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Security Dialogue for East Africa:
Insights & Perspectives

An Assessment of Sudan's Strategic Partnerships in Africa

The Relations with Chad and Ethiopia
before, during and after the Transition

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Introduction

Sudan is an important country in both Africa and the Middle East. Its geostrategic importance stems from its shared borders with the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya and South Sudan. This geostrategic importance gives Sudan geopolitical importance, to impact the politics, economics and security of those countries, and vice versa. This introduction provides a brief historical outline, before the analysis explores these themes in detail.

Sudan's geopolitical importance, and the use of geostrategic positioning, contributed to the resilience of the regime of former President Omar al-Bashir and the Sudanese Islamists Movement (SIM) that has ruled Sudan since 30 June 1989. From 1994, the SIM used Sudan's position to export its ideology of political Islam into the neighbouring countries of Chad, Eritrea and Ethiopia through supporting armed groups.¹ For the regime, this was a natural response to aggression from the United States of America (US) and its allies, who were isolating the country and supporting the Sudanese opposition.²

Sudan's geopolitical position also gave the SIM leverage to deal with regional competition, such as forging a close alliance with Iran in order to challenge Saudi Arabia. In the 1990s, this relationship helped Sudan to create its Popular Defence Forces, a paramilitary group initially created to replace the regular Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).³ To prolong its hold on power, the regime also developed close relations with the Russian Federation and China, buying arms and selling oil in the face of international

isolation, and avoiding international condemnation in the United Nations.⁴

The Bashir regime was also always open to political dialogue, providing Sudan with international legitimacy as a negotiating partner. It participated in talks with both the Bush and Obama administrations over the conflicts in South Sudan and Darfur and counter-terrorism operations, in the hopes that the US would see it as a partner in the Horn of Africa.⁵ It was also open to talks with both armed and non-armed opposition groups, with the intention of dividing and undermining the opposition.

Throughout this period, the Bashir regime consolidated their supporters in the state institutions and security services, including the SAF, and balanced regional powers against each other. These policies were part of its regime security and patronage system. Nonetheless, the regime faced numerous challenges, and ultimately Bashir's unpopularity, lack of economic vision and focus on regime security resulted in the removal of Bashir and other senior regime figures from power on 11 April 2019.⁶

It should be stressed that this did not really constitute the overthrow of the SIM from power. On the contrary, the pressures of international isolation and condemnation from the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the unwillingness of US-based financial institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to provide new lines of credit or debt relief for Sudan's 58 billion US dollars debt, convinced leaders within the regime such as Lieutenant-General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Lieutenant-General Yasir al-Atta that the only way to protect the regime's stay in power was through removing Bashir.⁷

Burhan and his allies decided that they would govern from behind the scenes, and retake power through post-transition elections. This calculation was based on the emergence of an internationally accepted transitional government that would end Sudan's isolation; after Sudan received debt relief and international legitimacy from Western countries, Burhan and his allies could restore through elections what would effectively be the former regime. They relied on the old government having 500,000 supporters in the state institutions and control of Sudan's lucrative black market to guarantee a post-transition electoral victory.⁸

However, the former regime also faced a challenge from Lieutenant-General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo or "Hemedti", and his Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary. The former regime had not forgiven Hemedti and the RSF for their involvement in arresting Bashir and the leaders of the regime in 2019. Moreover, civilian leaders of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), who represented protestors against the Bashir

regime, planned an alliance with Hemedti to use his forces to protect the transition period from the remnants of the former regime.⁹ To neutralise the possibility of such an alliance, Burhan and his allies used Hemedti and the RSF to empty the protest site in Khartoum on 3 June 2019.

Nevertheless, Hemedti went on to show his presidential ambitions. His regional backers, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), supported him for providing troops to the Arab Coalition for the war in Yemen against the Houthi movement. Moreover, the UAE has contracted him to send troops to southern Yemen to protect its influence, and to send troops to Libya, to support Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's offensive to capture Tripoli in 2019.¹⁰ Additionally, Hemedti has long-standing ties with the UAE, through facilitating the export of Sudanese gold to the country; reasonable evidence indicates his takeover of lucrative mines in Darfur.¹¹

Burhan and Hemedti did not initially confront each other, rather focusing their joint efforts on undermining Abdallah Hamdok, appointed on 20 August 2019 as Prime Minister for the transitional Government, and his FFC allies. Both Burhan and Hemedti were made part of the transitional arrangement through heading the Sovereignty Council, the highest transitional authority in Sudan, where in practice they overlapped with the mandates of Hamdok and his Cabinet. During the transitional period, the military component (Burhan and Hemedti) focused on continuing Bashir's balancing act to stay in power, while the civilian component (led by Hamdok) pushed to attract foreign investments and debt relief.¹²

Both sides seemed to be in harmony with the goal of ending Sudan's regional and international isolation. However, the politics over whether the civilian or the military politicians could claim the credit for ending Sudan's isolation, and ultimately continue to rule Sudan, created constant attrition in the arena of Sudan's foreign policy direction, especially towards the neighbouring countries of Chad and Ethiopia. Burhan and Hemedti overstepped their mandates, for example, by controlling the peace talks with armed movements in Juba, with the intention to undermine the FFC members of the cabinet. They further interfered with Sudan's foreign policy, meeting with Israeli officials, taking the lead in the border conflict with Ethiopia in the al-Fashaga region, and making regional and international visits to countries including Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Turkey.

This paper provides an analysis of Sudan's strategic partnerships within Africa, using Sudan's foreign relations with Chad and Ethiopia as case studies. It situates these within the power struggle over the foreign policy direction of the country between the civilian and the military politicians, and

within the military. A succinct literature review is first shared, to show the theoretical analysis guiding the study. The analysis then provides a brief overview of Sudan's political constitutional system, military, and economic capabilities in relation to Chad and Ethiopia, and shows foreign policy processes and institutions which the Bashir regime put in place, changing Sudan's relationships of belligerence with these countries to strategic partnerships. The political events preceding and following the 2019 overthrow of Bashir are then outlined, in order to provide context for the exploration of how Sudan's strategic partnerships continued, created or changed after the military coup of 25 October 2021, considering how and why foreign policy objectives and alignments were recalibrated to maintain the regime of Burhan and Hemedti. Finally, the paper emphasises the competition between Burhan and Hemedti to create their own partnerships to support their presidential ambitions.

