

A New African Country: Everything You Need to Know About “eSwatini”

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Featured image: King Mswati III (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The tiny African monarchy formerly known as Swaziland officially changed its name to “eSwatini” earlier this week in order to indigenize its identity and – in the words of King Mswati III – prevent any confusion with Switzerland, and the unexpected attention that this event engendered from the global media has made many people curious about this country and its geostrategic significance.

Swaziland’s King Mswati III [declared](#) on Thursday that his country will henceforth be known as “eSwatini”, its name in the indigenous Swati language, which he said would prevent people from confusing it with Switzerland whenever he or his state representatives travel abroad. It’s unclear whether he was just joking about the Switzerland part of his rationale, but the indigenization one used to be a trend in Africa ever since most of the continent gained independence after 1960. In recent years, the African archipelago of Cape Verde officially [renamed](#) itself “Cabo Verde”, which means the exact same thing but is just the Portuguese version of its name, while the country popularly known as East Timor has been emphasizing its official name of Timor-Leste lately. What most of the world considers to be the Czech Republic also [rechristened](#) itself as the indigenous “Czechia” in early 2016, showing that it’s not just “Global South” countries that have done this .

It’s therefore [not unprecedented](#) for something like this to happen, but for reasons speculatively related to the “e” prefix in the new Swati name speciously suggesting “electronic” or something related to the digital age (and thus serving as clickbait), the global media picked up on the story and it made rounds all across the world. This in turn generated a lot of curiosity about a country that most people had never heard of before, and which appears at first glance to be a very unique place given what’s been reported about it in the accompanying news blurbs. Absolute monarchies like the one in eSwatini are very rare nowadays, and the global public’s interest is also somewhat piqued whenever discussing small states such as this one which is [on par with](#) Qatar or the US state of Connecticut in size and located right between its much more geographically larger and well-known neighbors of [South Africa](#) and [Mozambique](#).

Demystifying The Myth Behind The Monarchy

HIV And Poverty:

eSwatini might seem like a “quaint” and “traditional” place to the casual information consumer, but those who do a bit of digging to learn more about it might be surprised at

what they discover. Late last month the country's Border Determination Special Committee [announced](#) that it has the right to claim some of its neighbors' territory due to the unfair colonial-era delineation that took place under heavy British pressure, dramatically threatening that this could even include South Africa's administrative capital of Pretoria. eSwatini, however, is a mostly powerless country with no serious military capabilities to speak of, so the news was largely met with amusement by regional commentators and attributed to the tiny country "overcompensating" for its small size with loud rhetoric designed for domestic consumption. eSwatini's 1,3 million people are [mostly impoverished](#) and have the [world's highest rate](#) of HIV infections, so the government obviously has an interest in distracting them from their misery with fantasies of regional grandeur.

Luxury For The Elite:



There are even more cynical reasons behind its territorial claims and national renaming as well, since King Mswati III lives a life of luxury that reportedly includes fleets of BMWs (which his government [expectedly denies](#)) and opulent palaces for each of his 15 wives. The King [receives](#) a quarter of all the country's mineral revenue and is suspected of using some of these funds to pay for his [two private jets](#). It's little wonder then that eSwatini is regarded as being the [most unequal country](#) in the world, an academic observation that's actually a fact of life for most of its inhabitants. Adding fuel to the fire of what must surely be the already existing discontent of the [over 70% of the population](#) that must rely on subsistence farming to survive, it was [reported](#) that eSwatini was subsidizing the King's 50th birthday party (which occurs on the year of the country's 50th independence anniversary from the UK) with money from the Swaziland National Provident Fund (SNPF) that's supposed to be used to help sick, disabled, and retired citizens.

Expensive Ceremonies:

On top of all of this, the state's coffers are annually drained in order to pay for the "[Umhlanga](#)" or "reed dance" ceremony where roughly 40,000 virgins gather to dance for the King and offer themselves up to be his next wife. The country has made use of World Bank funds to pay teenage girls [\\$18 a month](#) to remain chaste, which while marketed as a response to the AIDS epidemic, might become a way to keep track of who's "officially" a virgin and therefore eligible to participate in the Umhlanga. Every year the King and his countrymen also partake in the week-long "Incwala" ceremony that the government [promotes](#) as its most important cultural event but which has been [alleged](#) to have a more monstrous aspect to it involving the monarch's [unconfirmed 'physical' acts](#) with snakes and bulls. Whatever the truth behind these stories may or may not be, the Umhlanga and Incwala are sizeable budgetary obligations in one of the world's poorest states.

