

From Civil War to Geopolitical Battleground: External Power Competition and The Internationalizations of Sudan's War, 2023-2026

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<https://doi.org/10.56201/jpslr.vol.12.no9.2026.pg244.260>

Abstract

The Sudanese war that began in April 2023 developed from a struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) into a conflict embedded in a wider regional and international competition over security, trade, resources, political influence and access to the Red Sea. This study examined how competing geopolitical interests of external powers shaped the trajectory of the war, identified the strategic interests motivating regional and extra-regional involvement, assessed how external support affected the duration and internationalization of the conflict, and interpreted the war within the changing Red Sea–Horn of Africa security environment. The study was anchored in Realism and used proxy warfare as a complementary analytical concept. It adopted a qualitative documentary design and analysed United Nations documents, Security Council materials, government statements, sanctions records, policy research and recent scholarly literature published principally between 2023 and September 2026. The analysis found that external involvement did not replace Sudanese agency but materially altered the resources, incentives and strategic horizons of the belligerents. Egypt's security relationship with the SAF, reported UAE links to the RSF, Iranian military cooperation with the SAF, Russian pursuit of strategic access, Turkish and Qatari relationships, Saudi mediation and security interests, and US diplomatic and sanctions policies produced a dense network of partially overlapping external engagements. The study further found that external support increased the capacity of the belligerents to sustain territorial competition and contributed to the war's technological and geographic expansion. The paper concluded that Sudan had become an arena in which regional-order competition interacted with domestic military rivalry. It recommended coordinated external pressure, tighter enforcement of arms and financial restrictions, a single inclusive mediation architecture, protection of civilian political agency, and a regional Red Sea framework linking Sudan's peace process to neighbouring states' security and economic interests.

Keywords: Sudan; civil war; geopolitical competition; external intervention; proxy warfare; Red Sea security; internationalization

1. Introduction

The outbreak of large-scale war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), commanded by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), commanded by Mohamed

Hamdan Dagalo, in April 2023 represented a decisive rupture in Sudan's already fragile post-Bashir political transition. What began as a struggle over the structure and leadership of the security state rapidly generated territorial fragmentation, mass displacement, severe humanitarian distress and a reconfiguration of regional diplomacy. By 2025–2026, the conflict could no longer be adequately understood only through the domestic rivalry between two armed organisations. External financial, political, logistical, technological and diplomatic relationships increasingly shaped the material conditions under which the war was fought. The United Nations reported in 2026 that the conflict remained unabated and that civilian deaths, displacement, violations of international humanitarian law and the disruption of health and food systems had continued to intensify (United Nations in Sudan, 2026). Externalisation matters analytically because civil wars do not occur in insulated domestic spaces. Belligerents may obtain money, weapons, political recognition, intelligence, technology, safe transit, diplomatic protection and access to international markets from actors beyond their borders. In Sudan, the geography of the conflict has intersected with the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Gulf politics, Nile politics and global competition over strategic access. Chatham House's recent analysis described the conflict as part of a regional ecosystem in which gold, food security, maritime access, cross-border trade and rivalry among regional powers interact with the domestic war (Chatham House, 2025a, 2025b). The European Council on Foreign Relations similarly emphasised that Gulf states possess substantial capacity to affect Sudan because of their financial relationships with Sudanese actors and their interests in agricultural, livestock and mineral resources (Horner, 2025). The internationalisation of Sudan's war should therefore be distinguished from the simpler claim that Sudan has become a conventional proxy war. The latter can obscure the agency of Sudanese actors and imply that external powers fully control local belligerents. Recent scholarship on proxy warfare instead highlights reciprocal relationships in which local actors can manipulate foreign patrons, pursue autonomous agendas and bargain over support (Rauta, 2021). This is especially relevant in Sudan, where the SAF and RSF have developed their own political economies, territorial projects and relationships with domestic constituencies while simultaneously cultivating external partnerships. The contemporary evidence also complicates any binary account of the conflict. Egypt has maintained a close security relationship with the SAF, while Iran has developed military cooperation with the RSF. The UAE has been repeatedly identified in official and policy sources as a significant external actor in the RSF's war economy and support networks, although Abu Dhabi rejects allegations that it arms the RSF. Russia has pursued strategic interests around Port Sudan while adapting its relationships with Sudanese actors. Saudi Arabia has combined Red Sea security and economic interests with mediation efforts. Türkiye and Qatar have maintained relationships relevant to the SAF and Sudanese political economy, while the United States has relied principally on diplomacy, sanctions and humanitarian policy rather than direct military participation. The result is not a single external coalition but a competitive and overlapping network of relationships. The central problem addressed in this paper is therefore the gap between analyses that treat Sudan as a domestic civil war and accounts that reduce the conflict to a list of foreign patrons. A more adequate international-relations explanation must connect external competition to the transformation of the war itself. The key issue is not merely who supports which Sudanese actor, but how external competition changes the incentives, capabilities, duration, territorial geography and diplomatic possibilities of the conflict. This paper asks four questions. First, how have competing geopolitical interests of external powers shaped the trajectory of the Sudanese civil war since April 2023? Second, what strategic interests motivate regional and extra-regional powers in

