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POLICY BRIEF

Russia's Growing Ambitions in the Red Sea Region

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's ambitions in the Red Sea region have markedly expanded since Sudan's then President Omar Al-Bashir met with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Sochi in November 2017. These ambitions extend to the economic, security and diplomatic spheres, as Russia wishes to challenge the US and Europe for influence in this pivotal region and frame itself as a contributor to regional security. Russia's expanded presence on the Red Sea is closely intertwined with its goal of strengthening its diplomatic and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region. This linkage can be explained by geography, as the Red Sea serves as a gateway to expanded influence in the Indian Ocean. At the outset, it is essential to clarify the Red Sea region's scope. Geographically, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen border the Red Sea, while Jordan and Israel border the Gulf of Aqaba, which is located on the Red Sea's northern tip. However, Russia's contemporary engagement with Saudi Arabia is limited on Red Sea-related issues, except for oil price security and the Yemeni civil war, and the Red Sea rarely features in meetings between Russian, Israeli and Jordanian officials. Instead, Russia more regularly engages on Red Sea-related issues with countries that do not border its littoral zone, such as the UAE, Iran, Somalia and Ethiopia. Due to these patterns of engagement, this Policy Brief focuses on Russia's bilateral relationships with the six Red Sea countries and extra-regional countries on issues that impact Red Sea security.

This Policy Brief will address the following question: why is Russia paying greater attention to the Red Sea? This tilt has received little attention in extant scholarship since the end of the Cold War and deserves more. As the stability of the Red Sea and Bab El-Mandeb Strait is essential for maritime shipping, US and European policymakers should pay close attention to Moscow's manoeuvres. Russia's policy is not exclusively anti-Western, as it has historically cooperated with Western countries on anti-piracy, but its disruptive tactics – such as Wagner Group private military contractor (PMC) deployments in Sudan and indiscriminate arms sales¹ – exacerbate the Red Sea's existing state of insecurity. Russia's rising soft power in

1. Andrew McGregor, 'Russian Mercenaries and the Survival of the Sudanese Regime', Jamestown Foundation, 6 February 2019; Andrew McGregor, 'Russia's Arms Sales to Sudan a First Step in Return to Africa: Part 1', Jamestown Foundation, 12 February 2009.

the Red Sea region – which is enhanced by its rhetorical commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of states, arms sales to isolated countries, strategic use of debt relief, and the growing traction of its state-owned or aligned companies such as Rosatom – poses additional concerns for the Euro-Atlantic foreign policy community.

Russia's policy towards the Red Sea appears opportunistic. Inconsistent Western engagement with the Red Sea region – such as the US military withdrawal from Somalia, the imposition of sanctions against Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, and a fluctuating relationship with Egypt – have created a fertile environment for Russian influence. However, it faces substantial obstacles to achieving its goals, emanating from its limited economic footprint and growing external power competition in the Red Sea. But its security presence could potentially reinforce authoritarian consolidation and present a long-term threat to the freedom of navigation of Western countries. To understand the nature of Russia's developing Red Sea engagement, this Policy Brief examines the drivers of, and constraints on, Russia's commercial, security and diplomatic power projection in the Red Sea and outline its policies to expand its influence in this region. The Policy Brief concludes by highlighting the need for the Euro-Atlantic community to take measures to contain Russia's negative influence, and to encourage forms of Russian engagement that can further regional stability, peace and prosperity.

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL INTERESTS IN THE RED SEA

The expansion of Russia's attention to the Red Sea can be explained by three factors. First, Russia has associated a Red Sea presence with great power status for nearly a century. Under Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union tried to re-enter the region by establishing cordial relations with the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen and Saudi Arabia. This plan unravelled with the assassination of Soviet Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Karim Khakimov in 1938 and Moscow's subsequent diversion of attention from the Arabian Peninsula. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union expanded its influence on the Red Sea by aligning with Egypt until the 1973 war and emerged as the primary patron of Ethiopia under the Derg (1974–87) and South Yemen (1967–90). From 1990 to 2017, Russia was a marginal player in the Red Sea region, while profiting from regional conflicts like the 1998–2000 Badme War, and acting as a partner of last resort for isolated regimes, such as Omar Al-Bashir's Sudan and Isaias Afwerki's Eritrea. The current effort to restore Russia's presence in the region appeals to nostalgia for the Soviet Union's superpower status and resonates strongly with the Russian foreign policy establishment.

Second, Russia values the Red Sea's geographic proximity to the Bab El-Mandeb Strait, Suez Canal and Eastern Mediterranean. These three waterways are emerging theatres of Russian power projection. For example, Russia has a vested interest in the Bab El-Mandeb Strait's security because 6.2 million oil barrels pass through it every day. Although Russia does not

rely on this strait for oil exports, its security is nevertheless vital to the stability of global energy markets, which are a key Russian interest.² If a non-state actor, such as Yemen's Houthi rebels, disrupts shipping in the Bab El-Mandeb Strait, oil prices could increase precipitously and the OPEC+ supply regulation agreement might unravel.³ While this scenario could benefit Russia's economy in the short term, it also risks overheating international oil markets and might lead to an undesirable oil price crash in the long term.⁴ Notwithstanding its frequent disagreements with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait on oil production, Russia views the OPEC+ agreement as a key contribution to international economic governance and the fulfilment of its aspirations to regulate global oil prices, which date back to the 1970s.

