



GLOBAL TRANSITIONS SERIES



## Post Architecture: The Competitive Marketplace of Transition Management in Sudan

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THE UNIVERSITY  
of EDINBURGH



The Global Transitions Series looks at fragmentations in the global order and how these impact peace and transition settlements. It explores why and how different third-party actors – state, intergovernmental, and non-governmental – intervene in conflicts, and how they see themselves contributing to reduction of conflict and risks of conflict relapse. The series critically assesses the growth and diversification of global and regional responses to contemporary conflicts. It also asks how local actors are navigating this multiplicity of mediators and peacebuilders and how this is shaping conflict outcomes and post-conflict governance.

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## List of Abbreviations

AU	African Union
CAR	Central African Republic
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005)
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FFC-CC	Forces for Freedom and Change – Central Council
FFC-DB	Forces for Freedom and Change – Democratic Block
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PMC	Private Military Company
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
RCs	Resistance Committees
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SLM/A	Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army
SLM/A AW	Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army – Abdul Wahid al-Nur
SLM/A MM	Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army – Minni Minawi
SPLM/A	Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-N	Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army – North
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNITAMS	United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan

## Key Findings

- ▶ The Sudanese transition is increasingly entangled in a number of competing mediation and facilitation initiatives that all are of limited reach and influence. This competition provides favourable conditions for various splits within the actor groups, both on the side of the military regime and the side of the armed and the civilian opposition. The former has escalated to a point of an open civil war, severely risking the transition process as a whole.
- ▶ Since several regional actors – neighbours South Sudan and Egypt and the UAE, and other actors such as Russia – favour a strong role for the coup regime. Initially this favoured both the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Response Forces, due to the alleged predictability of the security sector. In the light of the violent tensions between these two factions, this approach has drastically failed. However, actors' room to manoeuvre nominally in favour of a democratic transition, such as the Troika and the United Nations, has strategically diminished.
- ▶ The inclination of nominally pro-democratic actors to keep engaging with the coup regime has undermined the prospects for a democratic transition even further. They not only encouraged the security sector to maintain its strong role, but they also lost substantial credibility among stakeholders seeking to pursue a democratic perspective against the coup regime. The attempt to engage the coup regime in a process of slow and gradual transformation has largely failed thus far, and is undermining potential long-term change for the sake of short-term stability.
- ▶ The liberal perspective on the Sudanese transition has not been replaced by an alternative vision. Instead, three axes of transitional contestation have emerged that impact the decision-making by regional and international actors: democratisation and the structural role of the Sudanese security sector, Islamisation, and geostrategic interests. Since these axes develop in a competitive marketplace environment, stabilisation emerges as the lowest common denominator between all stakeholders. Actors in the competitive transitional landscape are acting less aligned to their respective visions and strategies, but instead relational to one another along these axes of contestation, and deeply entangled in a political-military power play.

- ▶ The insistence on one unitary process by many of the international mediators and facilitators has resulted in competition between the political framework agreement and its signatories, and the Juba Peace Agreement and its signatories. The coup leadership has started to use the Juba Peace Agreement as a flexible tool against any substantial move towards a democratic transition and an undermining of its politically dominant role. At the same time, this insistence on one unitary process has also contributed to the escalation of tensions, as it aimed to enforce a decision in an evolving power-struggle within the military component.
- ▶ Since any reliance on transitional architectures and predictable transitional governance is likely to remain elusive – given the recent armed confrontations, even in the mid-term – international stakeholders need to reassess their approach of attempting to unify the negotiation streams. Instead, they should consider a multiplicity of transitional pathways. There is no way to “win” the marketplace competition over these transitional processes, but not “winning” them does not mean ‘losing’ them. Many of the competing initiatives are predominantly pragmatic and driven by own interests. Keeping Sudan in the driving seat of these processes should be instrumental to the willingness to support multiple – both complementary and competing – transitional pathways.

## Introduction

This report follows earlier work (Pospisil and Jenner; 2022) investigating the emerging regional configurations of transition management in the Wider Horn of Africa with a particular focus on Sudan. Together with a report by on the “congestion and diversification of third-party mediation in Sudan and South Sudan” (Peter and Houghton; 2023), it provides the empirical and analytical background for furthering the conceptual understanding of the regional dimension of contemporary transition processes. Sudan is a revealing case study for this undertaking. The country is currently undergoing simultaneous peace and democratic transition processes, whereby the latter has been halted by the military coup from 25 October 2021. The various negotiation streams in the coup’s aftermath have revealed a complex picture of competitive regional and international involvement, which offers insights relevant beyond the Sudan’s immediate context. This picture has taken a sharp and unfortunate turn after armed fighting broke out between the two major proponents of the military coup, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), on 15 April 2023.

Against this background, the report will investigate three questions: how does the alignment between regional and international actors develop within the two Sudanese transitions from conflict and from authoritarianism; what are the implications of the Russian invasion of the Ukraine for the regional transitional setting; and how can these processes be conceptualised, especially in contrast to envisioned frameworks such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA; cf. Engel and Porto; 2010). The latter question will be discussed in relation to existing literature on new emerging patterns in international peacemaking and peacebuilding, in particular Carothers and Samet-Marram’s (2015) argument of a “global marketplace of political change”.

