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SUDAN AND THE EMERGING WORLD ORDER

From US Unipolarity to Multipolarity

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Front cover photo

A stuffed panda and a Sudanese flag are placed at a military checkpoint in Khartoum North on 3 November 2024. Source: Amaury Falt-Brown / AFP



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Overview

Sudan's National Islamic Front (NIF) came to power after a coup in 1989 during the final days of the cold war and sought to oversee an Islamic renaissance. With US unipolarity, however, Sudan became a vassal state and President Omar al-Bashir was forced to introduce austerity, leading to his overthrow in 2019.

US power in Sudan was tempered by China's leading role in the oil-based economy, but this ended in 2011 with South Sudan's secession and the loss of oil.

The regime was toppled by a popular uprising that gave rise to a transitional civilian–military government, which was overthrown by the military and led to a debilitating civil war.

With multipolarity, a weakened United States no longer has the capacity or interest to impose its will and, in the context of a civil war, powerful Middle Eastern states are playing a critical role in shaping Sudan's political trajectory.

Key findings

- With the advent of US unipolarity in 1991, the Bashir regime was compelled to bring its foreign policy into line with US demands, including by imposing International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity, which led to the overthrow of the regime.
- Focused on great power rivalry, the United States did not support the 2018–19 popular uprising or the transitional government—even though they were favourably disposed to the United States.
- The incoming transitional government of technocrats and Bashir-era generals continued the regime's subservience to US foreign policy, including granting diplomatic recognition to Israel in order to end US sanctions.
- While multipolarity involves a decline in the power of the United States, it enhances the power of the ruling generals and regional states and makes ending Sudan's civil war more difficult.
- Although the United States officially acknowledges the existence of multipolarity, President Donald Trump's aggressive foreign and economic politics demonstrate an effort to return to US unipolarity.

Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War, three periods of global power distribution can be identified: the 1945 to 1991 cold war era of bipolarity of the United States and the Soviet Union; the 1991 to approximately 2020 era of US unipolarity; and the 2020 to the present era of multipolarity of China, the Russian Federation, and the United States. With the advent of US unipolarity, the United States was no longer constrained by the socialist bloc, and countries in the Global South were pressed to submit to US demands or face dire consequences. Although the NIF—whose rule largely coincided with the period of US unipolarity—believed Sudan to be the leader of an Islamic renaissance (Contemporary Islamic Political Views, 1994) and was therefore slow to appreciate the profundity of this change, it eventually submitted to US demands and surrendered Sudan's national sovereignty. The unipolar dominance of the United States has, however, ended, heavily impacting political developments in Sudan and globally.

In 2023, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley acknowledged that 'we are really in a multipolar international environment with at least three great powers: the United States, China and Russia' (Clark, 2023). This was affirmed by President Trump's Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who declared that the era of American unipolarity was over and that a return to multipolarity is a natural correction of the geopolitical order (Parsi, 2025). Rubio's understanding of multipolarity emphasizes competition between great powers and gives short shrift to countries in the Global South. In contrast, Rubio's Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, views great power rivalry as ruinous and contends that multipolarity must involve a new era of 'equality among all countries regardless of size' (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). While the United States under Trump has viewed international law as an obstacle, China has stated—in a white paper on global governance released in June 2026—that it defends international law and ascribes a central role for the UN (Xinhua, 2026).

While the emerging era of multipolarity offers the prospect of greater national sovereignty for countries in the Global South, in the case of Sudan it has further entrenched the power of the ruling generals. It is also giving rise to powerful regional states, often with opposing interests, whose involvement in Sudan makes its conflict even harder to resolve.

Against this background, the primary tasks of this study are twofold. Firstly, it assesses the extent to which the NIF/National Congress Party (NCP) and the brief successor transitional government, under conditions of US unipolarity, submitted to US demands that undermined Sudan's national sovereignty. Secondly, it analyses how the growing influence of China and the Russian Federation under emerging multipolarity restrained US power but also enhanced the power of the post-Bashir generals and regional states—contributing to Sudan's intractable civil war and suggesting that, despite acknowledging the end of US unipolarity, President Trump's aggressive foreign policy indicates US efforts to return to an era of unipolarity.

The United States and unipolarity in the post-cold war era

The cold war was a period of bipolar confrontation between the US-led Western democracies, based on individual rights and capitalism, and the socialist anti-imperialist Soviet-led Eastern bloc. This confrontation took shape with the establishment of NATO in 1949, with 12 members initially (and 32 by 2026), and the Warsaw Pact six years later made up of the Soviet Union and seven Eastern European countries (Yale Law School, 2008). No war was fought directly between NATO and Warsaw Pact members, but they engaged in proxy wars in Africa and Asia.