"The Scramble For eSwatini"

Russia:

The deplorable socio-economic conditions in eSwatini suggest that the state would have a powerful opposition movement clamoring for change, but the government [banned](#) the most

popular parties on anti-terrorist pretexts related to the 2008 "[Suppression of Terrorism Act](#)" that it promulgated the same year after three individuals linked to the PUDEMO opposition group died in an explosion while supposedly trying to blow up a bridge near the King's palace. A [spate of bombings](#) in the two years afterwards sowed fear in society that continues to be relied on to this day by the government in asserting the necessity of this controversial legislation, especially after the country's Supreme Court [ruled](#) in 2016 that parts of it were unconstitutional in a landmark decision that the state is still [appealing](#). Regardless of the eventual outcome of this legal dispute, Russia took note of Swaziland's publicly proclaimed anti-terrorist challenges and [entered into military cooperation](#) with it on this basis in February 2017 for what is planned to be an "indefinite duration".

US:

Russia isn't the only country that has an interest in deepening its presence in this strategic region of Southeastern Africa between rising Great Power South Africa and potential energy giant Mozambique, as the US [restored](#) its "[Africa Growth and Opportunity Act](#)" (AGOA) trade privileges with eSwatini at the beginning of this year after they were suspended in 2015 because of "concerns over restrictions on the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression." The American decision was preceded by a May 2017 [pronouncement](#) that there is "no terror threat in Swaziland", which might have been an oblique reference to the grounds on which the country agreed to enter into an indefinite period of military cooperation with the US' Russian rival. This statement is actually hypocritical because it implies that the government has no reason to challenge the Supreme Court's ruling against parts of the "Suppression of Terrorism Act", thus suggesting that it continues to "restrict (its people's) freedoms of assembly, association, and expression" and should therefore be ineligible for the AGOA.

India:

The Neo-Realist "19th-Century Great Power Chessboard" paradigm that's guiding the international behavior of the US, Russia, and other similarly sized countries during this pivotal moment of the [New Cold War](#) isn't influenced by "moral, ethical, and principled factors" except when relying on them to "justify" certain policy decisions, meaning that none of these states care all that much about the actual domestic situation in eSwatini so long as the sitting government satisfies their geopolitical interests, as it presently does for both the US and Russia. India, too, is making inroads in this landlocked state after its President [visited](#) the country earlier this month, [giving](#) it \$1 million and promising to set up a "Centre of Agricultural Excellence" there, as well as [finance](#) the construction of a new parliament. India also wants to [share its "developmental model"](#) with eSwatini in order to reduce the costs of doing business there and accordingly connect it to the joint Indo-Japanese "[Asia-Africa Growth Corridor](#)" (AAGC).

Taiwan:

eSwatini is a predictable partner for India and "easy pickings" for it because the kingdom doesn't have any relations with the People's Republic of China, instead "recognizing" Taiwan and even [hosting](#) its "president" earlier this week too. The island territory sees the kingdom as a diplomatic ally in the UN, and eSwatini's willingness to remain loyal to Taipei in spite of the billions of dollars that Beijing could presumably pour into the country if it reverses its recognition is indeed a very rare occurrence in today's world, albeit one that's working against its development by denying it a place on the New Silk Road. The US and its allies

have feted the King and endeavored to keep him on their side, but they might have to deliver something of tangible value to his people in exchange for their leader's loyalty if they want to forestall a [Color Revolution](#) in their symbolically anti-Chinese client state, and it's in stopping that scenario where Russia is set to play a rather peculiar role.

