

The comeback of the "Russian bear" to the Red sea

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The Red Sea is one of the world's most important trade routes, with its southern tip in Bab al-Mandeb strait (between Yemen and Djibouti) and its northern edge in the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aqaba. More than 10 percent of global shipping traffic passes through it every month, including four percent of the world's daily crude oil supply.

Russia has signed on December 1, 2020, a 25-year agreement with Sudan to establish a naval base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast.¹ The deal can also be extended in 10-year periods with the parties' consent.

According to the deal, Russia will be able to house up to four navy ships, including nuclear powered ones. The base could station up to 300 or more military personnel. Russia will have the right to transport via Sudan's airports and ports "weapons, ammunition and equipment" needed for the naval base to function. In exchange, Sudan will receive weapons and military equipment free of charge.²

Former chief of the Russian Navy's General Staff retired Admiral Viktor Kravchenko, told Interfax in November 2020 that the base (in Sudan)

aimed to help restore Russia's naval presence and increase the operational capabilities of the Russian fleet, particularly in a region of geo-strategic importance. "Russia will have a base on the Red Sea. This is a tense region. The Russian naval presence there is necessary...Our ships are constantly in this region and we need a basing point there," he said.³

On February 28, 2021, a Russian warship, the Admiral Grigorovich, entered the Sudanese port where Russia plans to set up the naval base. It was the first Russian warship to enter Port Sudan, according to Interfax.⁴

The Soviet Union had a strong influence in Africa and naval bases in the Red Sea, but this changed after the demise of the Soviet Union and amid economic woes and military funding shortages.

Under President Vladimir Putin, it now seems Russia has new aspirations for Africa and the new agreement with Sudan is part of Moscow's efforts to restore a regular naval presence in various parts of the globe.

The relations between Moscow and Khartoum during Al Bashir's era

Sudan's former President Omar al-Bashir visited Russia for the first time on November 23, 2017. During his visit to Moscow, al-Bashir asked President Vladimir Putin to "protect" his country from the United States.

The Sudanese President has reached an agreement with the Russian Defense Ministry on assistance in upgrading its armed forces. President al Bashir explained that, his country was interested in military-technical cooperation with Russia, because the military hardware at Sudan's disposal was of Russian manufacture.

According to al-Bashir, Sudan was also interested in developing economic interaction with Russia and was ready to discuss projects in peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Al-Bashir also had discussed with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu a possibility of establishing a Russian base in Sudan.

The Chairperson of the National Assembly's Committee of Security and Defense, Al Hadi Adam Ahmed, has affirmed Sudan's readiness for establishing Russian military bases on the Sudanese Red Sea Coast within the framework of the economic and military cooperation between the two countries.⁵

The relations between Moscow and Khartoum after the fall of Al Bashir

Sudan's president Omar al-Bashir has been ousted by the military and a popular revolution in April 2019. After al - Bashir was toppled, Sudan is led by a civilian-majority administration which has been seeking reintegration in the international community and to ending decades of pariah status.

A spokeswoman for the Foreign Ministry in Moscow urged all political and military forces in Sudan to act "extremely responsibly in the aim of stabilizing the situation as soon as possible and not allowing any further escalation."⁶

The pro-democracy revolution in Sudan had limited influence on Russia's interests in the country. Moscow has maintained strong ties with Sudan and its new president, General Burhan, and in May 2019, Russia and Sudan's armed forces signed a deal set to last seven years, as the Kremlin offered Khartoum military assistance and civilian nuclear cooperation.⁷

Russia continued to train Sudan's military and Moscow acknowledged in January 2020 that its military advisors were on ground in Sudan alongside forces loyal to the government as a political crisis there unfolded.⁸

Sudan and nuclear energy

As a part of the Russian strategy to be a dominant global and regional power, Russia is ready to support countries to build nuclear plants and to provide the technology.