Carothers and Samet-Marram characterised this marketplace as being driven by a variety of motivations – often non-ideological –, increasing contestation with a tendency toward forceful intervention, and the decreasing relevance of binding rules. Most importantly, marketplaces of political change would have an asymmetric character: “Fuelled by a perception of urgent national interest and taking advantage of local ties and knowledge, relatively weak countries are sometimes able to exert significant influence on transitions near them, rivalling or even outweighing that of major Western powers” (ibid: 1-2).

The case of the Sudanese transition largely confirms these findings. It functions based on numerous – sometimes counterintuitive – ad-hoc coalitions and several severe fault lines between the main stakeholders, rather than according to top-down architecture. These coalitions routinely overlap multilateral and bilateral players and national, regional, and international interest. The fault lines, as recent events have shown, can play out violently. In answering the three questions stated above based on seventeen expert interviews, and a database of all mediation efforts in Sudan and the players involved, this report investigates the structures and trends of the regional transition landscape in Sudan. These include the trend toward overarching ad-hoc coalition building, the multiplicity of processes, and the structural trend towards stability-oriented solutions that pitch peacebuilding against democratisation.



## The Context: Sudan's Twin Transition

Sudan's twin transition from both authoritarian rule and civil war came to an abrupt halt after a military coup on 25 October 2021 by what has been considered the "military component" of the power-sharing government under Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok. The coup confirmed long-held assumptions among many in the civilian opposition that did not trust the Sudanese Armed Forces to relinquish their political role; particularly in light of business interests and possible legal issues of prominent figures due to their role in the Bashir years (Interviews 5, 6).

The pretext of the military regime's coup was upholding the revolution, reducing political friction, and preventing civil war ([Hamilton; 2021](#)). In contrast to these lofty claims, the military regime immediately side-lined the civilian opposition, removed them from government and state bureaucracy, and detained some of their leading figures. International protest was half-hearted at best, focusing on keeping communication channels with the military regime open to protect stability. The coup also increased the political fragmentation on all sides of the political spectrum. The main opposition outfit, the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), split. Its two major factions were divided by their willingness to cooperate with the military regime and remain in government positions, which most of the signatories of the [Juba Peace Agreement](#) from 2020 did. They split from the main faction of the FFC (now FFC Central Council), which left the government and, initially, broadly refused to negotiate with the regime, and formed the FFC Democratic Block ([Dabanga; 2022](#)).

At the same time, a rift was forming within the military component, between the leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, "Hemeti", and the leader of the coup regime and commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. Using ever more clear words, Hemeti turned against the coup, going as far to even call it a "failure" ([Sudan Tribune; 2022](#)). Initially, this rift has been interpreted as a result of Hemeti's attempt to become a credible political figure, and to create a political homebase in Western Darfur, where he has been residing in recent months (Interview 4). The alliance of the RSF with the Russian Wagner Group, in contrast to the SAF's strong link with Egypt, was seen as enabling Hemeti to play such an independent role (Interviews 12, 13). In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of the Ukraine and substantial attempts of Russia to increase its military footprint in Sudan and, thus, improve the relationship with Burhan, this clear separation of the respective regional and international support structures has shifted.

The context changed significantly after street protests on 30 June 2022, and the subsequent announcement by the military regime on 4 July 2022 to suspend its participation in the dialogue facilitated by the UN-AU-IGAD Tripartite Mechanism, dissolve the Sovereign Council, form an independent Supreme Military Council, and hand over the responsibility to form a transitional technocratic government to the civilian forces ([Sudan Tribune; 2022](#)).

This move marked the end to the initial, Tripartite-supported consultation process, which never gained significant traction due to a lack of credible civilian Sudanese participation (interviews 4, 5). Because of the military's unilateral move, which was not aligned with the activities of the Tripartite Mechanism, the credibility of multilateral actors, especially UNITAMS and the African Union, has suffered significantly (Interview 17). The tactical retreat by the military is a result of the persistent pressure from the opposition movement, especially the street protests and sit-ins organised by the Resistance Committees (Interview 5). Yet, it was widely read as a tactical move aimed at sustaining the military's control of Sudan's political affairs ([International Crisis Group; 2022](#)) (Interviews 1, 4, 10).

Furthermore, the military actors put the opposition under considerable political pressure by surprising them with this manoeuvre. The military relied on the fragmentation of the civilian opposition, and its alleged difficulties to form a technocratic transitional government and name a commonly accepted Prime Minister. As a result, negotiations started among the highly fragmented and factionalised opposition forces on how to approach this move made by the coup regime (Interview 5). In Sudan, these attempts were again facilitated by the so-called Tripartite Mechanism. After a series of consultations and workshops, on 5 December 2022, the mainstream faction of the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC-CC) signed a Political Framework Agreement with the coup regime to establish a civilian government led by a civilian Prime Minister and a civilian President ([Sudan Tribune; 2022](#)).

While providing a pathway to a return to civilian rule in general terms, this agreement contains several obstacles. First, the five most difficult issues, including transitional justice and security sector reform, are postponed to a second negotiation phase, due to start mid-January. Second, participation on the oppositional civilian side has remained weak up until the time of writing. The two major armed movements outside of the Juba Peace Agreement, the SPLM-N al-Hilu and the SLM/A AW have rejected the deal. The main signatories of the agreement, the SLM/A MM and the JEM, among others which were assembled in the FFC-National Accord ([Dabanga; 2022](#)), are not yet part of this agreement. Finally, the coup leadership escapes untouched and remains in their respective roles in the security apparatus, which comes close to their full rehabilitation. Furthermore, the issue of the full integration of the security sector, especially the integration of the RSF into the Sudanese Armed Forces, developed into a major obstacle to a point where it even triggered a violent conflict between these two security forces.