Crucial to achieving US hegemony was the establishment of the IMF (1944), the World Bank (1945), NATO (1949), and later the World Trade Organization (1995) (Foot, MacFarlane, and Mastanduno, 2003). In addition, the UN and its powerful Security Council were dominated by the West. At the start of the cold war, most countries in the Global South were European colonies but, due to anti-colonial movements and US pressure, nearly all had gained independence by the early 1970s. The United States championed decolonization to open protected colonial markets to its corporations; to replace colonial currencies with the US dollar; and to preclude Eastern bloc support for anti-colonial struggles that could bring independent states into the socialist camp (Chomsky, 1992). States where colonial powers opposed independence, such as Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and Vietnam, aligned with the Eastern bloc as the United States feared.

Most former colonies did not want to be drawn into either bloc or subject to neocolonialism. In April 1955, representatives of 29 Asian and African states and territories met in Bandung, Indonesia, where they resolved to wrest autonomy from the capitalist core by promoting economic and cultural cooperation and supporting decolonization and national liberation (Munro, n.d.a). This set the stage for the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961, which comprised 120 countries representing 55% of the world's population (Munro, n.d.b). Sudan attended the Bandung Conference and subsequently joined NAM (Mathews, 1987). While NAM stressed non-alignment with both blocs, it agreed with the Soviet Union on key principles such as peaceful coexistence, equality, anti-colonialism, and national sovereignty (Kostiuk and Katkova, 2021).

Mikhail Gorbachev became Chairman of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985 and sought to construct a 'common European home' free of blocs (Scrafton, 2017). But Washington demanded a liberal democratic, US-led world order (Cohen, 2021). With the collapse of the Soviet Union on 26 December 1991, an empowered United States endeavoured to achieve global hegemony.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz forcefully expressed this in 1992 when he called for proactive US military intervention to prevent the rise of a peer competitor and urged the United States to use any means necessary to ensure its uncontested global dominance (Klare, 2003). What became known as the 'Wolfowitz Doctrine' led to a host of wars, 'humanitarian' interventions, and the 'global war on terror', while the United States maintained cold war deployments in East Asia and the Pacific (Johnson, 2004).

Sudan: From challenging the United States to subservience

Coming to power through a coup in 1989 in the fading days of the cold war, the NIF's opposition to socialism and a Sadiq al-Mahdi government opposed by the United States initially gained it Washington's approval (Young, 2024, pp. 114–19). The NIF call for a global Islamist anti-imperialist uprising, however, threatened US client states in the region and made its ideological leader, Hassan Turabi, an 'enigmatic foe for the West', according to the *New York Times* (Weiner, 1996). NIF policy included supporting the regime of Saddam Hussein

(even though he was a secular leftist) during the 1990–91 Gulf War, maintaining close relations with Iran, sending arms to Gaza, and hosting Islamic militants, including Osama bin Laden (Young, 2024, p. 101).

The United States was upset when Turabi held the Popular Arab and Islamic Conferences, which brought together pan-Arab and Islamist militants from around the world (Collins and Burr, 2009, p. 58). Most participants came from branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, but the secular Palestine Liberation Organization, Hamas, and Hezbollah also attended (Global Security Organization, n.d.), clearly demonstrating support for the Palestinians. Although these conferences failed to produce a viable anti-US alliance, they highlighted the importance of anti-imperialism to the early NIF. Unlike other leaders in the Horn, however, Turabi did not revise his policies with the advent of US unipolarity, believing that Sudan was the centre of an Islamic revival.

This is how Ahmed Dirdeiry, a senior member of the NCP and former minister of foreign affairs, put it:

[NIF policy] was partially attributable to the rising public feeling against the US and the West in general which continued to prevail in the Middle East after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The stand of Sudan in the First Gulf War is an example in hand. The new regime in Sudan decided to support Iraq, regardless of the implications of such decision to its relations with the West, because it wanted to capitalize on this tidal wave. Internally, a position that stands against the invasion of Iraq satisfied the overwhelming majority of the population and political parties that were simmering with hate of the US and its satellite states in the Gulf. Regionally, a position in support of Iraq resonates well with the anti-Western rhetoric of Hamas, Fatah, leading Islamic scholars and pan-Arab intellectuals (who were by then very influential).¹

From regional intervention to isolation

The Islamist government viewed the Ethiopian Derg—the military junta that ruled Ethiopia at the time—as a communist enemy and the main backer of the John Garang-led Sudan People's

