

SPOTLIGHT ON SUDAN



April 2022

No° 4

FOREWORD

After the 2019 revolution, Sudan was on track for international debt relief. However, this Western resolve changed after the October 2021 military coup that toppled the interim government formed after Bashir's overthrow. The government in Moscow used the West's disillusionment with Sudan's quick democratic transition to revive its military and economic interests in Sudan.

As the war in Ukraine rages on following Russia's intervention, Sudan's military and Russia are seeking to intensify relations and renew numerous agreements in various areas, including security and mining. For the past decade, the resource-rich African country has been Russia's gateway to expand its influence in Africa.

Against this backdrop, the latest issue of Spotlight on Sudan, a product of the Regional Program Political Dialogue in the Southern Mediterranean of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS PolDiMed), examines the geopolitical dimension of Sudan's fragile transition. This issue outlines Russia's relations with Sudanese political actors and highlights economic and security relations between Russia and Sudan.

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Sudan, Russia's Gateway to Africa?

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Russia's Influence and Operations in Sudan Since 2019

Since the April 2019 coup in Sudan, which overthrew President Omar al-Bashir and propelled Lieutenant-General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan to power, Russia has preserved its standing as one of Khartoum's most important international partners. Despite its staunch alignment with Bashir, which included the deployment of Wagner Group private military contractors (PMCs) during his final months in power, Russia seamlessly established close ties with Burhan and maintained workable relations with Sudan's first post-transition civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Due to its Red Sea naval base agreement in Port Sudan, which was made public in November 2020, and Sudan's embrace of a multipolar foreign investment strategy, Russia's presence in Sudan withstood the October 2021 coup that consolidated power in Burhan's hands and the international opprobrium that surrounded Moscow's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. As Russia broadens its outreaches to African countries to overcome its isolation from the West, these positive dynamics are poised to strengthen.

This paper will provide a succinct overview of Russia's post-2019 relationship with Sudan and subsequently transition to an in-depth examination of Moscow's presence in the Sudanese economy and growing security footprint in Sudan. Once the pillars of Russian influence in Sudan have been laid out, the paper will examine how Moscow is positioning itself relative to other great and regional powers. The paper will conclude with a brief forward-looking assessment of the sustainability of Russian influence in Sudan, as its economy is squeezed by sanctions, and how Moscow might navigate future political changes in Sudan.

The Evolution of Russia's Post-2019 Bilateral Relationship with Sudan

Although Russia aligned with MENA regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, in its support for "authoritarian stability" in Sudan, the April 2019 coup polarized the Russian foreign policy establishment. The Federation Council, Russia's upper house was especially critical of the coup. Andrei Klishas, the chairman of the Federation Council committee on constitutional legislation, decried the "violent unconstitutional change of power" in Sudan,¹ while Foreign Affairs committee chair Konstantin Kosachev compared it unflatteringly to the 2014 Euro-Maidan "coup" in Ukraine.² Leonid Slutsky, the chairman of the Russian State Duma's International Affairs Committee, reacted in a more pragmatic fashion, and predicted that Sudan's geo-strategic location would lead to long-term cooperation with Russia. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Wagner Group's lead figure, welcomed the coup, as he had expressed frustration with Bashir in March 2019 about his "extremely cautious position" towards the Sudanese protesters.³ Due to these disagreements, Russia initially hesitated to recognize the coup's legitimacy, but on April 18, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov

¹ "Sovet Federatsii zayavil o nedopustimosti nasil'stvennoy smeny vlasti v Sudane" (The Federation Council Announced the Inadmissibility of a Violent Change of Power in Sudan), RIA Novosti, April 11, 2019

<https://ria.ru/20190411/1552573705.html>

² "Russian Lawmakers Criticize Sudan Coup as "Unconstitutional," *The Moscow Times*, April 11, 2019

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/11/russian-lawmakers-criticize-sudan-coup-as-unconstitutional-a65190>

³ "Luke Harding and Jason Burke, Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>

well-documented presence in extractive industries, such as gold mining, Russia has also positioned itself as a key contributor to Sudan's economic development. During the October 2019 Russia-Africa Summit, which welcomed 43 African heads of state to Sochi, Putin and Burhan discussed economic and investment cooperation without divulging specifics.¹² Russia's policy of direct engagement with the Sudanese military on commercial deals meant that defence-sector cooperation expanded at a faster pace than civilian economic engagement. In August 2020, Sudan agreed to purchase Russian equipment at the Army-2020 Forum.¹³ This deal underscored Sudan's importance as a Russian arms client, as Moscow's only other contract was with Laos.