Sudan? Third, how has external support affected the duration, intensity and internationalisation of the conflict? Fourth, how does the Sudanese conflict reflect emerging competition over regional order in the Red Sea–Horn of Africa space? The paper argues that Sudan’s strategic location, resource economy and position within interconnected Red Sea, Nile, Gulf, Horn of Africa and Sahel security environments have encouraged external powers to treat the war as a component of wider geopolitical competition. External support has not mechanically caused the conflict, and it has not eliminated domestic agency. Rather, it has expanded the resources available to competing Sudanese actors, reduced some of the immediate costs of continued warfare, altered territorial and technological dynamics, and complicated diplomatic efforts. In this sense, internationalisation is best understood as a process through which a domestic war becomes structurally embedded in external strategic networks. The paper contributes to the international-relations literature in three ways. First, it links Realist explanations of power and strategic geography to the more relational concept of proxy warfare. Second, it treats external involvement as multidimensional rather than synonymous with arms transfers. Third, it places Sudan within the emerging Red Sea regional order, showing how maritime access, food security, gold, logistics, border security and rivalry among middle powers intersect with the conflict. The analysis is limited to the period April 2023–September 2026, thereby capturing the most recent phase of the war and the changing configuration of external actors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Civil Wars and External Intervention

Research on civil war has long established that domestic conflict is influenced by transnational environments. External states can alter the balance of capabilities, provide sanctuary or finance, impose diplomatic constraints, and affect the bargaining calculations of combatants. The traditional intervention literature often distinguishes between direct intervention and indirect assistance, but contemporary conflicts increasingly combine formal state action, private networks, commercial intermediaries and transnational armed actors. In Sudan, this literature is particularly relevant because the two principal belligerents emerged from a deeply militarised political order in which external relationships were already important before April 2023. The SAF was a state military institution with longstanding diplomatic and security relationships, while the RSF developed from the Janjaweed militia networks and later became a powerful autonomous security and economic actor. Their pre-war external linkages meant that internationalisation was not created by the 2023 war; rather, the war activated and expanded pre-existing networks. Recent policy research shows that the conflict is sustained through transnational flows of finance, commodities and political support. Chatham House’s 2025 study of gold found that the commodity connects Sudan’s conflict parties to traders, smugglers and external governments and that the gold economy provides important resources for sustaining warfare (Chatham House, 2025a). The United States Treasury has also documented financial and commercial networks linked to the RSF, including UAE-based companies and gold-related transactions, while imposing sanctions on individuals and entities associated with the group (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025). These findings indicate that externalisation operates through political economy as much as through battlefield assistance.

2.2 Proxy Warfare

Proxy warfare provides a useful conceptual bridge between domestic conflict and international competition. Rauta (2021) argues that proxy relationships should be understood as strategic

relationships involving agency on both sides rather than as simple patron-client hierarchies. Foreign sponsors seek influence while local actors use external resources to advance their own goals. This reciprocal relationship can produce unintended outcomes because sponsors cannot perfectly control proxies and proxies may pursue agendas that diverge from those of their sponsors. The Sudan case demonstrates the value of this approach. External actors have not operated according to a single coherent strategy, and Sudanese belligerents have not behaved as passive instruments. The SAF and RSF have cultivated multiple international relationships, shifted diplomatic positions and used external legitimacy to reinforce domestic claims. At the same time, foreign powers have adjusted their engagement according to developments on the ground. The resulting pattern is better described as competitive externalisation than as a centrally directed proxy conflict. Recent assessments nevertheless support the proposition that foreign assistance has increased the sustainability of the war. A 2025 Strategic Comments analysis observed that the scale of equipment required by the belligerents meant that the conflict had become significantly dependent on foreign actors' willingness to continue expending resources (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). The United Nations also reported in 2026 that increasing use of armed drones had become a major driver of civilian deaths, illustrating how external access to military technology can change the operational character of a civil war (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2026).

2.3 Geopolitics, Strategic Geography and Regional Security

Geopolitical approaches emphasise the interaction between territory, strategic location, resources and power. Sudan occupies a distinctive position between North Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. Its coastline provides proximity to one of the world's most consequential maritime corridors, while its borders connect it to Egypt, Libya, Chad, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Ethiopia. This geography creates multiple security externalities: instability can affect migration, border security, trade, food supplies, armed-group mobility and maritime security. The Red Sea dimension has become increasingly significant because the region contains overlapping security concerns involving Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Egypt, Türkiye, Russia, the United States and other actors. The war in Sudan therefore intersects with competition over ports, logistics and maritime access. Chatham House has highlighted the significance of Port Sudan and the wider Red Sea environment, including concerns over Russian and Iranian strategic presence (Chatham House, 2025c). The importance of maritime geography helps explain why actors that are not immediate neighbours of Sudan have nevertheless treated the conflict as strategically consequential. Resource geopolitics adds a second layer. Sudan's gold, agricultural land, livestock, oil infrastructure and potential port and logistics investments provide economic incentives for external actors. These interests do not necessarily mean that foreign governments entered the conflict solely to acquire resources. Rather, resource access can reinforce strategic calculations by linking commercial networks to political influence and security relationships. The result is a conflict ecosystem in which military, economic and geopolitical incentives are mutually reinforcing.