Russian experts contend that improved relations with Red Sea basin countries could expand Russia's trade share in the Suez Canal, which contains 10% of the world's sea traffic, and effectively complement its Mediterranean presence.⁵ These predictions might eventually come to fruition, as negotiations between Russia and Egypt in June 2021 resulted in the pledged construction of a Russian industrial zone in the Suez Canal Economic Zone.⁶ Russia's naval base in Tartous in the Eastern Mediterranean has served as an important resupply facility in recent years and the establishment of a parallel installation in Port Sudan could alleviate Moscow's long-term dependence on Syria.⁷ Moreover, it also complements Russia's rising influence in the Black Sea since the February 2014 annexation of Crimea, which expanded its access to the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean and, together with the modernisation of Russia's armed forces (notably the Black Sea fleet), laid the foundations for Moscow's eventual return to the Red Sea.

Third, Russia's renewed focus on the Red Sea also reflects its growing interest in Indian Ocean security. This strategic commitment was underscored by Russia's listing of the Indian Ocean as a 'priority area' in its 2015 maritime doctrine and reference to piracy in the Indian Ocean in its 2017 naval

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2. *Xinhua*, '6.2 mln b/d Crude Oil, Refined Products Flow Through Bab El-Mandeb Strait in 2018', 28 August 2019, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/28/c_138343168.htm>, accessed 6 July 2021.
 3. Author telephone interview with US Department of State official, April 2019.
 4. Nikolay Kozhanov, 'Does Russia Benefit from Attack on Saudi Oil Facility?', *Al-Monitor*, 23 September 2019, <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/09/russia-saudi-oil-iran-us-china.html>>, accessed 6 July 2021.
 5. *RBC*, 'Zachem Rossii voyennyy ob'yekt na Krasnom more' ['Why Does Russia Need a Military Facility on the Red Sea?'], 19 November 2020, <<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/11/2020/5fb431d29a7947b75f06e721>>, accessed 7 July 2021.
 6. *Egypt Independent*, 'SC Zone: Russian Industrial Zone Will Be First of its Kind for Moscow', 11 August 2021, <<https://www.egyptindependent.com/sczone-russian-industrial-zone-will-be-first-of-its-kind-for-moscow/>>, accessed 13 August 2021.
 7. *Mk.ru*, 'Poyavleniye rossiyskoy voyennoy bazy v Sudane ob'yasnily ekspert' ['An Expert Explains the Emergence of a Russian Military Base in Sudan'], 12 November 2020, <<https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/11/12/poyavlenie-rossiyskoy-voennoy-bazy-v-sudane-obyasnil-ekspert.html>>, accessed 8 July 2021.

modernisation plan.⁸ A March 2019 Russian International Affairs Council briefing conceded that ‘Russia is often seen as playing only a marginal role or no part at all in the Indian Ocean’s affairs’, but noted the region’s growing importance to Russia’s ‘pivot to the East’.⁹ Therefore, Russia’s Red Sea forays should be linked to other developments in Moscow’s Indian Ocean policy, such as its trilateral drills with China and South Africa,¹⁰ growing maritime cooperation with India¹¹ and strengthening partnership with Myanmar.¹²

RUSSIA’S COMMERCIAL FOOTPRINT IN THE RED SEA REGION

Despite Russia’s long history of economic engagement with Red Sea countries, commercial activities are the weakest pillar of Moscow’s regional strategy. Russia’s commercial ties with Egypt and Saudi Arabia are growing, but only slowly. Last year, Russia and Egypt’s trade turnover reached \$3 billion, and in August 2020, the Russian ambassador to Egypt, Georgiy Borisenko, announced that another \$7 billion would be added to Russia’s \$7.4 billion in investments in the Egyptian economy.¹³ Yet, Russia’s efforts to secure a free-trade agreement between Egypt and the Eurasian Economic Union have stagnated.¹⁴ Saudi Arabia’s target of \$10 billion in investments

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8. Stephen Blank, ‘Russia’s Efforts to Play in the Indian Ocean Basin’, Newlines Institute, 17 June 2021, <<https://newlinesinstitute.org/russia/russias-efforts-to-play-in-the-indian-ocean-basin/>>, accessed 8 July 2021. Russia Maritime Studies Institute, ‘The 2015 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation’, 2015, p. 29; *Garant.ru*, ‘Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 20 iyulya 2017 g. № 327 “Ob utverzhdenii Osnov gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v oblasti voyenno-morskoy deyatel’nosti na period do 2030 goda”’ [‘Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of July 20, 2017 No. 327 “On Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Activities for the Period up to 2030”’], 25 July 2017, <<https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/71625734/>>, accessed 8 July 2021.
 9. Ksenia Kuzmina, ‘Russia and the Indian Ocean Security and Governance’, Russian International Affairs Council, 22 March 2019, <<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-and-the-indian-ocean-security-and-governance/>>, accessed 5 July 2021.
 10. Ankit Panda, ‘Chinese, Russian, South African Navies Conduct Trilateral Naval Exercises’, *The Diplomat*, 27 November 2019.
 11. *Times of India*, ‘Putin Thanks India for Maritime Security Initiative, Reaffirms Russia’s Commitment to Combat Crime at Sea’, 10 August 2021.
 12. Artyom Lukin and Andrey Gubin, ‘Why Russia Is Betting on Myanmar’s Military Junta’, East Asia Forum, 27 April 2021, <<https://www.easiaforum.org/2021/04/27/why-russia-is-betting-on-myanmars-military-junta/>>, accessed 7 July 2021.
 13. *Egypt Today*, ‘Russia’s Investments in Egypt Reaches \$7.4B, Another \$7B to Be Added Soon: Amb. Georgiy Borisenko’, 31 August 2020.
 14. TASS, ‘Egypt Interested in Signing Free Trade Agreement with Eurasian Economic Union’, 28 August 2017.