Literature review and theoretical perspective

A country's foreign policy direction can be attributed to the internal politics of a regime in power. Hans Morgenthau, one of the prominent figures of realism of international relations theory explains that conflict between states is a result of domestic politics of a state, and human nature.¹³ Although Kenneth Waltz the founder of neorealist international relations theory sticks with the principles of realism that states are the central unit of analysis; the world is anarchical encouraging states to self interest of focusing on its own security and self help is rule of the game to survive. However, Waltz departs from realism by adding the international system in itself encourages states to behave in a certain way as a result of their place in the international order; their distribution of power that ultimately affects the balance of power within the international system.¹⁴

James Fearon complements this, providing an analysis of international relations literature in regard to integrating domestic politics into foreign policy analysis. According to Fearon, domestic politics only matters when it results in states following suboptimal foreign policies, or when differences in states such as culture, leadership style, economic policies and goals explain foreign policy choices. This analysis opens up theories of economic protectionism, diversionary wars, dichotomy of democratic and non-democratic regimes initiation of wars.¹⁵

Jalal Firoozabadi and Mojtaba Ashkezari argue that foreign policies are based on three sets of variables: (1) evaluation of threats and opportunities of anarchical international system by states, or more

precisely by decision makers; (2) strategic adaption of those countries in accordance to who the decision makers are, how they react to international threats, how internal actors affect foreign policy, which internal actors are most important; and under what conditions decision makers negotiate with internal actors; and (3) the level of mobilisation of state resources, including how states mobilise resources to reach specific goals, the influence of internal actors over decision makers, and the determining factors in bargaining with social groups.¹⁶

The literature of neorealism goes in harmony with studies on the deep state actors. According to Hans Morgenthau, in countries where a deep state or dual state exists, the deep or dual state is able to exert an

effective veto against the decisions of the regular state governed by institutions and the rule of law.¹⁷ This follows Oren Barak's explanation of the democratic deficit in the Middle East: the deep state and security networks are usually intertwined and will hinder a country's progress to democracy. These networks can especially dominate the security establishment in a state where they share norms, values and perceptions, encouraging them to see matters in a securitised perspective. Deep state networks will always work on protecting their actors' interests within the state, especially in a country consolidating its transition towards democracy.¹⁸

The concept of the deep state also enables understanding of the role of technocrats and strategies of minorities in state institutions, especially the foreign policy aspects. Juliet Kaarbo explains the conditions and strategies minorities use for an effective impact on a country's foreign policies: rewards and costs, such as threatening to withdraw from bureaucracy if a policy not to their liking is pursued; procedural strategies of manipulation of an institutional procedure to affect a policy outcome; and informational persuasion to encourage others to agree with a minority's position.¹⁹ This analysis is based on Graham Allison's model which argues that there is politics in bureaucratic institutions.²⁰

This analysis explains the politics of foreign policymaking, where authoritarian regime technocracy contributes to the making of the deep state and can impede transition to democracy. Mohammed Hussein and Imad Omar explain that technocrats' closeness to decision makers, where at times their recommendations may conflict with popular

opinion and accountability, can give way to the deep state.²¹

These processes and mechanisms are composed of different actors and power centres, which consider that their interests represent the interests of the state and should be reflected in a state's foreign policy pursuits. These views give insight into states' foreign policy goals and objectives, priorities, interests, and values, and therefore the interactions between states.

Strategic partnership is one of many foreign policy tools states use to achieve their objectives and interests. The concept gained precedence with the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the bipolar global order encouraged states to adapt new forms of alignment, away from alliances. Both Ellen Laipson and Paul Varkey explain this as a result of states wanting to achieve their foreign policies and goals without the rigidity of an alliance.²² Strategic partnerships certainly allow states more freedom and flexibility towards achieving their own interests. Lucyna Czechowska, Pan Zhongqi and Anna Michalski analyse how international politics encourages states to focus on pursuing their own interests through equal partnerships, rather than alliances where one state can dominate others.²³

Strategic partnerships can be defined as a foreign policy tool states use to coordinate their actions with other states. These actions could be seen from a neorealist prism, as a way for powerful states to maximise political, economic, and military dominance in the international system. From the neoliberal prism, it is seen as a bilateral relation

characterised by institutional flexibility, exceptional closeness, and the intensity of relations between subjects convinced of the integrity of their strategic goals and decide to implement them in the long-term.²⁴

Initially, alignments were focused on security, as analysed by Thomas Wilkins and further researched by Andriy Tyushka and Lucyna Czechowska.²⁵ However, over time its scope has expanded to include economic and political alignment. Pan and Michalski show that strategic partnerships based on both norms and values and interests tend to last longer than partnerships reliant on one or the other ingredient.²⁶

This research uses Wilkins's theoretical framework of strategic partnerships as organised around a principle, such as championing a multipolar world order, rather than a specific task such as deterring a hostile state or fighting state; goal-driven,

with no enemy state even if the focus of the partnership is on joint security matters such as terrorism, separatism or fundamentalism; unlike alliances in that they are informal in nature and require low commitments; and with economic interests as one of the "silent" areas of cooperation, and a key driver along with security.²⁷

This study adopts Wilkin's perspective of strategic partnerships, as it harmonises with both neoclassical realism and the analysis of the deep state. Both perspectives have influenced Sudan's foreign policy behaviour with Chad and Ethiopia between September 2019 and April 2023. Sudan's foreign policy behaviour has been especially influenced by the deep state of the former Bashir regime and the SIM, which has continued to dominate Sudan since 30 June 1989.

Analysis

Sudan-Chad relations under Bashir

The strategic partnership between Sudan and Chad has been a long time in the making. The driving reason behind this strategic partnership is that both countries realise the security of their regimes cannot be ensured if each other continued to support armed opposition groups against one another.

The Republic of the Sudan is, on paper, a multi-ethnic federal presidential system. Similar to Chad, power is vested in the Constitutional Charter and is separated between the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. However, the National Congress Party (NCP) has dominated the political system since Bashir's victory in a power struggle with Hassan al-Turabi, the ideologue of the SIM, in a palace coup of 1999–2001.²⁸ The export of oil and gold has allowed the Bashir regime to create, sustain and expand patronage networks within the state.²⁹ In 2019, its population was 43.23 million. Its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was 748 US dollars. Foreign direct investment was 830 million US dollars.³⁰ In terms of military strength, the SAF was ranked 74 out of 145 national militaries, according to Global Firepower. The SAF has a defence budget of 287,210,000 US dollars, including land forces, the air force and the navy.³¹

The Republic of Chad has maintained a semblance of a multi-ethnic presidential

republic, with a theoretical separation of power into different branches of the Government. In 2019, Chad had a rapidly growing population of 15.81 million. Its GDP per capita was 1,645 US dollars. Foreign direct investment was 570 million US dollars.³² In terms of military strength, the Chadian Armed Forces (CAF) were ranked 97 out of 145. The CAF has a defence budget of 292,610,000 US dollars, including land forces and the air force.³³

Chad's relations with Sudan have been fluid. Cross-border relations impacted political relations between the Government of Idriss Déby and the SIM. Déby took power in Chad through the armed movement, the Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS). Using Darfur as a rear base of operations against the previous regime of Hissène Habré, Déby created a coalition of the Zaghawa clan and Arab tribesman. SIM support allowed the MPS to march troops on N'Djamena in December 1990, and Déby ruled Chad until his death on 21 April 2021. Under his rule the MPS dominated the political system, and Déby's supporters staffed state institutions, especially the Republican Guard and CAF. After 2009, the export of oil created a rentier mentality and patronage system.³⁴

Déby initially had the support of the SIM, in order to block the Sudanese opposition, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), from receiving support from

Chad. Despite 13 years of cordial relations, however, Khartoum did not believe that Déby could control Chad's borders. In 2003, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) which hailed from the Zaghawa clan – the powerbase of Déby's regime – and the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM), both rose to challenge the Bashir regime. Both groups used Chad as a rear base, recruited from Déby's own Republican Guards, and gathered the support of the Zaghawa clan base of Déby's regime. While Déby sent forces in 2003 to attack both factions, the ethnic ties between the armed movements and CAF spoiled Déby's relations with Khartoum.³⁵