Unexpected Outcomes

In and of itself, Moscow has no interest in interfering in the domestic affairs of its partners – for better or for worse – so it isn't swayed by international criticism of eSwatini's visibly authoritarian system. Instead, Russia's relations with the kingdom are driven by the geopolitical desire to herald its [return to Africa as a Great Power](#) on the basis of anti-terrorist cooperation with the continent's militaries, which in this instance could be taken advantage of by the host state to suppress legitimate opposition forces. Russia wouldn't feel "responsible" if that happens since its leadership probably "rationalized" the aforementioned anti-terrorist military deal by focusing on the fact that it was made with an internationally recognized government and forecasting that the US or one of its allies would have satisfied the state's "security needs" anyhow had Moscow not stepped in first with what must have presumably been better (and probably "no-strings-attached") terms. The result is that Russian-supported forces might be used against what could one day become a pro-Chinese opposition.



Swaziland, or eSwatini, is located in southeastern Africa, between South Africa and Mozambique

This indirectly protects the interests of the US, India, and Taiwan and might at first seem to be glaringly at odds with Russia's own global ones, but the fact is that Moscow is masterfully trying to [maintain](#) a geopolitical "[balance](#)" all across the world per the vision of its foreign policy "progressives" and the tiny state of eSwatini has an outsized role to play in Southeastern Africa. Russia wants to [proactively avoid a strategic overreliance](#) on China in the future, and to this end it has a [grand strategic interest](#) in cooperating with the Indo-Japanese AAGC in spite of these two Great Powers more or less behaving as the US' "[Lead From Behind](#)" allies in "containing" China. The People's Republic has a reputation – whether rightly deserved or not – of refusing to provide its partners with market access to countries that China has a strong economic presence in, and Russia is aware that it cannot depend on China to "open up" any doors for it in Africa, though India is a whole other story.

Russia craves a prestigious return to Africa that would mark its evolution from a Eurasian power to a hemispheric one and thenceforth eventually a global one, and it knows that India is seeking partners to assist with its AAGC, to which end it might be interested in cooperating with Russia. With the "win-win" mantra in mind, the provisioning of Russian security assistance to eSwatini could be interpreted as reinforcing a government that's earned a reputation for being "anti-Chinese" and is rapidly entering into the Indian "sphere of influence", thus proving the concept that Russia can provide something of value to India and is therefore a worthy AAGC partner for joint projects in much more geostrategically important states along the East African Rimland. To be fair, Russia's military "balancing" role could also assist Chinese interests as well, but Moscow would have to be incentivized by receiving something of tangible economic benefit from Beijing along this part of the New Silk Road in return, which might eventually be forthcoming if China sees how "effective" this quid-pro-quo works for India.

Concluding Thoughts

The seemingly insignificant name change of a small African country surprisingly caught the attention of the global media, but few analysts have committed the time necessary to explain anything about this country's geostrategic importance in counteracting the superficial description that most articles have provided about the state formerly known as Swaziland. While not much more than a tiny landlocked speck on the map bedeviled by poverty and AIDS, what is now officially referred to as eSwatini has a much more symbolic standing in regional affairs than one might initially think, since its interesting international partnerships with Russia, the US, India, and Taiwan give one pause to think about how and why Moscow was able to establish military influence in a state that's so solidly in the Western orbit. One possible explanation is that Russia hopes to leverage its security assistance to this anti-Chinese country in a way that could demonstrate its strategic "balancing" value to India elsewhere in the continent and therefore earn Moscow a role along the Indo-Japanese "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor".

For as deplorable as the socio-economic and political situation may be in eSwatini, Russia – just like all Great Powers – is less interested in advancing "morals, ethics, or principles" in its interactions with its internationally recognized and legitimate government than it is in furthering its own interests per the Neo-Realist "19th-Century Great Power Chessboard" paradigm that's guiding its decisions. In this instance, it's extremely unlikely that Russia will be "called out" by the US because America is doing the exact same thing in its engagement with the Southeast African kingdom, so Washington would basically be "cutting its nose to spite its face" if it were to do so. Furthermore, contrary to decades' worth of sloganeering, the US doesn't really care about "human rights" and "democracy" except when these two emotive arguments can be exploited to "justify" a preplanned policy decision. The importance of all the aforementioned is to show that the "eccentricities" of eSwatini's ruler will be tolerated by all Great Powers except perhaps China so long as they have something to gain from doing so.

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