2.4 Sudan in the Red Sea Security Complex

The concept of a regional security complex is useful because security interactions in Sudan cannot be separated from those of adjacent regions. The Red Sea links the Arabian Peninsula to Northeast Africa, while the Horn of Africa links the maritime corridor to inland political and security dynamics. The war has consequently become entangled with Saudi–UAE competition,

Iranian regional strategy, Egyptian Nile and border concerns, Turkish and Gulf commercial networks, and Russian ambitions for strategic access. The literature also suggests that the Red Sea order is increasingly characterised by multi-alignment rather than a single dominant external power. Chatham House describes an evolving multipolar environment in which regional states seek autonomy and influence through flexible partnerships (Chatham House, 2025a). Sudan exemplifies this pattern because actors that cooperate in one arena may compete in another, and states can simultaneously support mediation while maintaining relationships with parties to the conflict.

2.5 Literature Gap

The reviewed literature establishes that Sudan's war has important external dimensions, but three gaps remain. First, many accounts focus on individual foreign actors, producing fragmented country-by-country explanations rather than a comparative account of how external competition collectively transforms the war. Second, policy literature frequently identifies military assistance, economic interests or diplomacy separately, whereas the internationalisation of Sudan's conflict emerges from the interaction of these dimensions. Third, the Red Sea geopolitical dimension is often discussed as a background condition rather than as part of the mechanism connecting external competition to the trajectory of the war. This paper addresses these gaps by developing a comparative framework that maps external actors across material, diplomatic, economic and strategic dimensions and interprets their interaction through Realism and proxy warfare.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Realism

Realism begins from the proposition that international politics is shaped by the distribution of power, the absence of a central authority above states, and the pursuit of security and strategic advantage. Classical realism emphasises power and interest, while structural realism places greater emphasis on the international system and the constraints generated by anarchy and the distribution of capabilities (Waltz, 1979). Mearsheimer (2001) further argues that great powers and strategically significant states seek opportunities to improve their relative positions in an uncertain international environment. Applied to Sudan, Realism directs attention away from the normative language of external actors and toward the strategic interests embedded in their behaviour. Egypt's concern with instability on its southern border and the Nile environment, Gulf states' interests in food security and Red Sea influence, Iran's interest in strategic relationships along the Red Sea, Russia's interest in military and logistical access, and Western concern with maritime security and regional instability can all be interpreted as security and power calculations. These interests may coexist with humanitarian or diplomatic objectives without being reducible to them. Realism also helps explain why external powers may tolerate relationships that generate reputational or legal costs when those relationships are perceived to protect strategic interests. However, realism alone risks underestimating the agency of local actors and the complexity of non-state networks. For this reason, the study supplements realism with proxy warfare.

3.2 Proxy Warfare as a Complementary Concept

Proxy warfare conceptualises indirect competition in which external actors support local parties to influence outcomes without assuming the full political and military costs of direct intervention. The concept is particularly useful for Sudan because external states have generally

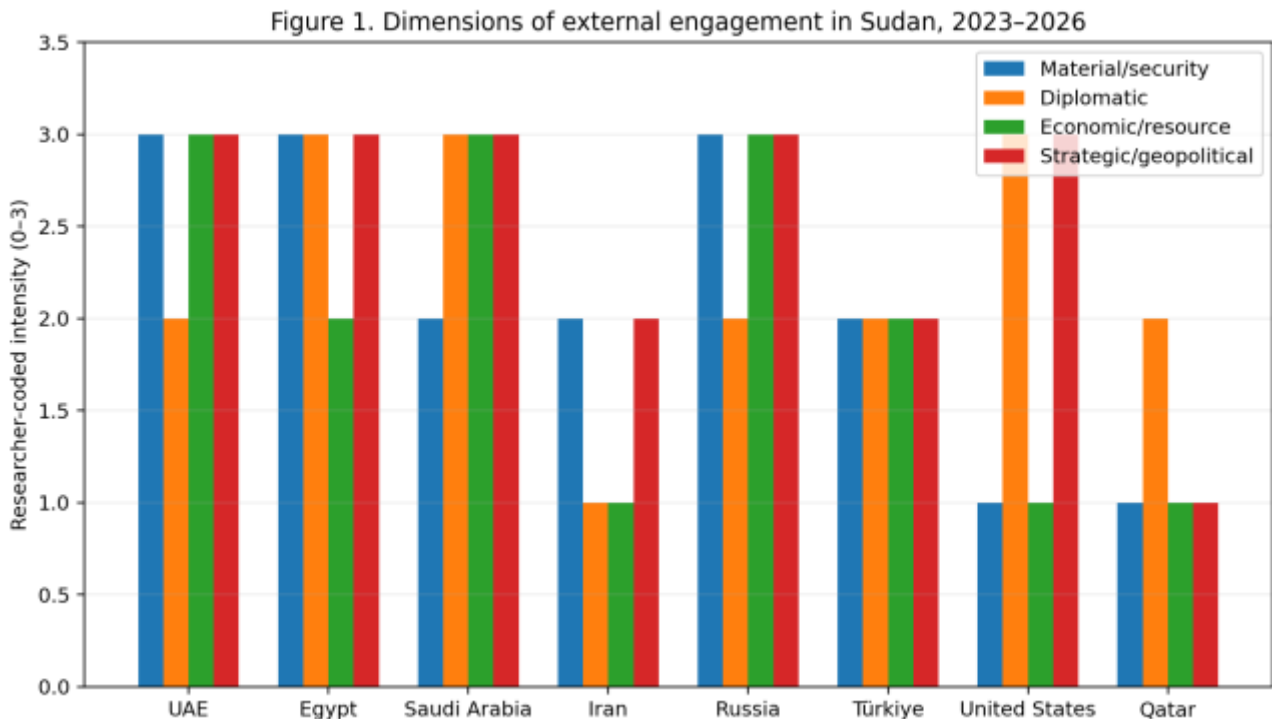
avoided direct large-scale deployment while maintaining relationships that affect the capabilities and diplomatic positions of the SAF and RSF. Proxy relationships can also be asymmetric and informal, involving financial networks, commercial entities, political contacts, technology and logistics rather than formal alliances. The theoretical proposition guiding this study is that Sudan's strategic location, Red Sea coastline, natural resources and proximity to major regional security complexes have encouraged external powers to treat the civil war as an arena for advancing broader geopolitical interests. The mechanism is expected to operate through four pathways: enhancement of belligerent capabilities, economic sustainment, diplomatic protection or legitimacy, and strategic competition over territory and access. The expected consequence is not necessarily permanent stalemate but a greater capacity for continued conflict and a more complex bargaining environment. At the same time, the framework recognises an important limitation. External support is not sufficient to explain the war. Domestic political exclusion, the institutional autonomy of the security sector, competition over state resources, and the failed transition after 2019 remain central. Externalisation should therefore be treated as an amplifier and transformer of the conflict rather than its sole cause.