The hawks of the Bashir regime, represented by Presidential Adviser Nafie Ali Nafie, Minister of Interior al-Zubair Bashir Taha, Minister of Humanitarian Affairs Ahmed Haroun, and West Darfur Governor Jaffar Abdul Hakim, created the *Front uni pour le Changement Démocratique*, which attacked Chad in December 2005.³⁶ Chadian government forces barely triumphed in another attack on N'djamena in 2008 by rebels sponsored by Sudan, saved by the rebels running out of ammunition and the involvement of the French ambassador. This encouraged Déby to follow a strategy of isolating rebels from their sponsors (Khartoum) and dividing rebel groups from within, ultimately managing to reduce the influence of the JEM and SLM within Chad.³⁷

On-off diplomatic relations and support for each other's armed oppositions continued until both sides decided to restore relations in 2009, in order to maintain their own regime security. This process was aided by changes in internal dynamics within

both regimes. In Sudan, Salah Gosh, head of the National Intelligence and Security Services, was removed from his post in 2009. The appointment of the pragmatic Ghazi Atabani as responsible for the Darfur file signalled the Bashir regime's decision to use diplomacy rather than a security approach to resolve the Darfur conflict and stay in power. The Bashir regime wished to end Sudan's international isolation and normalise relations with the US, and for the US to remove Sudan from its State Sponsors of Terrorism list (SST), which would enable access to international debt relief and new lines of credit. In Chad, Déby successfully co-opted the opposition against him, and appointed Moussa Faki, another pragmatist, as Minister of Foreign Affairs.³⁸

The countries signed a joint communiqué on 15 January 2010, a peace agreement outlining the immediate political and security interests of both countries. The nature of this partnership was security-driven. It called for the normalising of relations between both countries, an end to their hostilities (especially through ceasing support for armed movements against one another) and implementing a security protocol through a bilateral military-security commission including joint military units to patrol the Sudan-Chad borders.³⁹

Once that was achieved, both sides furthered their regime resilience through encouraging party-to-party interactions and cooperation. In September 2015, NCP and MPS deputies met in N'Djamena, signing memorandums of understanding and cooperation agreements, and agreeing to form joint committees to meet regularly. Against this background,

SAF Chief of Staff Mustafa Osman Obied met Déby to further security relations and defence training for Chadian military students in Sudanese military institutes.⁴⁰ In April 2018, at a two-day border conference in West Darfur, Bashir hosted Déby. The conference tackled border issues, and sought to enhance military, security, trade, economic and cultural relations.⁴¹ In April 2019, Bashir and Déby held consultations in Khartoum, on encouraging their countries' interconnectivity through railways and roads, the implementation of the Central African Republic Peace Agreement, coordination on regional issues including Libya, and enhancing cooperation and relations in all fields through joint ministerial committees.⁴²

Both countries also had an interest in stability and security within the Sahel, as stability and security in the region bolstered the regime security of the Déby and Bashir regimes. In 2016, Chad and Sudan agreed with the CAR to operationalise a tripartite border force that had been agreed in 2005. Both countries sought to stop armed opposition groups from using the CAR as a rear base to resupply and attack their regimes.⁴³ The CAR, Chad, Niger, and Sudan signed a judicial cooperation agreement in August 2018 to secure their borders and agreed to create an operations centre in N'djamena to combat terrorist groups, smuggling and human trafficking.⁴⁴

However, there have also been differences of opinion in regard to regional politics. For instance, following the downfall of Libya's Muammar al-Gaddafi during the Arab Spring in 2011, Déby supported Haftar and his Libyan National Army, believing Haftar would bring stability to Libya, Chad's next-

door neighbour. Bashir, however, supported Haftar's Islamist opponents, to ensure that Sudan's armed opposition would not receive a safe haven in Libya; the Bashir regime's Islamist leanings may have accentuated that support.⁴⁵

Sudan and Chad's economic and trade relations have not been as fully realised as their security interests. After the implementation of the security protocol agreement, bilateral trade rose from 1,227,777 US dollars in 2012, to 5,653,661 US dollars in 2018.⁴⁶ Both sides agreed to deepen economic and trade relations in 2018. Perhaps a significant push towards deepening of trade relations is the establishment of free trade zones between both countries, and Chad's use of Port Sudan on the Red Sea to ship its products internationally.⁴⁷

On the international stage, Sudan and Chad have demonstrated similar norms and values; in terms of voting on United Nations resolutions, the countries have a similarity score of 82.3 percent. This includes votes concerning arms control and disarmament, nuclear weapons, the Palestine-Israel conflict, human rights, colonialism, and economic development.⁴⁸ Behind these similarities are different motivations, however. Regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict, Sudan and Chad had no diplomatic relations with Israel since 1958 and 1972 respectively; however, both countries have sought to normalise relations with Israel. Sudan pursued this in order to convince the US to remove Sudan from the SST, and for international financial institutions to forgive Sudan's debts and provide new credit. Meanwhile, Chad has built security relations

with Israel since 2018, in order to purchase security and military technology to combat Boko Haram, an armed Islamist movement in the Sahel originating in Nigeria.⁴⁹

Sudan-Ethiopia relations under Bashir

Ethiopia's relationship with Sudan can be also characterised by fluidity of relations, and competition over regional influence in the Horn of Africa. Like Sudan's partnership with Chad, the focus of Sudan-Ethiopia relations has been on keeping the countries' regimes in place.

In the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, power is vested in the Constitution, where it is separated between the executive, the legislative and the President, the ceremonial Head of State, with the Prime Minister head of the Government. Theoretically, power is federated to each state; however, for decades the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated the political system from within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The TPLF's grip on power was bolstered by the fruits of a state-led development programme, supporting the needs of Ethiopia's population, 99.75 million in 2014. GDP per capita increased from 254 US dollars in 1990 to 840 US dollars in 2019. As of 2019, foreign direct investment was 4.14 billion US dollars.⁵⁰ In terms of military strength, the Ethiopian National Defence Force was ranked 49 out of 145, with a defence budget of \$538 million US dollars, including land forces and the air force.⁵¹

Despite their different ideological persuasions, the SIM supported the EPRDF in toppling the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. This support derived from the SIM's desire to end Ethiopia's prior support for the SPLM/A, in the form of providing training to its soldiers, safe havens, and taking in asylum seekers.⁵² However, Sudan's support for the secular EPRDF soon ended, as the SIM opted to support armed political Islamists.⁵³ The regime sought to export its ideology across other countries, to counter the influence of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda, all sponsored by the United States to support the SPLM/A and its allies.

