

The Bear in the Red Sea

What are the Implications of a Russian Naval Base on Sudan's shores?

Since the start of the recent fighting on 15 April 2023 between the SAF and the RSF, more than 25.000 people have been killed and eight million are internally displaced or fled to Egypt, Ethiopia, Chad, South Sudan or Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the conflict has resulted in a wide-spread famine where the World Food Programme estimated five million people will directly be affected by the end of 2024.

The foreign backing to General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Chairman of the Sovereign Council, currently the highest authority in Sudan, and his former deputy General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti", commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), encourage both sides to believe the war could end through military means rather than negotiations.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia provide political and military support to General al-Burhan, as he is, despite all, still representing the Sudanese state institutions. Egypt believes those institutions protect its southern borders from smuggling operations, terrorist groups and influx of refugees. In the same sense, Saudi Arabia seeks to protect its western shores to secure its investments that are tied to its Saudi Vision 2030.

General Hemedti and the RSF continue to get support from the UAE, Eastern Libya, Chad and Russia, who have been providing the RSF with military equipment, drones, machinery, and transit points for recruitment of soldiers in counterpart for the smuggling of Sudanese gold to the UAE and Russia by the RSF.

The foreign backing has been critical in the calculations of both General al-Burhan and Hemedti to reach their ultimate goal of ruling Sudan. Neither the SAF nor the RSF work for a democratic Sudan. Both seek to put in place an authoritarian regime.

—

When the conflict started on 15 April 2024, both General al-Burhan and General Hemedti believed that the war could end quickly. Hemedti and his advisers believed that they had a lightning victory against General al-Burhan and his allies in the SAF, while the latter believed that a victory against the RSF was possible through maintaining defensive positions. The intention of the SAF strategy was to exhaust the RSF and then attack at its weakest points to regain control of formerly lost regions in Sudan. However, in many instances, that strategy has proven to be ineffective and resulted in more and more losses for SAF units.

This brought the international support structures of the RSF into focus. First, General al-Burhan and his allies pledged Russia to stop sending the RSF sophisticated weaponry via Wagner mercenaries, now known as the Africa Corps. Russia's anti-aircraft rocket launchers effectively reduced the ability of the SAF air force to destroy the RSF gatherings and locations in Khartoum and other areas in Sudan. Malik Agar, the

newly appointed vice president of the Sovereign Council, visited Russia already in June 2023 to convince the Kremlin to end their support for the RSF.

That was easier said than done. Russia's foreign policy is based on a transactional philosophy. General Hemedti was sending huge amounts of gold to Russia via the M-Invest and Meroe Gold companies. That gold has been used to circumvent Western sanctions against Russia in the context of the Ukraine war. In exchange for the gold, Russia has been providing the RSF with sophisticated weapons and training through its Wagner paramilitary forces.

Unsurprisingly, Russia did not respond to stop supporting the RSF at the time, so General al-Burhan and his allies decided to encourage the deployment of Ukrainian special forces in Sudan to level the playing field, to weed out Wagner from Sudan and to pressure Russia to stop its military support for RSF. This resulted in wheat shipments from Ukraine to Sudan in February 2024 further indicating that Sudan and Ukraine were getting closer together against Russia.

The Russian reaction didn't take long. A shift became apparent when Mikhail Bogdanov, Russian deputy foreign minister, visited Port Sudan in April 2024. Bogdanov then recognised General al-Burhan as the legitimate head of Sudan and promised unrestricted

military aid by Russia to the SAF. In exchange for Russia's support against the RSF, General al-Burhan and his allies approved plans to build a Russian military base in Port Sudan. That project had been part of bilateral discussions since 2019. Russia is interested in having access to the Red Sea to challenge the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, Russia is interested in using the base to transport the gold from Sudan and the Sahel through the Red Sea to further withstand the US led sanctions against it for its invasion of Ukraine. This fits into a long lasting military cooperation between Russia and Sudan. The latter has acquired Russian weapons worth around US\$ 1 billion during the time of the regime of Omer al-Bashir that was ousted in April 2019.

The new Russian support was urgently needed. Given the series of early defeats, SAF officers pressured General al-Burhan to change tactics from defending bases towards more attacking positions which then resulted in the recapturing of Radio Omdurman in March 2024.

General al-Burhan and his allies use the rumors of a Russian naval base to pressure the UAE to stop supporting Hemedti and the RSF. Wagner uses UAE networks to finance its activities in the Central African Republic and Sudan. By putting the new Russian support on the table, UAE might see a general wind of change and reconsider its support for the RSF. This remains to be seen.

