between the civilian opposition and military forces. It shaped the present transitional authorities. Deep changes in Sudan allowed the Trump administration to withdraw the SST designation in December 2020 (also forcing Sudan's normalisation with Israel). This allowed, for example, the state to return to the world banking system and American companies from this sector to enter Sudan. The U.S. supports efforts to restore Sudan's economic stability and investment capacity, which is key for the successful transition. They granted its authorities a bridge loan of \$1.15 billion for the settlement of arrears to the World Bank. This opened Sudan—whose external debt amounts to \$60 billion—to the prospect of entering the IMF's programme to reduce the liabilities of the world's poorest and most indebted countries (HIPC). It will also allow debt reduction to be negotiated with creditors, such as the Paris Club.

The abolition of the SST status also enabled the U.S. to develop military cooperation with Sudan, an area in which Russia so far had the advantage. Senior American commanders visited, inviting Sudan and others to the International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme and supporting the reconstruction of the armed forces and putting them under civilian control. U.S. Navy ships also began to visit the Port of Sudan.

Sudan and the Region. The Red and Aden seas area is subject to a growing military presence and [competition between states for influence](#). In recent years, foreign bases have emerged in Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea. In this context, the importance of a 750 km-long Sudanese Red Sea coast free from foreign presence and located opposite Saudi Arabian territory, is growing. In 2016, Bashir broke off diplomatic relations with Iran, whose presence in the area was feared by the Saudis. In 2018, shortly after the talks on the base with Putin, Bashir allowed Turkey a 99-year lease of Suakin Island. This served to counterbalance the growing importance of the Gulf states, which interpreted the agreement as an announcement of the creation of a Turkish military base. Bashir's loss of power rendered these plans obsolete. At the beginning of 2020, Sudan joined the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (with Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Somalia, Djibouti and Somalia) established under Saudi auspices. In early 2021, Sudan conducted joint maritime military exercises with the Saudis.

After the change of power in 2019, Sudan continued a multi-vector foreign policy, often marred by a lack of coordination between decision-making centres. For example, parallel to the pro-Western policies of the Hamdok government, the actions of "Hemeti" favour the influence of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which he supplied with mercenaries in Yemen. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, nominally head of the collective presidency, has been exceeding his powers, for example, becoming the U.S. partner in the process of normalising relations with Israel.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The dispute over the Russian base in Sudan reflects not only the rivalry between Russia and the U.S. but also the divisions within the transitional Sudanese authorities. Russia's ties with Sudan are non-transparent, based on relations with selected elements of the government apparatus, and do not translate into development benefits for the wider society. It is therefore doubtful that a future parliament created by reformists will support a project that would benefit the RSF and military enterprises the most. The likelihood of rejection is probably even higher because of pressure from public opinion, which will demand that the deputies limit the influence of these institutions, perceived as relics of the old regime.

American involvement is compatible with the Sudanese government's priority to create the foundations for development by healing public finances and attracting investment. In order to achieve it, the authorities were able to make unpopular decisions, such as withdrawing subsidies on fuel prices or floating the Sudanese pound, which increased the cost of living. The implementation of reforms could result in groundbreaking decisions on debt relief from the donor conference in Paris on 17 May. The American approach is consistent with the Europeans' and coordinated within the so-called Friends of Sudan group (including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, but not Russia).

Halting the construction of the Russian base in Sudan is beneficial for NATO because it weakens Russia's influence in the vicinity of the Alliance's Southern Flank, which is particularly important in the context of its increasing involvement in Libya and CAR in recent years. Given this, it is possible Russia will renew the project of establishing [a similar base in Eritrea](#) where American and European influence remains minimal.