



MAGHREB October 2019

The Sochi summit: a snapshot of Russia's opportunistic approach to North Africa

On the 23-24th of October the first Russia-Africa Forum took place in Sochi, Russia. Modelled on the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FoCAC), the meeting was hailed as the evident sign of Moscow's comeback to Africa. Most of the talks were focused on trade, with Russian President Vladimir Putin announcing the goal of doubling trade ties with African countries by 2024. After having accumulated a considerable delay in the past decades, Russia's position vis-à-vis its main competitors remains weak. According to the latest estimates, Moscow's trade with the continent is now US\$20 billion, approximately one tenth of China's [Aggrey Mutambo, *Russia follows old path in new scramble for a piece of the continent*, 20 October 2019, *The East African*]. Nevertheless, military cooperation with old allies and new partners, and tectonic shifts in regional geopolitics are paving the way for Moscow's return. In North Africa in particular, Russia's approach has offered Moscow the opportunity to extend its influence, using both traditional means such as arms trade [about 49% of arms imports in North Africa comes from Russia, see Peter D. Wezman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian, Siemon T. Wezman, *Trends in international arms transfer*, 2018, *March 2019*, SIPRI] and unconventional measures.

For long considered Russia's major ally in the Maghreb, since early 2019 Algeria has suffered from political instability that forced the postponement of the presidential elections and the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. His successor, Abdelkader Bensalah, was present in Sochi, having talks with Putin. Together with the Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum, Bensalah tried to reassure Russian officials about the political stalemate, saying that the protests just involve a few people and indicating in the approaching presidential elections in December 2019 a way out of the crisis. Putin's reaction to Bensalah's words drew caustic comments in Algeria and confirmed Russia's considerable sway in the country [*La prestation de Bensalah devant Pontine enflame les réseaux sociaux*, 25 Octobre 2019, *Tout sur l'Algérie*].

From Putin's standpoint, Algeria's political decline and its consequences on Russia's interests in the region have been balanced with renewed ties with Egypt, which co-chaired the Russia-Africa Forum.

Chairperson of the African Union (AU), the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi intensified the contacts with Moscow over the years, establishing a strategic partnership that has raised eyebrows in Washington. As in Algeria's case, also with Egypt arms purchase represented a preferential channel to convey Russia's influence. The March 2018 deal to purchase 20 Sukhoi Su-35 multi-role fighters was just the last step of a military cooperation that intensified after the 2013 coup. This could be a significant inversion of the trend in military procurement established after the Camp David Agreement (1978) when US weapon systems modernised systematically the Egyptian armed forces.

Together with Bensalah and Sisi, also the Prime Ministers of Morocco and Tunisia were present in Sochi. Moscow also invited the Prime Minister of the Government of National Accord (GNA) of Libya Fayez al-Sarraj, despite Russia's known preference for his rival, General Khalifa Haftar. Russia's apparent double-game is part of a more complex strategy to extend its influence in the war-ravaged country. Reaching out to all parts of the conflict and the most relevant constituencies goes along with the use of mercenaries and information warfare. Putin's preference for these unconventional measures have already emerged in other African crises, but in Libya they are having a major impact. This strategy is allowing Moscow to rebuild its presence in the country and take a seat at the negotiating table once the conflict is over, whatever the outcome may be. Moreover, this multi-faceted policy can also accommodate Russia's regional partners ambitions and interests, allowing Moscow to reinforce relations with its allies and further expand its presence on NATO's southern region.

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