

Far-reaching consequences of the conflict in Sudan

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The conflict that has broken out recently between army units loyal to Sudan's military ruler and Sudan's paramilitary is potentially a major cause for concern. It is reported that the fighting started in the capital, Khartoum, and in the city of Omdurman.



The exact cause of the fighting is – for now – unclear, but it is believed to be linked to the power struggle between Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Sudan's military ruler, and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, head of Sudan's paramilitary and deputy head of the ruling council. Both men have significant influence over Sudan's military and political establishment and the situation is further complicated by the fact that they are both former members of the Janjaweed militia, which has been accused of committing human rights abuses in the Darfur region of Sudan.

The conflict has raised fears of a possible coup or civil war in Sudan, which could have significant economic and political implications for the country and region. Sudan is already grappling with a severe economic crisis, exacerbated by recent floods that have devastated parts of the country. The situation remains fluid and it is unknown how it will develop in the coming days and weeks. However, it certainly has the potential to destabilize not only Sudan, but the wider region.

At the moment, there is no tangible evidence to suggest 'direct' involvement by the US, Russia or China. However, both Russia and China have historically maintained diplomatic and economic ties with Sudan, which is bound to impact their stance on the current situation.

For example, just before fighting broke out, Russia and the Sudanese government had agreed to the construction of a Russian warm water naval port – something that has greatly annoyed the US administration because of its proximity to the Suez Canal. Russia has previously supplied military equipment to Sudan and has also been involved in negotiations relating to the country's political transition. China has also invested heavily in Sudan's natural resources and has a significant financial stake in the country's stability.

In the short term, given their vested interests, it is possible that both Russia and China will involve themselves either through diplomatic channels or by supporting one or more of the factions involved. There are also potential risks and challenges that may arise from the actions of other powers, such as Egypt (seen as siding with the military/government) and Saudi Arabia (seen as siding with the militia).

Perhaps with the assistance of Egypt and Saudi Arabia (who are both close to or getting closer to Russia and/or China), there is potential for Putin and Xi to use the conflict to distract the West from negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Certainly, the timing of this conflict gives the appearance of something more than coincidental happening and quality analysis must factor in those potential scenarios moving forward.

Some analysts believe that the creation of the north/south trade corridor by China and Russia is aimed at blocking Western shipping access to the Suez Canal – or, at least, providing a possible ‘lever’ which could be used in negotiations at a later date. Officially, the north/south trade corridor is designed to increase trade and economic co-operation between Russia, China and the countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

However, the Suez Canal is a vital global trade shipping route and the ongoing conflict and instability in Sudan could pose massive disruption to supply chains, especially if violence escalates, as indications suggest it will. Given Sudan’s proximity to the Yemen and the Suez Canal, a civil war would be even more significant. The conflict would then disrupt shipping routes through the Red Sea, impacting trade and global supply chains further.

The closure of the Suez Canal could have severe economic consequences for the entire region, including Egypt, which heavily relies on the revenue generated from it. Rather than closing the Suez Canal to Western trade, however, it is more likely that the focus of global powers such as Russia and China will be on securing their own economic interests and increasing their influence in the region.

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