The SIM's involvement in the assassination attempt against then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 1995 resulted in Ethiopia cutting diplomatic relations with Sudan, and the EPRDF increasing support to the SPLM/A and other opposition groups. Ethiopian leader Meles Zenawi was particularly wary of hydropolitics in the region, as he intended the construction of a dam on Ethiopia's Blue Nile, in order to produce cheap electricity to export to Sudan and other nearby countries. Zenawi was also worried that the civil war in southern Sudan would have negative repercussions on Ethiopia's stability.⁵⁴

The conflict between Sudan and Ethiopia ended as a result of the border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea starting in 1998. Sudan's diplomatic approach to the Ethiopian-Eritrean war allowed it to undermine the United States' strategy of using Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda to topple the Bashir regime. In the same period, Bashir and other SIM leaders initiated an ultimately successful palace coup against the erstwhile SIM ideologue Turabi. This resulted in a

shift in Sudan's foreign policy, with the end of attempts to export Islamist ideology, and renewed focus on regime security and staying in power in Sudan. This encouraged Ethiopia and Sudan to re-establish diplomatic relations, with Bashir and Zenawi meeting in 1999 and 2000.⁵⁵ The strategic partnership was institutionalised through the Higher Joint Sudanese-Ethiopian Committee in 2005, led by Bashir and Zenawi, and composed of subcommittees, each in charge of a sector of the countries' bilateral relations.⁵⁶

United States efforts to remove the SIM from power were further undermined by splits within the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a Sudanese opposition coalition that included the SPLM/A. The Bashir regime managed to coopt some of the opposition, which switched sides.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Ethiopia believed that Sudanese leaders had learned a strong lesson when Ethiopia invaded Sudan to support SPLM/A operations in 1995–1997 in Gadarif state and the towns of Kurmuk and Qaysan. Ethiopia understood it had a much larger population than Sudan and a stronger military tradition; while Sudan was expected to enhance its military with the proceeds of oil revenues, Ethiopia's military capacity would still be greater.⁵⁸

The partnership between Sudan and Ethiopia may be explained as a result of the Bashir regime looking to improve its relations in Africa, after United Nations Security Council resolution 1593, referring the ICC to look into the genocide occurring in Darfur. After signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the SPLM/A in 2005, the Bashir regime felt the United States Administration of George Bush Jr., which had pushed hard for

the end of Sudan's civil war, would follow through its promises to normalise the relations between the United States and Sudan and remove Sudan from the SST. However, with the US focus on the conflict and genocide in Darfur, the Bashir regime felt the United States and its allies had no intention to normalise relations. The ICC indictments against Bashir and other regime leaders encouraged the regime to develop its relations with African countries, especially its immediate neighbours. Other African leaders believed the ICC had been created by Western powers to control Africa; Bashir was thus able to travel to African countries which were ICC members, without fearing arrest.⁵⁹

The improved relations encouraged Bashir to allow Ethiopia, which had been left landlocked by the secession of Eritrea, to use Port Sudan, for which an agreement was signed in 2001. The access to Port Sudan encouraged both sides to improve road connectivity. Sudan constructed a road from Gadarif to Galabat, while Ethiopia built a connected road from Gondar to Metamma. A 1,600-kilometre pipeline was also planned, to provide Ethiopia with Sudanese oil. Ethiopia had increasing energy needs to support its development programmes and growing population.⁶⁰ During Ethiopia's state-led growth, 70 percent of its petroleum needs came from Sudan.⁶¹ The countries' joint economic and trade committee has met regularly since 2009, seeking to enhance bilateral trade relations and trading capacity in telecommunication, minerals, roads, electricity and other sectors. In 2016, the focus of the discussion was on Ethiopia's use of Port Sudan, developing of free trade zones, cooperation in banking and customs

aspects and border crossings.⁶² However, despite the progress of relations, in 2017 Sudanese exports to Ethiopia totalled 152 million US dollars, only 2.83 percent of Sudan's total export value.⁶³

Regarding security and military relations, both countries have focused their energies on ensuring border security from attacks from one another, ending support for opposition rebels, and countering terrorism. In 2008, the countries agreed to form joint border units, and put in place border markers to demarcate al-Fashaga, a highly contested region where Ethiopian farmers have settled on Sudanese territory.⁶⁴

In terms of party-to-party exchanges, in 2009, the NCP of the Bashir regime and EPRDF of Ethiopia signed a mutual cooperation agreement. Interestingly, it did not distinguish between party and state interests. The focus was to coordinate bilateral and international issues and boost people-to-people ties, especially along the border.⁶⁵

Sudan and Ethiopia have a similarity score of 90.83 percent in voting on United Nations resolutions.⁶⁶ They have demonstrated a similar approach to the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region, being founding members of the Sana'a Cooperation Forum in 2002 with Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen, meeting annually to discuss security and cooperation.⁶⁷ Notable differences include the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Initially, the countries saw eye-to-eye on the matter, as the GERD would allow Sudan to import electricity at a cheaper rate and exert greater control over the Nile which usually floods every August. However,

political differences emerged following pressure on Sudan from Egypt; the Bashir regime politicised the matter for the sake of regime security, rather than focusing on the interest of the Sudanese people.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the issue of al-Fashaga has remained unresolved.

Bashirism without Bashir

Sudan's strategic relations with Chad and Ethiopia did not shield the Bashir regime from the revolution of December 2018. The revolution should be seen as a result of complex political and economic conditions that Bashir had no ability or interest to address, instead focusing on short-term regime security and his remaining in power despite the ICC arrest warrant against him. The regime, particularly Bashir, ensured that 70 percent of state income was allocated to the military and the security services, depriving much funding for social welfare. Moreover, despite progress of relations with the US through lobbying Saudi Arabia and the UAE to remove sanctions on Sudan, the US did not remove Sudan from its SST, and new lines of credit and debt relief remained out of reach.⁶⁹

This came against a backdrop of protestors calling for the end of the Bashir regime. However, as Bashir did not show any willingness to resign, some leaders of the regime came to view him as a liability for the security of the regime. Hence, for the sake of the regime's survival, military and security leaders, including Salah Gosh, Yasir al-Atta, Burhan and Hemedti, decided that the best course of action was to arrest Bashir

and some other leaders with him, while the FFC held protests outside the General Military Command Headquarters (GMCH) in Khartoum in April 2019.⁷⁰

These individuals' plan was to use the civilians of the FFC to bring an end to the isolation of Sudan from the international community. Their intention was to take a back seat while the FFC and their civilians' ministers during the ensuing transition process would "rebrand" Sudan, which could then access new lines of credit and debt relief.⁷¹ The former Bashir regime, in the transition period functioning as a deep state, could then effectively be restored to power through elections, with Burhan as the presidential candidate.⁷² The plan would be easily realised, as a result of decades when regime supporters dominated Sudan's economy and were more organised than other political parties, divided among themselves as a result of the regime's co-optation and limiting of political freedoms. Burhan and his SAF allies were keen to see the transition period last only two years, ending with elections to restore the former regime to power. Burhan was determined that he would be President; he himself had been NCP leader in Nertiti locality in Darfur and was considered as a leading candidate for the replacement of the former president, should Bashir need to be replaced to save the regime.⁷³

Hemedti also viewed the transition period as an opportunity for his presidential ambitions. These ambitions were a result of his own economic empire, created through his al-Junaid conglomerate, which reportedly exported 50 million US dollars' worth of gold to the UAE annually from Darfur's Jebel

Amer mines that Hemedti had controlled since 2017. Fearful of possible SAF coup attempts, Bashir had appointed Hemedti as commander of the 20,000-strong RSF, a counter-balancing force to the SAF and answerable only to Bashir. Additionally, in an attempt to salvage the economic situation, the Bashir regime contracted the RSF to Saudi Arabia to fight in Yemen. An RSF soldier deployed in Yemen would receive over 22,000 US dollars over a six-month period, compared to the minimum wage of 180 US dollars per month.⁷⁴

However, Hemedti's ambitions became clear when he refused to deploy his forces against protestors in early 2019 as demanded by Bashir, hastening the President's downfall. In the same year, Hemedti deposited 1 billion US dollars to the Central Bank of Sudan.⁷⁵ Some leaders of the FFC came to believe that his forces could protect the transition period from the former regime in the form of the SAF senior leadership and their paramilitary organisations. However, this prospect evaporated when the RSF was involved in clearing the protest site in front of the GMCH on 3 June 2019, with over 100 protestors killed. Any alliance with Hemedti would discredit the FFC parties, which already had a poor reputation for their actions under the Bashir regime.

