

A powder keg ignited: Sudan's crisis and its implications for Africa



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INTRODUCTION

As Sudan's conflict enters its fifth month, a series of measures to contain and limit the fallout from the violence has been initiated, reflecting the threat the confrontation poses to areas well beyond the nation's borders.

This crisis involves not only Sudan but also neighboring countries, and has the potential to set off a chain reaction that could reverberate even further afield.

A troubling chapter is unfolding once again in Sudan, a country with a profound and troubling legacy shared with its southern neighbor, South Sudan.

Sudan's recent history of civil wars and political upheavals has left its mark on the nation's social and political fabric. From resource allocation to border demarcations, the repercussions of its complicated separation from South Sudan, which gained independence in 2011, continue to be keenly felt.

Both Sudan and South Sudan are plagued by ethnic tensions, scarcity of resources, political power struggles, conflict and historical grievances.

In this report, we will look at the impact of



Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, commander of the Sudanese paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), is addressing RSF fighters at an undisclosed location in his first appearance since the conflict began. AFP

Sudan's current crisis on its neighbors, and examine potential paths forward.

SCARS OF INDEPENDENCE

Fighting erupted in Sudan on April 15, 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, led by Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti.¹ The violence, which quickly drew in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, has caused a seismic shift in life in Khartoum, the capital, which used to bustle with South Sudanese, who worked and studied there, and in the embattled Darfur and Kordofan regions, which have been plunged even deeper into turmoil.

The Republic of South Sudan is now grappling with the burden of large numbers



The current struggle is a stark reminder of the challenges faced in achieving peace across the region



of refugees seeking sanctuary within its borders, placing further demands on its already strained resources. External support is urgently needed to alleviate the mounting strain on its limited capacity to cope.

An estimated 9.4 million South Sudanese face spiraling poverty, food insecurity and economic collapse. To this burden has been added South Sudan's share of the 926,000 refugees, who, according to the UN, have been forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries. The Sudan conflict has also displaced over 3 million people inside the country.² The current struggle is a stark reminder of the challenges faced in achieving peace across the region.

In the national peacemaking processes, Sudan serves as one of the guarantors for South Sudan, while South Sudan reciprocates as a guarantor for peace in Sudan. These roles are significant in terms of observation and consultation, but have proved to be of limited importance when it comes to maintaining regional stability and resolving conflicts. When agreements face difficulties, the involved parties may seek support to address the issues, yet all depends on the dynamics of the dispute. With the conflict in Sudan raging, regional peacemaking initiatives have failed to deliver the desired results. Nevertheless,

Due to the ongoing clashes between Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary RSF, tens of thousands of Sudanese crossed the border and took refuge in neighbouring countries like South Sudan. Getty Images

they have become vehicles for leaders to show initiative, and gain greater regional recognition as potential peacemakers.

When the conflict erupted in April, South Sudan's President Salva Kiir was seen as a key player in efforts led by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the eight-member East African trade bloc, to stop the violence,³ but despite his and the organization's best efforts, no progress has been made. In its latest move, IGAD proposed deploying humanitarian forces in Sudan, but this suggestion was strongly rebuffed by Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, the country's de facto leader, exposing the limitations of peacemaking conferences.⁴

Kiir's involvement in the Sudan conflict has also raised concerns that attention is being diverted from the peace process within his own country, highlighting the intricate relationship between the two nations. The government insists peace efforts are continuing, but critics believe that Kiir's engagement in Sudan's affairs is hindering progress at home.

OIL'S DUAL ROLE: TESTING THE TIES

South Sudan's shaky economy is dependent on oil. According to the International



The Saudi-flagged ferry passenger ship Amanah carrying evacuees stationed in Port Sudan. Foreign nations had scrambled to evacuate their citizens as the country slid closer to civil war.
AFP

Monetary Fund, which in early March approved \$114.8 million in emergency funding to combat food insecurity in South Sudan, oil accounts for 90 percent of government revenue.⁵ Being landlocked, however, the country is equally dependent on its northern neighbor's good graces to get that oil to international markets. Sudan's sole operational oil refinery is in beleaguered Khartoum, while all exports must pass through the strategically vital Port Sudan.

While the immediate effects of the conflict on the flow of crude have been relatively limited, concerns are growing about the long-term implications for South Sudan's oil exports. These were already in decline. East Africa's largest oil producer was producing 350,000 barrels per day before its own civil war broke out in 2013. A series of blows, including the global pandemic and devastating floods, saw production drop from 170,000 bpd in 2019/20 to an anticipated 150,000 in 2022-23.⁶

South Sudan relies heavily on a pipeline that runs through the heart of Sudan's capital,⁷ but in return for this lifeline, Juba pays substantial fees and tariffs to Khartoum, resulting in a robust revenue stream for the Sudanese government. This became a contentious issue in June when the RSF threatened to blow up the pipeline unless South Sudan halted the payments.⁸

For now, the RSF has not followed through on its threat, possibly for fear of retribution from South Sudan. Oil exports through Port

Sudan have risen despite the fighting, and in May were at their highest for two years, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.⁹ The conflict has highlighted the vulnerability of South Sudan's reliance on existing oil infrastructure, and the country has been exploring the possibility of constructing alternative pipelines to ports in Djibouti or Lamu, in Kenya. Of course, these large-scale projects could not be completed overnight and would require major funding.

Meanwhile, the turmoil in Sudan has not only dealt a blow to domestic fuel supplies, but also driven significant price increases, particularly for diesel, which has more than doubled in price in the country — a consequence of the current conflict that carries broader implications for regional stability.

A WEB OF CONSEQUENCES

Sudan occupies a pivotal geographical position, sharing borders not only with South Sudan, but also Egypt, Libya, Chad, Central African Republic, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Its strategic significance is underscored by its place in the Nile River system. The White and Blue Nile rivers converge in Khartoum, and effective management of the waters is crucial for regional stability. Downstream Egypt relies on the Nile for 90 percent of its water, and both Sudan and Egypt are concerned about the possible impact of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia, where the waters of the Blue Nile



The White Nile and Blue Nile converge in Khartoum, forming the Nile River, which has been at the center of a contentious regional dispute between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).
AFP

originate.^{10 11} When considering the possible impact of any escalation of the conflict in Sudan, other regional concerns must be taken into account. The country borders the Red Sea, through which about 10 percent of global trade passes, connecting key Asian and European markets. Sudan also has significant mineral resources, is Africa's third-largest gold producer, possesses substantial oil reserves, and is responsible for over 80 percent of global production of gum Arabic, a vital component in food additives, paints and cosmetics.

There are signs that the conflict is escalating in Sudan's western region of Darfur, which was plunged into a civil war in 2003 that killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions.¹² Here, the potential for division among the forces looms large. Some may align with Hemedti's faction, while others may work to undermine it. This pattern of internal conflicts, reminiscent of other civil wars, is already drawing external powers into the fray who will consider various options, including the provision of weapons.¹³

The potential for escalation is not confined to Sudan's borders, but is paving the way for the region to become an arena for external powers vying to extend their reach.¹⁴ As analysts speculate on the unfolding consequences, the ominous proliferation of arms across Sudan, coupled with the recruitment of foreign mercenaries,¹⁵ is creating growing concern among regional

leaders who fear the emergence of armed groups, born in the crucible of this crisis and potentially capable of challenging their authority. Chad, Sudan's immediate neighbor to the west, has witnessed its share of internal conflicts, and the Sudan war could further complicate the security dynamics of the central African country. With its porous borders and history of armed movements, a potential influx of refugees and armed groups from Sudan could add fuel to existing tensions in Chad and also Ethiopia, straining that country's already fragile security apparatus.

In addition, Libya's proximity to Sudan could make it a pivotal player in the unfolding drama. The civil war provides opportunities for external actors to assert influence by supporting different factions. Also, the re-emergence of groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and with financial support abroad is unsettling for regimes in Egypt and the broader Middle East.

Remarkably, Malik Agar, Al-Burhan's deputy, visited Russia at the end of July for the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg.¹⁶ Reports before the conflict suggested negotiations for military and economic agreements have been underway, with the aim of utilizing Sudan's ports along vital trade routes to Europe.¹⁷ US influence in the region, on the other hand, has been under strain,¹⁸ despite Western-led efforts toward restoring democracy, and engagement in peace talks in Saudi Arabia.



Left: Sudanese armed forces marked Army Day in eastern Sudan's Gadaref State, amid ongoing fighting between the two factions that has killed an estimated 3,900 people, according to the ACLED. AFP

Right: Smoke billows above buildings in Khartoum, as the city is engulfed in a brutal war that has left more than half of the already impoverished country in need of aid. AFP

In a region where the stakes are so high and stability is so precarious, the consequences of the Sudanese civil war are more than just hypothetical.

WHAT NEXT?

Since the escalating conflict in Sudan represents a dire humanitarian crisis, and threatens further and wider destabilization, it is crucial that a strategic path be identified that addresses immediate needs and long-term stability.

The current sporadic ceasefires, while essential to reduce immediate bloodshed, need to evolve into more sustainable peace agreements that lay the foundations for lasting tranquility. With regional stability in the balance, and neighboring countries at risk of being drawn into the turmoil, this requires robust international efforts.

The potential consequences of a full-scale civil war in Sudan are catastrophic. Beyond the significant loss of life and human suffering, the ripple effects will extend far beyond Sudan's borders, affecting neighboring countries, worsening refugee crises, and exacerbating existing regional conflicts. The international community must act swiftly to prevent this nightmare scenario from unfolding.

Central to this vision is the imperative for democratic leadership, a beacon of hope for the Sudanese people yearning for a government that genuinely represents their aspirations. Transparency, accountability and the rule of law must become the cornerstones of a new Sudan. A democratic transition would not only quell immediate grievances, but also offer the promise of a nation built on principles that respect

and protect the rights of its citizens.

The diplomatic stage must be reset, enabling regional bodies such as the African Union and global powerhouses to participate. Their discussions must address the deep-rooted causes of the conflict, weaving together the threads of history, resource allocation and political power struggles. Dialogue must be inclusive, ensuring all voices are heard and all concerns are acknowledged.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian imperative looms large. The people of Sudan cannot afford to wait for the outcome of protracted diplomatic debates. Immediate action is needed, with aid that reaches those on the ground, providing food, shelter and medical supplies to ease their suffering.

Simultaneously, this moment calls for a commitment to justice, a vow that those responsible for atrocities will face accountability for their actions. Vulnerable groups, particularly women and children, must find protection and empowerment.

In this delicate balance, the world must also be vigilant. Sudan's strategic significance is a double-edged sword, attracting those seeking influence for their own gain. A united front against such interference is necessary to preserve the integrity of the country's journey toward peace and self-determination.

As the curtain lifts on the next act in Sudan's tumultuous history, the script must be rewritten, with democratic principles, humanitarian action and regional stability as central themes. The path forward is fraught with challenges, but it is a path that the global community must take with unwavering resolve, investing not only in Sudan's future, but also in the broader objective of a more peaceful, interconnected world.

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