

Russia's Hybrid Wars Come to Sudan

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Russia, and Wagner, unlike Europe, have skin in the Sudan game. So do Turkey, Egypt, and the Gulf States. If this is not enough for Europe to take a much belated interest, then there is gold, minerals, and maritime connectivity, with the two choke points of Suez and Bab Al Mandab at each end of the Red Sea. If Russia acquires a Red Sea port as a result of a victory achieved by the Wagner-backed Rapid Support Force (RSF) that is fighting against the regular Sudanese army, it will be not just the gold mines of Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) that will have direct access to the Red Sea. Strategically, Russia will have acquired another warm seaport that can affect Europe's vital maritime connectivity to Asia. Wagner, in other words, is following the money, and is simultaneously trying to achieve some of Russia's strategic objectives, as well as currying favour with Putin in the process. As Ukraine yields less economic benefits to Wagner, why not go where there is gold? And why not try to put pressure on Europe by fomenting chaos on its perimeter? And, while at it, why not try to secure another warm seaport on the Red Sea? Welcome to this multi-layered geopolitical show as Russia opens a new theatre in Sudan.

The strategic front line for Russia doesn't stop at Crimea to its south and the Baltics to its west: it stretches from the Black Sea, through the two straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant, and through Suez to the Red Sea along the Eurasian Spine. And when a power like Russia is weaker than its adversaries in conventional military capabilities, hybrid tools can go some way towards compensating for that weakness.

HYBRID THREATS AGAINST EUROPE

Is there a hybrid threat against Europe lurking in the darker creases of this conflict? The answer is an emphatic Yes, particularly by inducing mass human movements through war and disinformation. A key aim would be to create chaos along the perimeter of the EU, causing potentially significant pressure on the domestic politics of the member states, leading in turn to cracks developing along the various social, political, and economic fault lines. This is particularly problematic in times of elections.

The military clashes between the regular Sudanese army and the RSF (previously of Janjaweed infamy during the Darfur civil war) that are destroying the Sudanese cities, infrastructure, health facilities and means of daily life, will lead to a massive humanitarian crisis. Already an expected quarter of a million Sudanese, in addition to foreign residents, are on the move in all directions towards the external borders of this third largest African country.

Closer to and more directly affecting the EU is the possible impact of disinformation-induced migrations, through the southern Mediterranean coastline, to Europe. An influx of Sudanese refugees into Egypt is gathering momentum, that may affect the delicate balances in Egypt, especially at a time when disinformation through social and other media are a real threat. In time, and as conditions mature, mass human movements towards EU shores may become the next challenge for the EU. Disinformation about water shortages, for example, linked to Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam, or about food shortages and rising prices linked to the war in both Sudan and Ukraine, could be deployed to trigger panic among a refugee population already

traumatized by war and psychologically ready to believe that more calamities are to come. Food prices are already rising exponentially exacerbating the “push factors” for people to start moving. Vegetable prices have risen by 600%, beef by 300%, and sugar, a key commodity in Sudan, has doubled in price. Already before the fighting started 15 million Sudanese, or 30% of the population of 45 million, were reliant on food aid delivered by humanitarian bodies. The sheer numbers directly affected by food shortages and prices are potentially huge and many will seek to flee to one of the seven neighbouring countries.

The Russian motivation is clear: to place maximum pressure on the EU and member states. This could be achieved through creating such a migration crisis at a time when the war on Ukraine enters a decisive phase, and as the EU faces elections in 2024.

FRACTURED GEOPOLITICS

Acquiring a port on the Red Sea has not been an exclusive Russian pre-occupation. Turkey and Qatar, who maintain very close bilateral relations, have also been active in Suakin Island and Port Sudan, a key strategic location roughly halfway between the Strait of Bab Al Mandab and Suez. It was in fact the regional administrative centre under Ottoman rule. There has been a reported agreement between the former Sudanese government of ousted President Omar Al-Bashir and Qatar for the latter to invest \$4bn in the development of the Port. Sudan's agreement with Turkey during the first ever visit by President Erdogan in December 2017, which related to the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA), reportedly confined Turkey's involvement to rejuvenating the historic buildings dating back to the Ottoman era, and to turn the island into a major tourism centre, especially for haj-bound pilgrims undertaking the short Red Sea crossing from Port Sudan to the Port of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia.