Among Western stakeholders, the agreement still finds unequivocal support, especially from the Troika countries and the European Union ([Sudan Tribune; 2023](#)). Some players who act more in the background, like Saudi Arabia, and to an extent the UAE and Qatar, have also reacted positively (Interview 16). Others, especially South Sudan, the official mediator of the Sudanese peace process, and Egypt, remain sceptical (Interview 13). The signatories of the JPA voiced fierce resistance ([Sudan Tribune; 2022](#)), partially out of concern of losing their power-sharing gains enshrined in the JPA, especially since the Political Framework Agreement called for an evaluation and rectification of the JPA and an inclusion of the two major hold-out groups, the SPLM-N al-Hilu and the SLM/A Abdul Wahid, in the transition process.

While UNITAMS and the Tripartite Mechanism, with support from other Western stakeholders such as the EU, aims to keep the implementation of the Political Framework Agreement on track, fragmentation mounted on all sides. Some regional players intentionally aggravated these tensions. In early February 2023, Egypt organised a five-day workshop reviewing the Juba Peace Agreement, deliberately in parallel with a key workshop organised by the Tripartite Mechanism in Khartoum to review the constitution making efforts in light of the Political Framework Agreement ([Dabanga; 2023](#)). Egypt's initiative was clearly designed to undermine the competing political process (interview 12). Later in February, the South Sudanese mediation held a workshop on the JPA implementation, where a new implementation matrix was signed ([Dabanga; 2023](#)). While formally within their mandate, the occasion was used by the signatories to lobby against the implementation of the Political Framework Agreement.

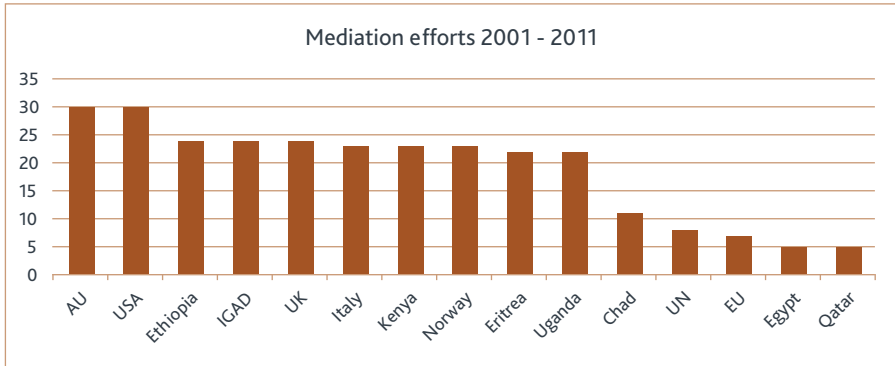
Finally, the strained relationship between the two coup leaders escalated. The leader of the RSF, Hemeti, started to criticise the military coup as a failure and as not having achieved its objectives (*Sudan Tribune; 2022*), thereby directly attacking the SAF commander in chief and junta leader, al-Burhan. In terms of the unification of all armed forces – also requested by the Political Framework Agreement – the RSF leader offered a period of ten years, which was strongly rejected by the SAF leadership (*Sudan Tribune; 2023*). Another workshop on the security arrangements, organised by the Tripartite Mechanism, has not been able to find a solution to the issue, delaying the completion of the final agreement that should pave the way to establish the civilian government (*Dabanga; 2023*). The situation remains fluid and unpredictable (*Sudan Tribune; 2023*), even more so as the rift between the two major security forces turned into an open war, fought in Khartoum and other places in the country. It is the first time in the decade-long history of Sudanese armed conflicts that the capital itself is hit by warfare.

## Mediating Transition – the Trends

Sudan is embedded in a complex and intertwined regional transitional landscape. Neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia (cf Abate Demissie et al; 2022) and South Sudan (cf Logo and Mariani; 2022) are undergoing complex political transitions, whilst the political situation in Libya, Chad and the Central African Republic are unstable. Sudan's armed conflicts are also highly internationalised. Sudanese armed outfits are present in Libya, Chad, and South Sudan (Interview 9). Egyptian soldiers are deployed in Sudan in support of the regular army. The bilateral relationship with Ethiopia recently improved, but had escalated previously to the point of armed conflict (although at a low scale) around el-Fashaga over the past years (de Waal; 2021). El-Fashaga partly borders Tigray, where the Ethiopian and the Eritrean armies have been involved in one of the deadliest armed conflicts of past decades, which was ended by a peace deal in November 2022 (mediated by the African Union, Kenya, the United States and South Africa) ([International Crisis Group; 2022](#)).

This complicated picture demonstrates the high level of internationalisation and regionalisation of the Sudanese armed conflicts and the current Sudanese transition. Regionalisation is a long-standing trend in the mediation of armed conflicts in Sudan. The 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement ([United Nations; 1972](#)) that ended the first Sudanese civil war was mediated by the All Africa Conference of Churches, and signed in Ethiopia. In subsequent decades, peacemaking interventions by neighbouring countries and regional actors continued to dominate (Peter and Houghton; 2023).