Analytical dimension	Realist expectation	Proxy-war mechanism	Observable evidence
Strategic geography	States seek access and deny rivals strategic advantage	Local actors become channels for external influence	Port access, Red Sea diplomacy, border security
Material capability	External resources alter relative power	Sponsors supply resources while local actors retain agency	Finance, technology, logistical support
Economic interests	Resource and trade interests shape state preferences	Commercial networks sustain armed actors	Gold, agriculture, livestock, logistics
Diplomatic competition	States seek influence and recognition	External legitimacy strengthens local bargaining positions	Mediation, recognition, sanctions, diplomatic visits
Conflict duration	Outside resources can reduce costs of continued war	Sponsors can enable repeated mobilisation	Persistence of fighting despite battlefield shifts

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design based on documentary and secondary-source analysis. The approach was appropriate because the central research questions concern strategic interests, external relationships, policy behaviour and geopolitical interpretation that are documented through official statements, sanctions records, Security Council materials, scholarly studies and credible policy research. The documentary corpus consisted of four broad categories of evidence. The first comprised United Nations materials, including Security Council documents, Panel of Experts materials, statements by senior UN officials and humanitarian reporting. The second comprised government and intergovernmental sources, including United States Treasury sanctions records and European Union measures. The third consisted of scholarly and policy research from institutions such as Chatham House, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the European Council on Foreign Relations and African policy

research organisations. The fourth comprised reputable international reporting used to cross-check time-sensitive developments and contested claims. Content analysis was organised around four coding dimensions: material/security engagement, diplomatic engagement, economic/resource interests and strategic/geopolitical objectives. Each actor was coded on a four-point ordinal scale from 0 to 3, where 0 indicated no meaningful evidence in the reviewed corpus, 1 limited engagement, 2 substantial engagement and 3 very substantial engagement. The scores are analytical coding aids rather than measurements of actual quantities of military assistance, money or influence. They are used to compare the breadth and visibility of engagement across the documentary corpus. Source triangulation was employed because allegations of foreign support in Sudan are politically contested. Where a government disputed an allegation, the dispute was recorded rather than treated as settled fact. For example, evidence and allegations concerning UAE support for the RSF have been accompanied by official UAE denials; accordingly, the paper distinguishes documented findings, allegations, and the position of the accused government. This approach reduces the risk of converting contested claims into unsupported assertions. The study covered April 2023 to September 2026. The temporal cut-off is important because the external environment changed during the war. Iran's relationship with the SAF, Russia's strategic calculations, Gulf competition, the role of mediation, and the technological character of the war evolved over time. The analysis therefore treats external involvement as dynamic rather than fixed. The principal limitation is that clandestine support networks cannot be measured comprehensively through open sources. Some military transfers, financial transactions and intelligence relationships remain classified or deliberately obscured. The findings therefore concern documented and credibly reported patterns of external involvement, not an exhaustive inventory of all foreign activity.



Source: Author's qualitative coding of the documentary corpus reviewed for this study. Note: scores are analytical indicators, not estimates of financial or military volume.