After U.S. state sponsorship of terrorism sanctions on Sudan were removed in December 2020, Russia announced sweeping plans to enter civilian sectors of the Sudanese economy. In March 2021, Nikolai Everstov, a representative of Russia's Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Khartoum, announced Russia's plans to train Sudanese agricultural specialists to increase wheat production, provide Sudan with aviation technology like the Sukhoi Superjet, MS-21s and Il-114, and create a telecommunications network. Everstov also called Sudan Russia's "gateway to Africa" due to its potential for rapid development and pledged to enhance Sudan's "digital sovereignty" by providing it with modern communication security technologies and high-speed Internet.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic also facilitated Russian economic cooperation with Sudan's private sector, as Moscow marketed its Sputnik V vaccine as a springboard for deeper collaboration.¹⁵ In keeping with Russia's long-standing policy of supplying humanitarian aid to Sudan, which included shipments to Darfur in the post-2006 period, Moscow agreed to supply wheat to Sudan in January 2022.¹⁶

While economic cooperation topped the agenda of Hemedti's Moscow trip, Russian invasion of Ukraine exacerbated Sudan's burgeoning economic crisis. Sudan relies on Russia and Ukraine for more than a third of its wheat supply, and due to the war, the post-coup suspension of international funding and poor harvests, the World Food Program (WFP) estimates that 20 million Sudanese could face malnutrition.¹⁷ Russian wheat exports are insufficient to ameliorate the crisis caused by supply disruptions and Moscow's commercial presence in Sudan's gold mines are facing greater scrutiny. This negative attention soared after a Sudanese gold company whistleblower told The Telegraph on March 3 that Russia had flown around 30 tonnes of gold per year on small planes from military airports.¹⁸

Although Sudan abstained from the March 3 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) motion condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Hemedti implicitly defended the war, it could still be adversely affected by Western sanctions. Yevgeny Prigozhin's M-Invest mining company has a Sudanese subsidiary, Meroe Gold, which is vulnerable to U.S., European Union

12 El Burhan: Sudan to Continue Cooperation with Russia, Dabanga, October 25, 2019

<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/el-burhan-sudan-to-continue-cooperation-with-russia>

13 Rossiya postavit vooruzheniye i voyennuyu tekhniku v Sudan i Laos (Russia will Supply Weapons and Military Equipment to Sudan and Laos), TASS, August 27, 2020

<https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/9309173>

14 Rossiya gotovit ryad krupnykh sdelok s Sudanom (Russia is Preparing a Number of Major Deals with Sudan), Rossiyskaya Gazeta, March 30, 2021

<https://rg.ru/2021/03/30/rossiia-gotovit-riad-krupnyh-sdelok-s-sudanom.html>

15 Sudanese Private Sector Interested in Russia's Sputnik V Jab, Says Diplomat, TASS, September 22, 2021

https://tass.com/world/1341091?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com

16 Reuters, February 23, 2022

17 Nashed, March 18, 2022

18 Tom Collins, How Putin Prepared for Sanctions with Tonnes of African Gold, The Telegraph, March 3, 2022

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/putin-prepared-sanctions-tonnes-african-gold/>

(EU) and British sanctions.¹⁹ In order to disrupt Khartoum's links with Prigozhin, the U.S. and EU could target up to 250 companies that are under the control of the Sudanese military.²⁰ The secondary sanctions risk and Sudan's increased focus on courting Western investment since the May 2021 Paris Conference could derail Russia's ambitious economic agenda.