in Russia, which was announced in July 2015, remains in effect as there has been little progress towards reaching this figure.¹⁵ Russia's trade volumes with Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia are also marginal and undiversified.

Russia's commercial interests in the Red Sea region are clustered in the defence, energy and mining sectors. Sudan purchased 50% of its arms from Russia from 2000 to 2016,¹⁶ and in August 2020 was one of two weapons purchasers at Russia's Army-2020 exhibition.¹⁷ Egypt agreed to \$3.5 billion in arms purchases from Russia in 2014¹⁸ and signed a \$2-billion contract for Su-35 fighter jets in 2019.¹⁹ Ethiopia has consistently ranked as one of Russia's top five arms clients in Africa, which included \$652 million in arms deals from 1998 to 2004.²⁰ The most recent slate of defence agreements between Russia and Ethiopia, which were signed at the 11th Ethiopia–Russia military technical cooperation joint meeting on 12 July, will allow Moscow to aid the modernisation of the Ethiopian National Defense Force and could result in further arms exports.²¹ Yemen purchased Russian equipment prior to Ali Abdullah Saleh's overthrow in 2012.²² Saudi Arabia also signed a provisional deal to purchase Russia's S-400 air defence system in October 2017,²³ but this agreement has since stalled.

Russia–Saudi Arabia energy cooperation hinged on Lukoil's joint exploration efforts with Aramco until October 2019,²⁴ and Riyadh has also expressed

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15. Andrey Ostroukh, 'Saudi Arabia to Invest up to \$10 Billion in Russia', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 July 2015.
 16. Richard Connolly and Cecile Sendstad, *Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter: The Strategic and Economic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia* (London: Chatham House, 2017).
 17. *Army Technology*, 'Russia to Supply Armaments to Sudan and Laos', 28 August 2020, <<https://www.army-technology.com/news/russia-armaments-sudan-laos/>>, accessed 7 July 2021.
 18. *Reuters*, 'Russia, Egypt Seal Preliminary Arms Deal Worth \$3.5 Billion: Agency', 17 September 2014.
 19. *Moscow Times*, 'Russia Secures \$2Bn Fighter Jet Contract with Egypt – Reports', 18 March 2019.
 20. Evgeny Korendasyov, 'Rossiya atakuyet rynki vooruzheniy i voyennoy tekhniki v Afrike' ['Russia Attacks Arms and Military Equipment Markets in Africa'], Russian International Affairs Council, 11 May 2017, <<https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rossiya-nastupaet-na-rynki-vooruzheniy-i-voennoy-tekhniki-v-afrike/>>, accessed 7 July 2021.
 21. *Ethiopian News Agency*, 'Ethiopia, Russia Sign Various Agreements to Enhance Military Cooperation', 12 July 2021.
 22. Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 145.
 23. Stephen Blank, 'Arms and the King in Saudi-Russian Relations', Jamestown Foundation, 11 October 2017.
 24. *Interfax*, 'Alekperov ob'yavil o nachale vykhoda LUKOYLa iz saudovskogo proyekta s Saudi Aramco' ['Alekperov Announced the Start of Lukoil's Withdrawal from the Saudi Project with Aramco'], 23 October 2019, <<https://www.interfax.ru/business/681422>>, accessed 6 July 2021.

interest in investing in Russia's Arctic liquefied natural gas reserves.²⁵ Russian civilian nuclear energy giant Rosatom has also embarked on the El Dabaa nuclear reactor in Egypt. Production licences for El Dabaa will be issued in mid-2022, while its construction will be completed by 2030.²⁶ At the October 2019 Russia–Africa Summit in Sochi, Russia and Ethiopia signed an intergovernmental agreement on peaceful nuclear energy cooperation, which could result in joint projects between Rosatom and the Ethiopian government.²⁷ Russia's mining interests are largely concentrated in Sudan, where the Wagner Group has been tasked with guarding gold deposits. Russia's EuroChem also signed a take-or-pay offtake agreement with Australian start-up Danakali, which gives it access to Eritrea's potash reserves. While the current extent of EuroChem's access to Eritrea's potash sector is unclear, this offtake agreement has until 1 July 2022 to take effect.²⁸