The tendency of regional predominance over transitional processes only started to change in the 2000s, when international actors, especially the US and the UK, but also Italy, Norway and, to a lesser extent, the European Union got substantially involved in Sudanese peacemaking. This trend would continue until the downfall of Bashir in 2019 (*Graph. 1*).



Graph. 1: Mediation efforts in Sudan, 2001-2011 (Peter and Houghton; 2023: Graph. 6)

The reasons for this change are threefold. First, there is the contextual condition that the 2000s were a prime moment of international peacemaking support towards comprehensive peace settlements. The years 2004 to 2006 saw several of these accords. Besides the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ([Peace Agreements](#)), the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement ([Peace Agreements](#)) and the 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement ([Peace Agreements](#)) for Sudan, comparable agreements were signed in Nepal ([Comprehensive Peace Agreement; 2006](#)) and Burundi ([Agreement of Principles; 2006](#)). The Iraqi Constitution ([Peace Agreements; 2005](#)), also a product of heavy international interference, was also agreed upon in this period. Second, the Bashir regime was eager for international recognition, especially from the US, and thus, welcoming towards international peacemaking support (Srinivasan; 2021). This, in turn aligned with the interests of the Southern Sudanese SPLM/A, which closely matched those of the US, especially during the CPA negotiation process (Pospisil; 2021: 95). Consequently, the Sudan Troika of the US, the UK and Norway was given a key role in guaranteeing the agreement.

Even with other actors – especially Qatar, a traditionally close ally of the US – obtaining key roles in instances of Sudanese Peace Making (Marsden; 2020), this picture only changed when Bashir fell in April 2019. Immediately after the downfall of the old regime, international mediation attempts multiplied, peaking in the year 2020 and remaining at a high level since (Peter and Houghton; 2023). However, in contrast to the previous decade, the involvement was mainly driven by neighbouring countries and regional powers, and to a lesser extent, by multilateral actors. The Western powers that dominated the CPA and, to an extent, post-CPA peacemaking, saw their role diminishing, which was also a result of more self-confident approaches taken by countries in the region (Interview 7).

The obvious factors contributing to this situation were the concern of most Sudanese stakeholders to keep the transition a predominantly Sudanese affair, and to limit substantial influence to regional actors, at least on the surface (Interview 12). However at the same time, Sudan developed into a geostrategically interesting place: the civil war in Ethiopia and the high tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) ([Mohyeldeen; 2023](#)), as well as the increasing involvement of Russia played substantial roles in that respect. These were all contributing factors for the rapid development of a fiercely contested competitive marketplace of transition support.

Several features and characteristics can be derived from this situation: a declining purchase of concepts of liberal democracy and peacebuilding without the emergence of tangible alternative visions, a predominantly interest-based, pragmatic, and competitive approach towards transition support, and the breakdown of structured approaches to transition management. Overall, regional and international actors align with Sudanese stakeholders less around common visions or even strategies, but instead, act relationally and pragmatically along a set of contested issues that predefine the transitional trajectory.

## Declining Purchase of Democracy and Democratic Powers

Nominally liberal actors are facing a decline in their influence in Sudan. One reason is the increasing variety of viable support options that the military regime can draw upon. Even though the economic situation appears dire, there is no need to repeat the desperate search for international recognition that former dictator Bashir undertook, especially in the final decade of his rule. Paradoxically, this decline in relevance has not resulted in clearer stance on democratic values, but in an unprincipled, relational pragmatism as an attempt to retain relevance in adverse contextual conditions.

The present approach of liberal actors is characterised by giving in to contextual conditions. Their shared reasoning suggests that the military will continue to play a relevant role in the future, and therefore have to remain a partner in the transition process (Interview 16). Paradoxically, this view aligns with the vision of some of the so-called “hold-out groups”, who decline any engagement with the formal transition processes because the military would not be willing to leave, and, therefore, will remain prepared to undertake a coup again should their essential interests get threatened (Interview 2). In doing so, Western liberal players have lost considerable credibility in the Sudanese pro-democracy movements, despite public statements in favour of a democratic transition (Interviews 5, 6).

The African Union took the clearest consequences after the military coup, by upholding the suspension of Sudan’s membership, a step initially taken on 6 June 2019 and not yet withdrawn ([African Union; 2023](#)). At the same time, coup leader al-Burhan was not only invited to speak at the UN General Assembly as the formal representative of Sudan ([United Nations; 2022](#)), but also participated in the funeral procedures for the British Queen in London ([Sudan Tribune; 2022](#)). Although he was not allowed to enter with other heads of states and was treated as having a ministerial rank (Interview 17), his participation was widely recognised in the region and interpreted as a clear sign of an apologetic stance by the West towards the coup junta.



The fragile regional environment – especially the conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia – the difficult situation in Chad and CAR, and the increasing influence of Russia, are contributing to an alignment of international actors behind the lowest common denominator of stabilisation. Since democratisation is a risky and disruptive process, it is the nominally normative powers that align themselves with those who prefer a short- to mid-term stability out of their self-interest. The clearest conceptual stance among these nominally normative powers is taken by the United States. Notwithstanding its formal commitment to democracy, which is underlined by the Biden-administration's regular "Summits for Democracy", relevant actors in the state department favour authoritarian change management, if it aligns with US national interest (Interview 15).