When Burhan officially became head of the military component of the post-Bashir transitional Government, the Transitional Military Council, he appointed Hemedti as his deputy. Burhan had close relations with Hemedti since his time as a military intelligence officer in Darfur and intended to use Hemedti as a shield from SAF coup attempts. The emptying of the protest site

on 3 June 2019 effectively tied Hemedti to working with Burhan, to ensure each other's security while working to achieve their conflicting presidential ambitions. In July 2019, Burhan abolished article 5 of the RSF Law of 2017, effectively making the RSF a separate entity from the SAF.⁷⁶

Burhan and Hemedti used their positions in the Sovereignty Council, Sudan's collegial presidential body at the time, to undermine the mandate of Prime Minister Hamdok and his Cabinet. The Juba peace talks that began with Prime Minister Hamdok were taken over by the military component of the Sovereignty Council, namely Lieutenant-General Shamsaldin Kabbashi of the SAF and Hemedti. The military component of the Sovereignty Council used the talks to capitalise on the differences between the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF) and the FFC, pre-existing the signing of the Constitutional Charter in 2019 and intensifying after its signing. This antagonism partly owed to the FFC's failure to provide every party within its coalition with a say, resulting in the SRF withdrawing from the FFC. Before the signing of the transition deal with the FFC, the military members of the Sovereignty Council opened direct talks with the Darfur-based SLM of Mini Minawi and the JEM – the leaders of which dominated the SRF – via the lobbying of Hemedti's cousin. Hemedti had an interest in expanding his influence in Darfur through building an alliance with the Darfur factions of the SRF, which he had started before the signing of the transition agreement with the FFC in July 2019. The FFC saw the behaviour of the SRF as amounting to political opportunism, especially when Minawi demanded greater representation in

the Government for the SRF before the Juba peace talks.⁷⁷ For their part, the FFC lacked a strategy; while they wanted to be involved in the talks, they could not have much impact, as a result of the split with the SRF.

The military component was heavily involved in Sudan's foreign policy, overstepping its mandate of the security of the state to interfere with the mandate of the civilian politicians in the Cabinet. For example, Burhan met Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in February 2020 in Uganda, without coordination with the Cabinet which had authority over Sudan's foreign policy according to the Constitutional Charter. The Cabinet responded that the normalisation of ties with Israel was beyond its power and must be considered by the planned legislative council and constitutional conference.⁷⁸ Although no normalisation of relations then occurred between Sudan and Israel, it became apparent that Burhan's meeting with Netanyahu was to support his own presidential ambitions. What ultimately ensured the normalisation of relations with Israel was Israel's use of its lobbying power in Washington to encourage the US to remove Sudan from the SST. These relations continued with the involvement of Hemedti, who met with the Mossad chief Yossi Cohen in August 2020. Officially, the focus of the meeting was on normalising Sudan-Israel ties; however, Hemedti also sought to develop independent relations between the RSF and Israeli security services.⁷⁹

These meetings put pressure on Hamdok and the Cabinet to compete with the military component in normalising relations with Israel for the goal of Sudan's delisting from the SST and access to the World Bank's

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, so Sudan could be forgiven its debts. These pressures were not isolated from politics in Washington, with the Donald Trump Administration demanding Hamdok and his civilian ministers to normalise relations with Israel and forcing Sudan to repay Bashir-era reparations for supporting Osama Bin Laden's 1998 attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and USS Cole while docking in Aden, Yemen.⁸⁰

The military component of the Sovereignty Council thus undermined their civilian counterparts. The deep state was a natural ally of the military in this process. The civilian ministers had focused considerable energy as per the Constitutional Charter in investigating and dismissing supporters of the former regime from state institutions.⁸¹ In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs alone, 109 officials appointed by Bashir or his now-dissolved NCP were dismissed.⁸² These appointments had not been made on this basis of merit, but rather political patronage. The deep state responded to these dismissals through undermining the civilians in the transitional Government, leaking and falsifying proceedings of the Cabinet, Sovereignty Council and individual ministries.⁸³ They also used state institutions such as the justice system to protect themselves, with the Supreme Court nullifying their dismissals and the work of the Dismantling Committee, contrary to a law passed by the Cabinet and Sovereignty Council in November 2019 on dismantling the former regime.⁸⁴

Other developments in which the military components were involved further

undermined the transition period. These became evident with the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement of 2020. The agreement appointed SRF members and leaders, who were close to the military component through political patronage, as ministers and heads of institutions. In response, the FFC parties, either out of political opportunism or fear of the military component, pressured Hamdok into also appointing their leaders to other ministerial positions. The new appointments shifted the transitional Government from being one of civilians of technocratic expertise, to one of civilians of political expertise, jeopardising Sudan's transition to democracy.⁸⁵

The tactical alliance between the SRF and military component of the transitional Government worked against the FFC leaders in the Government. Gibril Ibrahim, head of the JEM, was appointed Minister of Finance and Economic Planning. During his time as a minister, he undermined the work of the Dismantling Committee by claiming it had misappropriated funds and properties it retrieved from its investigations.⁸⁶ Ibrahim thus attempted to use his position to support his own ambitions of reuniting factions of the SIM to bolster his presidential ambitions.

Meanwhile, some SRF leaders worked with splinter groups of the FFC to form the FFC-National Accord (FFC-NA). The military supported this group through sponsoring its founding conference and inviting foreign diplomats to attend. The military intended to use the FFC-NA as an alternative to the FFC, and as a civilian cover to legitimise themselves. Through coordination with Burhan and Hemedti, the FFC-NA mounted

daily protests against Hamdok's Government and called on Burhan to lead a military coup. The engineering of the downfall of the civilian Government continued when Mohamed Amin al-Tirik, a tribal chieftain and close affiliate of the Bashir regime, blockaded Port Sudan, demanding that the Government be dissolved and that the military take power. These developments encouraged Burhan and Hemedti to finally launch their military takeover on 25 October 2021, effectively ending Sudan's transition to democracy.

Relations with Ethiopia

Despite previously close relations, the strategic partnership between Sudan and Ethiopia had not matured enough to withstand the challenges of regime change in both countries, resulting in both sides restarting the process while addressing their own international arrangements.

During Sudan's transition period, the FFC and their ministers, including Hamdok, developed close ties with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. These relations were the result of two reasons. First, Ahmed stepped in as a peace broker between the FFC and the military, when the sides reached a standstill in talks after the military's attack on the protests at the GMCH.⁸⁷ Second, before accepting his post as Prime Minister, Hamdok was based in Addis Ababa as Deputy Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and openly expressed his admiration for Ethiopia's rapid economic growth.⁸⁸

These factors worried Egypt that Sudan would side with Ethiopia on the GERD. To

Egypt, the building of a dam on the Blue Nile represented a threat to its water security; the Nile represents 95 percent of the water needs of the country. Before Bashir's overthrow, Egypt was keen to ensure that Sudan would support Egypt's demand that Ethiopia sign a legally binding agreement regarding the control of the water flow, so that the GERD would not undermine Egypt's water security. This matter should have been resolved with all three countries signing the Declaration of Principles in 2013.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, regime changes in Ethiopia and Sudan undermined this, and encouraged Egypt to develop close relations with Sudan to pressure Ethiopia to sign another legally binding document.