5. Sudan's Strategic Geopolitical Position

Sudan's strategic significance derives from the interaction of geography, resources and political position. Its Red Sea coastline gives it direct relevance to maritime security, while its location between North Africa and the Horn creates a bridge between different regional security environments. Its borders connect multiple conflict-prone and strategically important spaces. This makes instability in Sudan capable of producing external effects beyond its territory.

Port Sudan is particularly significant because it is the principal maritime gateway for the SAF-aligned authorities and an important node in humanitarian and commercial logistics. External interest in Port Sudan cannot be separated from the wider Red Sea environment, where maritime routes connect the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf. Chatham House has noted that Russian naval ambitions and growing Iranian presence have implications for Red Sea security, while the war also interacts with Gulf competition (Chatham House, 2025c).

Natural resources provide another layer of strategic significance. Gold has become one of the most important conflict commodities. Chatham House's research shows that gold connects Sudanese armed actors to cross-border commercial networks and that control of mining and distribution has implications for the financing of war (Chatham House, 2025a). The European Union likewise identified the mining sector as important to sustaining the conflict when it expanded sanctions in 2025 (Council of the European Union, 2025). Agriculture and livestock also matter. Gulf states have longstanding interests in Sudanese agricultural production and food security. These investments create incentives to maintain access to land, ports and trade corridors. The strategic value of Sudan is therefore not limited to military geography; it includes the ability to influence food supply, commodity flows and regional logistics. The country's proximity to Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sahel further raises its geopolitical importance. Egypt has security concerns relating to its southern border and the Nile environment. Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and broader Nile politics create an additional strategic context. To the west, instability in Darfur has consequences for Chad and Libya. To the south, the war affects South Sudan and cross-border oil and humanitarian networks. Sudan consequently occupies a junction where multiple security complexes overlap.

6. External Powers and Competing Strategic Interests

6.1 Egypt

Egypt's relationship with Sudan is rooted in geography, historical ties, border security and Nile politics. Cairo has maintained a close relationship with the SAF and has repeatedly emphasised Sudan's territorial integrity and state institutions. From a Realist perspective, a stable Sudan under a state-centric security structure may be viewed by Egypt as preferable to prolonged fragmentation on its southern border. Egypt also has an interest in developments affecting the Nile basin and in preventing instability from creating additional pressure on its economy and security environment. The relationship with the SAF therefore has strategic significance beyond the immediate battlefield.

6.2 United Arab Emirates

The UAE has become one of the most consequential external actors in the Sudan conflict. Its interests include gold and commodity networks, agricultural investments, logistics, Red Sea influence and broader regional positioning. Chatham House identifies the UAE as a central actor in the conflict ecosystem and links its Sudan policy to gold, food security and competition over regional influence (Chatham House, 2025a). U.S. Treasury sanctions in January 2025

documented UAE-based companies and financial networks linked to RSF financing and weapons procurement. At the same time, the UAE has rejected allegations that it supplies the RSF, and its official position must be distinguished from findings or allegations made by other actors (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025; United Arab Emirates, 2025). The analytical significance lies in the density of economic and political networks connecting the UAE to Sudan, regardless of disputes over specific transfers.

6.3 Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia combines strategic, economic and diplomatic interests in Sudan. Its geographic position across the Red Sea makes Sudan relevant to maritime security and regional stability, while its investments and food-security concerns create economic interests. Saudi Arabia has also played a prominent role in mediation efforts, including the Jeddah process. Its position illustrates the multidimensional character of external involvement: a state can possess strategic interests and relationships with Sudanese actors while simultaneously promoting negotiations. From a Realist perspective, mediation can itself serve strategic stability by limiting spillover and protecting regional interests.

6.4 Iran

Iran's role expanded during the war through renewed relations with the SAF and reported military cooperation. The strategic significance of Sudan for Iran is connected to the Red Sea and to Tehran's wider effort to maintain regional relationships and access. The reported supply of drones and other military cooperation demonstrated how technology can alter the battlefield without requiring a conventional foreign deployment. This case illustrates the proxy-war mechanism in which relatively limited external inputs can produce disproportionate operational effects when local actors possess the organisational capacity to integrate them.

6.5 Russia

Russia's Sudan policy reflects a mixture of strategic access, resource interests and flexible alignment. Port Sudan has been important in discussions over Russian naval ambitions in the Red Sea, while Russian-linked commercial and security networks have also been associated with Sudan's gold economy. Russia's relationships have evolved rather than remaining tied permanently to one Sudanese actor. This flexibility is consistent with a Realist strategy that prioritises strategic access and influence over ideological consistency. The war has consequently offered Moscow opportunities to bargain over security relationships, resources and regional positioning.

6.6 Türkiye

Türkiye's interests in Sudan combine economic relations, diplomatic influence and security cooperation. Ankara has maintained relationships with Sudanese state institutions and has historically sought commercial and political influence in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea. Its role is less direct than that of the most heavily implicated external actors, but it forms part of the broader pattern of multi-alignment in which Sudanese actors cultivate several external relationships simultaneously.