Hence, paradoxically, it appears that democratic values have lost their purchase not necessarily among the potential recipients of transitional policies, but among the nominally normative powers themselves. Democracy remains however a contested political good. It remains widely undisputed that Egypt is highly interested in not having an example of democratic governance in its neighbourhood. Sudanese security actors as well, and the presently commanding faction of the SAF in particular, are only interested in a guided democratic setting at best that is not going to threaten their strategic interests (Interviews 4, 5). Given this picture, democracy is less a strategic anchor for regional and international stakeholders, and instead an axis of contestation that forces these stakeholders to relational actions, always dependent on the moves of other competitors in the transitional marketplace.

## Contestation instead of Intention and Ambition

The often-raised question towards the loss of purchase of liberal values in political transitions is with what visions, values, or norms they are substituted. The Sudanese case suggests that this is not the case. There are no alternative models put forward, or even in development, to replace them. The one norm that comes close to it is the traditional figure of state sovereignty. Sovereignty as a stance in international relations has seen a comeback and is used by several Sudanese stakeholders to push back against the influence of mediation initiatives, especially from multilateral actors. The explicit stance of the Sudanese coup regime that UNITAMS and the Tripartite Mechanism have only a mandate to facilitate, and not to mediate, has been underpinned with sovereignty-concerns and the ambition to keep the transition a Sudanese-led affair (Interview 12).

Internationally, China is the strongest advocate of a conservative vision of state sovereignty. In the region, Ethiopia is traditionally a dedicated proponent of such a vision. Consequently, China's Special Envoy for Horn of Africa Affairs, Xue Bing, emphasised during his last visit in Addis Ababa in March 2023 that China would always respect Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (*Xinhua*; 2023). This statement could be transferred to any other country in the region. A sovereignty-first approach conflicts with the fact that interactions across borders are a common feature of politics in the Wider Horn. Comparative research has clearly demonstrated that "most armed conflicts in Africa have a significant transnational element" (de Waal et al; 2019), which is particularly true for the Wider Horn. When it comes to political and practical transition support, cross-border activities have a long tradition among countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Carothers and Samet-Marran, 2015: 11). The involvement of South Sudan and most neighbouring countries, as well as the Gulf States, the traditional liberal actors, and Russia demonstrate this clearly in the case of Sudan (Pospisil and Jenner; 2022).

Other interests are mixed. Besides the anti-democratic sentiments in Egypt, no clear visions or paradigms are emerging. As a second element of interest, the relation to Islamic pressure groups and Islamisation in general has emerged over the last two years (Interviews 2, 5). This factor has gained attention after the military coup from October 2021, and the subsequent return of Islamist cadres to the state bureaucracy, a move that went along with attacks on the Committee to Dismantle the June 30 1989 Regime and Retrieve Public Funds ([Dabanga; 2022](#)). Turkey has been a visible supporter of Islamisation in the whole region, especially in Ethiopia and Somalia but also in Sudan (Interview 13), through the issuing of stipends and scholarships to students for studying at Islamist higher education entities ([Mashamoun; 2022](#)).

The main anti-Islamist players are, to an extent, Egypt and the Gulf countries, especially the UAE. In the case of the UAE, this specific interest intertwines with the interest to secure land for agricultural production (Pospisil and Jenner; 2022: 27) and with the inner-Sudanese political power play between the main security actors. For radical Islamists, even coup leader Burhan is viewed:

*“As betraying the Islamist project. Burhan thinks taking a public stance against Islamist factions in Sudan will help secure the confidence of regional leaders such President Abdel Fattah el Sisi in Egypt, Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahayan (MBZ) in the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia who share a visceral hatred of Al Ikhwan al Muslimun (Muslim Brothers)”.*

*(Africa Confidential)*

Burhan's additional problem is that the UAE are, together with Russia, seen as Hemeti's ultimate suppliers ([ibid](#)).

Besides pivoting towards democratisation, Islamist groups and Islamisation, geostrategic power interests are a third axis of contestation between regional and international actors. These interests are of different origin but converge in the Sudanese transition to fluid and mostly tactical coalitions. The strongest player, mainly focusing on its geostrategic ambitions, is Russia. Besides the obvious interest in the Darfurian gold resources, which are even more critical in the current sanction regime against Russia, the ambition to build a military control belt from the Sudanese coastline to the Sahel guides Russian positioning and behaviour.

Ethiopia also has a direct interest in Sudanese politics, not the least given the perennial border conflicts between the two countries and Ethiopia's urgent need to forge political alliances against Egypt for gaining support in the GERD conflict. Another country with comparable interests is South Sudan. Maintaining control over the respective other's peace process – South Sudan is the official mediator of the Juba Peace Process, while Sudan is one of the guarantors of the South Sudanese [R-ARCSS](#) – is an important element in both countries' regional policies. South Sudan also formally hosts the leadership of both major JPA hold-out groups, SPLM-N's Abdelaziz al-Hilu and SLM/A's Abdul Wahid al-Nur. It enables both to exert a certain amount of control over each other's political processes.