To achieve this, Egypt focused on furthering its ties with the military, especially Burhan, who became Chair of the Sovereignty Council. Burhan's first foreign trip in this role was to Cairo in November 2020. In those talks, the GERD was a significant topic, which Burhan attempted to tackle personally through travelling to Ethiopia afterwards. Egypt trusted Burhan because the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) – which effectively leads the country after the coup of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on 3 July 2013 – sees the SAF as its reflection and the only institution that can control Sudan. Many SAF officers, including both Burhan and, formerly, Bashir, had received training in Egypt.⁹⁰

The civilians led by Hamdok formed a delegation to negotiate a win-win solution for Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan. The civilians delegated the technical focus on the GERD to Yasir Abbas and his Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources, and the political side to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Hamdok and these ministries gave indications of siding with Ethiopia rather than Egypt on the matter.

Burhan also used relations with Ethiopia to improve his image with Sudanese people, especially after he and military leaders including Hemedti ordered their forces to forcefully clear the protest site on 3 June 2019. Burhan met with Ethiopia's Ahmed and reached an agreement to dispatch 6000 SAF soldiers to close the Ethiopian border, in advance of Ahmed mobilising the Ethiopian Defence Forces to attack the TPLF in Tigray, who challenged Ahmed's rule over Ethiopia after he had significantly marginalised their power.⁹¹

This arrangement reopened the contested issue of the al-Fashaga region, where both countries had never demarcated their borders. When the Bashir regime was in power, Sudan allowed Ethiopian Amhara farmers to continue to farm on these lands. Both countries agreed in 2008 that the land was within Sudan's sovereign territory, while Sudan would allow the Amhara to farm in the area. A Joint Boundary Commission and Joint Technical Boundary Committee were created in 2018 to resolve the matter.⁹²

However, the SAF now recaptured the 95 percent of the region from Amhara militias, which attempted to retake the region with the support of elements of the Ethiopian Defence Forces. With Ahmed focusing on his war with the TPLF and needing the support of the Amhara militias, especially the Fano, against the TPLF, Dena Moufti and the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were delegated to tackle the matter. They have done so through using diplomatic avenues

and statements to maintain that al-Fashaga belongs to Ethiopia.⁹³

In the midst of the conflict, Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt still engaged in talks over the GERD. From Sudan's side, leading the talks were the Ministry of Land and Irrigation, which focused on the technical aspects of the GERD's implications, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was expected to carry out the diplomatic articulation of those matters. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs politicised the matter rather than following the Ministry of Irrigation's and Water Resources' lead, as the conflict over al-Fashaga shifted the behaviour of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs led by Mariam Sadig al-Mahdi, who was vice-head of the National Umma Party and a leader of the FFC coalition.⁹⁴ There was no diplomatic sensitivity in dealing with Ethiopia, which was in the middle of a civil war. There was a high possibility that the Tigray region would secede under the control of the TPLF, potentially encouraging other regions to follow suit. Hence, Ethiopian officials unceasingly insisted that the al-Fashaga region belongs to Ethiopia.

The conflict between the SAF and state-backed Ethiopian militias for al-Fashaga changed the perceptions of Hamdok and his civilian Cabinet on the GERD issue. They thus followed Egypt's demand that Ethiopia signs a legally binding agreement in regard to the operability of the GERD. This was in spite of the fact that the GERD would be in Sudan's own interest, to regulate its water flow and obtain a cheaper source of electricity.⁹⁵ One possible reason for this approach is Hamdok and his Cabinet being unable to adhere to the Constitutional Charter, which calls for

Sudan to have balanced foreign relations to achieve its interests regionally and globally. This came at a time in Sudan when there was no legislative oversight of the Government's performance. In the absence of a legislative council, policy issues were discussed in weekly joint meetings between the Sovereignty Council and Cabinet. Despite the many pressing issues, few meaningful discussions were made on any policy, including foreign policies.⁹⁶ Likewise, some officials such as Asma Mohamed Abdalla were focused on dismantling the former regime within their own ministries, while also attempting to put Hamdok's foreign policy objectives into place, such as removing Sudan from the SST.⁹⁷ Other officials did not possess the experience to be in diplomatic corps, such as Mariam al-Mahdi.

Partnership with Chad

The strategic partnership between Sudan and Chad survived the toppling of the Bashir regime. However, it has not progressed beyond what the regimes of Bashir and Déby had already established, and which was dominated by their personalities.

Both Sudan and Chad continued to focus on the security of their regimes. Déby focused on close relations with the Sudanese military component. The security of his regime had been disturbed with returning Arab tribesmen who had fought in Darfur for the RSF. They were returning with the belief, implanted into them by the Bashir regime, that Déby and his Zaghawa tribe were monopolising power in Chad. The Zaghawa were also bothered by Déby's closeness

with the Arabs in Chad. Déby thus invested in his relationship with the Sudanese military component to gain some leverage.⁹⁸ Democracy in Sudan was seen by regimes in the region as a threat.⁹⁹

Déby thus facilitated talks between Hemedti and both Minawi and Ibrahim. Helping with these talks was his Chief of Staff Bishara Issa Djadallah, who was also Hemedti's cousin. Those talks focused on switching the support of Minawi and Ibrahim from the FFC to the military's side. The FFC and the international community were pressuring the Sudanese military to agree to a partnership for a transition period in Sudan. Déby felt that his regime's security would continue to be undermined. For these reasons, Déby left the talks before the signing of the agreement in Sudan.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, Hamdok and his civilian Cabinet worked to ensure the normalisation of relations between Sudan and Chad. In December 2020, after both Burhan and Hemedti held separate visits to Chad, Hamdok met with Déby, seeking to enhance border security from arms smuggling and irregular immigration through further strengthening the Joint Monitoring Units patrolling the border.¹⁰¹ Moreover, both sides agreed to actualise the Chad-Sudan railway project linking Ndjamenà to Port Sudan.¹⁰² These meetings were a test for deepening strategic partnership between both countries.

Déby was also invited to participate in the Juba peace talks between the transitional Government of Sudan and the SRF. He wanted to achieve two strategic goals. Firstly, he wanted to ensure that Darfur

would no longer be used as a launch pad for rebellions against his regime, especially from marginalised Arab Chadians had been sponsored by the Bashir regime and supplied with arms and land. Second, the increasing power and influence of Hemedti and his RSF alarmed Déby, concerned that Arab Chadians who had been RSF fighters would encourage cross-border violence that would pressure Hemedti and his RSF to aid any Arab rebellion against the regime in N'Djamena.¹⁰³ These encouraged Déby to pressure the Zaghawa Darfur factions of the SRF, JEM and SLM-Minawi to sign the Juba Peace Agreement in October 2020.

