



Research Paper: The interests of Russia in Sudan

Author: Sudan Democracy Lifeline Fellow

Writing Date: 31\5\2024

Affiliation: Published as part of the 2024 AMEL Sudan Democracy Lifeline Fellowship

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of AMEL

Description of AMEL Fellowship: The AMEL Sudan Democracy Lifeline Fellowship is an online program dedicated to empowering emerging voices to influence global discussions on democracy, peace, and development in Sudan. Through a series of interactive workshops, mentorship, and evidence-based research projects, fellows gain critical skills in analysis, policy formulation, and advocacy.

Further Readings: For more insights and publications from AMEL's fellows, visit our website: democracyactionsd.org/publications

Contact Information: If you have any questions or would like more information about AMEL's and our work, please reach out to us:

- **Email:** sudandemocracy@amelproject.org
- **Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/democracyactionproject>



Abstract

This paper examines the growing influence of Russia in Sudan from 2016 to 2023, focusing on its economic, military, and strategic interests. It explores how Russia has leveraged Sudan's rich natural resources, particularly gold, while pursuing military cooperation through arms sales, training, and plans for a Red Sea naval base. The analysis highlights Russia's broader strategy in Africa, aiming to counter Western influence and expand its geopolitical reach by securing key positions in resource-rich and strategically located nations like Sudan.



Introduction:

Sudan lies at the crossroads between East Africa, Middle East and North Africa, in addition to Sub-Saharan Africa. Sudan has land borders of 6,780 kilometers long, bordered by Egypt, Libya, Chad, Central Africa, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea (Al-Shahi 2024). The resources of Sudan include Oil, Arabic Gum, Agriculture, livestock, and Mineral resources, putting Sudan among the nations that have unused resources.

However, this geolocation which includes access to the Red Sea, in addition to the mentioned resources, grants Sudan a unique value that could benefit it for development and geopolitical advantage. Moreover, the cultural and ethnic diversity and plurality of Sudan, besides its wide area (1,868,000.0 km²) and the border overlaps between citizens of neighboring countries give it another preferential advantage, such as the diversity of languages, cultural identities, and easy access to neighboring countries.

However, Sudan was in the interest scope of Russia, since before the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as they had strong ties initiated in 1960, and then developed by Lt.General Ibrahim Abboud, the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the Prime Minister of Sudan, when he visited the USSR. Since then, the ties started rising until 1970 when Numieri, a former president of Sudan, reduced the diplomatic ties with Moscow and expelled the Soviet military advisers from Khartoum. The ties back again after the revolution of 1985, when Al Sadiq Al Mahadi, the last elected prime minister in Sudan, visited the USSR in 1986 (“Bilateral Relations” n.d). However, due to the sanctions of the United States on Sudan, the ties started strengthening, including investment, diplomacy, and military cooperation. In 2018, Sudan and Russia signed an agreement to grant Russia a Naval base on the Red Sea coast of Sudan (“Why is Russia establishing a naval base in Sudan?” 2018).

This paper sets out to understand the updated Russian focus on Sudan, reviewing the different aspects of interests, including resources, military, and strategy.

Methodology:

This paper focuses on studying the recent interest of Russia in Sudan. A timeframe between 2016 and 2023 is considered to conduct the analysis. This timeframe has been chosen because it was observed that the ties between Sudan and Russia started rising since 2016. To accomplish the aim of the paper, a conceptual framework will be discussed and then used to review the interests of Russia in Sudan for each concept. Moreover, contextual review will be used to specify the past determined interests of Russia in Sudan, in order to deploy comparative analysis between the reviewed literature and the findings of this paper.



Moreover, media analysis for the official news agency of the Russian state (TASS) was considered as the best instrument for defining the declared interests of Russia. To collect the data, manual data collection on the website of TASS has been conducted using the search term “Sudan”.

Limitations:

Language barrier:This paper conducted a literature review of the existing literature in the English language. We consider that reviewing the existing literature in the Russian language might add value to the comparative analysis.

Lack of human sources:The outline of this paper included interviews with Sudanese politicians and analysts as a method of data collection. However, the author failed to question everyone he contacted.

