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SUDAN CRISIS: WHAT WORRIES THE WORLD?

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On April 15, 2023, Sudan witnessed abrupt fighting between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) led by Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Rapid Support Force (RSF) led by Gen Mohammad Hamdan Dagalo, both accusing each other of attacking first. However, the fighting is for control of the resource-rich and strategically located state having traceable footprints of geopolitics. More than 1,800 people have so far been killed since the fighting began leaving almost 1.6 million people displaced.¹ Efforts by the international community to end the war by bringing both warring factions to a peaceful settlement have so far failed. However, a series of ceasefires have remained fragile, with the first one brokered by the US on April 24 that remained intact for 72- hours.²

Formerly, both Gen Burhan and Gen Dagalo were together in a coup against former President Omar al-Bashir, removing him from power in 2019. After the coup, a transitional council was set up jointly of civilian leaders and military that agreed to a transitional government for three years until elections in 2022 while signing a new constitution. However, another coup by the army in 2021 removed the joint transitional setup and once again promised to conduct a democratic election in 2023. Again, a joint transitional setup took control of the governance of the country. The current fighting is in violation of the joint transitional setup that both the generals had agreed upon earlier.

Political instability coupled with poor governance in Sudan dates back to the 20th Century British colonization that co-governed Sudan with Egypt under the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty.³ Under the arrangement, the British replaced political leaders and developed a government run by the Islamic School System in the North of Sudan while power in the South was shared among hundreds of different tribal leaders and Christian missionaries. This divisive tactic created deep-rooted socio-economic tensions throughout Sudan (North & South),



culminating in the second civil war in the South (1983-2005) for more regional autonomy and, resultantly, South Sudan separated from North Sudan in 2011.⁴

Major global powers are drawn to Sudan's geostrategic location for its proximity to the Red Sea. Its location on River Nile is very important for downstream Egypt and upstream Ethiopia, along with valuable oil, gold, iron ore, silver, copper resources and considerable hydro-electrical potential. Sudan exported \$317 million in crude oil to the world in 2020,⁵ while the most valuable export from Sudan is gold, ranking third in Africa for production. UAE, Italy and Turkey are the top exporting destinations for Sudan's gold.⁶ There are reports that the Russian Wagner Group has been involved in Sudan's gold mining business for quite some time. The Group is reported to have been supplying the country's army and paramilitaries with equipment and training.⁷

Regional countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, and UAE watch for their interests. Sudan's northern neighbour Egypt is considered a close aide to Gen Burhan. So far, about 150,000⁸ people have crossed into Egypt since the fighting began. Shortly before the conflict, Egyptian troops and the SAF were undergoing a joint military exercise named 'Nile Defenders'⁹ encompassing army, navy and air force contingents. Libya – the northwest neighbor- enjoys a very close cooperation with the RSF's Gen Dagalo, who had sent his militia to fight on behalf of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in the Libyan civil war.¹⁰

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There are reports that Gen Haftar is providing arms to Gen Dagalo in the current conflict.¹¹ Wealthy oil producers like Saudi Arabia and UAE have signed business deals with Sudan to invest in a range of projects from agriculture to an airline and a strategic port on the Red Sea coast. UAE is another close ally to Gen Dagalo and benefitted from the RSF militia in the Yemen civil war against Houthi rebels.¹²

Amidst global dimensions, the major one is the Russian plan for a naval base in Port Sudan, speculated to have spurred the current power struggle. The 25-year-long port agreement with Russia was signed in 2017 by then President Omar. However, the subsequent coups hung the project's prospects in balance. However, by Feb 12, 2023, a joint press conference by the Russian Foreign Minister and his Sudanese counterpart confirmed Sudan's decision to host a Russian naval base on the Red Sea.¹³ Earlier, the US ambassador had categorically enunciated US opposition against rekindling the deal with Russia and warned of consequences if Sudan did so.¹⁴ The US Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland also visited Sudan in March 2023.¹⁵ The US is aware of the Wagner group's activities in Sudan and has already imposed sanctions on two of its companies.¹⁶ Western media has claimed that the Russian group is supplying the RSF with missiles to help it combat the SAF.¹⁷

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The talk of transitioning to democracy for improved governance in the country has never ended. However, one of the major problems in this transition has been the SAF and the RSF. The plans for military reforms under an internationally-brokered deal that called for the RSF to be integrated into the SAF besides shifting the country towards democracy. But the RSF suggested the absorption should be gradual and happen over ten years, while the country's military insisted on two years. The disagreement on a timeline is one of the reasons for the current war.¹⁸

The power struggle is also labelled as a spin-off of the US-Russia tensions. It seems that both have picked up sides in

the squabble. Gen Burhan is supported by Egypt's Gen. Fattah El-Sisi, who enjoys a strategic partnership with the US and is an important US ally in Africa.¹⁹ The US has a reputation for safeguarding its interests under the garb of democracy as memories of the Arab Spring are still fresh, while some view the situation as another colour revolution. One is also reminded of the US history of smooth sailing with autocrats/dictators in different parts of the globe to secure its strategic interests. On the other hand, the Russian efforts for the strategic port deal with Sudan have been quite consistent. Besides, the Russian Wagner Group's business activities in Sudan are well known. It is no surprise that the Group's arms supplies to Gen Dagalo²⁰ have earned his favours for the Russian naval base.²¹

The US is being criticized for not having been able to anticipate the infighting and thus its inability to prevent the infighting in Sudan, as intense rivalry between the two armed factions was no secret and also for its failure to empower the civilian leaders.²² The US and its allies' efforts to isolate Moscow with sanctions over the Ukraine invasion and bolstering democracies worldwide, especially in Sudan, have faced a set-back. It is not known as to what extent the port deal would be executed amid the ongoing turmoil. No doubt, Sudan is yet another chessboard where global powers are jostling for power and influence in Africa. Besides, security in the African continent is seriously under stress, particularly for those sharing borders with Sudan due to the unchecked movement of people and arms. The spillover of the fighting is leading to a refugee crisis that is developing into a humanitarian crisis. Averting the humanitarian crisis calls for inclusive multilateral efforts in unison with international organizations and regimes for an agreement to address the current power struggle and return to swift civilian rule.

The Sudan crisis may turn into a proxy battle when regional ethnic and tribal forces are pushed to take sides and leading to a humanitarian catastrophe. The need is to have a strong ceasefire followed by broad-based peace negotiations with support from regional and international parties. Picking sides while attempting to put an end to the war would not help. Given the power politics and ulterior motives of the warring factions, it is unlikely that Sudan will return to civilian transition very soon.

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