However, Déby's death on 20 April 2021 while surveying a battlefield against Chadian rebels shifted the strategic partnership between both countries in Hemedti's favour. Mahamat Déby, the former leader's son who was appointed head of Chad's Transitional Military Council (CTMC), appointed Djadallah, also Vice-Chair of the CTMC, as the head of the Joint Monitoring Units monitoring the Chad-Sudanese border. This enabled Hemedti to use his ties to encourage Chadian Arabs to further move into Darfur. Intercommunal violence erupted when RSF guarding Sudan's border allowed their Chadian brethren to carry out raids on African Sudanese tribes in Jebel Moon and other mineral-rich areas, effectively depopulating those areas so Chadian Arabs and other pro-RSF tribes could settle there.¹⁰⁴

Mahamet Déby focused his energy on consolidating his power in Chad through maintaining the influence of the Zaghawa clan. He feared that the Gorane and Arab tribes in Chad would challenge his regime

as they did his father's, with support from Sudan. The fear has been magnified as a result of Hemedti's growing influence. Chadian rebels were present in the RSF, and Hemedti, the Chadian Arabs and the Gorane had a common adversary in the Zaghawa, who they saw as elites in Chad who had marginalised them, and their enemies in Sudan who owned richer lands than them. These sentiments had been used by the Bashir regime to defeat the Darfur rebellion after 2003. Further, these groups had a common ally in Libya's Haftar. Members of these groups, especially the Front For Change and Concord, fought in Libya as mercenaries, and used Libya as a base to launch incursions against the Chadian regime, including that during which Idriss Déby was killed.¹⁰⁵

To consolidate his power and legitimise his rule, Mahamet Déby held peace talks with Chadian opposition. However, Déby believed that Hemedti and his allies, such as then-President Mohamed Bazoum of Niger, sought to undermine these talks, that later cumulated in the Doha Accord signed on 8 August 2022. Bazoum and Hemedti worked together on this matter, as a result of them being from the same Rezigat tribe, a nomad tribe that extends from Sudan to Libya, Chad and Niger, with the intention to increase their power, and ultimately perhaps a state of their own.¹⁰⁶ Hemedti sought to harness the sentiments of Arab tribesman who are minorities and marginalised in countries across the Sahel, who are longing for a land to settle and thrive in, rather than continually fight other groups over resources.

Rivalry between Burhan and Hemedti

Recent changes in Sudan's strategic partnerships with both Ethiopia and Chad have been a result of the duality of power in Sudan between Burhan and Hemedti. This duality started with Burhan wanting to use Hemedti as his shield from any SAF coup. In doing so, he allowed the RSF to be placed at strategically important positions in Khartoum and throughout Sudan. Burhan also gave Hemedti and his RSF free rein for recruitment throughout Sudan, increasing their forces to 100,000 fighters by 2023.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Burhan dissolved the operation units of the National Intelligence and Security Services and handed the bases to the RSF. These units, which numbered 13,000 soldiers, represented a threat to Hemedti, as they were close to Gosh and had the ability to challenge him.¹⁰⁸

Differences between Burhan and Hemedti emerged with Hemedti purposely not sending his RSF to join the SAF in their campaign for al-Fashaga.¹⁰⁹ Hemedti also met with Abiy Ahmed during the al-Fashaga conflict, disturbing many SAF officials. Hemedti may have developed a strategic partnership with Ahmed through his frequent official and unofficial visits to Ethiopia, where he may have also had business interests.¹¹⁰ Both Hemedti and Ahmed also had close ties with the UAE. The UAE backed Hemedti for his gold smuggling operations to the UAE, through which he made 50 million US dollars annually before 2019. The UAE wanted Hemedti to represent Sudan in the GERD talks and were keen on strengthening their influence over the

Red Sea to enable further penetration into Africa.¹¹¹

With Burhan, the UAE would have found that challenging, due to his closeness to Egypt on the GERD matter and resulting poor relations with Ahmed. The UAE's solution to the al-Fashaga question was to divide the land between Sudan and Ethiopia, and to take 40 percent of the profit of Emirati investments in the region.¹¹² Burhan would not accept such a proposal, as it would undermine what legitimacy he tried to create through recapturing what many Sudanese believe is Sudanese territory. Furthermore, Ahmed believed that in Ethiopia's civil war, Burhan and the SAF were siding with the TPLF, which intended to overthrow his regime in Addis Ababa.¹¹³

Tensions between Burhan and Hemedti grew after they out a military coup against their civilian counterparts of the FFC and Hamdok and his Government on 25 October 2021. The reaction of the international community and Sudanese to this coup reopened these tensions. Burhan realised that his SAF allies had used him again as a scapegoat, as they did when he emptied the protest site in June 2019. This effectively undermined his own presidential ambitions.

Meanwhile, Burhan had focused on consolidating his own power, which meant that Hemedti would always be subordinate to him. Burhan reappointed former Bashir regime officials to their positions in state institutions who had been dismissed since 2019, including 104 diplomats back into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and reinstating judges.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, he reshuffled the SAF, promoting 40 officers to senior

positions believed to be supporters of the former Bashir regime, and retiring 30 SAF officers such as Major-General Essam Mohamed Hassan Karrar, commander of the land forces. Burhan's retirement of Karrar and others could be seen as a pre-emptive move against any coup attempt from other members of the former Bashir regime, such as the military coup attempt on 21 September 2021. This was led by Major-General Abdelbagi Othman Bakarawi, commander of the armoured corps. Karrar, Bakarawi and other SAF officers opposed the growing influence of the RSF and its separation from the SAF; they distrusted the RSF as having not been trained in military academies, lacking military discipline, and – they considered – being mercenaries not sufficiently loyal to the country.¹¹⁶

These developments also impacted the strategic partnerships of both Burhan and Hemedti. For instance, Mahamat Déby's wariness of Hemedti's growing influence in Chad made him a natural ally of Burhan. Burhan developed close relations with Déby, meeting with him in January 2023.¹¹⁷ This meeting was important to Déby, as it focused on securing the Sudan-Chad borders, and borders with the CAR. Déby was particularly concerned with borders due to his suspicions that Hemedti was planning to support Chadian opposition forces by allowing them to operate from Darfur.¹¹⁸

Alexander Lascaris, US ambassador to Chad, allegedly informed Déby that Hemedti was indeed planning a coup against him, setting up a base in the CAR with the support of Russia's Wagner Group.¹¹⁹ Russia had then been using Wagner to expand its presence in Africa, seeking to replace French influence

in Sahel and West African countries including Mali, the CAR and Burkina Faso.¹²⁰ Chad under the Déby family has been a close ally of France in the region. The fall of Chad to a pro-Russian regime would also accord with Hemedti's interest, to gather Arab militiamen from Mali, Niger and Chad to join the RSF and fight for their own country to settle in.¹²¹

Burhan and some SAF officers may have already been planning to curtail Hemedti's influence outside Sudan, particularly in the CAR to defeat his interest in Chad, too. This became apparent with Déby paying Burhan a visit in December 2022 to establish relations with Burhan. Burhan started to resurrect the unit of border guards through retired Major-General Ahmed Abdel-Rahim Shukrat Allah, who he knew from his time in Darfur. Burhan was creating a force of former Tamazuj (a paramilitary created by Sudanese military intelligence), retired border guards and some retired RSF personnel, on the Sudan-CAR borders, with the intention of supporting the Salaska movement in CAR against the CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadera and Wagner, both of whom had close ties with Hemedti.¹²² Hemedti and his allies, seeing this as a challenge to Hemedti's ambitions, had Shukrat Allah abducted. Burhan also appointed Osman Mahamat Younis, a retired police chief, as ambassador to Chad, to provide him direct insights into the country. Usually, retired SAF officers were appointed to such positions, indicating the centrality of security matters.¹²³