## Relation instead of Architecture

This complex picture of intertwined interests shows several things. First, normative perspectives, and liberal peacebuilding and transition management in particular, have lost considerable purchase and relevance. It is a fair argument that such orientations indeed never had the relevance in *realpolitik* as it had in diplomatic speeches. But even though such speeches and statements are still to be found among the traditionally liberal stakeholders, the flexible rapprochement to the Sudanese coup leaders clearly demonstrates that this is not matched with concrete purchase. Second, normative perspectives have not been exchanged with different approaches. There is no distinguishable Chinese or Russian approach to peacebuilding, nor is there one from stakeholders in Sub-Saharan Africa or the Gulf. Instead, actors behave relational towards others, always aiming to predict and react to moves by others. The regional marketplace of political transitions generates a common approach of relational pragmatism.

The relational behaviour of actors is evolving around several axes of contestation. The three major ones have been explored above – the contestation about democratisation, Islamisation, and about, sometimes competing, sometimes overlapping, or sometimes complementing geostrategic interests. Actor behaviour is as much decided by their own assumptions as it is by the behaviour of others. Steps are not taken due to strategic orientation, but are decided based upon answering or countering the moves of others at a predominantly tactical level.

These “tit-for-tat” logics are demonstrated in the steps taken by the regional backers of the competing strongmen in the Sudanese security sector, al-Burhan and Hemeti. These match the increasing divide between the two and take into account their respective activities at a regional level:

*“Many things divide Burhan and Hemeti, who have worked in alliance since their days under Beshir organising the mass killings to suppress opposition in Darfur. They have rival foreign backers, with Egypt supporting Burhan, and the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia favouring Hemeti because his forces have fought the Houthi movement in Yemen, and took the side of the UAE in Libya”.*

*(Africa Confidential)*

Such logic extends to the multilateral level. The relationship between UNITAMS, the AU and IGAD has been strained from the very beginning of the transition and the establishment of UNITAMS (Interviews 10, 17). The atmosphere between UNITAMS and the AU, and SRSG Volker Perthes and former AU Special Envoy, Mohamed El Hacen Lebatt, has been perceived as particularly difficult (ibid). The relation between UNITAMS and AU has been challenging ever since, even after Lebatt's withdrawal. The constitution of the Tripartite Mechanism, thus, is more a temporary fix born out of these difficulties than a strategic cooperation between multilateral partners (Interview 17). Other groupings, such as the "Quad" or the "Friends of Sudan" are rather loose and flexible alliances as well (Interview 12).

The relational and pragmatic behaviour stands against attempts to forge something like an African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which was one of the aims behind the transformation of the former Organisation for African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (Engels and Gomes Porto; 2010: 2). The concept of an architecture – or of an established set of hierarchies with the UN as the global and the AU as the continental lead – followed by a number of regional organisations that cover all parts of the continent, was more of a theoretical construct. However, in the current context, neither the multilateral nor the bilateral players align with this structure. Besides the competitive and unsettled alliance in the Tripartite Mechanism, which as much formally links the global, the continental and the regional dimension as it prevents open competition between them, the bilateral alliances as well are fluid, flexible and bridge across continental boundaries.

Instead of an architecture or even structure, the relational behaviour of national, regional, and international players in the Sudanese transition resembles what Timothy Morton (2013: 81-95), with reference to Martin Heidegger, calls a "mesh" – an interrelatedness of everything. In the context of a transition, such interconnectedness refers to the meshing of layers – national, regional, international – as well as of interests – as laid out in the above-mentioned axes of contestation. Political decision-making in such transitional mesh is necessarily relational, and less based on unilateral orientations, and pragmatic, since longer term and even midterm goals are unforeseeable and unplannable.

## Multiplicity of Processes: Peace versus Democracy

The chaotic and relational character that the regional and international involvement in the Sudanese transition takes has structural consequences. It has resulted in competition between a variety of regionally supported processes and enabled forum shopping and flexible alliance building among Sudanese stakeholders (Interview 16). The desperate answer of the multilateral actors, especially UNITAMS, and the nominally liberal supporters, gathered around the Troika, was the attempt to reduce and control the political processes. From the outset, the challenge was bringing the Juba Peace Process and the political transition – especially the transition of political power from the security sector to a civilian government – into a coherent format. Since the Sudanese security sector has also remained the main counterpart of the JPA signatories in the Juba Peace Process, strongly supported by the South Sudanese mediation, this attempt was bound to fail.

As the facilitation mandate of the Tripartite Mechanism is focused on the political process – and explicitly, not the peace process – their attempt is naturally to turn the political framework agreement, and potential subsequent documents, into the main transitional cornerstone. The more obvious these attempts become, the more pronounced the resistance of the JPA signatories – and also, the JPA mediators and guarantors, especially of South Sudan and Egypt – becomes. Effectively, the result of the attempt to unify and harmonise the transition processes is increasing in fragmentation and competition between them. Arguably, this approach also contributed to the outbreak of the war between the SAF and the RSF, by aiming to enforce a strict timeline on security sector integration. Trying to keep all processes together pits them further against one another. The more centrifugal and centralised the approaches towards governing this transition are, the more centripetal the structural forces develop.

## Implications of the Russian Invasion in the Ukraine

The Russian invasion of the Ukraine has substantially impacted the regional configuration around Sudan. It has not led to a structural change, yet it has accentuated given positions and interests, and sharpened the division about the geostrategic contestations emerging around the Sudanese transition. Russian-Sudanese relations go back a long way. For the Bashir regime, the Soviet Union – and later, the Russian Federation – were the main source of weapons for the SAF (Interview 12). The necessity for maintenance and supplies kept Russia as an important partner particularly for the SAF, after the emergence of the RSF and other security sector actors, and the downfall of the Bashir regime (ibid).