Liberation Army (SPLA) insurgency in 1983, and therefore assisted the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in its final drive to topple the regime in 1991 (Rift Valley Institute, 2024). The NIF and Turabi subsequently, and mistakenly, claimed that Muslims were a discontented majority in Ethiopia and sought to replace EPRDF with an Islamist entity; however, the Front had little trouble suppressing the dissidents (Young, 2012, p. 37). The NIF also attempted to upend the Eritrean government, but again there was little sign of Muslim discontent, and these efforts were quickly put down (Healy, 2008, p. 4). The United States viewed Ethiopia and Eritrea positively. This, combined with Khartoum's failure to advance the peace process with SPLA, ongoing human rights abuses, and harbouring of US-designated terrorist groups, led President Bill Clinton in 1993 to place Sudan on a list of state supporters of terrorism and imposed sanctions (US DoS, 1997).

By this time, the ideological fervour of most party cadres had dissipated, and they were more interested in enjoying the benefits of state power than taking up a global struggle for political Islam (Young, 2024, p. 161). As the popular Sudanese adage goes: 'We followed the Islamists to the mosque, but they went to the "souk" [market].' Or, as Ghazi Salahuddin—who held many senior positions in NIF and NCP governments—put it, his colleagues formed 'a conservative elite who would cling to power as a way of protecting their position and possessions' (Salahuddin, 2018).

Accommodating Washington

Despite the NCP's Islamic rhetoric, Bashir spent his remaining years in power trying to improve relations with the United States and its Arab clients to end the sanctions and prevent the United States from engineering his overthrow. As a result, the regime accepted the US-led Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) peace process, assisted the US-led invasion of Libya, stopped smuggling weapons to Gaza, and broke relations with Iran (Young, 2024, p. 111). In addition, Sudan's National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) collaborated with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 'global war on terror', by providing information collected by Sudan on Islamist groups in the region. The United States was slow to accept this support because of the Clinton administration's 'irrational hatred' of the NCP, according to a CIA operative (Rose, 2001).

Since the Bush era, the principal US concern in Sudan has been countering terrorism, with the US State Department acknowledging Sudan as 'a strong partner in the war on terror' (MacAskill, 2007). While the United States repeatedly raised the issue of Sudan's authoritarianism and lack of democracy when addressing American audiences, according to NCP informants US diplomats never made Sudan's democratization a requirement for improved relations (Young, 2024, p. 114). In keeping with US practice elsewhere, it instrumentalized democracy, using it as a weapon against regimes it opposed, such as Sudan, and ignoring democracy when it might undermine client states, such as the ruling autocracies in the Middle East (Al Talei, 2021).

Despite US pressures, Sudan was not completely isolated because China, India, Malaysia, and others invested heavily in the petroleum industry, and in August 1999 Sudan began exporting oil (Pax Christi, 2008). Sudan quickly became Africa's third-largest oil producer and its economy grew fivefold, accounting for 60% of Sudan's total revenues between 2009 and 2011, with nearly 500,000 barrels produced per day—most of which were exported to China (IMF, 2009).

Living standards improved after Sudan began exporting oil but, with the secession of southern Sudan in 2011 and the loss of most of its oil revenues, the economic crisis returned; demonstrations broke out and continued sporadically for the next two years, influenced by the start of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. Yet another round of IMF austerity measures was announced in September 2013, prompting the youth to take to the streets, where dozens were killed in clashes with the security forces (*Guardian*, 2013). The regime survived, however, with the support of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Based on the '*janjawid*', RSF was a paramilitary force used by Bashir during the war in Darfur, after which it was restructured, in August 2013, as RSF under the command of Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as Hemeti, and loyal to the president (Al Jazeera, 2015).

SPLA, Darfur, and limits of American pressure

Developments in the early 1990s reshaped US engagement with the Sudanese conflict. The 1991 overthrow of the Derg in Ethiopia by EPRDF, along with the end of the cold war, left SPLA increasingly vulnerable. SPLA, however, won the approval of Samaritan's Purse, an NGO operating in southern Sudan

whose high-profile leaders—Billy Graham and his son Franklin—were on intimate terms with President George W. Bush and urged him to take action in Sudan (Young, 2012, pp. 68, 122). Human rights organizations, anti-slavery groups, and the US Congressional Black Caucus also opposed the NCP (Young, 2019, p. 50). The most influential group, the Friends of South Sudan, highlighted Sudanese government human rights abuses (both real and imagined), had important links to the Democratic Party, and, under President Clinton, was very influential in shaping US policy on Sudan (Young, 2024, p. 137).

