

While Al-Shabaab conduct a deadly attack on a military base in Somalia, Russia is jockeying for influence

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On 26/05/2023, Al-Shabaab militants attacked a Forward Operating Base (FOB) of the Ugandan Army in Bulo Marer, Somalia. The Ugandan troops stationed there were part of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS).

According to released footage by Al-Shabab's media arm, Al Kataib Foundation, the military base was overrun. At least 2 T55 Main Battle Tanks of the Ugandan Army were destroyed while the garrison suffered a large amount casualty in KIA and WIA.



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The attack followed a well-known pattern in Al-Shabaab's attacks against military bases in Somalia. First, a VBIED detonated in the main gate of the base, and then dozens of militants, equipped with small arms, RPGs and supported by mortar and machine gun fire stormed the base.



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A number of Ugandan soldiers were also captured by Al-Shabaab militants as evidenced by footage released by Al-Shabab's media arm, Al Kataib Foundation, which used the opportunity for its publicity campaign.



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In support of the African Union's peacekeepers, US forces conducted an airstrike which according to a statement of US Africa Command destroyed military hardware which the militants were trying to transport (it is probably one of the two T55s which were destroyed).

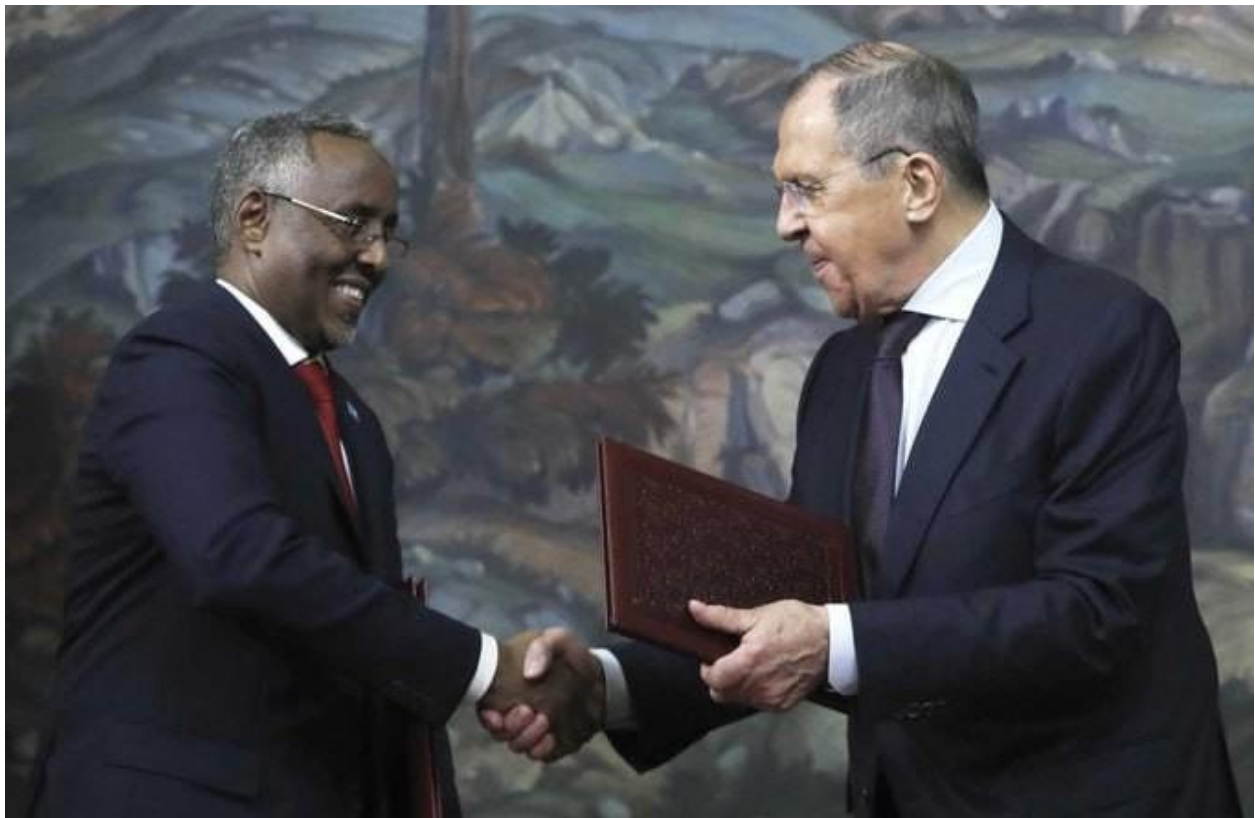
On Sunday 28/05, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, in a rare statement, acknowledged that the Ugandan Army suffered casualties in the attack without providing further details.

This is not the first time that the military base in Bulo Marer is attacked by Al-Shabab's militants. On 1 April 2018, Al-Shabaab fighters attacked again the Forward Operating Base (FOB) of the Ugandan Army in Bulo Marer and although their attack was repelled, this came with a great cost for the Ugandan army as it suffered at least 50 KIA while also at least 30 militants were killed.

Bulo Marer holds a strategic position as a major road artery (Marka-Afgoye) passes through it. It was occupied by Al-Shabaab up until August 2014 when it was liberated by Amisom Forces.



On the same day that the attack against the FOB in Bulo Marer occurred, Russia via its Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov, offered to Somali Foreign Minister Abshir Omar Jama, who was visiting Moscow, military support in terms of military hardware and ammunition. It has to be noted that Somalia is under a long-term UN arms embargo which was imposed in 1992 after the outbreak of the civil war and factional violence.



In the short to medium term, Al-Shabaab will keep conducting attacks against Somalian Army and ATMIS forces trying to inflict casualties on them and increase its influence in Somalia. However, recent trends suggest that the terrorist group will not try to hold urban territory but will withdraw to the rural areas after each successful attack. The inability of the Somali armed forces and ATMIS to effectively counter Al-Shabaab militants will contribute to the worsening of the security situation in Somalia.

Russia will exploit the worsening security situation in Somalia and by offering military assistance to Somali government will try to increase its influence. However, due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine which limits the type and quantity of military assistance that Russia can offer, and because of the already established cooperation and support provided by the US it is unlikely that in the short to medium term, Russian influence in Somalia will increase at the same levels as in Central African Republic or Mali.