

Russia Expands its Foothold in Africa

On December 8, the Russian government officially announced its agreement with Sudan to build a modern port and establish a navy base for at least 25 years. The new port, along with Russia's base in the Syrian city of Tartus, will strengthen its military presence in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.



October 23, 2019: Vladimir Putin meets with Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman Burhan, chairman of the Sovereignty Council of Sudan, at the Russia-Africa summi in Sochi, Russia. Photo: kremlin.ru.

After three years of discussions and planning, during which the Sudanese government was overthrown, Moscow has finally reached an agreement with the new regime in Khartoum to build a state-of-the-art navy base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast. This agreement is a clear expression of a successful Russian policy in Africa and the Middle East—something the Biden administration will have to

reckon with.

Why does Russia need a port in Sudan?

The port in Sudan will be Russia's first military base in Africa, providing a convenient docking station for Russian battleships for refuel and repair. It will complement Russia's base in Tartus, Syria, which Moscow plans to modernize, with investment amounting to about **\$500 million**, and make into the Russian army's anchor in the Mediterranean. It can be safely assumed that, in addition to battleships, including nuclear vessels, the new Russian base will house electronic intelligence systems and Russian air defense systems.

The port is slated to be built at a strategic junction of a major trade route running through the Red Sea and connecting the Arabian and the Mediterranean Seas via the Suez Canal, where Russia is currently establishing an industrial zone and a free trade zone. All this will give Russia a large degree of influence on what is happening in both Africa and the Middle East.

Moreover, Moscow is continuing its efforts to establish more bases and ports in Africa, keeping close contacts with Egypt and Eritrea, with the goal to expand geopolitical influence and pursue its interest in what it considers critical areas. As a gateway to Africa, the port, for instance, will allow Russia to operate more easily in the Central African Republic, where Russian mercenaries have reportedly been present for several years.

Finally, Russia has always dreamed of having "warm water ports," and this dream is now coming true on two continents and at two important junctions—the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

Political background

The plan to build the port had been originally discussed and agreed upon with **Omar al-Bashir**, then-Sudanese president, who was ousted during the 2019 revolution and is currently wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. As Russia opened up talks with Sudan in 2017, al-Bashir came to Moscow for an official visit, which resulted in an agreement on the construction of the first Russian port and development of several mineral mines in Sudan. But these plans never materialized.

In 2018, a popular upheaval broke out in Sudan, and after months of protests, al-Bashir was removed from office by the military—the president’s former close aides and associates. Although Russia stood by al-Bashir and even helped him to suppress the revolution, it immediately recognized the new regime, perhaps because it was not very different from its predecessor. Many of the members of the Sovereignty Council established for the transition period were well acquainted with their Russian counterparts.

The new regime ended up supporting Russia’s idea of building a naval base in Sudan, which also means that Moscow has reached an agreement not only with Khartoum but also with its sponsors in the Arab world—the Gulf principalities—and possibly with the United States as well.

The new Sudanese government’s relations with Russia developed in parallel with Khartoum’s close ties with Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi. The latter, apparently, played a key role in shaping the new Sudan regime and its pro-Western political bias. It is hard to believe that any decision, especially as significant as granting permission to Russia to establish a military base in the country so dependent on the graces of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, would not have been greenlighted by them first. Given the fact that the U.S. has the power to exclude Sudan from its list of countries sanctioned for being backed by terrorists, would Khartoum have dared to deal with Russia without Washington’s tacit consent?

In the past, Russia tried to negotiate the construction of a seaport with Djibouti—a small African republic on the Red Sea coast—but these efforts failed, partially because of US opposition, as Washington is determined to keep control over this strategic point overlooking the Indian Ocean. In Sudan, the talks actually bore fruit due to a variety of local and geopolitical circumstances. Just like Egypt, Sudan enjoys close ties with the US, but at the same time tries to get the most out of its relationship with other powers, such as Russia.

Russia’s advances in Africa

In recent years, Russia has become the number one arms exporter to Africa, outgunning France and the US, which have traditionally supplied arms to African countries. While Africa is viewed as a prestigious and coveted arms market, Moscow is not just interested in supplying arms to the poorest countries in the

world. Last year, **Vladimir Putin** hosted the Russia-Africa summit, where numerous deals were signed on arms, nuclear energy, and food. Although most have yet to be implemented, Russia's involvement in Africa continued to grow in 2020.

The port agreement with Sudan is a significant territory-marking for Russia, especially in light of the growing struggle among various powers for influence in Africa. Still, it is important to remember that the political situation in Sudan remains extremely sensitive: if the transitional government does not meet the public demand for democratization and separation from the difficult past, it might be ousted just as Omar al-Bashir was before.

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