

Geopolitical Analysis of the “Power Shift” in Sudan

Russia's Special Interest in Sudan

By [Kester Kenn Klomegah](#)

Global Research, November 01, 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the “Translate Website” drop down menu on the top banner of our home page (Desktop version).

To receive Global Research’s Daily Newsletter (selected articles), [click here](#).

Visit and follow us on Instagram at [@crg_globalresearch](#).

Whether it was “a coup or not a coup” by definition, description or explanation, what happened October 25 was simply power shift or appropriately political power grab under gun point (unconstitutional change of government and state power) in Sudan. It has sparked several academic and non-academic discussions throughout the world. Chairman of the Sovereignty Council of Sudan Abdel Fattah Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, as first steps in an announcement publicly declared a state of emergency and suspended both the council and the government.

He, however, defended the state administrative forcible change over as a necessary step to prevent civil war. He further suspended a number of provisions of the constitutional declaration, which sets the frames of the interim period after toppling of President Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country for 30 years, and determines relations between the military and civilian authorities, but sternly promised that next political elections planned for July 2023.

Abdel Fattah al-Burhan sets the primary task to resolve the stalemate between political forces and the army, reshape the declaration towards the transition to the civilian government and political elections. “We are aiming to see through a transition to a civilian government. The mistrust between transitional parties occurred after the signing of the peace agreement in Juba,” Abdel Fattah al-Burhan said in his first public address to the nation.

Sudan, located in northeast Africa, has deepening economic crisis, so many social and political forces. While some are advocating for developing democracy, others have, under the circumstances, aligned with the military, which has accused the civilian governing parties of mismanagement and monopolizing power. Apparently, the Sovereign Council – established as a collective presidency body comprises both civilians and military leaders, but tensions between the civilian and military leaders have persisted since after toppling

Omar al-Bashir.

Condemnation have routinely come from the United Nations, the African Union, Regional Organizations and individual external countries. Multiple international actors, including the [United States](#), [United Kingdom](#), and [Germany](#), have made clear their support for Sudan's civilian transition. Human Rights Watch, for instance, has seen the takeover risks precipitating a reversal of the small but important gains made over the course of the last two years under the now-dissolved transitional government.

Interesting and most importantly, there are two main issues to understand and take into consideration, here. The first the strategic location of Sudan and second who is the new Sudanese leader in relation to key global players in the North and Northeast Africa.

Sudan as Strategic Location

As noted by Dr. Mohamed Chtatou, Professor of Education Science at the University in Rabat, there are different economic, geopolitical and geostrategic challenges in the Mediterranean Sea, the location of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Sudan.

At the crossroads of three continents, the Mediterranean is an area under tension, with important strategic issues: confrontation between Arabs and Europeans, rivalry between powers, colonization, control of the straits and the Suez Canal. It remains a space of confrontation between great powers, and distant powers (United States, Russia) continue looking to invest in it, and now includes newcomers like China.

He further argues that the region is one of the oldest maritime trade areas and thus subject to many challenges. The Mediterranean Sea junction of three continents and bordered by a great diversity of countries and cultures, is also in the age of globalization. He stresses the function of a maritime corridor, not only of interest to the Egypt of the canal but also some containerization hubs in the region.

Further tracking down from the Maghreb coastline to Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, there are many competing interests within EU countries, notably between France and Germany, and in the Arab world. Nevertheless, from a strictly economic point of view, the Maghreb remains a strategic trade area for the EU since the majority of exports and imports from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia go to or come from European countries. Likewise, in terms of energy, Algeria alone supplies around 15% of the EU's natural gas needs. Along these, Sudan also presents itself for foreign naval base.

Who is Abdelrahman al-Burhan?

According to a report written by Oscar Rickett from Middle East Eye, General Abdel Fattah al-Burkhan is the Chairman of Sudan's Transitional Sovereign Council (TSC) since April 2019, and is Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. He is described as a veteran soldier, and had long been one of Bashir's reliable lieutenants – both literally and politically.

Born in 1960 into a Sufi family in a village north of Khartoum, Burhan studied in a Sudanese army college, then later in Jordan and at the Egyptian military academy in Cairo, where fellow alumni included future Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. He is married and has three children.

Burhan and Sisi are longstanding friends, though the Sudanese general has lifelong

affiliations with the kinds of Islamist movements that Sisi has outlawed. Still, as Patrick Smith, editor of Africa Confidential, told Middle East Eye (MEE), the two military leaders are united by “the greater good of stopping democracy”.