6.7 United States

The United States has primarily used diplomacy, sanctions, humanitarian policy and multilateral pressure rather than direct military participation. Washington has imposed sanctions on individuals and commercial networks associated with the conflict and has repeatedly called for a ceasefire and political transition. The United States also has broader interests in Red Sea maritime security, regional stability and limiting the spread of transnational armed networks. Its role demonstrates that internationalisation does not necessarily require military sponsorship; diplomatic and economic instruments can shape the strategic environment.

6.8 Qatar and Other Actors

Qatar has maintained political and economic relationships in Sudan and has historically played mediation roles in Darfur. Other regional actors, including Chad, Libya, Ethiopia and South Sudan, are affected by cross-border flows of refugees, arms, commodities and armed groups. The African Union and IGAD have also sought to influence the diplomatic process. These actors are important because internationalisation involves not only powerful states but also neighbouring countries and regional organisations whose security is directly affected by the war.

Actor	Principal strategic interests	Primary modes of engagement	Relationship to conflict
Egypt	Border security; Nile politics; state stability	Security ties; diplomacy; political support	Predominantly SAF-oriented
UAE	Gold; food security; logistics; Red Sea influence	Economic networks; diplomacy; alleged material support	Widely reported RSF-oriented; UAE denies arming RSF
Saudi Arabia	Red Sea security; investment; regional stability	Mediation; diplomacy; economic ties	Mediator with strategic ties across Sudan
Iran	Red Sea access; regional influence	Military cooperation; diplomatic ties	SAF-oriented
Russia	Port access; gold; geopolitical influence	Security/economic networks; diplomacy	Flexible and evolving relationships
Türkiye	Trade; diplomacy; Red Sea/Horn influence	Commercial ties; diplomacy; security cooperation	Closer institutional ties with Sudanese state
United States	Regional stability; maritime security; transition	Sanctions; diplomacy; humanitarian policy	Pressure on all belligerents; no direct combat role
Qatar	Mediation; economic and political influence	Diplomacy; investment	Historical Darfur engagement; political ties

7. External Support and the Internationalisation of the War

The evidence indicates that external support affected the war through at least four mechanisms: sustaining material capacity, enabling technological adaptation, strengthening political legitimacy and expanding the conflict's economic geography. These mechanisms interacted rather than operating independently.

First, material support increased the capacity of the belligerents to continue fighting after battlefield reversals. The 2025 assessment by the International Institute for Strategic Studies noted that the conflict had acquired the characteristics of a proxy war because the combatants required substantial external resources to maintain the scale of operations (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). This does not mean that every external actor sought indefinite war. It means that external relationships reduced the immediate resource constraints that might otherwise have encouraged stronger bargaining pressure.

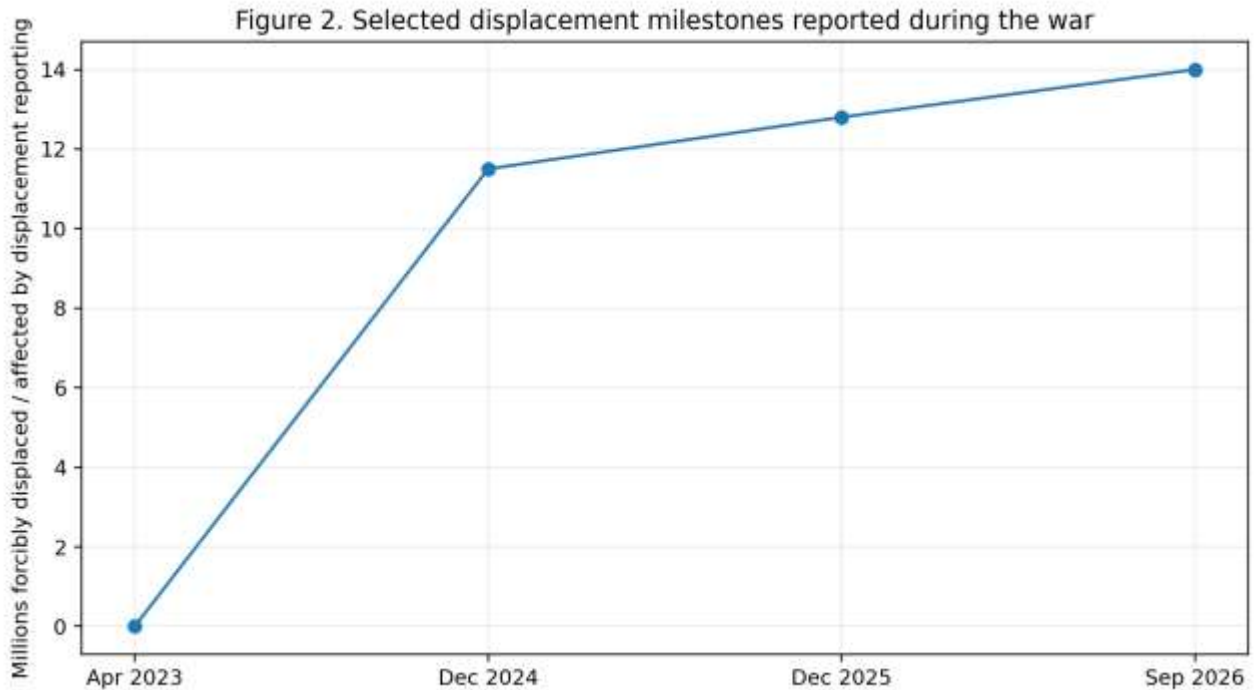
Second, technological assistance changed the character of warfare. The UN Human Rights Office reported in May 2026 that armed drones accounted for at least 880 civilian deaths between January and April 2026, representing more than 80 percent of the conflict-related civilian deaths recorded by the UN team during that period (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2026). This is significant for internationalisation because sophisticated technology can extend the geographical reach of violence and reduce some of the operational limitations imposed by distance or terrain.

