

Geostrategic Importance of Sudan

April 15, 2025 marked two years since Sudan was engulfed in a devastating civil war, triggering one of the largest and most severe humanitarian crises in the world today. Two years ago in April, fighting erupted between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), displacing millions, plunging the country into acute food insecurity, and destroying vital health and education services. Despite the humanitarian disaster that has resulted, Sudan's war has largely escaped the global spotlight. Sudan is the forgotten war, especially to a Western world that can only focus on Ukraine. What are the geopolitical factors that make Sudan so tempting to fight over?

Geographical Posture of Sudan

Sudan is a country located in the northeast of the African continent which is the strategic heart of Africa and the Middle East. Before the referendum that separated Sudan into two parts in 2011, Sudan was the third largest country in Africa, and the sixteenth largest in the world. The country is bordered by Egypt to the north, the Red Sea to the northeast, Eritrea to the east, Ethiopia to the southeast, Central Africa to the southwest, Chad to the west, Libya to the northwest, and South Sudan to the south. Sudan (including South Sudan) is also a country through which the Nile River flows, which is the longest river in the world.

Sudan is filled with mineral resources available in very abundant quantities such as gold, petroleum, natural gas, uranium, chromite, and iron ore, as well as asbestos, cobalt, copper, granite, gypsum, kaolin, tin, manganese, mica, natural gas, nickel, silver, uranium, and zinc. In addition, Sudan is blessed with fertile agricultural land because the legendary Nile River flows through it. Geostrategically, Sudan is located along strategic natural features, namely (1) the Nile River and (2) the Red Sea. These two locations make Sudan have a very high strategic value in terms of trade, resources and transportation.

The Layers of the Sudan Conflict

The Economist has described Sudan as a "chaos machine" with regional shockwaves, simply put, if Sudan is in chaos, the shockwaves will ripple across the region, given Sudan's strategic position at the heart of Africa and the Middle East. Sudan is a picture of regional conflict, where local and international dynamics are increasingly intersecting, with a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Instability is the gateway to colonization, as neither side can win on its own, both the SAF and the RSF have attracted outside powers as allies, either by sending money and arms or by direct intervention – which of course outside parties with interests in Sudan will exploit to their advantage. Meanwhile, the failure of international institutions and the indifference of Western democracies have allowed other, more daring players to step in. This is where geopolitics comes into play, creating layers of conflict that intersect many interests, and let's unpack them one by one.

a. Local Axis of Chaos: Paramilitary Industrial Complex

The transitional government was never able to contend with the RSF as Bashir's most dangerous legacy; and continued to legitimize the RSF and give it the freedom and opportunities to turn into a second army.

After the fall of Omar Bashir, his most dangerous legacy was a paramilitary entity with great economic power. The RSF has turned into what Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation and a leading scholar of Sudan, calls a "a private transnational mercenary enterprise." In addition to mercenaries, the RSF relies on the Hemedti family business also on gold mines. Money, weapons and gold have ultimately become the source of energy for the RSF. Without money from wide-ranging streams of incomes, the RSF would not have been able to sustain its expensive enterprise as internal and regional dynamics dwindled its resources.

It is not surprising because the RSF was born from an ecosystem of the paramilitary industrial complex that made the power of arms meet the accumulation of capitalist wealth leading to a marriage of interests with the elite. The RSF also grew up in a repressive military environment as the Sudanese Military (SAF) had been heavily involved in the country's political, social, and economic spheres since the 1950s. As a result, military factions competed in "commercial, industrial, and agricultural trade activities."

How bad is the military industrial syndrome in Sudan? We can read from the data from May 2020, that under the authority of the Sudanese Ministry of Defense alone there were more than 200 companies in May 2020, with an annual revenue of 110 billion Sudanese pounds (\$2 billion at the official exchange rate at that time). While the RSF has 250 companies, plus significant revenue from the mercenary business. According to a comprehensive review by researcher and political analyst Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, these military companies are involved in the production and sale of gold and other minerals, marble, leather, livestock, and gum Arabic. They are also involved in import trade—including controlling 60 percent of the market related to the lives of many people.

This model of military leadership is very volatile and will never bring a country to stability because it places the power of money and weapons as the main controllers. As a result, Sudan is always hit by endless conflicts and coups. The Sudanese people, with a Muslim population of nearly 50 million, ultimately had to be the victims of the greed and shallowness of their leaders who were easily steered by foreign powers.

b. Regional Conflict of the Nile River

The Nile River is the second longest river in the world which is a source of water that flows through 11 countries in the African continent. The existence of the Nile River is very important for the sustainability of meeting the water needs of the countries through which it flows. Sudan is one of the main countries that is predominantly flowed by this river.

Under the colonial rule in 1929, the British reached an agreement with Egypt that gave them complete control of the river. Further on in 1959, it was revised giving Egypt control of 66% of the river's flow, Sudan 22 %, and the rest was lost under evaporation. Many Egyptian diplomats argue that these are legally binding agreements that must not be changed. Ethiopians on the other hand argue that despite the source of the Nile coming from Ethiopia, it was never included in these agreements, therefore, arguing they now have the right to overrule these agreements.

The conflict on the Nile River began in 2011 when Ethiopia announced that it would build a dam called the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The purpose of the GERD development itself is to be used as a hydroelectric power plant in Ethiopia which is sourced from the Nile River. Unfortunately, this was not responded positively by Egypt and Sudan because both countries felt threatened by the reduced flow of water to their countries.

Many are concerned about the possibility of military conflict between the countries involved, which would have an impact on Europe and the entire world. In 2021, the European Council stated that *"a negotiated solution to the GERD dispute would make a major contribution to regional stability and sustainable development in the three countries concerned."*

c. Global Intervention from the Red Sea

The Red Sea is a major international trade route connecting Asia and Europe—an estimated 12-15% of global maritime trade worth over \$1 trillion passes through the Red Sea each year. The Red Sea is vital to the three major players, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Russia, and this adds to the complexity of the Sudanese crisis. Sudan is only 30 km from Saudi Arabia across the Red Sea. This makes it easy for foreign trade and interests to enter the country.

Along the Red Sea, Sudan has seven vulnerable neighbours and 800 km of coastline. When a country like Sudan in a strategic region collapses, it sucks in foreign intervention, which in turn exports instability to its neighbors. So, Sudan can quickly destabilize Chad, Somalia, Ethiopia,

the Sahel and countries further afield in the Horn of Africa and East Africa. On the other hand, as Sudanese refugees head for Europe and major disruptors and interventionists come from the Gulf and the Middle East, even a war could affect three separate continents.

The UAE, which supports the RSF, aims to expand its influence in Sudan and secure access to valuable resources, especially gold; an estimated 50-80% (around 60 tonnes) of Sudanese gold is smuggled primarily through the UAE, with its true value two to three times higher than the official figures, which is why the UAE is so interested in ports, and Sudan's strategic location on the Red Sea makes it an attractive partner to expand its maritime presence to counter the influence of rival powers in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. In fact, the UAE has trained soldiers from eight African countries, including Ethiopia, and established military bases in Sudan's neighbours, including Chad, Eritrea, Egypt, Libya and government-controlled areas of Somalia.

These moves are also designed by the UAE (which has been closely aligned with the Zionist entity and was a pioneer of the Abraham Accords) to counter radical Islam, perhaps remembering that it was in Sudan that Osama bin Laden first established his Al Qaeda organization in the 1980s. By building these defense ties, the UAE can mobilize troops from other countries to fight in Sudan alongside its RSF proxy.

Meanwhile, for Russia, it is important to maintain its interests in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, which may have an impact on control of the Suez Canal. Russia is playing a two-legged game, supporting both sides. In return for its support for al-Burhan and Hemedti, the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary force, gains access to billions of dollars worth of gold. These resources can be used to fund other Russian initiatives, including the war in Ukraine.

For Saudi Arabia, which supports the SAF, the Red Sea is crucial to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, its strategic framework for reducing the country's dependence on oil and diversifying its economy. One of the key components of Vision 2030 is developing the Red Sea's tourism infrastructure to attract international visitors. The ongoing conflict and extremist actions in the Red Sea could jeopardize Saudi Arabia's ambitions, including the \$500 billion NEOM project.

As these complex dynamics show, both at local, regional and global levels; even if it were to end soon, the Sudanese conflict has already destabilised the region, exacerbating tensions within and between countries in the region. In the Islamic paradigm, geopolitical power does not only rely on natural wealth and geostrategic location but also relies on the strength of authentic leadership and a life system based on revelation guidance. What happened in Sudan is an important lesson that shallow, yet tyrannical greedy leadership is the source of disaster that makes the Sudanese people like food to be fought over by the enemies of Islam. Remember the words of Rasulullah (saw): narrated from Tsauban RA, Rasulullah (saw) said: «يُوشِكُ الْأَمَمُ أَنْ تَدَاعَى عَلَيْكُمْ كَمَا تَدَاعَى الْأَكَلَةُ إِلَى قَصْعَتِهَا فَقَالَ قَائِلٌ: وَمِنْ قَلَّةٍ نَحْنُ يَوْمَئِذٍ؟ قَالَ: بَلْ أَنْتُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ كَثِيرٌ وَلَكُمْ غَنَاءٌ كَغَنَاءِ السَّيْلِ، وَلَيَنْزَعَنَّ اللَّهُ مِنْ صُدُورِ عَدُوِّكُمْ الْمَهَابَةَ مِنْكُمْ وَلَيَقْذِفَنَّ اللَّهُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمُ الْوَهْنَ. فَقَالَ قَائِلٌ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَمَا الْوَهْنُ؟ قَالَ حُبُّ الدُّنْيَا وَكَرَاهِيَةُ الْمَوْتِ» **“Soon the nations will call one another to attack you as diners call one another to a dish.”** Someone asked, “Will it be because we are few in numbers on that day?” He said, **“No, rather you will be many on that day, but you will be like the scum, the dirt and refuse on the surface of flood water. Allah will take away your fear from the hearts of your enemies, and Allah will fill your hearts with Wahn (weakness).”** One of the companions asked: “What is this ‘Wahn’, O Messenger of Allah?” He replied, **“Love of this world and dislike for death.”**

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