His first international trip after becoming Sudan’s de facto head of state was to Egypt in May 2019. From there he went on to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. Earlier in his working life, Burhan served briefly as Sudan’s defence attache in Beijing, but his military career under Bashir was defined by prominent roles played in South Sudan, Darfur and Yemen where, as head of the armed forces, he helped supply the Saudi-led coalition with Sudanese mercenaries.

Burhan’s time in Darfur is significant also because it brought him into contact with the warlord Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo, widely known as Hemeti. Hemeti became leader of the Janjaweed, the Arab militias that brought death and despair to Darfur, and which have since morphed into the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), with Hemeti still at the helm.

As head of the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces respectively, Burhan and Hemeti are both allies and rivals. Hemeti serves as vice president of the transitional military council, but his family and the RSF benefit enormously from their control of gold mines in Darfur, as well as from the patronage of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Sudan’s military has, in theory, a bigger budget, and is in control of a significant military industrial complex.

These various sources of power and wealth have come under threat from Sudan’s civilian-led government and it is thought that this is partly why Burhan and Hemeti have moved when they have. Burhan was due to step down as the military’s chair of the sovereign council this year, to be replaced by a civilian appointee.

Both he and Hemeti are said to be mindful of being held accountable for past actions in Darfur, and Burhan had been lobbying to dissolve the civilian-led council of ministers, according to [Africa Confidential](#). Hemeti is a more charismatic, more cartoonish figure than the quietly spoken, methodical Burhan, and the RSF leader is more closely associated with the atrocities surrounding the transition to democracy – most notably, the massacre of more than 128 people in Khartoum in June 2019 – than the armed forces general.

Russia’s Relationship with Sudan

As the local Russian media, recopying or quoting from Vedomosti, Kommersant financial newspaper writes, “Under al-Bashir, Khartoum and Moscow launched talks on the establishment of a Russian naval facility in Sudan on the Red Sea.

A related agreement was signed with Sudan’s Sovereign Council after al-Bashir’s ouster, but it wasn’t ratified and in June 2021, the chief of staff of the Sudanese Armed Forces said that the African country planned to review the agreement’s conditions. Now, with the new political developments, the issue of a Russian naval facility in Sudan “has been put on the back burner” as there are no reliable politicians in Sudan, who would be willing to publicly discuss the topic with Russia.

“It’s Washington who is the key actor in the Sudanese drama. Much will depend on whether the United States will continue to unequivocally condemn the coup or soften its position. If Washington moves to bring sanctions back in order to support civilian activists, it will lead to a complete socio-economic disaster in Sudan,” Associate Professor at the Russian State

University for the Humanities Sergei Seregichev told Kommersant.

According to him, any future developments in Sudan will play into Russia's hands but it would be more beneficial for Moscow if the military remained in power in the country because the less influence the West has in Sudan the better.

What is more, many Russian academics and politicians share the above view from Associate Professor at the Russian State University for the Humanities Sergei Seregichev, that Abdel Fattah al-Burhan remains number one in Sudan. Despite everything including, at the same time, with high expectation to see the involvement of the people in the political process and developing a genuine democracy, Russia practically needs leaders who cooperates usefully and manipulatively to realize its strategic goals in the region.

Egypt's General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi and Sudan's General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan are suitable for Russia. These two situations also compared well to Libya, Russia continuously advocates for all-inclusive political forces paradigm, but offer enormous support for Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar. The obvious trends are that Russia follows that Gaddafi-era, Mubarak-era and Bashir-era military personalities to enforce or operationalize its military-technical cooperation – a very good sign for boosting geo-strategic influence in the part of Africa.

The UN and the African Union

The United Nations, the African Union, Regional Organizations and individual external countries raised dissatisfaction about the political developments, further condemned the undemocratic and forced change in Sudan. Of course, these were routinely reported in the media. UN Secretary General António Manuel de Oliveira Guterres, in an official statement posted on Twitter, said “there must be full respect for the constitutional charter to protect the hard-won political transition.”

The Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, has learned with deep dismay of the serious development of the current situation in Sudan. Faki Mahamat calls for the immediate resumption of consultations between civilians and military within the framework of the political declaration and the constitutional decree. He, however, reaffirms that dialogue and consensus be the only important path to save the country and its democratic transition, and further calls for the necessary strict respect of human rights. In the end, Sudan was suspended from the African Union.