Given the very close relationship between Qatar and Turkey, the Turkish-Qatari interest in Suakin has been portrayed by their adversaries as Turkey acquiring port rights by partnership and proxy. It raised concerns

regionally particularly for Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Gulf states over suspicions that Turkey was seeking to expand its military foothold in Africa, the Gulf and the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and some other Gulf states were on the opposite side to Turkey over Syria, Libya, and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) operating in northern Syria on the Turkish borders. The Qatari investment is seen by the Sudanese as being the more legitimate and acceptable form of engagement, as Arab Gulf states routinely make investments in the region. There have been speculations on whether Turkey will deploy a military force on Sudanese soil by the Red Sea, although this was vehemently denied by General Abdul Fattah Al Burhan, the de facto Head of State and Head of the Sudanese regular army, fighting against the RSF headed by General Mohammad Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti).

General Dagalo, until fighting broke out, was the number two in the Sudanese hierarchy, having come to prominence as the Deputy Leader of the Transitional Military Council launched after former strongman Omar Al-Bashir was overthrown in 2019. His RSF, founded in 2013 under Dagalo's leadership, and the regular army staged a second coup in 2021 against the joint civilian-military government that came into being after the 2019 coup. But now Dagalo seems unhappy about the regular army's position on how the RSF would integrate into the regular army. It is more likely that the RSF balked at diluting its power base and mining operations. Dagalo's business interests thrived with the help of Al Bashir and included gold mining, infrastructure, and livestock. The RSF were also recruited by regional powers to fight their wars: Dagalo sent the RSF to fight against the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen. Effectively, the fighting between the regular army and the RSF reflects the fact that both Al Burhan and Dagalo have concluded that the leadership contest is now a zero-sum game. That is the local breach that Russia and the main regional actors are exploiting to try to get as big a geopolitical slice as possible of the Sudanese cake.

Egypt has supported Al Burhan and the regular Sudanese army. It reportedly has also been trying to see the back of Wagner in Sudan. A key question is whether Turkey, Egypt

and Qatar and some of the other Gulf states will stand by and watch from the side lines if the Sudanese army were on the verge of defeat, or will they intervene? If they do in fact intervene, it will usher in a proxy war with Russia, such as in Libya and Syria. Another key question is: Would the strategic desire of both Russia and Turkey to have a Red Sea port in Sudan add to the list of stresses between them (in addition to Libya and Syria and the Caucasus)? The answer is most likely going to be in the affirmative.

This Red Sea geopolitical dynamic directly affects the strategic stability of the EU, through migration, maritime connectivity, choke points, possible future energy projects, terrorism, and organised crime. All these elements represent a fertile source for Hybrid Threats from disinformation to threatening undersea infrastructure.

SUDAN: AN OLD BATTLE GROUND

For as long as the Pax Americana dominated the Middle East and North Africa, regional players were limited in how far they could unfurl their wings. The US “pivot” to Asia created a vacuum, which the regional players are vying to fill in. The “pivot” (as well as, later, the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan) led to two direct consequences.

First, after the fall of Mubarak in Egypt, the regional rulers lost faith in their historic compact with the US: regional stability for regime security. The links between Egypt and Sudan run very deep. The ascendance of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, supported by Turkey and Qatar, after the fall of Mubarak strengthened the Islamist factions in Sudan’s armed forces under the leadership of former president Omar Al Bashir. Hence the agreements with Qatar and Turkey. This faction reportedly continues to have significant influence inside the regular army. The collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, led by former president Mohamed Mursi, ushered in the early stages of the collapse of Al Bashir 30-year rule in Sudan. Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf states supported both Presidents Abdulfattah El Sisi of Egypt and Al Burhan in Sudan, both of whom overthrew the Turkey/Qatar-supported Brotherhood rule in Egypt and Sudan. Into

this complex regional competition Russia and the Wagner Group saw an opportunity to establish a foothold that turned into a serious military and mining presence that complements their operations in the Sahel region and Libya.

Second, the regional players, having lost confidence that global geopolitical actors such as the US will secure their broader national interests, began jockeying for regional alliances that are often transactional and opportunistic in nature. Russia and Turkey provided an excellent template for how this can work: sometimes on the same side where interests overlap; but on opposite sides where interests collide. This is the key practical reason (from a geopolitical perspective) why the EU’s value-based approach has faced such serious obstacles. It is effectively the polar opposite to a transactional approach to geopolitics.

This was further complicated by the geopolitics of energy between the Gulf and Russia. As the Gulf states became increasingly involved in both the domestic politics and the economy of Sudan (e.g., buying up large agricultural land for their own food security needs), and as Russia became increasingly entrenched in the country through Wagner’s activities, and as Turkey supported Qatar in addition to having strategic plans of its own, it was inevitable that these stresses would surface in the form of conflict that might have been resolved without resorting to violence. However, that conflict has now become armed.

