

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

The Bear, the Dragon, or the Eagle. Who Will Win in Sudan?

LTC Hany Mohamed, EGY Army (CSAG/CCJ5)

LTC Rene Berendsen, NLD Army (CSAG/CCJ5)

LCDR Stipe Skelin, CRO Navy (CSAG/CCJ5)

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. **Subject** Analysis of the current situation in Sudan.
2. **Purpose** To present the results of the CSAG's analysis regarding the on-going situation in Sudan.
3. **Introduction**

On April 15, clashes in Sudan broke out between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) of Gen Dagalo "Hemedti" and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by Gen Al Burhan. Both generals came to power in April 2019. Gen Al Burhan (SAF) as the Chairman of Transitional Sovereign Council and Gen Dagalo (RSF) as his Deputy. In 2021, Gen Al Burhan dissolved the civilian government and imposed a state of emergency, claiming a "revolution correction," (considered a military coup) thereby neglecting the efforts made for the process of transition towards a civilian democratic government. The main cause of the tension is the competition for absolute power between Gen Al Burhan and Gen Dagalo. Currently there is no civilian government. The main request from Sudanese society is to switch power from the military to a democratic elected government, able to oversee the military forces, and the integration of the RSF into the SAF.

For now, it seems that SAF has the upper hand militarily, controlling the capabilities of heavy armor units, Navy, and Air force assets (estimated total of over 140,000). RSF only has lighter ground units (estimated total of over 70,000). However, its units are battle-hardened, due to their experience in the Sudanese insurgency war.

4. **Overview**
 - a. **Context**
 - (1) Sudan gained independence from Great Britain in 1956 and joined the Arab League in the same year.
 - (2) Since then, Sudan has a long history of rebellion movements, civil wars, and military coups. Sudan was suspended from the African Union since 6 of June 2019. South Sudan gained independence from Sudan by referendum in 2011.
 - (3) Sudan has one of the world's biggest agricultural potentials and is the third largest producer of gold in Africa. There are more than 40,000 gold mining sites in Sudan.
 - (4) RSF emerged from the "Janjaweed" forces, that supported the Al Bashir government in the settlement of the Darfur dispute in 2003. In 2017, RSF came directly under the leadership of the President of the Republic. Because of his support, Al Bashir gave Dagalo an official rank as military general and the privilege of taking control of the goldmines. Just before the coup on the Al Bashir government in 2019, Gen Dagalo (RSF) aligned with the opposition.
 - b. **Why now?**

- (1) According to the power transition timeline, April 11, 2023, was the suspense for the beginning of the transition of power to a civilian government, and the RSF's integration into SAF.
- (2) Prosecution for the war crimes in 2003 and 2019 is ongoing in Sudan. Sudanese society asks for the accountability for the war crimes, and the killings of pro-democracy protesters by Gen Dagalo and Gen Al Burhan.

c. **What are the desired end states of the parties involved?**

- (1) **SAF** - Gen Al Burhan declared that he is fighting to create the opportunity for transition to a democratic government, thereby guarantying the future of Sudan.
- (2) **RSF** - Open sources claim that Gen Dagalo fights to protect his influence over a significant piece of the military, while benefitting from the goldmining revenues.
- (3) **Civilian leadership** - The civilian leadership of Sudan wants democratic elections and to form an official Sudanese civilian government. They will most likely align with the military actor that can support this goal.

5. **International Actors**

a. **Egypt**

- (1) Sudan is considered the strategic depth of southern Egypt security.
- (2) Egypt and Sudan have a common defense agreement that includes providing training for entire Sudanese forces (SAF+RSF). Participating in the "Nile's Eagle" exercise in Sudan, Egyptian military personnel and equipment (including MIG-29 fighter jets) are held up at a SAF military air base in southern Sudan, which is currently under the control of RSF. On April 19, RSF reportedly destroyed two MIG-29s and damaged three other aircraft.
- (3) Egypt officially announced that it does not take sides in this domestic dispute, however it offered to mediate between the two sides if requested.
- (4) This situation may lead to more complicated talks (between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia) aimed at resolving the Great Ethiopian Renaissance (GERD) Dam situation on the river Nile.
- (5) There is a possible increase in the flow of weapons and refugees towards Egyptian border.

b. **Israel**

- (1) Israel-Sudan relations have recently changed. Sudan signed the Abraham Accords and shifted from the "three no's" to the "three yes": yes to negotiations with Israel, yes to recognition of Israel, and yes to peace between the two states and between the people.
- (2) Gen Al Burhan (SAF) has a good relationship with the Netanyahu government. On the other hand, Gen Dagalo (RSF) has a very close relationship with the Mossad. Regarding this it is a win-win situation for Israel, with open communication lines to both sides.
- (3) The security of the Red Sea is paramount for Israel. The freedom of maneuver and the conduct of operations of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) could be affected by the hostilities in Sudan.
- (4) Israel may be affected by a huge influx of Sudanese refugees, who will look for security in Israel.

c. **Russia**

- (1) Russia has large stakes in Sudan. In February 2023, Sudan and Russia signed an agreement concerning the port of Sudan, to install a maintenance base there for the Russian navy. One of the strategic goals of Russia is to gain leverage in the Red Sea area.
- (2) Currently, Gen Dagalo (RSF) controls the gold mines. Sudanese gold mines are vital to Russia in terms of financing the war in Ukraine and circumventing international sanctions imposed on Russia. The Wagner Group, more aligned with the RSF, oversees the security (and operations) of the gold mines that are a lifeline for funding ventures like the war in Ukraine.
- (3) Due to the historical relationship between the RSF and the Wagner group, Gen Dagalo could obtain military equipment which his units lack from Russia to neutralize the threat of the Air component of the SAF. Nevertheless, Russia could adopt a more opportunistic approach towards the winner of this conflict

to guarantee its interests.

d. **China**

- (1) China inevitably wants stability in Sudan because of its strategic location on the Red Sea. China already has investments in the port of Sudan and other infrastructure projects as part of China's BRI.
- (2) Currently, there are no signs of China aligning with any side of the conflict. No clear stance nor official statements related to current crisis, have been released.
- (3) If the fighting/war prolongs, China's BRI investments are at risk. Impacts on the Red Sea area could be substantial, both direct and indirect impacts to China are related to disrupted trade (routes) and transporting through and around Sudan.

e. **US**

- (1) US is the largest provider of humanitarian assistance to the Sudanese people for decades.
- (2) In 2017, the US revoked longstanding economic sanctions against Sudan. In 2020, the US removed Sudan from the list of "State Sponsors of Terrorism."
- (3) On April 17, US diplomatic convoy came under fire. The circumstances of the attack are unclear; however, some sources claim RSF was behind the attack.

6. **Conclusions**

a. **USA/USCENTCOM**

- (1) The United States could work to keep Egypt out of the conflict and pressure Gen Dagalo (RSF) to return Egyptian troops and equipment to avoid possible further escalation.
- (2) Despite the Russian influence on Gen Dagalo (RSF), the United States could bring the protagonists to the peace table, relying on the humanitarian aid it has provided for years and with the assistance from regional partners like KSA, and UAE.
- (3) Since Sudan is now less focused on the GERD (Dam) dispute, the United States could be a mediator on this issue.

b. **Strategic Competitors**

- (1) China's billions of investments and funding in Sudan have not helped much less guaranteed peace or stability and may have political and diplomatic implications for China, in addition to economic implications.
- (2) After China brokers the Saudi Arabia-Iran deal China may try to become the go-between in the Sudan situation. China could benefit from a "brokerage for peace in Africa". This could lead to boosting China's image around the world: a new success for Chinese diplomacy in another continent.
- (3) Russia can change the course of the conflict if it provides RSF with the necessary equipment and weapon systems through Wagner. For Russia, the Sudanese gold mines, and port of Sudan are crucial interests, so they could swing their support to the winning side.

c. **Red Sea Region/USAFRICOM**

- (1) The situation in Sudan may have a ripple effect on other African countries (Chad, Central African Republic) creating further instability and insecurity due to military operations and possible refugee movements.
- (2) Red Sea SLOCs could be under threat, which could affect one of the region's most important trade routes.
- (3) Israel's freedom of maneuver in the region could be affected by the war efforts in Sudan. The impact of refugees from Sudan may affect security in Israel.

7. **Recommendations**

- a. In close coordination with USAFRICOM, USCENTCOM should engage with Egypt to understand any required support.
- b. If Russia intends to intervene in Sudan with troops or equipment, USCENTCOM could induce regional partners to close (air) corridors from Syria restricting Russian access to Sudan.
- c. STRATCOM wise, USCENTCOM could consider the following narratives:

- (1) China: "Chinese Infrastructure investments, and the BRI does not bring stability."
 - (2) Russia: "Russia cannot be trusted. They will change who they support during a crisis."
- The target audiences should be CENTCOM AOR countries' governments.