RUSSIA'S SECURITY FOOTPRINT IN THE RED SEA REGION

Beyond its wide range of arms contracts, Russia has expanded its role as a security provider in the Red Sea through military cooperation agreements, participation in anti-piracy missions and naval base negotiations. Since 2015, Russia has signed a diverse array of military cooperation agreements with African countries, which include training and counterinsurgency assistance, broadened its cooperation with external partners on anti-piracy and intensified its naval base negotiations. Aside from sporadic police training initiatives, these military cooperation agreements reversed a quarter-century of largely transactional arms sale-based security partnerships between Russia and African countries. In December 2017, Russia and Egypt finalised a military cooperation agreement, which purportedly allowed both sides to use their airspaces and airbases for a period of five years.²⁹ Russia signed a similar agreement with Ethiopia in April 2018, which included provisions for training and cooperation on peacekeeping, counterterrorism and anti-piracy

25. *Financial Times*, 'Saudi Arabia Aims to Take Stake in Russian Arctic LNG Project', 25 October 2018.

26. Nuclear Engineering International, 'El Dabaa Nuclear Project Reported Delayed by Political Tensions', 29 July 2021, <<https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newseel-dabaa-nuclear-project-reported-delayed-by-political-tensions-8946026>>, accessed 10 August 2021.

27. Rosatom, 'Russia and Ethiopia Sign an Intergovernmental Agreement on Cooperation in the Peaceful Use of Atomic Energy', 23 October 2019, <<https://rosatom.ru/en/press-centre/news/russia-and-ethiopia-sign-an-intergovernmental-agreement-on-cooperation-in-the-peaceful-use-of-atomic/>>, accessed 6 July 2021.

28. Andy Hemphill, 'Russia's EuroChem Strengthens Potash Prospects with Deal in Eritrea', Independent Commodity Intelligence Services, 12 June 2018, <<https://www.icis.com/explore/resources/news/2018/06/12/10230792/russia-s-eurochem-strengthens-potash-prospects-with-deal-in-eritrea/>>, accessed 20 July 2021.

29. Edward Yeranian, 'Russia, Egypt Finalizing Military Cooperation Agreement', *Voice of America*, 1 December 2017.

efforts.³⁰ To build on these training initiatives, Russia and Ethiopia agreed to elevate cooperation in the fields of intelligence and security on 9 July 2021.³¹ Russia and Egypt carry out regular military exercises, which included the October 2020 *Friendship-3* drills on the Black Sea. Ethiopia reportedly sent 1,000 officers to Russia for naval training in December 2019.³² While Ethiopia does not have a navy, it possesses 11 commercial ships in the Red Sea region and a stake in the Djibouti port, which would be protected by military personnel with naval training. Ethiopia has also announced plans to reconstitute its navy.³³ Russia has also engaged in clandestine security cooperation with Sudan, as the Wagner Group supported Omar Al-Bashir in the months leading up to the April 2019 coup.³⁴

Over the past two decades, Russia has periodically viewed anti-piracy missions off the coast of Somalia as a valuable area of cooperation with NATO, the UK and the EU.³⁵ Russia has generally combated piracy through unilateral action. One notable exception to this trend occurred in November 2008, when the UK's HMS *Cumberland* and Russia's *Neustrashimy* frigate jointly repelled Somali pirates seeking to capture a Danish vessel in the Gulf of Aden.³⁶ The piracy threat off the Gulf of Aden directly impacted Russia in May 2010, as Somali pirates hijacked the MV *Moscow University*, which was shipping \$52-million worth of oil from Sudan to China.³⁷ While the immediate threat of Somali piracy has almost disappeared, Russia's experience in this sphere impacts its Indo-Pacific strategy. In October 2019, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov promised to hold regular joint counterterrorism and anti-piracy drills with China and Iran in the Indian Ocean.³⁸ At Pakistan's invitation, Russia participated in the *Aman-2021*

30. *Reuters*, 'Factbox: Russian Military Cooperation Deals with African Countries', 17 October 2018.

31. *Borkena*, 'Ethiopia, Russia to Strengthen Cooperation in Intelligence, Security Areas', 9 June 2021, <<https://borkena.com/2021/06/09/ethiopia-russia-to-strengthen-cooperation-on-intelligence-and-security-areas/>>, accessed 10 August 2021.

32. *Stratfor*, 'Ethiopia: Army Sends 1,000 Officers to Russia for Naval Training, Report Says', 11 December 2019, <<https://worldview.stratfor.com/situation-report/ethiopia-army-sends-1000-officers-russia-naval-training-report-says>>, accessed 10 August 2021.

33. Dickens Olewe, 'Why Landlocked Ethiopia Wants to Launch a Navy', *BBC News*, 14 June 2018.

34. Samuel Ramani, 'Moscow's Hand in Sudan's Future', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 July 2019.

35. Simon Saradzhyan, 'The Dynamics of Russia's Response to the Piracy Threat', *Connections* (Vol. 9, No. 3, Summer 2010), pp. 19–44.

36. Peter Walker, 'British and Russian Ships Fight Off Somali Pirates', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2008.