In recent years, Russian interests in Sudan have increased substantially. Sudanese gold became an important hard value supply for the Russian financial system, which has become pivotal when, in the aftermath of the invasion of the Ukraine, financial sanctions against Russia were issued ([CNN; 2022](#)). In exchange for the gold, the RSF received training and supplies by the Russian PMC-outlet Wagner Group (Interviews 3, 13). The presence of the Wagner Group needs to be seen not just in the context of gold production, however. In recent years, the group has expanded its sphere of influence from the Central African Republic, where it is present since 2017, and Libya to Mali and Burkina Faso ([Ehl; 2023](#)). Recently, Wagner started to establish a presence in Chad ([Africa Defence Forum; 2023](#), which puts both Sudan and Niger in geostrategically important positions in preventing the establishment of a Russian military belt through the whole Sahel.

As in Niger, which has recently moved to the centre of attention of US and French West Africa policies ([Stepansky; 2023](#)), Western policies towards Sudan, especially the flexible stance towards the coup junta and the preparedness to negotiate with them, is to be seen against the background of curbing Russian influence (Interviews 10, 13). These efforts are, however, largely unsuccessful. Only one day after a joint visit of the Special Envoys and Representatives from the EU, France, Germany, Norway, the UK, and the US on 8 February 2023, coup leader al-Burhan welcomed Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to an official visit ([Sudan Tribune; 2023](#)). This obvious diplomatic snub of the consolidated Western effort demonstrates their severely limited influence and the failure of the strategy to rehabilitate the coup regime for the sake of stabilisation and weakening their Russian ties.



The situation has become more complex since the rifts between Hemeti and the RSF, and al-Burhan and the SAF have deepened. Hemeti is seen by the Russians as a guarantor of regional stability, especially in the border regions to Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR), where Russia needs a quiet environment to pursue its business operations, especially around the Vakaga gold mines, implemented by the Wagner Group ([Galindo and Rolland; 2023](#)). When the situation in the area became unstable due to an increasingly uncontrollable involvement of RSF elements in the CAR civil war, Russia essentially ordered Hemeti to close the Sudanese-CAR border, which he implemented in December 2022 (Interview 16). This close relationship is seen by al-Burhan with increasing suspicion.

*Divisions between Burhan and Hemeti grew clearer after the latter visited Russia in March, supporting Moscow's bid for a naval base in Port Sudan. While Burhan has also voiced support for this, he saw Hemeti's cosyng up to Russia as preparation for a coup. Burhan gave the defence minister, retired Lt Gen Yassin Ibrahim Yassin, the mandate to control Sudan's shores and continental shelf, as a statement that the SAF have the final say on Port Sudan. Burhan also travelled to the UAE and Saudi Arabia to win direct financial backing and limit Hemeti's lines of contact.*

*(Africa Confidential)*

After the invasion of the Ukraine, the Russian interest in gaining naval access to the Sudanese coastline, particularly through a naval base near South Sudan, increased again. After the civilian government had suspended the agreement in April 2021, al-Burhan, now as head of the coup junta, reinstated the commitment just a few days after the military coup ([Sudan Tribune; 2021](#)). This commitment both showed Russia's equidistance between RSF and SAF, and demonstrated the willingness of al-Burhan to use far-reaching concessions to Russia to curb both Western pushes towards democratisation and Hemeti's political-military ambitions.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's visit in February 2023 finally focused on sealing the deal. The construction of a naval base for up to 300 Russian troops was agreed upon, based on a guaranteed twenty-five-year lease with the option of automatic ten-year prolongations thereafter. As material exchange, Russia will deploy the SAF with military equipment ([Kuczyński; 2023](#)). The agreement should also safeguard the SAF leadership from excessive requests by the RSF.

Foremost, however, it demonstrates the willingness and the ability of the Sudanese military rulers to use any leverage against international interference in the political transition that works against their interests. Within this context, the consolidated efforts of the Western actors to rehabilitate al-Burhan and the coup leadership, to both limit Russian influence and slowly push towards democratisation, appear desperate and helpless. The approach of a gradual and risk-averse democratic transition that focuses on stabilisation and geopolitical influence in Sudan has undoubtedly failed.

## Conclusions

The Sudanese transition confirms some of the established research findings about contemporary processes in general, and in Sudan in particular. Transitions become increasingly complex, regionalised, and enduring, leading more to instances of formalised political unsettlement even if they reach negotiated outcomes (Bell and Pospisil; 2017) and evolve in a marketplace-type of fashion (de Waal, 2015; 2016). They also feature structural resistance to deadline diplomacy (de Waal et al; 2019) and an enduring character. The transition's enduring and sometimes violent character portrayed not the least by a fluid, flexible and, overall, weak character of peace and transition agreements, results in a pragmatic approach towards negotiations and settlements. The willingness of actors to "compromise" (Barnett and Zürcher; 2009) their interests with interests of regional and international stakeholders has also increased.