Lack of access to references:Some research papers and books were covered by a paywall or required the institution’s access. However, the supervisor assisted in accessing some of these references.

Conceptual framework:The conflicts among nations have many themes and motives. For this paper, in the context of the Russian interest in Sudan, the following themes will be considered to examine each interest.

Resource competition:The resource scarcity within a specific region generates a process of searching for it in other regions and territories. In a geopolitical manner, the state that looks for resources might face resistance or even competition from other nations. Resources like Oil, Agriculture, and Minerals are the main resources of conflict (Homer-Dixon, T. F. 1999). Moreover, natural resources played a role in 40% of all intrastate conflicts in the last 60 years, and the affected countries are twice as likely to relapse into conflict in the first five years following a settlement (Ratner, B et. al 2018). In addition, (Klare, M.T 2011) mentioned that Natural resources have been identified repeatedly as a driving force behind recent conflicts and military buildups.

Military dominance:Many tensions and conflicts erupted from competition for military dominance, or strategic positioning (Kissinger, H. 2014).

Geostrategic control:Several conflicts in history were for disputes of greed over strategic locations, transportation and commercial routes, or access to key geopolitical hubs (Mahan, A. T. 1987). The fields of interstate competition vary, while states compete for economic, political, and energy gains, in addition to geostrategic control (Evaghorou, E. L 2020).

Literature Review:



Scholars, Analysts, Politicians, and Think Tanks have highlighted the interests of Russia in Sudan. Most of the literature found that Russia has strategically engaged with Sudan for various reasons, including geopolitical interests, economic opportunities, and military dominance. Russia's historical ties with Sudan, dating back to the Cold War era, have influenced its contemporary involvement in the region. Many scholars emphasize Russia's intent to expand its influence in Africa as part of its broader geopolitical strategy (Kohnert, Dirk 2022).

Additionally, Russia's interest in Sudan's natural resources, particularly its minerals, has been a significant driver of its engagement. Furthermore, analysts highlight Russia's efforts to strengthen its military presence in Sudan, evidenced by arms sales, military cooperation agreements, and the establishment of naval facilities (Peter, M., & Plichta, M. 2023). Overall, the literature underscores the multifaceted nature of Russia's interests in Sudan, reflecting a combination of geopolitical, economic, and strategic considerations.

(Pospisil, J. and Jenner, A 2022) defined the interests of Russia in Sudan as the need for protecting their gold investments in Sudan, Red Sea naval access, and maintaining a geostrategic corridor to the Central Africa Republic -which was influenced by Russia-, weapons market and security forces, and destabilisation of Western liberal interests. In addition, Russia aims to challenge the plans of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in the Red Sea (Okwany, C. C. O., & Hansen, R. 2023).

However, numerous pro-U.S. scholars indicated that Russia is a threatening power to the United States' international interests by intervening in the Sudanese internal issues. (Meservey, J 2023) mentioned that Russia's interest in Sudan represented capturing a presence on the Red Sea coast of Sudan, which would give Moscow a commanding presence on a critical international shipping route. Furthermore, Russia's interests are more tied to military perspectives as it is dealing with Sudan in military modernization to upgrade the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) (Wunderlich et. al 2018).

Moreover, Russia is working to restore the heritage of the Soviet Union in the region, especially in the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. Russia uses its power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to strengthen its ties with the African countries under sanctions such as Sudan and Eritrea. For example, Russia used its influence in the UNSC to revoke a resolution that condemned the military coup in Sudan in 2019, which ousted Omer al-Bashir (Siegle, J 2021). In return, Russia benefits from arms sales and military cooperation (Oğultürk, M. C 2017).

Russia is positioning itself as an alternative influencer to Russia instead of the United States and the European Union (E.U.) in Africa, in order to strengthen its presence there. Furthermore, Russia is ambitious to get a presence in Sudan, especially on its Red Sea coastline, in order to get marine access for its investments in Sudan and the Central Africa Republic (CAR) (Czerep, J 2021).



Russia is clearly interested in Sudan's mineral resources, especially gold, in addition to less interest in oil extraction. Russian investments in Sudan include companies such as M-invest and Meroe Gold (Svoboda, K 2024). Both companies are under sanctions from the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) ("Treasury targets financier's illicit sanctions evasion activity" 2020).

Analysis: To achieve the goal of this paper, media analysis will be conducted for the Russian Governmental News Agency (TASS). The aspects of the analysis were categorized based in the conceptual framing mentioned above. Moreover, interviews were conducted with analysts to diversify the points of view, and assist in conducting a comparative analysis of the interview results, the media analysis, and the literature review.

Resources: Sudan is a diverse country from a resources perspective. This diversity put Sudan among several challenges in managing and getting benefits from these resources. Moreover, other powers are eyeing Sudan's resources, including Russia.

In 2010, a Russia-Sudan high-level working committee was founded with the aim of intensifying Sudanese-Russian ties. 2016 witnessed the fifth session of the committee when the minister of foreign affairs of Russia mentioned that both countries confirmed mutual commitment to strengthening cooperation in the area of development of natural resources, agriculture, energy, infrastructure, transport, and personnel training (Tass 2016).

This statement established the later developments in the ties between the two states. Also, it paved the road for the Sudanese part to declare its welcoming to the Russian interest in the country. The former Sudanese minister of state for foreign affairs announced in August 2017 that the Sudanese president, Omer al-Bashir -ousted in 2019-, plans to visit Russia, describing the visit as "historic and represents a milestone" and added that Sudan is interested in Russian companies investments, especially in gold mining (Tass 2017).

After this statement, TASS reporting on Sudan connected with investments in energy and grains sales (Tass 2017). In addition, al-Bashir visited Moscow and agreed with Russian President Putin to upgrade the military capabilities of the Sudanese Armed Forces (Tass 2017). Russia benefited from this agreement by taking the privilege of establishing a naval base on the Sudanese coast in the Red Sea, in addition to opening the investment sphere to Russian companies such as M Invest and Meroe Gold (Tass 2017).

However, this narrative analysis agrees with the literature review in highlighting the strategic interest of Russia in utilizing Sudan's resources, particularly gold and energy fields.

Military dominance: Sudan is among the top four Russian arms export destinations between 2013 and 2022 (Adf staff 2023). Between 2016 and 2023, TASS reported five news items about military



cooperation between Russia and Sudan. In September 2016, it was reported that Russia exported helicopters to four African countries, including Sudan (Tass 2016).

It has been noted that the years following 2016 witnessed an increasing interest from Sudan towards developing Sudan's defense capabilities using Russian technology. On the other side, the Russians considered Sudan as "an intermediary country to the Islamic world" as described by Viktor Bondarev, the Chairman of the Defense and Security Committee of Russia's Federation Council, in November 2017 (Tass 2017). Moreover, he indicated that the military cooperation between the two nations will grow rapidly. It is important to know that only one year after this statement, Sudan and Russia signed an agreement to establish a Russian military base on the Sudan Red Sea coast.

In the context of the former Sudanese Minister of State for Foreign Affairs 2016 statement about enhancing cooperation across various sectors, particularly in personnel training, TASS reported in February 2023 that the U.S. authorities had imposed sanctions on the Wagner Private Military Company, designating it a transnational criminal organization (Tass 2023). Following this, the U.S. urged Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to pressure the leaders of Sudan and Libya to sever their connections with Wagner. This report serves as a clear acknowledgment from the Russian side of Wagner's presence in Sudan, contradicting Sudanese denials made in 2022 (Khalid Abdelaziz & Nafisa Eltahir 2022). Additionally, the Russians had previously stated that military companies were training the Sudanese army, although they did not specify Wagner by name (Maria Tsvetkova, 2019).

However, this analysis documents specific instances of military cooperation and training between both nations, reflecting ongoing developments and future ambitions, without defining any strategic objective, in contrast with the literature review examining how military modernization aligns with Russia's strategic objectives.