The Russian State Corporation for Atomic Energy (Rosatom) said on December 22, 2017, it has signed in Khartoum an agreement to build the first nuclear power plant to produce electricity in Sudan. The deal came a month after a visit by the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to Russia during which a nuclear energy cooperation agreement was signed between the two countries.⁹

The document was signed by Dmitri Bazhenov, Marketing & Business Development Director at Rosatom Overseas (a Rosatom Group company), and Musa Omer Abu El-Gasim, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Water Resources and Electricity of Sudan.¹⁰

The document created a legal basis for interaction between the two countries in peaceful use of nuclear energy across a wide range of areas, such as assistance in creating and developing nuclear infrastructure of Sudan, fundamental and applied research in peaceful use of nuclear energy, production of radioisotopes and their use in industry, healthcare and agriculture, education, training and advance training of specialists for the nuclear sector.¹¹

The parties agreed to carry out a feasibility study for the construction of a nuclear power plant in Sudan. The study includes site surveys and estimation of key project parameters, such as technical solutions to be used, capacity, core equipment, project schedules and milestones, and financing mechanisms.

Water Resources, Irrigation and Electricity minister Muataz Musa said the project is part of a government plan to generate more than 5000 megawatts by 2030. Since several years, Sudan announced it had plans to build a four-reactor nuclear power plant to fill the gap in power generation by 2030.¹²

Sudan's Omar al-Bashir has been ousted by the military and a popular revolution in April 2019, and the future of the nuclear power plant deal is not clear.

The Russian navy in Syria

Russia's decision to build a naval base in Sudan should be seen as part of an overall Russian strategy. Russia has maintained a significant military presence in Syria since 2015 and has an air base in Khmeim and a naval base in Tartus. Russia also has military presence in Libya.

Russia has waged a military campaign in Syria since September 2015, allowing President Bashar Assad's government to reclaim control over most of the country following a devastating civil war.

The Russian navy already has established a major presence in the Mediterranean, thanks to a naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus. In 2017, Moscow struck a deal with President Assad to extend its lease on Tartus for 49 years. After signing the agreement that allows Russia to keep up to 11 warships there, it has moved to modernize and expand the facility.

As part of Putin's efforts to beef up the military, the Russian navy in recent years has revived the Soviet-era practice of constantly rotating its warships in the Mediterranean.

Summary

Moscow has in recent years turned its focus to Africa as it seeks to reaffirm its geopolitical influence around the globe. The Red Sea naval base will be Russia's first in Africa and only its second on foreign soil, after Tartus in Syria.

Russia is systematically expanding its spheres of political, military and economic influence from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and to the Indian Ocean. This strategy requires the construction of a modern and strong fleet which, in order to maintain a continuous and effective presence, needs naval bases where vessels can safely dock and be supplied.

The Russian naval base at Port Sudan is part of this strategy and will increase the capability to operate militarily in the proximity of two of the most important chokepoints of the world, the Suez Canal and Bab al-Mandab strait.

The Red Sea has become an arena of geopolitical, rivalry and struggle for influence by the great powers US, China and Russia. Even though the agreement between Sudan and Russia stated that the naval base “meets the goals of maintaining peace and stability in the region, is defensive and is not aimed against other countries,” the construction of the base is part of the competition and struggle for influence in the region.¹³

Notes:

¹ Russia Signs Deal to Open Naval Base in Sudan, the Moscow Times, December 9, 2020.

² The deal, published on the Russian government's website on December 9, 2020.

³ Why is Russia establishing a naval base in Sudan? TRT, December 9, 2020.

⁴ Russia’s Interfax news agency reported on February 28, 2021, citing a statement from the Russian fleet.

⁵ <http://www.svdaily.net/index.php/new-posts/local-news/11316-sudan-announces-readiness-to-establish-russian-military-base-on-red-sea-coast>

⁶ It's Business as Usual for Russians in Sudan, Despite Bashir's Fall, Time, April 12, 2019.

⁷ Russia Signs Deal to Open Naval Base in Sudan, the Moscow Times, December 9, 2020.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Russia to build nuclear power plant in Sudan, Sudan Tribune, December 23, 2017.

¹⁰ Nuclear power plant for Sudan, Rosatom Newsletter, 202, January 2018.

¹¹ Sudan Receives First Batch of Su-35 Fighter Jets, Al Defaya, November 25, 2017.

¹² Russia to build nuclear power plant in Sudan, Sudan Tribune, December 23, 2017.

¹³ Why is Russia establishing a naval base in Sudan? TRT, December 9, 2020.