Interestingly, Russia is among a few countries that have been extra mindful in its criticisms of the power swift in Sudan. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Russian Special Presidential Envoy for the Middle East Mikhail Bogdanov and Ministry's Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, considered as “unacceptable” the foreign intervention in Sudan's internal affairs.

On October 18, Sergey Lavrov issued a stern warning to external countries and specifically to the United States during a press conference with his Guinea-Bissau counterpart Suzi Carla Barbosa. He unreservedly reminded that Russia initially sought to preserve the territorial integrity and unity of Sudan, by all means necessary, but a number of actors, led by the United States decided that the Sudanese people should live in separate states.

“We believe that any interference in this country's internal affairs must be stopped,” he said. “The Sudanese people must define their own fate; we expect that everyone who is

trying to counter this principle now realize their responsibility not to allow another hotbed of destabilization on the long-suffering continent of Africa.”

The Minister underscored that

“Russia did a lot to make this ‘divorce’ peaceful, but interference has begun after it: the imposition of approaches to the building of democracy in its Western understanding, of shock reforms, which caused a reverse reaction. The social and economic state of the people and unemployment has worsened abruptly, and the traditional structure of the Sudanese society is currently under serious tension.”

On October 27, Bogdanov had a phone call with US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman, after which the ministry issued an official statement.

“The sides discussed the recent development in the Republic of Sudan. The Russian side underscored the need for prompt stabilization of the situation, settlement of the existing intra-Sudanese controversies via an inclusive dialogue with involvement of all political forces in the interest of achieving a national accord. And further the resolution of urgent social and economic problems of Sudan,” the Ministry said in its statement, adding that the Russian side “emphasized the unacceptability of external intervention in the internal affairs of this country.”

On October 21, during her weekly briefing, Zakharova reiterated thus:

“I can only reaffirm our position. I would like to remind everyone that some external players, primarily the United States, decided that it would be better for the Sudanese if they suddenly lived in two different states. A campaign of foreign interference was launched, with attempts made to impose on the Sudanese the approaches and ways to build democracy that the West deemed appropriate. As the result, serious tensions have developed in the traditional structure of the Sudanese society.”

She believes that

“any interference in the internal affairs of Sudan, or any other country, should be stopped and that the Sudanese people must determine their own future themselves. It is our fundamental principle, which is based on international law and the UN Charter. We do hope that all those who are trying to reject this principle are aware of their responsibility for the future of the state and the people whose life they want to change according to their own pattern.”

Understanding Russia’s Special Interest in Sudan

While the creation of the two separate Sudanese states were determined through a referendum – the will of the Sudanese themselves, it is equally important to understand Russia’s frequent expression of sympathy and its special interest in Sudan. Russia has had “friendly relations” with Sudan, dating back from Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country for 30 years.

Before his overthrow, Omar al-Bashir made one more trip to Russia in November 2017, agreements were reached on Russia’s assistance in modernizing the Sudanese armed forces. Khartoum also said at the time it was interested in discussing the issue of using Red Sea bases with Moscow. That proposal drove Moscow into signing a document, after several

discussions and negotiations, the possibility of constructing a naval base in the region, along the Red Sea and in the Indian Ocean.

According to the executive order, the published document says “an agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Sudan on creating a facility of the Navy of the Russian Federation in the territory of the Republic of Sudan be adopted” and further authorizes “the Defense Ministry of Russia to sign the aforementioned agreement on behalf of the Russian Federation.” The document stipulates that a maximum of four warships may stay at the naval logistics base, including “naval ships with the nuclear propulsion system on condition of observing nuclear and environmental safety norms.”

That document submitted by Russia’s Defense Ministry, approved by the Foreign Ministry, the Supreme Court, the Prosecutor General’s Office, the Investigative Committee of Russia and the Russian Cabinet. As the document says, the Russian Navy’s logistics facility in Sudan “meets the goals of maintaining peace and stability in the region, is defensive and is not aimed against other countries.”