In a general picture, the UAE continues to build its national brand as a reliable partner in Africa, the Middle East, and the Gulf. To achieve this objective, the UAE has been steadily buying and building ports in the Red Sea since 2006. In 2022, Sudan and the UAE signed a US\$ 6 billion agreement to build Port Abu Amama, 200 kilometers north from Port Sudan. While the new Russian naval base does not target UAE's economic interests directly, it would still become a factor for the security in the Red Sea. General al-Burhan uses that leverage to pressure the UAE to stop supporting the RSF and its allies. In the same sense, General al-Burhan uses the new Russian naval base as part of a hedging strategy to pressure the US and its allies to focus more on supporting his rule in Sudan rather than supporting Sudan's transition to democracy.

—

Sudan allowing Russia to build its logistical base has limited impact in both the Sahel and Horn of Africa. Expert sources state that to Chad, Russia building a naval base in the Red Sea has no implications for the near future as the country transports its oil through Cameroon to international markets. However, it has been involved in supporting the RSF through allowing the RSF to use Amdjarass and its borders to replenish its troops and get military equipment. It is believed that Chad's support for the RSF is carried out

through Hemedti's cousin General Bichara Issa Djadalla, a former minister of defense of Chad and current chief of staff of President Mahamat Deby. It is also confirmed that the UAE airlifts weapons and ammunition to the RSF through Amdjarass and had also set up a Chadian field hospital for RSF troops there.

However, the support of Chad to RSF is not done collectively by the Deby's regime, which is dominated by the Zaghawa ethnic group, the support base of Deby's regime. Deby's regime fears that once the RSF defeats the SAF in Sudan, the RSF and their kinsmen in Chad will work together to also topple Deby's regime.

The constant flow of the kinsmen of RSF from Mali, Niger and Chad through Chadian borders into Sudan is a result of the Chadian authorities not having the ability to fully control their borders with Sudan, experts say. The flow of kinsmen of the RSF might provide them with an opportunity to enrich themselves and find new lands to settle.

With regards to other countries in the Sahel, especially Niger, Mali, and the Central African Republic (CAF), a Russian naval base on Sudan's shores also does not have any visible implications. All three countries already have close relations with Russia and ship their gold and other minerals to Russia through airlifts rather than via the Red Sea. Both

Mali and Niger have close relations with Russia as a result of the appreciated junta regime's populism against France and the extracting arrangements for golds and minerals in exchange for Wagner's protection against rebel dissidents in both countries.

General al-Burhan and his allies decided to establish close relations with the junta regimes of both Mali and Niger to encourage Russia to support General al-Burhan and his allies against the RSF and to contain the flow of RSF's kinsmen from those countries into Sudan where they are replenishing RSF's manpower.

In regard to the Horn of Africa, the political considerations of both Eritrea and Ethiopia weigh more than military relations. President Isaias Afwerki has been close to General al-Burhan and his allies since the start of the conflict. He allowed armed movements allied with the SAF to train in Eritrea, and has allowed political parties (including factions of the former Bashir regime) in support of General al-Burhan and his allies to form the Sudan National Alliance (SNA), a political bloc that aims to support General al-Burhan rule after the conflict in Sudan ends in their favor.

President Afwerki's support for General al-Burhan and his allies stems from his fear of not wanting to be encircled by both the RSF that might challenge Eritrea's traditional ethnic allies in East Sudan. He would like to see these

relations untouched by the fighting. At the same time, President Afwerki is also at odds with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia as a result of him signing the Pretoria Deal with Tigray Popular Liberation Front (TPLF). That is because it takes away Afwerki's opportunity to defeat the TPLF, not allowing him to protect his regime from what he believes is the TPLF's goal of declaring an independent state of Tigray and later on absorbing Eritrea into that state.

In April 2024, Vladimir Kasatonov, Deputy Commander in Chief of the Russian Navy, shared Russia's interest in building a naval base in Eritrea. However, it seems that neither Afwerki nor Russia are really interested in building the base. From Eritrea's side Afwerki is using it as a pressure card of hedging between Russia and the West. According to Dr. Mohamed Khair Omer, expert political analyst on the Horn of Africa, it is doubtful that a Russian navy base in Sudan will impact Afwerki relations with General al-Burhan. Afwerki will continue his support for General al-Burhan and his allies as he does not want a regime in Sudan that is close to Ethiopia and the UAE, he states.

In regard to Ethiopia, there is no possibility that the building of a Russian navy base will have an implication of shifting Ethiopia's relations towards supporting General al-Burhan and SAF. There is no evidence that Ethiopia has been directly supporting the RSF. However, as experts noted, in dialogue

forums Ethiopia has been leaning towards RSF positions as a result of Sudan's previous support for the TPLF during Ethiopia's civil war.

At present, Ethiopia is pursuing its own plans for access to the Red Sea through an agreement with Somaliland. Given the diminished popularity of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed after the recent and costly conflict with the TPLF, this project mainly seeks to shore up popular support for his leadership. Indeed, Russia has shown an interest towards helping Ethiopia to rebuild its navy. However, Ahmed will continue to hedge between Russia and the US until he returns to the good graces of the US. Dr. Mohamed Khair Omer summarizes that the US is interested in deeper relations with Ethiopia as a result of the country being economically liberalized by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and the US most likely would like to see Chinese firms removed from Ethiopia.

—

Although the building of a Russian naval base on Sudan's shores does not have much implication on states in the Horn of Africa or the Sahel, the impact of that will be felt by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey.

Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia are seen as close to General al-Burhan and his allies. Egypt has been focusing on maintaining the sovereignty of Sudan since the

conflict started. In July 2023, Egypt led a conference of neighboring countries resulting in a declaration of non-interference in the conflict. Egypt has further been working to host another conference in 2024 between Sudanese political parties to rally support for General al-Burhan rule in Sudan.

Egypt believes in helping al-Burhan they can better protect its southern borders and that General al-Burhan, after all, represents Sudanese institutions that can hold the country together. Sudan is one of Egypt's main trading and investment partners. In 2022 Egypt's exports to Sudan rose to US\$ 504 million, and Egypt has 229 projects in Sudan that are worth US\$10.8 billion. These security and economic considerations encourage Egypt to continue its support of General al-Burhan. At the same time, Egypt sees the Red Sea as an important part of its economic security and physical security. In terms of economic security, through the Suez Canal, Egypt has made US\$ 9.4 billion in revenues in 2022/2023 that contributed to 2 percent of Egypt's GDP in the same fiscal year. In terms of physical security, it also wants to ensure security from smuggling, and trafficking operations that used to go through the Red Sea.

For Egypt, a Russian Red Sea base poses a threat to its security as Egypt has always been close to the US. At the same time, there is a possibility that Egypt might be wary of Russia having a naval

base on Sudan's shores which could move Sudan closer to Ethiopia on regional security issues. To Egypt, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) represents a threat to its water security and has been working with Sudan to pressure Ethiopia to sign a legally binding agreement in order to regulate the dam's operation. Ethiopia refused this on many occasions.

Even if it is not possible to evaluate to full extent the accuracy of the prospect of Sudan moving closer to Ethiopia on the GERD matter, it remains clear that Egyptian authorities are boosting the political legitimacy to enhance General al-Burhan to lead Sudan in a post-war transition period, as the Cairo Conference in July 2024 clearly indicated.

Saudi Arabia also has the same strategic evaluation of supporting General al-Burhan and his allies as wanting to ensure the security of its western borders on the Red Sea, namely to protect its investments in its western seashores that are tied to its Saudi Vision 2030. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia also has economic-security interest in Sudan, where it has US\$ 35.8 billion worth of investments in Sudan with most of those investments focused on the agriculture sector to support Saudi Arabia's food security. The inclusion of Russia in the Red Sea will complicate Saudi Arabia's ability to maintain its economic and security interest in regard to the Red Sea, especially as a result of the UAE including

itself in the region through leasing or buying ports in the Red Sea. To Saudi Arabia, the involvement of the UAE in the Red Sea is a challenge to its interest in maintaining its own security policy in the region, beyond food security provided by Sudan to Saudi Arabia. A Russian base on Sudan's Red Sea, might pressure Saudi Arabia to be more supportive of General al-Burhan and his allies in the civil war rather than just being a facilitator of the Jeddah Forum. Its role in this forum is also driven by the presence of both SAF and RSF forces in Saudi Arabia's fighting operations in Yemen.

Nazar Abdel Aziz, a secretary general of the Broad National Front, indicates that without the support of the US, both Saudi Arabia and Egypt would be reluctant to see the construction of a Russian navy base in Sudan as both countries still see Russia as a Soviet inspired empire that is focused on replacing regimes in power with ones aligned to it.

Turkey also has a stake in the Red Sea as a result of it having a military base in Somalia that it has built in 2017. Somalia has signed a ten year agreement with Turkey in February 2024 to train the Somali army in maritime security. A Russian naval base will not shift relations between Sudan and Turkey due to the presence of many former Bashir regime leaders in Turkey. This is why General al-Burhan and his allies are keen to rely

on Turkey to rebuild Sudan once the conflict is over.

—

In regards to the US, the presence of a Russian navy base on Sudanese shores poses risk to the US's grand strategy in protecting the stability and interest in the Indo-Pacific sea. The US administration's national security strategy shows the US's objective in the Red Sea is to not allow any build-up of rival military power in the area. A build up in the Red Sea will challenge the US's grand strategy in the Indo Pacific. Unsurprisingly, the US has always focused on hindering Russian presence in the Red Sea. However, the US administration does not have a coherent strategy to secure states in the Red Sea, allowing General al-Burhan and his allies to use the public statements concerning the new Russian naval base as leverage in ongoing relations with the US.

The US Department of defense is visibly worried about a deeper cooperation between Russia and Iran in the Red Sea. Since the beginning of the Ukraine war, US officials have noted an intensified coordination between Russia and Iran as well as a rise in transfers in drone and fighter jet technologies between both countries. This plays well with General al-Burhan who seeks to encourage the US to engage even further on his interests in Sudan.

At the same time, the UK has similar interest to the US in regard to the connectivity of the Red Sea to the Indo-Pacific region where Australia, UK, and US have developed a trilateral security defense partnership. Specifically the UK is interested in protecting its shipping traffic in the Red Sea from Oman, India and China to the UK. All disturbances are to be avoided. Hence the UK will be anxious about the new plans of Russia having naval bases in the Red Sea and on Sudanese shores.

Germany and France are both equally concerned that Russia's naval base in Sudan will have an impact on their objectives and interests in the region. Both countries have an interest in keeping Russia out of the Red Sea. Germany's policy on the Indo-Pacific seeks to de-risk China and other powers through engagement and trade interdependence. France on the other hand has interests in the Indo-Pacific region as a result having overseas territories and at the same time is focused on being a middle power of de-escalation of any conflicts in the region through multilateralism.

Both Germany and France also have concerns that a Russian Red Sea base will make it easier for Moscow to transfer gold outside Africa allowing Russia to further withstand Western sanctions. From their point of view, speedy gold transfers to Russia would only extend the war in Ukraine which had a severe

impact especially on the German economy due to a high dependency on Russian gas.

Moreover, France on its own has been bothered with losing its influence in West Africa to Russia as a result of the military coups that brought to power military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger which put an end to the G5 Sahel security alliance that France saw vital for its security policy in the Sahel.

Neither the US, nor its western allies or even some of their regional allies have an interest in a Russian naval base in Sudan. This alone provides General al-Burhan and his allies, including the Islamists who formed the former Bashir regime, with advanced leverage to play out US', European and Russian interests in the Red Sea. At this point is it however unclear if this might lead to a leveling of weaponry support for SAF compared to the RSF's support through Mali, Niger and the Central African Republic.

—

The plan for a Russian navy base is a bargain chip for General al-Burhan. Should the SAF prevail in the conflict, General al-Burhan and his allies would have no reason to relinquish power to a civilian authority in order to again lead Sudan's transition to democracy. The danger of a Russian naval base could make the US and Europe believe that a stable Sudan is preferable to a

democratic regime change in Sudan. Given that they focus on Ukraine, Gaza and the geopolitical challenges around China, they do not seem to act directly but rather through Egypt, the UAE and the African Union to get this foreign policy burden off their chests. As a result, it is likely that the US and Europe might accept what General al-Burhan and his allies will be offering once the fighting comes to an end in Sudan: stability over democracy.

At the same time, the African Union has been working to include the National Congress Party (NCP) of the former Bashir regime in the talks to end the conflict and to start Sudan's transition to

a new regime. However, there is no guarantee that the NCP will not use the process to work with General al-Burhan to return back to power, resulting in a new authoritarian regime and effectively ending Sudanese hopes for democracy.

Foreign interference will not allow Sudan to transition to credible democracy. It will be up to Sudanese civilians to form a credible and united front to bring an end to the war so as to gain the support of the US, its western allies and regional powers to pressure both General al-Burhan and General Hemedti to stop the fighting and to relinquish power to a civilian government that will pave the way for a democracy in Sudan.

—

About the author

Jihad Mashamoun is a Political Analyst on Sudanese Affairs. A holder of a doctoral degree in Middle East Politics from the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter. He is also an Honorary Research Fellow at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter. He has authored and co-authored numerous articles on the Sudanese uprisings and Sudanese affairs and provided expert interviews on Sudan for both radio and print. Follow him on Twitter @ComradeJihad.



Published by

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Sudan
Constantin Grund, Resident Representative
<https://sudan.fes.de>

The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Printed reproductions only with the permission of the publisher. This publication is not to be distributed commercially but free for distribution.