37. Xan Rice, 'Russia Frees Captured Somali Pirates', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2010.

38. *RIA Novosti*, 'Rossiya i Kitay provedut ucheniya po bor'be s piratstvom v Indijskom okeane' ['Russia and China to Hold an Anti-Piracy Exercise in the Indian Ocean'], 2 October 2019, <<https://ria.ru/20191002/1559356273.html>>, accessed 8 July 2021.

military exercise in the Arabian Sea from 12 to 16 February 2021. This allowed it to participate alongside a 45-country bloc, which included NATO members, against transnational maritime security threats.³⁹

To augment its military cooperation agreements and anti-piracy efforts, Russia has tried to establish a Red Sea naval base for over a decade. During a trip to Yemen in October 2008, then Chairman of the Federation Council Sergei Mironov admitted that Russia aimed to establish a naval base in Aden.⁴⁰ The 2012 Yemeni revolution and Houthi insurgency sullied Aden's appeal as a naval base location, and Russia courted Djibouti as a possible alternative. The high cost of a Djibouti base, which was estimated at over \$1 billion, and countervailing pressure from the US caused Russia to abandon this aspiration in 2014.⁴¹ As Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's growing vulnerability risked Russia's access to Tartous and Khmeimim Air Base in Syria (which gave Moscow a foothold on the Mediterranean), and the Euromaidan revolution placed Russia's Black Sea access in doubt, Russian officials viewed a Red Sea base as a lower priority. Once Assad's position strengthened and its control of Sevastopol in Crimea was secure following annexation in 2014, Russia's Red Sea facility aspirations swiftly resurfaced.

In November 2017, Omar Al-Bashir offered Russia an opportunity to construct a naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast. This proposal was greeted with scepticism in the Russian defence establishment, as Port Sudan was located further than desired from the Indian Ocean and was a lower quality port than Aden.⁴² Due to these criticisms, Russia-Sudan negotiations did not take off and in September 2018 Russia announced plans to establish a logistics centre in Eritrea.⁴³ As progress towards the construction of a facility in Eritrea stalled, Russia signed a 25-year agreement to construct a resupply facility in Port Sudan in November 2020, which could be renewed in 10-year intervals with the consent of both parties.

Russia's decision to settle for a less than ideal naval base location, despite a decade of negotiations, underscores its limited influence in the Red Sea region. Its initial struggles in bringing this base to fruition magnify Russia's vulnerability. Although the agreement benefits Sudan by entrenching its

Russia's decision to settle for a less than ideal naval base location, despite a decade of negotiations, underscores its limited influence in the Red Sea region

39. Naval Technology, 'Multinational Naval Exercise "Aman-2021" Begins in Arabian Sea', 15 February 2021, <<https://www.naval-technology.com/news/aman-2021-arabian-sea/>>, accessed 8 July 2021.

40. Vladimir Vorobiev, 'Poseshcheniye bibleyskogo Mankhettena' ['A Visit to Biblical Manhattan'], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 17 October 2008, <<https://rg.ru/2008/10/17/mironov.html>>, accessed 8 July 2021.

41. Kommersant, 'Strana pyati baz' ['Country of Five Bases'], 13 February 2017, <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3217935>>, accessed 8 July 2021.

42. Amalia Zadari, 'Rossiyskaya baza v Sudane: "eto chudovishchnyye raskhody"' ['Russian Base in Sudan: "These Are Monstrous Expenses"'], *Gazeta.ru*, 1 December 2017, <<https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2017/12/01/11024036.shtml>>, accessed 8 July 2021.

43. Salem Solomon, 'Russia-Eritrea Relations Grow with Planned Logistics Center', *Voice of America*, 2 September 2018.

multipolar security policy vision and potentially facilitating Russian arms deals, Russia's Port Sudan naval base has experienced a backlash among Sudanese civil society figures. These figures are concerned that it could perpetuate the military's dominance over Sudanese politics.⁴⁴ The agreement's viability was also called into question in June 2021, as it was not approved by Sudan's legislative council, which handles international agreements.⁴⁵ Sudan's rent-free provision of territory to Russia and pressure from Saudi Arabia to suspend the agreement prolonged this renegotiation, but on 12 July Lavrov announced that Sudan was prepared to ratify the base.⁴⁶ As Port Sudan lacks the provision for an air force component and a runway, it is unlikely to expand Russia's capacity for power projection in sub-Saharan Africa beyond giving it naval access. However, it could legalise Russia's military presence in Sudan, and allow Russia to combat the spillover of the Yemeni civil war and a potential resurgence of piracy, which could destabilise the northwest corner of the Indian Ocean.⁴⁷ The Port Sudan facility will also be used as a logistics centre which can host 300 personnel and four naval units.⁴⁸

RUSSIA'S DIPLOMATIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE RED SEA

Since Russia's ill-fated mediation efforts during the 1994 Yemeni civil war, Moscow has modestly expanded its diplomatic involvement in the Red Sea region. As the 1992–93 wave of Russian embassy closures in Africa did not extend to the Red Sea region, Moscow's increased assertiveness in multilateral institutions and engagement with non-Western powers are the most notable shifts. In contrast to its unilateralism in Syria and Libya, Russia has projected diplomatic influence through the UN and regularly engaged with regional institutions, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development economic bloc on the Horn of Africa.⁴⁹ Through engaging with

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44. *Al-Quds*, 'Aikhtilaf alara' hawl mawqie alqaeidat aleaskariat fi alsuwdan wamasdaru: aljaysh yaqtarib min musku tahasubana libaydin' ['Opinions Differ Over the Location of the Military Base in Sudan and a Source: The Military is Approaching Moscow in Anticipation of Biden'], 15 November 2020, <<https://www.alquds.co.uk/الرأى-الذي-يقترب-من-المسكن-تحتسبنا-ليبايدن>>, accessed 8 July 2021.
 45. *Moscow Times*, 'Sudan Renegotiating Russian Naval Base Deal – Reports', 2 June 2021.
 46. *TASS*, 'Sudan Prepares to Ratify Agreement on Russian Navy Base – Lavrov', 12 July 2021.
 47. Kirill Semenov, 'Russia to Establish Naval Base in Sudan', *Al-Monitor*, 16 November 2020, <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/11/russia-military-bass-sudan-red-sea-khartoum-kremlin.html>>, accessed 6 July 2021.
 48. Warsaw Institute, 'Russia's Problem in Sudan: No Chance for Port Putin?', 11 June 2021, <<https://warsawinstitute.org/russias-problem-sudan-no-chance-port-putin/>>, accessed 10 August 2021.
 49. Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), 'IGAD Executive Secretary Meets Minister Lavrov, Concludes Successful Mission to Moscow', 19 September 2020, <<https://igad.int/executive-secretary/2520-igad-executive-secretary-meets-minister-lavrov-concludes-successful-mission-to-moscow>>, accessed 10 July 2021.

these institutions, Russia has engaged in shuttle diplomacy with Yemen's warring factions and offered to provide technical assistance to the conflicting parties in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute. These forays have produced few tangible results. Russia's flexible diplomacy strategy in Yemen, which balances positive relations with Saudi-aligned President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, the Houthis and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), has not elevated its profile as a conflict mediator.⁵⁰

Although Russia hosted talks between Egypt and Ethiopia on the GERD dispute in October 2019,⁵¹ these achieved little traction and Lavrov did not accept Egypt's request to serve as a mediator during his April 2021 visit to Cairo. Instead, Russia supports African Union mediation in the GERD dispute,⁵² which aligns with Ethiopia's position⁵³ and precludes UN Security Council involvement. Russia has tried to balance this stance by acknowledging Egypt and Sudan's 'legitimate concerns' about the GERD's negative impact on water security in the region, but Moscow's statements have not been well received in Cairo.⁵⁴

Although Russia's involvement in crisis arbitration has been more symbolic than substantive, Moscow has sought to enlist states in the Red Sea region into its broader normative challenge against the US. Russia's narratives on crises impacting state sovereignty initially received little support in the Red Sea region. Sudan was the only country in the region to vote with Russia on UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262 in March 2014, which supported the Crimean referendum, and Egypt was the Red Sea region's sole public supporter of Russia's military intervention in Syria in the fall of 2015.⁵⁵ However, Russia's strident support for non-interference in the Red Sea region has allowed it to expand its normative partnerships with

50. See Samuel Ramani, 'The Russian Role in the Yemen Crisis', in Stephen W Day and Noel Brehony (eds), *Global, Regional and Local Dynamics of the Yemen Crisis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 81–96.

51. Fatma Lotfi, 'GERD Talks: Egypt, Ethiopia Resume Coordination, Russia Ready to Mediate', *Daily News Egypt*, 27 October 2019.

52. *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 'Russia Supports an African Solution for GERD Crisis', 13 April 2021.

53. Ethiopian officials frequently describe the GERD dispute as a 'technical issue' that should be resolved through tripartite negotiations and an African issue. Ethiopia views Egypt's attempts to 'internationalise' the GERD dispute by involving the Arab League and the UN Security Council negotiations as an affront to its commitment to 'African solutions to African problems'. For more details, see *Al Jazeera*, 'Ethiopia Rejects Arab League Resolution on Renaissance Dam', 16 June 2021.

54. *Al-Monitor*, 'Egypt Disappointed by Russian Stance on Nile Dam Dispute', 16 July 2021, <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/egypt-disappointed-russian-stance-nile-dam-dispute>>, accessed 10 August 2021.

55. *Al-Arabiya News*, 'Egypt Supports Russia's Military Moves in Syria', last updated 20 May 2020, originally published 4 October 2015, <<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2015/10/04/Egypt-voices-support-for-Russia-s-moves-in-Syria>>, accessed 10 July 2021.

While Russia's normative outlook has diversified its partnerships in the Red Sea region, its relationships with external stakeholders are more ambiguous

Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Ethiopia, as well as the Sudanese military. While the normative alignment of Russia and Sudan dates back to its abstention from UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1054 on sanctions on Sudan in 1996, these partnerships have become increasingly prominent over the past decade and especially since 2017. In this period, Russia has emphatically opposed Western criticisms of Red Sea countries and efforts by the US and its allies to impose sanctions on countries in the region. Instances of this have included the 2012 Yemeni revolution, the aftermath of the Jamal Khashoggi assassination, the June 2019 Khartoum massacre and the Tigray War.

While Russia's normative outlook has diversified its partnerships in the Red Sea region, its relationships with external stakeholders are more ambiguous. As India and Russia conducted two naval exercises in the eastern Indian Ocean in 2020 and are expected to sign a mutual logistics pact later this year, New Delhi has welcomed Moscow's establishment of a naval base in Port Sudan.⁵⁶ While India does not plan to use the Port Sudan base, New Delhi views an increasingly multipolar Red Sea as a check on Chinese hegemony and supports Russia's rising regional ambitions. Pakistan might also view Russia's Port Sudan base as strategically beneficial, as it already has a port call privilege agreement with Moscow,⁵⁷ and greater Russian naval access to the Indian Ocean could strengthen that pact.

China's relationship with Russia in the Red Sea region is opaque. Chinese media outlets praised Russia's potential ability to use its Port Sudan base to combat foreign interference or a potential popular revolution in the future.⁵⁸ However, China and Russia diverged on the merits of the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, as Moscow has criticised Riyadh's conduct and was alone in abstaining on UNSC Resolution 2216 in April 2015. Some Russian commentators viewed China's base in Djibouti with suspicion, as they were concerned that this installation symbolised a more assertive Chinese security policy, which could sharpen Sino-Russian contestation in Eurasia.⁵⁹ Although the Russia-China-South Africa trilateral naval exercises in December 2019 and Russia-China-Iran trilateral naval drills in February 2021 underscore the growth of Sino-Russian cooperation on Indian Ocean

56. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'Russia Naval Base in Sudan Could Expand its Partnership with India in the Indo-Pacific Region', *Economic Times*, 4 December 2020.

57. Alexey Muraviev, 'Russia's Red Star in the Red Sea', *The Interpreter*, 30 November 2020.

58. *People's Liberation Army Daily*, 'Èluósī zài fēizhōu "bǎo diǎn" de fǎn zhì yìyì' ['The Countermeasure Significance of Russia's "Guarantee Points" in Africa'], 26 November 2020, <<http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2020/1126/c1011-31945524.html>>, accessed 10 July 2021.

59. For a reflection of this sceptical view of China's Djibouti base, see Mikhail Sergeev, 'Kitai Mozhet Postroit Voyennyye Bazy Na Svoem Shelkovom Puti' ['China Can Build Military Bases on the Silk Road'], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 3 May 2019, <https://www.ng.ru/armies/2019-05-03/100_silkway0305.html>, accessed 10 July 2021.

security, this collaboration has yet to manifest itself in the Red Sea region.⁶⁰ As there are no public plans to allow Russian vessels to use the Djibouti base or Chinese ships to use the Port Sudan base, the prospect of Sino-Russian cooperation on the Red Sea is a minimal threat to Western interests. The simultaneous expansion of Russian and Chinese security ties with Ethiopia, which coincided with US sanctions over Tigray and France's suspension of security cooperation with Ethiopia, is worth watching. However, even in this case, Moscow and Beijing's cooperation with Ethiopia has occurred along separate tracks.

Russia's relationships with the UAE and Turkey in the Red Sea could also experience friction. While Russia aligns with the UAE on supporting federalism in Yemen, which would lead to greater autonomy in southern Yemen, and has cordial relations with the UAE-aligned STC, it has periodically opposed Abu Dhabi's assertive security policies in the Red Sea. Russia also views its Port Sudan base as an installation which could pre-empt a revitalisation of Turkey's stalled Suakin base agreement, and is concerned about its ability to catch up to Ankara's \$650 million in extant investments in Sudan. The prospects of Russia-Iran cooperation on the Red Sea are brighter, as Moscow views Tehran as a constructive stakeholder in ending the Yemen war and vetoed a February 2018 UN resolution which blamed Iran for transferring ballistic missiles to the Houthis.⁶¹ However, Russia is unlikely to support Iran's destabilising activities in Yemen and Somalia, as doing so would alienate Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Russia's competitiveness with regional powers and unwillingness to pressure them over policies it deems counterproductive underscores the limits of its influence in the Red Sea.

POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS FOR THE US AND EUROPE

Although the US has centred its national security strategy around great power competition and most European countries share its trepidations about Russia's rising influence in the Middle East and Africa, the US, the UK and the EU have not devised a clear strategy to counter Russia's rising presence in the Red Sea region. Western policymakers should acknowledge that Russia is there to stay, as countries in the region embrace a multipolar world order, and exercise restraint in countering its influence. Russia's establishment of formal security partnerships and a legitimate military presence in the region via the Port Sudan base can both benefit and jeopardise regional security. The most effective way to counter Russian influence is to develop a grand strategy for the Red Sea region rather than chasing Moscow at every turn. However, there are several immediate

60. Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'Russia and China Team Up on the Indian Ocean', *The Interpreter*, 16 December 2020.

61. *Mehr News Agency*, 'Tehran, Moscow Discuss Regional Issues, Yemen Developments', 25 February 2021, <<https://en.mehrnews.com/news/170379/Tehran-Moscow-discuss-regional-issues-Yemen-developments>>, accessed 10 August 2021.

recommendations that US and European officials should consider, and these are outlined below.