To win support for SPLA, the Friends of South Sudan had to repackage SPLA leader Garang—transforming him from a Marxist–Leninist revolutionary into an 'African hero' leading a democratic struggle. Typical of this whitewashing, a prominent member of the Friends and a senior government official, Roger Winter, claimed in Congressional testimony that 'the people of the SPLM are democrats. They respect the kind of approach to governance that is taken in United States of America' (Winter, 2009). According to former Representative Harry Johnston, who headed the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Africa, Ted Dagne—an Ethiopian-American, Friends member, and head of the Congressional Research Bureau—'was very suspicious of the Sudan government, and so I became very suspicious' (Hamilton, 2012). Another member of the Friends, John Prendergast, was appointed to the National Security Council by Secretary of State Susan Rice, a strong critic of the NIF, and brought Hollywood star power to the organization with George Clooney and Angelina Jolie, who regularly appeared as 'expert witnesses' before Congressional hearings on southern Sudan (Young, 2019, p. 48).

Bashir responded to the growing US opposition to his regime by endorsing an IGAD-brokered, but US-led, peace process, and signing the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which put southern Sudan on track for independence in 2011. By making these concessions, Bashir had reason to believe that Washington would end its sanctions; however, the sanctions continued and were strengthened by President Bush in 2007 because of the growing conflict in Darfur (White House, 2007). Bush had hoped to capitalize on his government's role in brokering a peace agreement in Sudan. Instead, the administration was restrained by civil society groups led by the Save Darfur

Coalition who maintained—like the evangelicals and the Friends—that the United States must lead a moral crusade against the Sudanese regime (Mamdani, 2009). Although the conflict in Darfur, which broke out in the final days of the north–south war, had some unique characteristics, it was largely a product of the same Arab supremacy and regional marginalization that had produced wars in southern Sudan, Blue Nile, the Nuba Mountains, and eastern Sudan.

Bashir's problems grew in July 2008 when, at the instigation of the United States, the International Criminal Court (ICC) charged him with genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Darfur even though Washington did not recognize the ICC's authority in the United States (Mamdani, 2009).

In keeping with their understanding of national sovereignty in the post-cold war era, China and the Russian Federation provided the NCP government with weapons during its war with SPLA and opposed a UN proposal to send peacekeepers to the country (Blair, 2007). The close association between the Khartoum government and China, however, led the Darfur rebel Justice and Equality Movement to attack Chinese oil operations in Kordofan in October 2008 and abduct nine Chinese oil workers, five of whom were killed (Large, 2009, p. 618).

When critics called for a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympics due to China selling weapons to the regime, Beijing used its influence to facilitate the deployment of a joint African Union (AU)–UN peacekeeping mission to Darfur in 2007 (Marks, 2022). Although China did not participate in the IGAD negotiations, it provided funding and worked with mediators and Western special envoys (Verjee, 2016). This led China to become more involved in Sudan's domestic politics. Bending its commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of countries, it pursued a policy of 'influence without interference', which permitted guarded criticism of the NCP (Large, 2009, p. 619). China's role in developing the oil industry and its growing involvement in the economy limited US efforts to completely isolate the regime.

Obama, Trump, and conditional normalization

In the final days of his presidency, the Barack Obama administration announced an easing of most of the sanctions against Sudan (Morello, 2017). Due to fears of the anti-regime lobbyists who had strong support in Congress, however, some US sanctions tied to Sudan's state sponsor

of terrorism designation remained in place for a further six months, which meant that incoming President Trump would have to approve the arrangement (Kelemen, 2017; Small Arms Survey, 2018, p. 17).

Like his predecessors, Trump's policies on Sudan and South Sudan were largely shaped by domestic concerns. Unlike them, however, Trump did not have the baggage of his three predecessors, who supported the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) long after it was clear that it was as guilty of human rights abuses as the NCP. Trump also rejected the conviction held by his predecessors—and indeed the entire foreign policy establishment—that the United States was the 'exceptional nation' needed in the resolution of conflicts (Young, 2019, p. 190).

In response to the problem inherited from Obama, Trump announced an additional three-month period to permanently revoke the sanctions on Sudan, pending the government's continued cooperation. This was because of opposition in Congress and civil society, which remained vehemently anti-NCP, while the US intelligence community supported ending the sanctions having worked closely with its Sudanese counterparts (Manson, 2017).