Burhan's desire to end this duality with Hemedti was not isolated from developments in the international community. Internationally, Sudan was isolated once again, as a result of Burhan

and Hemedti suspending Sudan's transition to democracy. To show its disapproval of the coup, the United States and the World Bank suspended 2.85 billion US dollars aid to Sudan. The Paris Club followed suit, suspending its forgiveness of 90 percent of Sudan's debt that it had promised. The African Union suspended Sudan until the restart of the transition. In essence, the international community condemned the military coup and called for the continuation of Sudan's democratic transition process.¹²⁴

Burhan and Hemedti both faced the challenge of forming a Government that the international community would accept. Both attempted to form a Government using the FFC-NA, which they both had supported and planned to use as an alternative partner to the FFC.¹²⁵ However, that plan has not been achieved, because the Sudanese people did not accept the end of the transition process, or the involvement of Burhan, Hemedti and their allies in any new transitional arrangements.¹²⁶ Burhan feared Hemedti had plans to advance his own presidential ambitions by making an alliance with the FFC, with the intention to topple Burhan from power as he did Bashir in April 2019.¹²⁷

These manoeuvres encouraged Burhan to focus on weakening Hemedti's influence nationally, regionally and internally, and to enter talks leading to the signing of the framework agreement with the FFC that he did not seek to honour, and on which Hemedti attempted to capitalise to rebrand himself to achieve his presidential ambitions. He realised that the duality with Burhan no longer served his interests. Indeed, Burhan and his SAF allies had used him and his RSF to empty the protest site in June 2019,

undermining any opportunity for Hemedti to brand himself as a supporter of civilian rule, an image which he had hoped to support his presidential candidature in post-transition elections. Further, he believed he could directly challenge and defeat the SAF officers if needed. He had expanded the size of the RSF to 100,000 soldiers, with thousands of pickup trucks mounted with anti-aircraft guns, in order to challenge the SAF in urban warfare.

The first part of Hemedti's rebranding process was to prove he was a supporter of the civilians, namely the FFC and the civilians who signed the agreement. The second was to gain total independence from Burhan through the framework agreement; previously, Law 5 of the RSF Act still made him answerable to the overall commander of the SAF, i.e. Burhan. The Law is part of the RSF Act that the former regime introduced and approved in the legislative assembly in 2017. It loosely ties the RSF to the SAF during times of national emergency or war through subjecting the RSF to the governing provisions and laws of Sudanese Armed Forces; and allows the head of the state to merge the RSF into the SAF at any given time.¹²⁸

This was a reason why Hemedti and his commanders were placing obstacles in the way of integrating the RSF into the SAF as Burhan and his SAF allies wanted, igniting tensions and leading to troop buildup on both sides.¹²⁹ Both sides brought their units into Khartoum, and the RSF sent its forces into Merowe Airbase to counter any possibility of a Sudanese or Egyptian attack on it.

The escalation of tensions reached a point of no return when Burhan and Hemedti disagreed on the military chain of command when a new civil-military Government would be formed. Burhan wanted to be the only military figure reporting to the Government; Hemedti, on the other hand, wanted to have a direct channel with civilian politicians without needing to go through Burhan. In other words, Hemedti was calling for his independence, and for the RSF to be a counterbalance to Burhan, which Burhan and the SAF leadership found unacceptable.¹³⁰

Finally, Hemedti gave up on any further political manoeuvring, and started an assault to attempt to take over power on 15 April 2023. He wished to pose as the guardian of Sudan's transition to democracy, after which he would nominate himself as President of the country. The RSF quickly seized strategic areas in Khartoum, seeking – unsuccessfully – to arrest or kill Burhan and SAF leadership. The intention behind this lightning strike was a result of Hemedti's belief that the RSF would

manage to achieve these political objectives, which in turn would allow him to put his plan into place, a new Sovereign Council and a security and defence council. Hemedti did not anticipate that the SAF leadership would put up a fight and go for a war of attrition, to drain the RSF and its supply lines to significantly weaken them into surrender.¹³¹ During this war, both sides have received the support of strategic partners, with Ethiopia's Ahmed supporting Hemedti, and Chad's leadership split into two camps, with Déby supporting Burhan and the SAF and the Minister of State Special Advisor to Déby General Bichara Issa Djadallah supporting Hemedti.

Conclusion

Sudan did not have an opportunity to realise any deep strategic partnership with other countries such as Ethiopia and Chad until the palace coup of 1999 against Turabi, head of the SIM. Before this time, Sudan did not have foreign policy objectives and goals beyond protecting the regime's resilience. Hence, the SIM supported armed movements which would later form the Déby regime in Chad and the EPRDF in Ethiopia, neither of which subscribed to the political Islam of the SIM regime.

The relationship with those Governments did change over time towards establishing strategic partnerships, as a result of the Bashir regime wishing to maintain its resilience by abandoning support for armed groups against Déby and the EPRDF. The change in all three countries' relationships with one another continued to progress towards strategic partnerships, between the countries' regimes rather than between their states per se. In essence, the deepening of trade, economic, security and foreign relations between Sudan, Ethiopia and Chad encouraged the regimes to continue trying to build their resilience.

However, the strategic partnerships did not mature sufficiently to become durable beyond Bashir's downfall. The state institutions which build Sudan's relationships were dominated by supporters of the former Bashir regime. Sudan, Ethiopia, and Chad have experienced regime changes of some kind. Before Burhan and Hemedti's attempts to undermine Sudan's transition to democracy, the changes in all three countries resulted in civilian leaders in Sudan needing to restart the strategic partnerships

where the Bashir regime had left them. Diplomatic sources interviewed for this research described how supporters of the former Bashir regime or otherwise formed a deep state, focused on undermining the civilians within the ministries and Cabinet of the transitional Government.

The lack of a legislative component of the Government did not help with this either. Despite agreeing to form a legislative council, the FFC had faced several obstacles and delays in forming a council that would have helped the Cabinet monitor and scrutinise the implementation of Sudan's foreign policy objectives and goals. The lack of a legislative institution opened the door for both Burhan and Hemedti, and their regional backers, to shape Sudan's foreign policy objectives, and to stay with the Bashir-era status quo of strategic partnerships with Chad and Ethiopia. Burhan and Hemedti were encouraged by the UAE to normalise ties with Israel, and the United States administration under Trump pressured Hamdok to also work on normalising those relations, despite having no mandate to do so.¹³²

The civilian politicians also had a lack of vision to guide them. For example, Asma Abdalla focused on removing the deep state within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, rather than leaving that work to the commission tasked with dismantling the former regime. Significantly, Hamdok seemed to have a lack of trust in some members of his last Cabinet, appointing advisers to achieve policy objectives and goals, and delegating Minister of Justice Nasredin Abdulbari on missions that a Minister of Foreign Affairs or diplomat would usually be expected to carry out.¹³³

These factors, and the civilians being undermined by Burhan and Hemedti, stalled Sudan from deepening its strategic partnerships, especially with Chad and Ethiopia. Both Burhan and Hemedti used Sudan's transition period to create their own strategic partnerships with the regimes of those countries. When they both realised that the duality of their regime could not exist any longer, both deepened their

personal strategic partnerships with Déby and Ahmed. These partnerships would be used fully after the open conflict between both Burhan and Hemedti began with the eruption of Sudan's ongoing civil war on 15 April 2023, with Hemedti claiming to fight in support of Sudan's transition to democracy, and Burhan and his SIM allies in the SAF claiming to fight for stability in Sudan. In either case, as long as this situation persists, the strategic partnerships of Sudan will serve each of their interests, not the Sudanese call for democracy.

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