Competitive regionalism, as predicted in the "marketplace of political change" argument by Carothers and Samet-Marram (2015) is also a given reality. The question, however, remains as to what extent this setting is indeed new. The empirical data shows two things very clearly: first, the number of mediation attempts and involved actors in Sudan has significantly increased since 2019 and the ouster of Bashir. However, more importantly – in terms of the comparative insights – the character of these actors has significantly changed over the last decade. While regional actors and regional organisations have always been involved in Sudanese peacemaking over the last 40 years, the role of Western actors has clearly diminished with the downfall of Bashir. This is surely a late confirmation of Bashir's surge for international recognition. At the same time, it is a consequence of the diminishing role of Western actors and a region-wide thrive for home-grown solutions.

The role of multilateral organisations has become that of competitive facilitators entangled in often difficult partnerships, with other multilateral organisations or bilateral stakeholders. The situation resembles more a mesh than a structured architecture, such as it has been suggested in all the works on the "African Peace and Security Architecture" (APSA). Again, the question remains whether this is indeed new or if this architecture has always been elusive. While the figure of an architecture has always been more of a legal framework – and continues to exist as such – it is the diminishing role of the United Nations that represents something new. The Tripartite Mechanism between UN, AU and IGAD is a clear indication of this trend. The mechanism got established after the UNITAMS struggled to get traction among Sudanese stakeholders and after a severe turf war with the AU. Far from being a planned and structured effort, the Tripartite Mechanism itself represents a formalised political unsettlement.

Interferences and engagement by regional powers and international actors such as Russia are not predominantly driven by different peacebuilding visions, as it is sometimes assumed by Western mediators. The most normative vision in the Sudan process is possibly expedited by Egypt, which clearly wants to avoid any successful democratic transition in its neighbourhood. All other actors are motivated either by self-interest or by the entanglement with other actors. Decision-making is intrinsically relational and revolves around several axes of contestation, along which actors design their relationships towards one another. The three main axes in the Sudanese transition at current are the contestation around democratisation, around Islamisation, and around partially established, and partially emerging geostrategic interests.

Notwithstanding the claims of diplomats and political officers of complementarity and long-term planned initiatives, the situation resembles a chaotic marketplace of strategies and tactics of gaining influence. What can be observed is not the development of an alternative model to Western peacebuilding and democracy promotion, but a predominantly tactical game whose long-term impact on the transition remains largely unforeseeable.

As a generalisable insight, such a situation favours stability-oriented approaches that play in the hand of and empower authoritarian rulers, since stabilisation remains the fallback option that Western actors also adhere to when a situation threatens to become uncontrollable. The Sudanese particularity means that this orientation towards stability in a competitive environment of regional and international mediation means that the peace process is pitched against the democratic transition. Bringing both processes into one seems an increasingly impossible task.

While these findings are not surprising, Western actors are reluctant to accept their potential implications. As recent events clearly demonstrate, the quest for short-term stabilisation can fail as well, and not only undermine long-term peacebuilding and democratisation, but can result in the outbreak of armed violence. Approaches to mediation and facilitation are still focusing on unifying and controlling processes and make them subject to deadline diplomacy. Such approaches routinely fail and tend to make matters worse, often turning into significant stumbling blocks for transitional progress. Cited reasons, like the necessity to have everybody involved for the sake of abstract "inclusion", or the prevention of forum and mediator shopping, are weak arguments when the only likely tangible result is a persistence of failure.

The consequence of working with the competitive landscape of a transition marketplace is to give up on the idea of a planned structure, and instead apply a principled, pragmatic approach that accepts the multiplicity of complementing and, at times, competing processes. Not all of these processes require or deserve the same amount of support but attempts of unifying them towards one all-encompassing comprehensive deal are likely to be elusive. Far too often, however, principles are thrown over-board for the sake of keeping the designated primary process running. Working with the grain of transitions, by contrast, demands the acceptance of multiplicity and diversity, and the ability to work with a wide variety of partners in a wide variety of settings. This is the new reality of a post-architectural transitional landscape.

## Annex 1: List of interviewees

Interview 01	Juba, Nov 22/Jan 23	Sudanese armed opposition figure (male)
Interview 02	Juba, Mar 23	Sudanese armed opposition figure (male)
Interview 03	Juba, Feb 23	Sudanese political activist (male)
Interview 04	Online, Jan 23	Sudanese political activist / observer (male)
Interview 05	Online, Feb 23	Sudanese political observer (female)
Interview 06	Nairobi, Mar 23	Sudanese political observer (female)
Interview 07	Nairobi, Dez 22/Mar 23	Regional mediator, multilateral outfit (female)
Interview 08	Juba, Nov 22	Regional mediator, multilateral outfit (male)
Interview 09	Online, Mar 23	International mediator, civil society outfit (male)
Interview 10	Nairobi, Mar 23	Regional political analyst (male)
Interview 11	Nairobi, Dez 22/Mar 23	Regional political analyst (male)
Interview 12	Nairobi, Dez 22/Mar 23	International political analyst on Sudan (male)
Interview 13	Online, Feb 23	International political analyst on Sudan (male)
Interview 14	Nairobi, Dez 22	International political analyst on East Africa (female)
Interview 15	Nairobi, Dez 22/Feb 23	Humanitarian actor with focus on the Horn (male)
Interview 16	Nairobi, Mar 23	Political officer, multilateral actor (male)
Interview 17	London, Nov 22	Former political officer, multilateral actor (female)

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