A key feature of Russia’s transactional and opportunistic relations with the Gulf states is that they have two very different axes: (1) the gas axis vis-à-vis Qatar; (2) The oil axis vis-à-vis the rest of the Gulf states. Whereas the first is confrontational and adversarial in the global gas market, as well as across a range of geopolitical issues, the second is cooperative and transactional/opportunistic, such as within OPEC+. These patterns of how Russia interacts differently with the Gulf states (that are active in Sudan geopolitically and economically) will have a direct bearing on how the situation in Sudan will unfold. From a European perspective, it is essential to realise that Sudan now has become another front in the interplay between regional geopolitical jockeying for position on the one

hand, and the global geopolitical instability on the other. In other words, it is not a distant war in a distant place about which we know very little. What happens in Sudan will not stay in Sudan!

CONCLUSIONS

Let's start with the immediate actions to be taken:

1. It is most unlikely that a long and durable cease fire will be achieved anytime soon. Europe should prepare for a humanitarian disaster. The war, if prolonged, is likely to spill over regionally, cause renewed ethnic and other strife, and may also fracture Sudan internally leading to disintegration. Such massive fault lines are fertile soil for Hybrid Threats and plans and scenarios must be developed to deal with such eventualities.
2. Another front with Russia/Wagner has now opened. This extends the Ukraine line of confrontation into Europe's southern flank, opening up the potential for the use of Hybrid tools. Counter-Hybrid operations must now become an urgent priority.
3. Europe's relations with Egypt, the Gulf states and Turkey will be affected by how the situation will evolve in Sudan. Therefore, there is an urgent need to simultaneously develop scenarios as well as engage in concrete and interest-guided dialogues with Turkey, Egypt, and the Gulf states. This dialogue should cover the situations in Libya and Syria, the two other likely extensions of the Ukraine war to the southern perimeter of Europe.
4. Securing connectivity (data cables, shipping, and trade) through the Red Sea past Suakin Island and the maritime choke point of Suez is a key urgent priority.
5. A million Sudanese citizens and foreign nationals may soon be fanning out of the country. Many will head north to the Egyptian border. Egypt will most likely need urgent financial support to meet this added security and economic challenge. Whether these refugees will try to make it to the

Mediterranean coast and potentially for some to cross into Europe is a key question for the EU as the challenge will then become an EU matter.

6. Dis- and mis-information in this extremely volatile situation is a real Hybrid threat to induce mass human movement towards Europe as European elections loom in 2024. Monitoring social media and other mass communications in Arabic should be a priority to establish an early warning system.
7. All efforts must be undertaken immediately to stabilise the Renaissance Dam conflict between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt and to prevent any escalation, especially given the Hybrid threat potential of disinformation on water shortages that may induce mass human movements. Naturally occurring droughts may be exacerbated by manmade events, or through the use of Disinformation, or both in a mutually enhancing manner. For example, in the last couple of years Sudan was exposed to what was thought to be droughts caused by filling the dam.

This is real geopolitics happening in real time with threats that are direct, physical, Hybrid and imminent. Time is of the essence, as is the ability to tackle multiple crises simultaneously. It must be recognized that the decision-making silos that we have grown accustomed to, may not necessarily be adequate for the era of geostrategic confrontations along multiple geographical axes. Add a dash of cross-border and Hybrid threats, expanding ungovernable spaces, the rising role of non-state actors ignoring national borders, the nexus of the latter with organised crime, and the rising maritime and minerals dependencies: it quickly becomes apparent that the cocktail of challenges demands a culture change in how Europe responds to crises. Not only "right of bang", but, crucially, preventatively, and proactively as well, in defence not just of its values, but its interests as well.

Europe is now out of Sudan, too, having seen its influence wane in the Sahel region. That is, if it really ever exercised any significant political influence in Sudan at all over the past two decades. It didn't have to be like this, but that's

what happens when geopolitical realities are sacrificed on the altar of hope, and hope is not a strategy. It is also what happens when interests and maps become afterthoughts. Trying to do the right thing can be extremely different from doing things right, especially when foreign policy choices are largely dictated not by the hardnosed geopolitical realities of the world, but by what happens to be the favourite domestic political cause of the moment. Such indulgences should no longer be an option if the EU is serious about its foreign and security policy. Sudan must serve as a wake-up call for European strategic thinking because some of Europe's key interests will otherwise be severely undermined, including on its eastern flank. The eastern and southern flanks must be seen as one integrated strategic zone. The Ukraine war has come to Sudan.

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