Foreign Minister of Sudan Mariam Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi following talks in Moscow on July 12, this year, together with Lavrov, agreed to the ratification of the document by both the State Duma of the Russian Federation and Parliament of Sudan. On July 1, President of Russia Vladimir Putin submitted an agreement on building a Russian naval station in Sudan for ratification by the State Duma. Earlier, Sudan announced its decision to revise the 25-year agreement that was first brokered by its ousted leader Omar al-Bashir during a meeting with Vladimir Putin in 2017 to establish a Russian naval base in Port Sudan, on Sudan’s Red Sea coast.

After the 2017 meeting, the project did not take up immediately though. But signifies that Russia will make one huge stride by establishing a naval facility in Sudan. It distinctively marks its maritime security presence in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea region. Sharing a northern border with Egypt, Sudan is located on the same strategic coastline along the Red Sea. Russia needs both Sudan (Northeast Africa) and Egypt (conduit to Maghreb) to have unshakeable influence in the region.

During the first Russia-Africa summit held in Sochi, President Vladimir Putin held business discussions with Chairman of the Sovereignty Council of Sudan Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al-Burhan. Putin noted that “Sudan is certainly one of our long-standing reliable partners” referring to days of Omar Al-Bashir.

With the internal political processes are taking place there, Putin said “the signing of the constitutional declaration, the formation of the Sovereignty Council and the establishment of a transitional government to be the first steps aimed at getting the country on the path of sustainable development. Many tasks still lie ahead. We intend to continue rendering all necessary aid and support for the normalization of the situation.”

Abdel Fattah Burhan replied:

“Our relations have a long history: 60 years ago they began to develop, and you have always supported Sudan, always stood by Sudan, and we always know that Russia stands together with countries that fight for their rights, for justice. We would like to tell you that the changes in Sudan are positive. They are happening in a successful and positive way. Today armed forces and coalition forces play an important role

in these events, and they want to build the future of Sudan.”

“As you have already mentioned in your speech, our relations are developing, and these bilateral relations are based on several agreements. We hope that we will sign new documents and cooperation agreements, and you will help us, in particular, to build up our armed forces,” the Sudanese leader said, and concluded “We have much common ground, such as, investment cooperation. We also cooperate at international forums, and share common positions on many international problems.”

African Leaders and Sustainable Development Goals

In this 21st Century, Africa need development especially building its most needed infrastructure, modernizing agriculture (large-scale food-production) and adding value to products (industrialization). Thus, foreign partners and potential external investors have to logically realize these, but it's for African leaders to know that muscle-flexing (militarized or weaponized) approach is simply incorrect to addressing today's Sustainable Development Goals.

In addition, rhetoric are not only ineffective in terms of conflict resolution but also may, in fact, be aggravating tensions and violence. Instead, African leaders require comprehensive development-oriented policies combined with good governance, these are the best solution, at least, to minimizing social conflicts and economic disparities, ultimately ensure that long-term peace and harmony on the continent.

Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Amina Mohammed, on October 28 meeting with diplomats emphasized the “vital importance” of peace and security in Africa, and highlighted how all African Union members, and other regional and sub-regional groups, can make lives more secure across the continent. She deployed African leaders' largely *ad hoc* approach to the continent's development issues, most often relegated to the background.

She explicitly pointed to a military coup d'état in Sudan, to continuing conflict in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region, and persistent threats of terrorism and violent extremism. In her observation, there has been “a rise in seizures of power by force” and “a proliferation of militias” across Africa.

She said that despite these “worrisome developments” happening there in Africa, Africans have continue working relentlessly for a prosperous, sustainable and peaceful continent, based on the universal principles of human rights, as witnessed through growing cooperation between the United Nations, African Union and sub-regional organizations on sustainable development, elections and peace processes.

As always trumpeted, the global perception is that Africa remains as one of the world's least developed regions, and deep-seated poverty despite its resources. In conclusion, and for this argument on conflict resolution must be seen inextricably incorporated into pursuing development goals, there is one simple surest way for an African Solution to African Problems: for Africa leaders necessarily resolve to “focus on sustainable development” and be abreast with the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development and the AU's Agenda 2063.

*

Note to readers: Please click the share buttons above or below. Follow us on Instagram, @crg_globalresearch. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site,

internet forums. etc.

Kester Kenn Klomegah, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), is now a frequent and passionate contributor to Global Research. As a versatile researcher, he believes that everyone deserves equal access to quality and trustworthy media reports.

Featured image is from the author

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Kester Kenn Klomegah](#), Global Research, 2021

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Kester Kenn Klomegah](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca