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## ***Russia and Sudan resume plans to create logistics base: reasons for changes***

At SPIEF, Deputy Head of the Sovereign Council of Sudan Malik Agar arrived in Russia along with other high-ranking guests. According to **experts**, the purpose of the visit is to re-conclude an agreement on the construction of a Russian logistics base in Port Sudan, the implementation of which will lead to significant changes in the balance of power in the Red Sea region.

In early June, 2024, Malik Agar, a veteran of Sudanese politics and the second most important person in Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's government, who is **currently** deputy head of the Sovereign Council of Sudan, **arrived** in Russia on an official visit. Although Agar's arrival is formally timed to coincide with the opening of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), negotiations on the construction of a logistics base for Russian Navy ships on the Red Sea coast **undoubtedly** remain his main goal. It is noteworthy that a similar agreement between Moscow and Khartoum was **reached** in 2020, but the Sudanese side later **announced** its intentions to reconsider its negotiating position, which was largely due to the high level of volatility in the domestic and foreign policy of Sudan in the years following the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir and power in the country was unsustainably distributed among various factions of the military and representatives of civil society. Thus, an analysis of the reasons that led to such dramatic changes in the position of the Sudanese authorities is necessary, as well as to assess the real prospects for the implementation of the deal, taking into account the domestic political context in Sudan.

**Sudan: who to negotiate with?**

Unlike in 2020-2021, when, despite the transitional nature of political institutions, Sudan had a relatively centralised system of government, today there are two warring centres of power in the country: The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by General Hamdan Dagalo ‘Hemedti’ and the Armed Forces (AF), that are loyal to the head of the Sovereign Council Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who took office after the coup in autumn, 2021. The open conflict between two coalitions of Sudanese elites has been ongoing since mid-April, 2023, and has led to the de facto division of the country into two camps: supporters of Hemedti, who control Darfur and part of Kordofan, and supporters of al-Burhan, that are mostly in the eastern provinces, including the Red Sea region with its capital in Port Sudan (where, in fact, and it is planned to build a logistics base). Given the inability of either side to achieve a direct victory on the battlefield, as well as the lack of full control over the capital, Khartoum remains the site of the fiercest fighting since the first day of the conflict. The international community prefers to maintain contacts with both the RSF and the Sovereign Council as part of de-escalation efforts. However, when it comes to intergovernmental contacts, representatives of the latter have a number of obvious advantages as legitimate representatives of the Sudan. First of all, the Sudanese diplomatic corps provides a link between external players and al-Burhan; appointment of diplomats were carried out even before the conflict between the RSF and the Armed Forces, which means that current ambassadors and consuls answer to the Sovereign Council. Moreover, representing the most educated part of the political elites, Sudanese diplomats consider the figure of ‘Hemedti’, who comes from the nomadic tribes of Darfur and has completed only a few grades of elementary school, much less legitimate than a coalition of high-ranking military officials. Secondly, unlike Field Marshal al-Burhan, who has held leading positions in various military and transitional government bodies since the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir, Hemedti is little known to foreign governments, being the commander of tribal militias that have repeatedly been accused of human rights violations. As a result, although the commander of the RSF maintains active contacts with neighbouring states and periodically makes visits abroad, international players perceive him only as one of the parties to the internal Sudanese conflict, who does not have the right to negotiate on behalf of the state.

### **Sudanese motives**

Thus, why did the leaders of the Sovereign Council decide to resume negotiations with Moscow on the construction of a logistics base in Port Sudan considering the conditions of domestic political uncertainty and the possible foreign policy consequences, including a negative reaction from the US? Moreover, why was the warming in relations with Russia so

clearly indicated through the visit of Deputy head of the Sovereign Council Malik Agar if the intention for rapprochement could have been demonstrated in a less open form?

To begin with, it should be kept in mind that the prerequisites for the intensification of contacts between Moscow and the government of al-Burhan can clearly be traced throughout spring, 2024, for example, at the end of April, Russia's special representative for Africa and the Middle East, Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia Mikhail Bogdanov, visited Port Sudan, noting that Russia recognises the legitimacy of the Sovereign Council. At the same time, [information](#) on the supply of diesel fuel from the Russian Federation to the Sudanese military appeared. In general, such a choice is quite natural for Moscow; al-Burhan's forces control the coast and have more support in the world than the Hemedti-led RSF. Thus, if the military is ready to guarantee Russia the right to build a strategically significant naval logistics base, the RSF simply have no equivalent offer to make. In turn, the Sudanese AF, experiencing enormous difficulties in confronting the mobile units of the RSF, are in dire need of supplies of military equipment, ammunition and fuel. Apparently, the assistance of Egypt and Iran in this matter is not enough.

Given such a configuration of interests and starting positions of the parties, the decision to cut a 'deal' between Russia and the government of Field Marshal al-Burhan seems to be quite motivated and mutually beneficial. Receiving the resources urgently needed to defeat the internal enemy, the Sovereign Council is ready to meet Moscow's geopolitical needs, especially since the decision to create a base has already been made several years ago, which means it will be perceived by external players with some 'understanding'. At the same time, the willingness of parties to ensure the implementation of the project is supported by the emergence of a natural 'exchange formula' that is relevant both for Russia and the leaders of the Sudanese AF, although the previously seen changes of heart of the Sudanese authorities should not be written off.

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