In January 2017, Trump placed Sudan on a list of seven Muslim-majority countries whose citizens were temporarily barred from obtaining US visas, and prohibited refugees from these countries from entering the United States. When this was overruled by the courts, it was reintroduced as a 'vital measure' to strengthen national security (Sevastopulo and Bradshaw, 2017). The visa restrictions on Sudan were lifted in October after Sudan 'diligently cultivated its relationship with US allies in the Middle East', crucially by providing thousands of fighters from RSF to support the Saudi–Emirati war in Yemen backed by the United States (Elamin, 2017). This represented one of the very few instances where the Sudan government demonstrated agency in its relations with the United States, but only to the extent of returning to the status quo before Trump launched his anti-Muslim campaign.

Sudan: Chaos and declining US Power

To overcome Sudan's deepening economic crisis, Bashir pleaded for financial support from the rich Gulf states and asked them to intercede with the United States to end the state terrorism designation. As acknowledged in numerous

meetings with NCP functionaries, however, Gulf support never met the regime's needs and the state terrorism designation continued. Had Bashir acquired sufficient financing, he would not have had to comply with IMF demands for austerity and the uprising that overthrew him might never have happened.

Regional competition and the fall of Bashir

Sudan's weakness also meant that it was caught up in the tangle of conflicts between Middle Eastern states. Saudi Arabia deposited USD 1 billion in Sudan's central bank to end relations with Iran in January 2016 (Perteghella, 2019). Qatar and Türkiye continued their conflict with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Sudan, which intensified after the announcement on 17 January 2018 that Türkiye had been granted a 99-year lease on Sudan's Red Sea coast. While Türkiye claimed it was constructing a tourist hub, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE held that it was of a military nature (Oruç, 2019).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE funded RSF to fight their war against Ansar Allah in Yemen and, together with Egypt, support Khalifa Haftar in Libya. While this arrangement partially alleviated Bashir's economic crisis, it represented a loss of national sovereignty for Sudan and involved conflict with Yemen, with whom Sudan had always maintained good relations. The most blatant example of Middle Eastern states meddling in Sudan's affairs, however, was the effort by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to replace Bashir with his security chief Salah Gosh (Young, 2020).

Adding to the pressure on the regime, the US designation of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism precluded it from receiving debt relief from the IMF's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, while the US Congress opposed the provision of funds for the unpopular NCP (Nehanda Radio, 2019). Due to the regime's inability to end or even reduce US pressures, Bashir told Vladimir Putin, 'We are thankful to Russia for its position in the international arena, including Russia's position in the protection of Sudan. We are in need of protection from the aggressive acts of the United States' (Deutsche Welle, 2017). Sudan's quid pro quo for Russian support was allowing the Wagner Group to enter into the country and agreeing to a Russian naval base at Port Sudan (Middle East Eye, 2022). But Russian support was too little and too late to stop the collapse of the regime.

The 2018–19 uprising

Although the wave of demonstrations between 2011 and 2013 was repressed, the opposition planned and organized further struggles, which broke out in 2018–19 in response to another round of IMF austerity. Demonstrators across Sudan called for Bashir to be replaced by a civilian government and, after the military failed to contain the spreading protests, it arrested Bashir on 11 April 2019 (Young, 2020, p. 38).

After jockeying for power, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan was pronounced head of the Transitional Military Council and announced that the military would hold power for two years, appointing a government of technocrats before handing over power to an elected government (Magdy and Keath, 2021). This was rejected by the opposition, who once again took to the streets (Young, 2020, p. 38).

Despite years of US antipathy towards the Bashir regime, the absence of anti-imperialism, and appeals by the youth for a democracy influenced by Western values and NGOs, the United States did not endorse the uprising and remained largely a bystander (Young, 2024, p. 127). Apart from their demand that the regime leave, demonstrators were primarily concerned with individual rights and opposition to restrictions on women and their attire. Although the 1964, 1985, and 2018 uprisings were all responses to IMF-imposed austerity, the 2018 demonstrators stood out by not emphasizing social and economic demands.²

Moreover, the ‘Proposal for a Charter to Establish the Authority of the People’, drafted by the Khartoum State Resistance Committees, makes no mention of the need for national sovereignty to achieve the goal of democracy (Khartoum State Resistance Committees, 2022), contrary to the demands of demonstrators in the 1964 and 1985 uprisings. According to Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) Politburo member Siddig Yousef, the mobilization during the 2018–19 uprising was more extensive than those of 1964 and 1985, which he participated in, but the protesters’ level of political consciousness was lower.³