Third, external diplomatic relationships have influenced the legitimacy environment. The competing diplomatic efforts around the SAF-controlled authorities, RSF political initiatives and regional mediation forums have created multiple arenas in which the belligerents seek recognition and bargaining leverage. Internationalisation therefore occurs not only through military assistance but also through competing claims to represent Sudan.

Fourth, the conflict has developed a transnational political economy. Gold, agricultural commodities, livestock, fuel and financial networks connect Sudan to external markets. Chatham House's 2025 analysis showed that gold in particular links armed actors to cross-border networks that can sustain mobilisation (Chatham House, 2025a). Sanctions regimes have attempted to disrupt these networks, but enforcement remains difficult because commercial transactions can move through intermediary jurisdictions.

The combined effect is a conflict that is increasingly difficult to settle through a purely domestic bargain. Each belligerent can calculate that continued external support may improve its bargaining position. External patrons can also interpret battlefield outcomes in terms of their own regional interests. This creates a strategic interaction in which local and external calculations reinforce one another.

However, internationalisation should not be interpreted as a one-directional process. Sudanese actors have exercised agency in selecting partners, changing alignments and negotiating access to external resources. The RSF's transnational commercial relationships and the SAF's state-to-state diplomatic relationships represent different models of externalisation. Neither is simply controlled from abroad. The resulting conflict is a hybrid of domestic power struggle and international strategic competition.



Source: Author's synthesis of selected reported displacement milestones. The points are not a continuous statistical series and should not be interpreted as a precise annual growth rate.

Period	Major internationalisation trend	Strategic implication
Apr–Dec 2023	Rapid formation of external support networks and regional mediation	Domestic war immediately acquired regional dimensions
2024	Expansion of cross-border logistics, gold networks and diplomatic competition	External resources became increasingly important to battlefield sustainability
2025	SAF territorial gains; stronger debate over proxy-war character; expanded sanctions	Foreign support became central to explanations of conflict persistence
Jan–Apr 2026	Growing use of drones and wider geographic reach of attacks	Technology reduced the ability of seasonal or geographic constraints to limit violence
May–Sep 2026	Continued external-support debate and renewed UN calls for accountability	Internationalisation remained a central obstacle to conflict resolution

8. Sudan and the Emerging Red Sea Geopolitical Order

Sudan's war is simultaneously a domestic conflict and a struggle embedded within an evolving Red Sea order. The significance of this order lies in the number of states seeking access, influence and security along the maritime corridor connecting the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Gulf

of Aden and Indian Ocean. The war's continuation therefore has implications for port access, maritime security, trade and regional power balances.

The competition is not reducible to a simple great-power rivalry. Middle powers such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Türkiye possess significant financial, diplomatic and military capabilities and pursue autonomous regional strategies. Iran seeks strategic depth along the Red Sea, while Russia has sought opportunities for naval access and economic influence. The United States remains an important diplomatic and security actor, although its instruments in Sudan differ from those of regional sponsors. The resulting order is characterised by multi-alignment, issue-based partnerships and competition among actors that may cooperate elsewhere.

Sudan also demonstrates the importance of economic statecraft. Port development, agricultural investment, mineral trade and logistics can create long-term influence without formal territorial control. This is particularly important for middle powers whose strategies combine commercial investment with diplomatic and security relationships. The UAE's Sudan policy illustrates this pattern clearly, as economic networks and strategic ambitions intersect around gold, food security and maritime logistics (Chatham House, 2025a).

The Red Sea order is also shaped by the risk of fragmentation. If Sudan becomes divided into durable zones of political and military control, external actors may establish separate relationships with different authorities. Such a scenario would deepen competition over ports, borders, trade corridors and natural resources. Chatham House has warned that fragmentation could undermine the long-term interests of the very regional powers that currently benefit from access to Sudanese resources (Chatham House, 2025b).

The emerging order therefore presents a paradox. External competition can make Sudan strategically valuable while simultaneously making peace harder to achieve. The more Sudanese territory, ports and resources become connected to external strategic calculations, the more difficult it becomes for domestic actors to reach a settlement that does not affect foreign interests. Internationalisation thus increases the number of stakeholders in the conflict and expands the number of issues that a settlement must address.