Geostrategic control: Sudan's strategic position as a cross-border between Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, compounded with its access to the Red Sea, has drawn the attention of regional and international powers. On November 26, 2017, TASS reported Russia's interest for the first time in establishing a naval base on Sudanese territory (Tass 2017). Rather than focusing specifically on Sudan, the Russian interest was presented from a broader perspective, mentioning Sudan as one of the potential countries for a naval base among several others. The report was an interview with Frants Klintsevich, the First Deputy Chairman of the Defense and Security Committee of Russia's Federation Council, and coincided with al-Bashir's visit to Russia.

However, Russia was concerned with the Sudan uprising in 2019, as the change of Sudan leadership may impact its projects in Sudan, especially the Red Sea base. The Transitional military authorities in Sudan confirmed to Russia that the foreign policy of Sudan towards Russia will not be affected by the leadership change (Tass 2019). Moreover, it seems that Russia was looking for confirmation that reassured its role regarding the situation in Sudan after the ousting of al-Bashir. Immediately, the Russian Presidential



Special Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov visited Khartoum and met Abdelfattah al-Burhan, the SAF's chief commander and then he got promises from al-Burhan that Sudan is willing to forge ties with Moscow (Tass 2019).

However, TASS reporting on the Russian geostrategy with Sudan was exclusively about the naval base in the Red Sea, linking it with the Sudanese benefits of a military upgrade (Tass 2019). The reporting included mass reporting about any single piece of news that represented hope for Russia to establish its Naval base in Sudan. It even uses the term "hope" in describing the Russian ambition for the ratification of Sudan on the agreement between both nations (Tass 2021). However, between 2017 and 2023, TASS reported the Naval base in Sudan eleven times.

In conclusion, this analysis shows Russia's strategic maneuvers, such as the establishment of the naval base and direct responses to the rapid political changes in recent years in Sudan, contradicting the literature review which linked the Russian interest in Sudan to its intention to confront the Western influence, particularly that of the U.S. and its AFRICOM. Moreover, the analysis agreed with the literature review and found that military cooperation and the establishment of a naval base are central themes, indicating Russia's aim to strengthen its military existence in the region through Sudan.

Conclusion:

Russia has a deep interest in Sudan, as Sudan represents a gate to its influenced territories in Africa through the Red Sea. For that, the Red Sea itself is another obsession for Russia. Without a presence in the Red Sea, as one of the most crucial commercial routes, Russia can not have any direct access to Africa, and will not have any chance to counter the influence of the U.S. in it.

Moreover, Russia is trying to retrieve its heritage in the Soviet era, especially in the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. So, Sudan is the best choice for Russia because of its resistance to U.S. dominance. The presence of Russia in the Red Sea restored its partial dominance, and hope for military dominance in the future. This military dominance is connected directly to the upgrade of the Sudanese military as an ally to Russia.

Russia is very interested in investing in Sudanese resources, especially gold, employing companies to work there to finance its treasury.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Adf staff. (2023). Russia emerges as top weapons supplier to Sub-Saharan Africa. Africa Defense Forum. <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/04/russia-emerges-as-top-weapons-supplier-to-sub-saharan-africa/>



Al-Shahi AS, Sikainga AA, Economist Intelligence Unit et al. (n.d).Sudan. Encyclopedia Britannica. (Accessed on May 3, 2024).

Bilateral relations. (n.d). Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Sudan. (Accessed on May 3, 2024). https://sudan.mid.ru/en/dvustoronnie_otnosheniya/

Czerep, J. (2021). Sudan: Cooperation with the US at Russia's Expense.

Evaghorou, E. L. (2020). Energy Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and Geostrategic Implications on the Cyprus Issue. *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies*, 13(1), 109-133.

Homer-Dixon, T. F. (1999). "Environmental Scarcities and Violent Conflict: Evidence from Cases." *International Security*, 19(1), 5-40.

Khalid Abdelaziz & Nafisa Eltahir. (2022). Sudan's foreign ministry denies presence of Russian Wagner Group. Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudans-foreign-ministry-denies-presence-russian-wagner-group-2022-03-22/>

Kissinger, H. (2014). *World Order*. Penguin Books.