The absence of a class-based focus, which gave a revolutionary character to the 1964 and 1985 uprisings, was due to the NCP’s dismantling of Sudan’s trade unions, the repression of Sudan’s once-powerful left, and a youth no longer exposed to leftist perspectives. Were it not for Sudan having, by 2018, been a vassal of the United States for many years and the Trump administration

“The United States did not endorse the uprising and remained largely a bystander.”

showing no interest in the uprising, the 2018–19 uprising would bear comparison to recent colour revolutions in Bangladesh, Georgia, Nepal, and Serbia. This explains why prominent members of the Sudanese business class, including Osama Daoud’s DAL Group (with extensive links to the UAE), could join NGOs in providing basic services—such as toilets, food, and rubbish collection—during the months-long sit-in opposite the military headquarters in central Khartoum, as observed by the author.

Middle Eastern states attempted to influence the outcome of the uprising and the resulting government but had conflicting interests. Qatar and Türkiye were sympathetic to the Bashir regime because of its origins in the Muslim Brotherhood. For the same reason, however, the regime was opposed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Saudi Arabia favoured the national army continuing to lead the country, while the UAE supported RSF (Rickett, 2024). Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi sought to end Sudan’s support for Ethiopia’s Renaissance Dam (Helmi, 2019) and likely feared that a popular uprising displacing the military in Sudan might encourage dissidents in Egypt. Israel wanted Burhan to remain in power because a civilian government accountable to the people would find diplomatic recognition difficult.

Heightened regional involvement in Sudan was also fuelled by the perception of declining US engagement in the region following the United States’ announcement of personnel reductions in its counter-insurgency operations in Africa—part of efforts to better align the US military’s global posture with Trump’s National Defense Strategy, which focused on ‘near-peer’ competitors: the Russian Federation and China (Garamone, 2019). The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, aimed at limiting the Iranian nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief, along with Obama’s announced US pivot to Asia, led some to believe that the era of US hegemony was ending (Lacher, 2022).

It was only after Burhan and Hemeti had met with the leaders of Egypt, Saudi

Arabia, and the UAE that the sit-in was declared a ‘threat to national security’ and cleared on 3 June 2019—indicating the level of influence of these states (Tisdall, 2019). What these states shared was opposition to a democratic transformation in Sudan. But by killing masses of unarmed civilians, the military overreached and the United States, the United Kingdom, and their regional allies forced the generals to accept a hybrid military–civilian government of technocrats that would operate in parallel to a Sovereign Council headed by Burhan.

The transitional government and external influence

The United States, together with ‘Quad’ partners Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the United Kingdom, pressed the civilian forces to participate in a transitional government with the military pending general elections. According to former US diplomat Cameron Hudson, the limited role of the United States was not due to a lack of concern, but because the country ‘is one of many powerful actors vying for influence to shape political outcomes’ (Hudson, 2021). After the United States had long dominated Sudan, this statement speaks powerfully to declining US power in the context of a changing global configuration of power. It was also due to the Trump administration having little interest in a democratic uprising in the periphery. The administration also did not support the fledgling transitional government, even though it was headed by Abdallah Hamdok and a team of technocrats who wanted to win the favour of the United States.

Instead, the Trump administration’s priority was normalizing Sudan–Israel relations (Guyer, 2023). With the support of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the Trump administration pressured Sudan to grant Israel recognition as part of the Abraham Accords, which also saw Bahrain, Morocco, and the UAE recognize Israel without resolving the long-standing Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Zeidan, n.d.). Like Trump, previous US administrations had pushed for Arab–Israeli

normalization (Lynch, 2024) to the extent that one official said, ‘American policy is Israeli policy’ (Young, 2024, p. 112).⁴

Prime Minister Hamdok told the Americans that the decision to recognize Israel could only be made by an elected parliament, but this was not accepted and he relented (*Times of Israel*, 2020). Instead, Burhan, as chairperson of the Sovereign Council, met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Uganda on 3 February 2020, and on 23 October announced that Sudan officially recognized Israel (Suliman and Gubash, 2020). On the eve of this announcement, however, the Arab Opinion Index survey revealed that more than 80% of Sudanese were opposed to granting diplomatic recognition to Israel (Al-Sheikh, 2020).

In response to Sudan’s recognition of Israel, Trump declared that ‘the United States will take steps to restore Sudan’s sovereign immunity and [to] engage its international partners to reduce Sudan’s debt burdens and advance discussions on debt forgiveness’ (Hansler, 2020). It was further revealed that Sudan would be removed from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism, which had been used since 1993 to bludgeon its governments.

The United States, however, also made Sudan’s removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism contingent on Sudan providing compensation to the families of the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and the 17 sailors killed in the 2000 bombing of the *USS Cole* in Aden, in compliance with US court orders, on the grounds that Khartoum had hosted bin Laden (Duster and Paget, 2020). These crimes, for which the Hamdok government bore no responsibility, were allegedly carried out by the Bashir regime. In March 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the United States had received USD 335 million from a near-bankrupt Sudan as compensation for the victims of these attacks (Middle East Eye, 2021).

Upon coming to power, the transitional government resolved to reach a peace agreement with a mix of established armed groups and others. The agreement existed largely in name only and was carried out exclusively by the military component of the government. The resulting Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), signed on 3 October 2020, failed to reduce insecurity in Sudan, and increased the military’s power in the transitional government when some of the militia leaders joined the Sovereign Council as allies of the military (Dabanga, 2021). Significantly, the United States played no role in reaching the JPA and

was neither a witness nor a guarantor of the agreement—again reflecting its declining engagement in the country.

Like the Bashir regime, the Hamdok government was committed to a neo-liberal restructuring of Sudan’s economy and to embracing austerity as a precondition for gaining support from the IMF’s HIPC Initiative (IMF, 2021). These measures, however, lowered the standard of living of many Sudanese, and the government rapidly lost support. Hamdok won the approval of the IMF and the West, while his refusal after six months in power to meet with the demonstrators who had put him there made his loyalties clear (Young, 2024, p. 125). According to Magdi el Gizouli, ‘[t]he transitional government had two contradictory objectives: austerity and democracy. But austerity could only be enforced through military means’ (Benjamin, 2023).

Military rule and civil war

Hamdok’s declining popularity set the stage for the army’s second coup on 25 October 2021. The immediate trigger, however, was the impending handover of the key position of chairperson of the powerful Sovereign Council from Burhan to a civilian, which would upset the balance of the Council (de Waal, 2021). The generals could only be assured they would not be held responsible for their crimes, and would continue to reap the benefits of their financial holdings, by maintaining the support of their Arab allies and retaining the chair of the Sovereign Council (Dahir and Walsh, 2021).

In the wake of the coup, the Joe Biden administration froze USD 700 million in development assistance to Sudan, halted an estimated USD 6 billion in broader international support, and cancelled plans to pay USD 50 billion of Sudan’s debts, but none of the generals were sanctioned and Washington refused to call the action a ‘coup’ (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2023). Unlike Bashir, however, who in the final days of unipolarity submitted to US–IMF pressures, the changing international configuration of power gave Burhan sufficient latitude to reject US and Western pressures.

The United States, the United Kingdom, and their Arab partners welcomed the subsequent agreement reached between Hamdok and Burhan on 21 November 2021 to reformulate a military–civilian transitional government and appoint another ‘technocratic’ cabinet (*Independent*, 2021)—precisely what the military wanted. Most of Hamdok’s cabinet resigned in disgust; the Forces of

Freedom and Change (FFC)—the civilian coalition that had led the 2019 revolution—rejected the agreement, and the people again took to the streets (Young, 2024, p. 129). Hamdok’s position became untenable and, with protestors calling for full civilian rule, he resigned on 2 January 2022 (Al Jazeera, 2022a).

This set the stage for the long-predicted conflict between Burhan and Hemeti, which broke out in the streets of Khartoum on 15 April 2023—ostensibly over the integration of RSF into the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), but in practice over control of Sudan (Lodhi, 2024). Recent estimates indicate that 14 million people have been displaced since the war began (UNHCR, 2026); 33.7 million are in need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2026); and estimates of the death toll range from 61,000 to hundreds of thousands as of mid-2026 (Center for Preventive Action, 2026), including indirect causes (such as starvation and illness). Adding to Sudan’s woes, insecurity in Khartoum led Burhan to decamp to Port Sudan, where a de facto capital was established, complete with foreign embassies,⁵ posing the danger that Hemeti would establish a counterpart in Darfur (Jamal, 2024). Indeed, this occurred when RSF in alliance with the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement–North (SPLM–N) and its leader, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, serving as Hemeti’s deputy, announced the formation of a parallel government, increasing fears of Sudan’s division (Magdy, 2025).

Multipolarity and the Sudan conflict

The United States’ limited response to the Sudan uprising, the Hamdok government, the generals’ coup, and the subsequent war was influenced by the 2018 ‘Africa Strategy’, which prioritized challenging China and the Russian Federation over encouraging peace in Africa (Solomon, 2018). The United States was therefore more concerned about the agreement for the Russian Federation to build a naval station in Port Sudan, despite the military stating that the deal must await the formation of a civilian government to be ratified (Magdy, 2023).