9. Discussion of Findings

The first finding is that external competition has shaped the trajectory of the war by altering the distribution of resources available to the belligerents. This finding is consistent with Realist expectations: states and other powerful actors respond to perceived strategic opportunities and threats. Yet the Sudan case also confirms the proxy-war insight that external relationships are reciprocal. The SAF and RSF are not passive recipients; they actively seek external relationships to improve their domestic positions. The second finding is that external actors are motivated by overlapping rather than identical interests. Egypt's calculations are strongly connected to border and Nile security; Gulf actors combine food security, investment and Red Sea interests; Iran's engagement has a stronger strategic and technological dimension; Russia's engagement is linked to access and resources; Türkiye combines commercial and diplomatic interests; and the United States relies primarily on diplomacy, sanctions and humanitarian instruments. These differences make the conflict a competitive ecosystem rather than a binary alliance structure.

The third finding is that the economic dimension is inseparable from the security dimension. Gold and other commodities provide revenue, while agricultural and logistics interests create incentives for long-term access. This supports the argument that contemporary geopolitical competition increasingly operates through economic statecraft and transnational commercial networks rather than through formal military occupation. The fourth finding is that technological

externalisation has altered the intensity and geography of violence. The documented rise in drone-related civilian deaths in early 2026 demonstrates that access to technology can change operational patterns. The implication for conflict resolution is substantial: even if ground fighting becomes constrained by geography or weather, technological capabilities can enable continued attacks. The fifth finding is that externalisation has complicated mediation. The existence of several foreign interests creates multiple channels of influence but also multiple veto points. A ceasefire arrangement that does not address the concerns of neighbouring states, Gulf powers, external sponsors and commercial networks may be difficult to sustain. Conversely, an externally imposed settlement that excludes Sudanese civilian actors' risks reproducing the structural conditions that produced the war. The evidence therefore supports a qualified internationalisation thesis. Sudan's war has become internationalised not because foreign powers have replaced domestic actors, but because domestic and external strategic calculations have become mutually reinforcing. This is a more precise interpretation than describing Sudan simply as a proxy war.

10. Conclusion

This study examined the transformation of Sudan's civil war from an overwhelmingly domestic struggle into a conflict embedded within wider geopolitical competition between regional and extra-regional powers. The evidence demonstrates that Sudan's strategic location, resource base and position within the Red Sea–Horn of Africa security environment have attracted sustained external attention. Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, Türkiye, the United States and other actors have pursued different combinations of security, economic, diplomatic and strategic interests. The study concludes that external involvement has materially influenced the trajectory of the war. External relationships have expanded the resources available to belligerents, enabled technological adaptation, strengthened competing diplomatic positions and connected the conflict to transnational political economies. The effect has been to increase the complexity and resilience of the conflict rather than simply to determine its outcome. Realism explains why external powers treat Sudan as strategically significant: security, access, relative influence and regional position matter. Proxy warfare complements this perspective by explaining how external powers can pursue interests indirectly through local actors while those local actors retain agency. Together, the frameworks provide a stronger explanation than either would provide alone.

The most important implication is that Sudan's peace cannot be treated exclusively as a domestic bargaining problem. External powers have become part of the conflict structure, and their interests must therefore be addressed through coordinated diplomacy. Yet internationalisation should not become an excuse to marginalise Sudanese civilians. The political settlement must remain Sudanese-led, while external states are pressured to reduce the resources and incentives that sustain continued warfare. Finally, the Sudan case illustrates a broader transformation in African international relations. Strategic competition is increasingly organised through flexible partnerships, economic networks, technology, logistics and regional middle powers. Sudan is consequently not merely a victim of geopolitical competition; it is also an arena in which the emerging Red Sea order is being contested. Understanding that interaction is essential to explaining why the war has proved so difficult to end.

11. Policy Recommendations

1. A coordinated external-pressure mechanism should be established around the principal states capable of influencing the SAF and RSF. Rather than proliferating parallel initiatives, the United Nations, African Union, IGAD, Arab League, European Union and key regional states should

align minimum requirements around an immediate cessation of hostilities, humanitarian access and a civilian-led political process. The September 2026 UN position that countries supplying external support should face accountability provides a basis for stronger multilateral diplomacy (United Nations, 2026).

2. Arms-embargo and financial-sanctions implementation should be strengthened through better monitoring of aviation routes, commercial intermediaries, gold transactions and dual-use financial networks. The UN Panel of Experts has an established mandate to monitor violations of the Sudan sanctions regime, while the EU and United States have continued to expand targeted sanctions. The policy priority should be consistent enforcement and information-sharing rather than the multiplication of disconnected sanctions lists.

3. Regional mediation should be redesigned around the reality of overlapping interests. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and other influential states should be engaged in a structured regional framework in which security and economic concerns are negotiated alongside the Sudanese peace process. The objective should not be to assign external states ownership of Sudan's transition, but to reduce incentives for competitive sponsorship.

4. Sudan's peace process should place greater emphasis on the political economy of war. Gold, agricultural assets, ports, livestock corridors and other revenue-generating sectors should be incorporated into a post-conflict economic governance framework. Without addressing the financial foundations of armed mobilisation, a ceasefire could merely provide an interval before renewed competition.

5. External actors should support a civilian-led political settlement rather than treating military actors as the only credible interlocutors. International pressure should be directed toward preserving Sudanese civilian agency, protecting humanitarian access and creating conditions for representative political institutions. A sustainable regional order requires a Sudanese state capable of managing its territory and resources without becoming dependent on competing external patrons.

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