While Russia's commercial presence in the Red Sea has a relatively low ceiling, there are several measures that Western policymakers should consider to further restrict Moscow's presence. The strict enforcement of the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act could potentially stymie Egypt's Su-35 deal. While Russia's economic presence in Ethiopia, Egypt, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia is either negligible or does not impede Western interests, the US and Europe should pay special attention to Moscow's rising economic footprint in Sudan. Specifically, they should build on the May 2021 Paris Conference, which facilitated Sudan's debt relief from the World Bank and IMF, to limit Khartoum's dependence on Russia. Active support for debt relief would also counter Russia's use of debt forgiveness as a tool of diplomatic engagement in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, the US and Europe should coordinate on curbing Russia's use of grey-zone and illicit financial tactics in the Red Sea region. While the US and the EU have imposed sanctions on Yevgeny Prigozhin over his conduct in Libya, a similar set of punitive measures have not yet been imposed on the M-Invest mining company nor the Wagner Group's residual presence in Sudan. The US and the EU should also impose pressure on partners, such as Saudi Arabia or the UAE, which work with the head of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces, Mohamed Hamdan 'Hemedti' Dagalo,⁶² on illegal gold smuggling and pre-empt linkages between these countries and Russia on financial transactions.

Russia's growing security presence presents both opportunities and challenges for Western countries. As anti-piracy has historically been an area of cooperation for Russia and the West, having endured the crises in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria, collaboration in this sphere could persist if the piracy threat revives. However, the steady decline in Russia-NATO cooperation since the 2008–10 Somali piracy crisis suggests that any lingering coordination in this sphere will do little to mitigate systemic confrontation. The Biden administration's continuity of Donald Trump's great power competition-focused national security strategy and the US military withdrawal from Somalia further complicate cooperation in this sphere. Russia's failed attempts to secure facilities in Djibouti, Somaliland and Eritrea, and ongoing travails in Sudan, suggest that its influence in the security sphere is fragile and can be overcome without radical shifts in Western policy. However, there are some prescriptions that could pre-empt the expansion of Russia's security presence in the Red Sea. The expansion of US, EU and UK involvement in security sector reform and the linkage of investments to civilian control of the military could help dilute the impact of the Port Sudan base. Furthermore, Western countries should strengthen support for regional security initiatives, such as the Saudi-led Red Sea coalition that was announced in January 2020. This might discourage

62. Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, 'Bad Company: How Dark Money Threatens Sudan's Transition', European Council on Foreign Relations, 9 June 2020.

Saudi Arabia from replicating its drills with China,⁶³ which address combat readiness against piracy with Russia.

As Russia uses regional instability to leverage its presence, Western countries should address these conditions to limit Russia's presence in the region and counter Moscow's opposition to Western norms. The US and the EU should also encourage the involvement of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey in Red Sea security, as the assertiveness of these countries limits the impact of Western disengagement. However, it should also carefully monitor the UAE's support for separatism in Somalia and Yemen, its drone supplies to Tigray and human rights violations that could accompany these countries' roles. President Joe Biden's appointment of a US special envoy to the Horn of Africa and the US's growing interest in GERD, Tigray and the Sudan–Ethiopia border dispute also constrain Russia's ability to fill a diplomatic vacuum in one or more of these regional crises.

FINAL REMARKS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Although Russia's commitment to the Red Sea region has grown since 2017, the foundations of its influence are shallow and remain vulnerable to competition and disruption from external stakeholders. Except for arms sales and nuclear energy, Russia's commercial presence in the Red Sea region is small in scale, its cooperation with the West and China on maritime security issues is limited, and it has struggled to convert assertive rhetoric in the UNSC into influence over regional arbitration processes. Notwithstanding Moscow's promotion of its 'Syrian model' of counterinsurgency to Middle Eastern and African countries,⁶⁴ Russia is unlikely to carry out expansive military or diplomatic interventions in fragile states such as Somalia and Yemen.

The future of Russia's Port Sudan naval facility could provide a powerful litmus test for the trajectory of its influence in the Red Sea region. Its completion will allow Russia to expand its involvement in Indian Ocean maritime security and deepen its partnership with Sudan, while also complementing its expanding presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Indo-Pacific region. This could amplify Russia's ability to destabilise the region, if it is so inclined, but could also create narrow opportunities for Russia and the West to cooperate in maritime security.

If this base agreement unravels, Russia could become more reliant on disruptive tactics to gain influence on the Red Sea, and could leverage arms contracts, UNSC vetoes and PMC deployments to exacerbate the region's chronic state of insecurity. As the Yemen and Tigray wars persist, the Port Sudan base negotiations remain in flux and the GERD dispute intensifies,

63. *Arab News*, 'Saudi Arabia, China Conduct Drill to Improve Combat Readiness', 17 November 2019, <<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1585431/saudi-arabia>>, accessed 8 July 2021.

64. Samuel Ramani, 'Russia Takes its Syrian Model of Counterinsurgency to Africa', RUSI Commentary, 9 September 2020.

it remains to be seen whether Russia will be an order-builder, disruptor or marginal player in the Red Sea region.

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