Klare, M.T. (2011). Resource Competition and World Politics in the Twenty-First Century. In: Machlis, G., Hanson, T., Špirić, Z., McKendry, J. (eds) *Warfare Ecology*. NATO Science for Peace and Security Series C: Environmental Security. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1214-0_4

Kohnert, Dirk, (2022). The Impact of Russian Presence in Africa. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4067193>

Mahan, A. T. (1987). *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*. Dover Publications.

Maria Tsvetkova. (2019). Russian contractors are training the army in Sudan, says Moscow. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-sudan-contractors-idUSKCN1PH23T/>

Meservey, J. (2023). America's Best Choice in Sudan Is the Least Bad Option. Hudson Institute, May, 23.

Oğultürk, M. C. (2017). Russia's renewed interests in the Horn of Africa as a traditional and rising power. *Rising Powers Quarterly*, 2(1), 121-143.



Okwany, C. C. O., & Hansen, R. (2023). Sudan—a case of domestic and international powerplay. Available at SSRN 4534057.

Peter, M., & Plichta, M. (2023). China and Russia in Sudan: Surveying Data on Economic and Military Engagement.

Pospisil, J. & Jenner, A. (2022). Fragmented Transitions in the Context of Competitive Regionalism: The Case of Sudan (PeaceRep Report: Global Transitions Series). PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh

Ratner, B., Burnley, C., Mugisha, S., Madzudzo, E., Oeur, I., Mam, K., ... Adriázola, P. (2018). Investing in multi-stakeholder dialogue to address natural resource competition and conflict. *Development in Practice*, 28(6), 799–812. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2018.1478950>

Siegle, J. (2021). Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability. *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, 80-90.

Svoboda, K. (2024). Russia's loans as a means of geoeconomic competition in Africa and Latin America. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 71(2), 156-166.

Tass. (2016). Russia, Sudan agree to expand ties in resource development — ministry. TASS. <https://tass.com/politics/881449>

Tass. (2017). Sudanese president plans to visit Russia in late 2017. TASS. <https://tass.com/world/959062>

Tass. (2017). Lukoil eyeing series of joint projects with UAE, Kuwait, Sudan. TASS. <https://tass.com/economy/975383>

Tass. (2017). Russia hopes to increase grain sales to Sudan — Putin. TASS. <https://tass.com/economy/977080>

Tass. (2017). Russia to help Sudan upgrade its armed forces. TASS. <https://tass.com/defense/977087>

Tass. (2017). Russia, Sudan sign agreement on peaceful use of nuclear energy. TASS. <https://tass.com/economy/977319>



Tass. (2016). Russia to export helicopters to four African countries in 2016-2017. TASS.
<https://tass.com/defense/899781>

Tass. (2017). Senator: defense and technology cooperation between Russia and Sudan to reach new level. TASS. <https://tass.com/defense/977473>

Tass. (2023). US tries to force Libya, Sudan to end ties with PMC Wagner — Associated Press. TASS.
<https://tass.com/world/1570897>

Tass. (2017). Senator: certain countries can offer use of military bases to Russia. TASS.
<https://tass.com/politics/977479>

Tass. (2019). Sudan's ambassador promises military coup will not affect relations with Moscow. TASS.
<https://tass.com/world/1053508>

Tass. (2019). New Sudanese government willing to forge ties with Moscow, said diplomat. TASS.
<https://tass.com/world/1054244>

Tass. (2019). Russia, Sudan plan to boost defense cooperation. TASS. <https://tass.com/defense/1059881>

Tass. (2021). Moscow hopes Sudan is to ink agreement on Russian military base — Russian diplomat. TASS. <https://tass.com/defense/1359587>

Treasury targets financier's illicit sanctions evasion activity. (2020). U.S. Department of The Treasury.
<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1058>

Why is Russia establishing a naval base in Sudan?. (2018). TRT. (Accessed May 3, 2024).
<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-is-russia-establishing-a-naval-base-in-sudan-42205>

Wunderlich, E. J., & NAVAL WAR COLLEGE NEWPORT RI. (2018). US rapprochement with Sudan: State sponsor of terrorism no more. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE NEWPORT RI.