What Will Sudan Gain from having a Russia Naval Base?

On July 1, 2021, the Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin submitted an agreement with the Republic of the Sudan to the State Duma for ratification to set up a logistics center in its territory for the Russian Navy. How long have negotiations been going on between the two countries on having Sudan accommodate a Russian military facility? Which states are putting up opposition to military cooperation between Russia and Sudan? How will the construction of a Russian naval base affect the development and prosperity of this North African country? Will the international balance of power in the Middle East change after this?

Even back in 2015, former Sudanese President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir expressed interest in a military partnership with Russia, since his plans included large-scale modernization work for the Sudanese army. Al-Bashir examined the option of providing Russia with a port on a gratuitous basis in exchange for deliveries of the latest armaments. However, al-Bashir's plans were not destined to come true by virtue of the fact that in 2019 he lost power following a coup.

Russian-Sudanese negotiations about the logistics center’s location continued under the new head of state, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who showed loyalty to the Kremlin's policies just like his predecessor. However, the Sudanese political crisis has caused a significant slowdown to occur with the dialogue between the two countries. It was only in the first half of December 2020 that information came to light that the Russian Federation had signed an
agreement with Sudan on operating a naval base for a 25-year time period.

To help bolster its level of defense, not only the United States but also Russia needs to have as many military installations around the world as possible. Even back in Soviet era, Russian naval bases were located at various times in Ethiopia, Yemen, and Somalia. After the collapse of the USSR, and the political and economic crisis that followed it, Russia was forced to shut down some of its foreign military facilities, and significantly reduce funding for the rest of them. All the naval bases around the Red Sea were disbanded. Now that the Russian economy has recovered, the country is considering bringing its military facilities back into the region.

The main opponents of the Russian military presence in North Africa are the United States and other NATO countries. To prevent Russia from reinforcing its positions in the Middle East, and to deprive it of access to the Indian Ocean, the United States and its allies are using all the levers they have at their disposal.

After Sudanese President al-Bashir was overthrown, during whose reign Washington classified Sudan as a state that supports terrorism, the United States changed its attitude towards this North African nation. Now, so that it does not lose its influence in the region for good, the United States is ready to provide loans to Sudan at reduced interest rates, and provide it with political support and weapons. However, the leadership in Sudan must understand that Washington's benevolence is not eternal: first, the United States has been experiencing an internal crisis for several years, and is gradually losing its status as a world superpower. Second, Americans rarely give other countries a helping hand without demanding compensation. It can be assumed that if Sudan takes a political turn toward America, then soon it will have to face an impressive number of American energy companies that will be interested in securing Sudanese natural resources at reduced prices.

In addition, Saudi Arabia, which lays claim to being the region’s leading power, has a negative attitude toward the construction of a Russian military base in Sudan. Riyadh does not approve of Russia's actions, and does not want to see Russian military installations near its shores.

If a logistics center for the Russian Navy is built in Sudan, then that will represent a completely new stage in Russian-Sudanese relations.

It is common knowledge that Sudan is not one of the world’s most economically developed countries, and among its 45 million population there are a large number of poor people. The country often faces food and energy shortages. As far as military power goes, the arsenal the armed forces in this North African state possess has mostly outdated equipment and weapons.

Cooperating with Russia over the long term would help remedy all of the above-mentioned problems. In those countries that have good relations with the Russian Federation, Russian specialists provide assistance to their foreign colleagues in constructing nuclear power plants. If Sudan agrees to hold an expanded dialogue with Moscow, then Russia will render considerable assistance to help develop its energy infrastructure, and by doing so raise both the population’s standard of living and the general level of economic development. As far as military cooperation is concerned, Russia is one of the world leaders in the manufacture and export of various armaments, so Khartoum will receive high-quality, relatively inexpensive weapons at its disposal, and these will have a positive effect on the country's defense capabilities.

If the Russian Federation provides assistance to Sudan, it will get a new ally in the region, thereby increasing the weight it carries in the Middle East. Gaining an outlet to the Red Sea, Russia will significantly expand the capabilities its navy has, and will be able to hold an even more confident dialogue with the United States and its allies - and they, in turn, will be forced to listen to Moscow's words more often.

The international balance of power in the Middle East could change dramatically. First, Moscow's additional outpost places serious restrictions on the capabilities of the United States and its allies in this region. Second, other countries could follow the example set by the Sudanese, and also express the desire to have Russia on their list of friends. If this happens, then the Russian Federation will be able to start playing one of the main roles in the Middle East's political arena in the foreseeable future.

The conclusion can be drawn that building a Russian naval base in Sudan could become a bright page in both Russia’s history and Sudan’s. If the partnership between the two countries grows stronger, then the state of affairs in the region will become altered, since the United States and its allies will lose one of their most promising spheres of influence.
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