Russia's Security Cooperation with Sudan

In addition to arms contracts, Russia's security footprint in Sudan is undergirded by the Wagner Group's unofficial presence and Moscow's prospective Port Sudan naval base. The Wagner Group's arrival in Sudan predated the revolution that brought about Bashir's demise. In July 2018, Bashir acknowledged a "big number" of Russian military-technical specialists worked in Sudan but did not disclose their duties.²¹ The Wagner Group's arrival in Sudan was followed by a slew of mixed messages, which created confusion about the role of Russian PMCs. On December 26, Sudanese opposition sources revealed that Russian PMCs were training special operations from Sudan's National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS). An NISS source rebutted this and stated that the Wagner Group was working with Sudan's mainstream intelligence and security services.²² Russian official rhetoric on Wagner's role in Sudan was similarly ambiguous. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and Bogdanov insisted that Russian PMCs were involved in personnel training, while Maria Zakharova emphasized that Russian security personnel were solely employed in a private capacity. In the spring of 2019, the Wagner Group encouraged Burhan to engage in repression of FFC demonstrators if it resulted in a "minimal but acceptable loss of life."²³ Since the Khartoum Massacre, the Wagner Group's ability to advance Russia's interests in Sudan has diminished greatly. Cameron Hudson, the former chief of staff of the U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan, notes that the Wagner Group operates outside of Khartoum to avoid public scrutiny and primarily works on guarding the Jabal Amer gold mine.²⁴ Through this guardianship role, the Wagner Group can capitalize on divisions within Sudan's military and intelligence services by establishing links with key figures in those bodies, but it is unable to project power on Russia's behalf at a national level.²⁵

Due to the Wagner Group's shortcomings, Russia has made a concerted effort to "legalize" its security presence in Sudan by constructing a naval base on its Red Sea coast.²⁶ According to the November 2020 basing agreement, Russia's proposed Port Sudan facility would contain 300 military and civilian personnel, and four ships, which included nuclear-powered vessels.²⁷ Russia also agreed to supply Sudan with military equipment required to guard the base for free and announced plans to use the Port Sudan facility as a resupply center for Russian warships.²⁸ This basing agreement would last twenty-five years and unless there were objections raised by Russia or Sudan, it would automatically extend in ten year intervals.

19 Matteo Caniglia and Theodore Murphy, Khartoum's Autocratic Enabler: Russia in Sudan, European Council on Foreign Relations, December 15, 2021

<https://ecfr.eu/article/khartoums-autocratic-enabler-russia-in-sudan/>

20 Ibid

21 President of Russia, July 14, 2018

22 Russian Military Firm Working with Sudan Security Service: Sources, January 7, 2018

<https://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article66883>

23 Luke Harding and Jason Burke, Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa, The Guardian, June 11, 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>

24 Interview with Cameron Hudson, December 2020

25 Ibid

26 Zachem Rossii voyenny ob'yekt na Krasnom more (Why Does Russia Need a Military Facility on the Red Sea), RBC, November 19, 2020

<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/11/2020/5fb431d29a7947b75f06e721>

27 Russia Plans Naval Base in Sudan, Al Jazeera, November 13, 2020

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/13/russia-plans-naval-base-in-sudan>

28 Russia Plans Red Sea Naval Base in Sudan, RFE/RL, November 12, 2020

Russia's naval facility agreement with Sudan serves two purposes. First, it allowed Russia to preserve its relationship with the Sudanese military in the post-transition period. Sudanese Foreign Minister Omar Qamar al-Din also admitted that he had not received a copy of the Port Sudan basing agreement prior to its ratification.²⁹ This suggests that Burhan sidelined Sudan's civilian authorities on Port Sudan, much like he had done with the Israel normalization. Second, Russia views its Port Sudan naval facility as a gateway to expanded power projection in the Red Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Indian Ocean. After the Port Sudan agreement was announced, Russian security officials, such as RSB Group head Oleg Krinitsyn, highlighted the Port Sudan's proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which is critical to global oil exports.³⁰ The location of and responsibilities allotted to Russia's Port Sudan facility could also strengthen Moscow's presence in the eastern Mediterranean. Russian defence experts, such as Yuri Lyamin, believe that the Port Sudan facility could increase Moscow's access to the Suez Canal and alleviate pressure on Russia's facility in Tartous, Syria, which currently carries out most of the resupply responsibilities.³¹

As the benefits of the Port Sudan base were disproportionately slanted towards Russia, the facility agreement was disrupted in the spring of 2021. FFC supporters sharply criticized the Port Sudan base. Kamal Bolad, a key FFC member, claimed that the army had "hijacked the position of decision-making" and asserted that "There is no transparency in the ruling of this country."³² On April 29, Sudan reportedly suspended Russia's planned naval base and the cessation of "any new deployment of the Russian military" on its soil. The Russian Embassy in Khartoum swiftly denied these reports and on May 2, the Russian Navy's Amur class repair ship PM-138 travelled through Port Sudan to work on base construction.³³ On June 2, Lieutenant-General Mohammed Othman al-Hussein, and Mikhail Bogdanov both admitted that the terms of the Port Sudan basing agreement were being renegotiated.³⁴ This announcement was greeted with pessimism in Moscow. Boris Dolgov, a leading Russian Orientalist, expressed fears that closer U.S.-Sudan relations could potentially derail the basing agreement.³⁵

The Sudanese military's ascendancy assuaged Moscow's concerns, and on November 2, Burhan stated that the base's construction was on track.³⁶ However, there are still reasons to believe that the facility is not an iron-clad deal. The long-term future of the Port Sudan base could hinge on the acceptability of Russia's concessions to Sudan. While Sudan initially requested, S-400 anti-aircraft systems, Su-30 and Su-35 jets, and a 1,200 MW power plant on the Nile River, Russia is reportedly prepared to offer Sudan complimentary arms shipments and information about the hydrometeorological situation in the Red Sea.³⁷ Sudan's neutrality

<https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-plans-naval-base-on-sudan-strategic-red-sea/30943645.html>

29 Mohammed Alamin, Sudan's Civilians Sidelined in Army Overtures to Russia, Israel, Bloomberg, December 11, 2020

30 RBC, November 19, 2020

31 Poyavleniye rossiyskoy voyennoy bazy v Sudane ob"yasnil ekspert (The Emergence of a Russian Naval Base in Sudan Explained by the Expert), Mk.ru, November 12, 2020

<https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/11/12/poyavlenie-rossiyskoy-voennoy-bazy-v-sudane-obyasnil-ekspert.html>

32 Alamin, December 11, 2020

33 Jeremy Binnie, Russian Navy Ships Continue to Visit Sudan, Janes Intelligence, May 5, 2021

<https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/russian-navy-ships-continue-to-visit-sudan>

34 Military Chief Says Sudan Reviewing Naval Base Deal with Russia, Al Jazeera, June 2, 2021

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/2/military-chief-says-sudan-reviewing-naval-base-deal-with-russia>

35 Gennady Petrov and Denis Moiseev, Moskva ne namerena otstupat' v Afrike pered Vashington (Moscow Does not Intend to Retreat from Africa in Front of Washington), Nezavisimaya Gazeta, June 2, 2021

https://www.ng.ru/world/2021-06-02/1_8163_moscow.html

36 Sudan's Burhan Reiterates Commitment to Russian Naval Base, November 2, 2021

<https://sudantribune.com/article222677/>

37 Vorota Indiyского okeana (Indian Ocean Gate), Nezavisimaya Gazeta, November 19, 2020

on key UNGA votes, such as the March 3 vote on the invasion of Ukraine and April 8 on suspending Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council, could signify its concerns about a binding security partnership with Moscow. As Eritrea, which also possesses a Red Sea coast, sided with Russia on both resolutions, Russia could revive logistical facility discussions with Asmara that coincided with Sergei Lavrov's 2018 visit.

Russia's Relationships with Rival External Powers in Sudan

Russia's interactions with external powers in Sudan have been heavily influenced by its reaction to the April 2019 coup and pursuit of a Port Sudan naval facility. Prior to Bashir's fall, Russia formed an axis of illiberalism with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as all three countries feared that successful revolutions in Algeria and Sudan would trigger Arab Spring 2.0. Nikolay Patrushev's January 2019 trips to Egypt and the UAE addressed the need to prevent a colour revolution in Sudan and deepened their counter-revolutionary coordination. Kirill Semenov, a Moscow-based defence analyst focusing on the Middle East, opined that Russian PMCs would shore up Bashir's regime, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided financial support.³⁸ Russian media coverage, which emphasized exogenous triggers of Sudan's economic crisis like U.S. sanctions or South Sudan's secession, amplified Saudi Arabia and the UAE's pro-Bashir line. As RT Arabic had larger viewership in Sudan than Al-Arabiya, especially on social media, it could communicate Saudi and Emirati talking points to a local audience, and counter Al-Jazeera's supportive stance towards the Sudanese revolution.³⁹ Although the UAE's backing of Burhan's coup temporarily put it at odds with Russia and Saudi Arabia, Moscow viewed its position on Sudan as beneficial for its relationships with both Gulf monarchies. A May 2019 article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* boasted that the link between Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE "appears to be closer and perhaps stronger than the relationship between the capitals of the region and Western powers," and cited their synergistic support for stability in Sudan as a driver of this partnership.⁴⁰ Although China was more preoccupied with political stability in Sudan than regime type, it aligned with Russia on blocking a UN condemnation of the Khartoum Massacre.

Russia's Port Sudan naval facility ambitions risk exacerbating tensions with the U.S. and to a lesser extent, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, while bolstering its cooperation with China and India. Russian media outlets hailed the base's potential to challenge unquestioned U.S. hegemony over the rules of navigation in the Red Sea.⁴¹ The base could also place Russia in competition with Turkey, which has \$650 million in infrastructure contracts and investments in Sudan's Suakin port.⁴² Saudi Arabia, which was fearful of the Russia-Iran partnership and did not want a Russian base near its territory, allegedly supported Khartoum's base renegotiation.⁴³ While Chinese officials have remained silent about the Port Sudan facility, state-aligned media outlets have expressed cautious optimism about Russia's facility construction. Although

https://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2020-11-19/1_1118_ocean.html

38 Kirill Semenov, Top Russian Security Officials Tour Egypt, Gulf to Discuss Syria, Libya, Al-Monitor, February 4, 2019

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/02/russia-patrushev-ksa-uae-egypt-syria-libya.html>

39 Anna Borschevskaya and Catherine Cleveland, Russia's Arabic Propaganda: What it is, Why it Matters, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 19, 2018, notes that RT Arabic was ranked as Sudan's 104th most viewed website, while Al-Arabiya ranked 116th

40 Ravil Mustafin, Sudanskiy krizis svyazal Moskvu i arabskiye stolitsy (Sudanese Crisis Links Russia and Arabian Capitals), May 6, 2019

https://www.ng.ru/kartblansh/2019-06-05/3_7591_kart.html

41 Rossiyskaya voyenno-morskaya baza v Krasnom more (Russian Naval Base in the Red Sea), Expert, November 16, 2020

<https://expert.ru/expert/2020/47/baza-rossijskogo-vmf-v-krasnom-more/>

42 Vladimir Mukhin, Platsdarm dlya rossiyskikh atomnykh podvodnykh lodok gotovitsya v Krasnom more (A Foothold for Russian Nuclear Submarines is Being Prepared in the Red Sea), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, November 12, 2020

https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-11-12/2_8013_submarine.html

43 Interview with former Deputy Editor in Chief of Sudan Tribune Wasil Ali, June 2021

COVID-19 and the possibility of Russian defence cuts could dilute the Port Sudan base's impact, The People's Liberation Army Daily viewed the installation as a key step in Russia's bid to "break long-term strategic containment by the United States and NATO".⁴⁴ Chinese media outlets also praised Russia's Port Sudan base as a bulwark against a potential "colour revolution" in Sudan. Russia's Port Sudan base proposal has also earned plaudits in New Delhi. Rajesh Soami, an Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation in New Delhi, contends that Russia's presence in the Indian Ocean is viewed favourably in New Delhi, especially as India seeks to prevent the creation of new Chinese naval bases in eastern Africa.⁴⁵ An easing of China-India tensions could change this calculus, but Russia remains a convenient third party for both countries.

The Future of Russia's Policy Towards Sudan

Although Russia's short-term influence in Sudan is relatively secure, its longer-term strategic position is murkier. The West's imposition of sweeping sanctions on Russia could convince Moscow to pursue for-profit security forays in Africa, which bolster its reliance on Wagner Group PMCs and encourage it to scupper the Port Sudan base. The more stringent U.S. imposition of Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions could also deter Russia from supplying arms to Sudan, which views Western investment as the gateway to economic prosperity. Beyond Ukraine war-related variables, Russia's tightening partnership with Ethiopia, which has a border dispute with Sudan over el-Fashaga, and support for an African Union resolution to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute could create frictions. The UAE's drawdown from Eritrea and Somaliland, which includes the closure of Assab base, could create openings for Russia to project influence on the Red Sea through these alternative theatres. These variables, combined with the progress of Sudan's democratic transition, will profoundly influence the trajectory of Moscow-Khartoum relations for years to come.

44 Èluósī zài fēizhōu "bǎo diǎn" de fān zhì yìyì (The Countermeasure Significance of Russia's "Guarantee Points" in Africa), People's Liberation Army Daily, November 26, 2020
<http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2020/1126/c1011-31945524.html>

45 Interview with author, December 2020

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