

The US-Russia Confrontation and its Reflection on Sudan

Russia's well-known desire in reaching warm-waters is not limited to getting access to the Mediterranean Sea only; Russia has also been seeking a way to enter the Red Sea ports for a while. In this regard, Moscow has been approaching Sudan gradually in order to establish a military naval base in Port Sudan city, meanwhile, Sudan's reactions have been uncertain, with contradictory statements raised by Khartoum so far.

The Red Sea and straits on its northern and southern tips (the Suez Canal, Bab al-Mandab) are highly strategic locations for sea trade, the Horn politics as well as the Middle East eco-politics. For that, the Red Sea with its geopolitical advantages is closely influenced by the growing international competition and tensions. As known, one of the US' largest military bases Camp Lemonnier, under the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), is located in D'jibouti. Lemonnier has been operating since 2002 and has been used for "counter-terrorism" efforts in the region after 9/11. But actually, this military base provides the US control over the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden conjunction. After China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Red Sea coasts along with East African coasts and ports became highly strategic locations for global actors. In this vain, China has established its first and only overseas military base in D'jibouti in 2017. And China continues desiring more military bases further south and on the Atlantic coasts of Africa although it worries the West.^[i]

The day Russia started its unexpected and controversial invasion of Ukraine, Moscow was hosting an official delegation from Sudan led by the second man of Sudan's Sovereignty Council, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. As shown by the news, pending Red Sea naval base along with economic and political issues were discussed between Russian and Sudanese officials during the 8-day visit.^[ii] This meeting was actually a clear sign of Khartoum seeking Russia's political backing, and at the same time, it marks Russia's desire for Sudan.

Russia-Sudan connection or in other words Russian engagement in Sudan is nothing new; it can be remembered how former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, blamed and wanted by the West, had signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia in 2017 that allowed entry of Russian warships into Sudan's ports. Moreover, in the last days of his reign, al-Bashir visited Damascus under the sponsorship of Moscow in an attempt to normalize the status of the Assad regime in Syria. For the sake of political and financial support, al-Bashir willingly accepted playing such a role just to please Moscow, hoping to extend his falling 30-year long regime. However, Russia's desire for Sudan goes beyond that fake normalization.

Just like the Soviet era, Moscow once again wants to have military bases all over the strategic locations, including the Red Sea, in order to get access to political superpowers and consolidate its power like the golden days of the past. In this matter, the African continent is one of the places in which Russia has been seeking to increase its influence and confront the Western powers for a while. During the last decade, Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin started implementing a new policy on Africa, and in this approach, the Wagner group expanded its presence in the continent in an expansionist way. Mali, Libya, DRC, Mozambique, and Central Africa became places where Wagner paramilitary elements are highly visible nowadays.

The current Russian invasion of Ukraine is already showing its negative impact on the global wheat supply chain including in Africa since many African countries are regular buyers of Ukrainian wheat. The same negative impact is also felt in the skyrocketing oil prices all over the world. Moreover, the Ukraine conflict might also shake Russia's policy on Africa in one way or another. But it seems that the West and Russia's polarization in the shadow of the Ukraine conflict might affect Sudan politics more than any other country.

Sudan is in a transitional period since the al-Bashir era ended in 2019 with a military coup. And US-Sudan relations were finally normalized after a long sanction and blockage. For the last 3 years, civilian political groups that advocated democratic demands through street protests could only find backing from Western countries, while military elements leading the Sovereignty Council reached out to Israel, Egypt, UAE, and Russia for financial and political backing in order to remain in power, despite the pressure of the ongoing

street protests. And the polarization between the civilian and military elements in Sudan politics somehow seems parallel with the polarization between the West and Russia.

Russia aims to get access to the Red Sea via Sudan, although Western actors, especially the US, want to keep Russia out of it for strategic considerations. It also seems that Khartoum amuses the file of the naval base to gain time because Khartoum's remarks on the issue sometimes look highly contradictory. However, when the crisis in Ukraine deepens and US-Russia polarization escalates, this might end Sudan's uncertainty ultimately and force the Sudanese authorities to take a sharp decision on this strategic issue.

[i] ["China Eyes More Bases in Africa, US Military Official Says". VOA. 22 April 2021.](https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_china-eyes-more-bases-africa-us-military-official-says/6204929.html)
https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_china-eyes-more-bases-africa-us-military-official-says/6204929.html

[ii] ["Sudan welcomes military base agreement with Russia in the Red Sea". Africanews. 03 March 2022.](https://www.africanews.com/2022/03/03/sudan-welcomes-military-base-agreement-with-russia-in-the-red-sea/)
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