Also of concern to the United States was the Wagner Group’s role in both training RSF and gold mining, particularly in Darfur where the United States feared that the Russian Federation was building a corridor to its military bases in Libya and the Central African Republic and sought to undermine American and French influence (Riboua, 2023). The

“Sudan is not the priority it once was for the United States.”

Wagner Group had exchanged weapons for mining concessions elsewhere in Africa and would have considered RSF an attractive partner given its leading position in gold production in Darfur (Michaelson, 2020). These arrangements were pursued while RSF was killing unarmed Sudanese demonstrators calling for the overthrow of the military. Moscow has since replaced Wagner with the state-controlled paramilitary Africa Corps, which aligns with government policy emphasizing territorial integrity and national sovereignty (Lechner, 2024).

The Russian Federation's support for the military included vetoing a draft resolution in the UN Security Council condemning the military's first coup in 2019, which it argued undermined Sudan's sovereignty (Landry, 2019). This enabled Hemeti's meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the day that Russian forces invaded Ukraine, which Hemeti tacitly supported (Yassin, 2022). As a result, it was widely believed that Hemeti had the support of the Russian Federation. In April 2024, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov met with Burhan in Sudan, however, and expressed support for 'the existing legitimacy in the country represented by the Sovereign Council' (Reuters, 2024). This apparent shift towards SAF also aligned with the Russian Federation's longer-term efforts to secure a naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast. In December 2025, Sudan's military authorities reportedly offered a 25-year agreement allowing the Russian Federation to establish such a base, although the project has yet to materialize (Faucon and Bariyo, 2025).

From 2011 to 2018, Beijing granted Sudan an estimated USD 143 million in loans and remains a major investor in the country (Tounsel, 2023). In late 2025, China cancelled USD 45 million of Sudan's debt (Sudan Horizon, 2025). The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) found that China was the only country to provide Sudan with arms in 2018 (Yellinek, 2019). Since the Jaafar Nimeiri era, however, a major foreign source of weaponry has been the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, which has limited dependency on the West. Sudan's exports to China in 2021 amounted to USD 780 million, having increased at an annual rate of 10.6% over the previous 25 years (Tounsel, 2023). Khartoum was one of the first African governments to sign on to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is developing a special economic zone, a cargo distribution centre, Nile shipping and tourism resources on the Red Sea, and

other infrastructure in Port Sudan (Chaudhury, 2023). Nevertheless, China did not support Bashir during his final days (Yellinek, 2019).

Meanwhile, US Sudan policy has been caught up in multiple incongruities and ambiguities, notably between a 'big power' cold war II focus and a civil war with important regional dimensions—including allies supporting opposing combatants, divisions within the US government, and competing peace processes. While the UAE supports RSF, Egypt rejects militias and has thrown its weight behind Burhan, despite his links to the Islamist NCP. Iran and Eritrea support SAF, while Ethiopia, an ally of the UAE, appears to be on good terms with RSF (ICG, 2024).

The US executive and Congress have not been aligned when it comes to Sudan policy, with Congress unhappy with Assistant Secretary of State Molly Phee's stewardship (Abtar, 2024). Added to this, the United States has had three special envoys for the Horn of Africa (Jeffrey Feltham, David Satterfield, and Mike Hammer) in recent years, with Donald Booth serving as the special envoy for Sudan under both Obama and Trump before Tom Perriello assumed the position in 2024 (US Embassy in Sudan, 2024). This rapid turnover undermines policy consistency and indicates that Sudan is not the priority it once was for the United States.

The Sudanese mediation process has involved multiple diplomatic actors—including the 'tripartite' (the UN, the AU, and IGAD); the FFC and the military, which were involved in talks; and the 'Quad'—which has complicated diplomatic efforts. The most important takeaway is that 'the US has lost a lot of leverage over the last decade', and that this is best attributed to declining US power both in the region and globally (de Waal, 2023).

Changing configurations of global power

According to the IMF, in 2022 China accounted for 18.9% of global gross domestic product (GDP) in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), surpassing the United States with 15.4% (Swanson,

2023). While US investment in Africa has steadily declined, China is the biggest trading nation and manufacturer in the world and has been Africa's largest trading partner and the biggest source of foreign investment in the Horn since 2009. In 2021, Africa's trade with China amounted to USD 261 billion, compared to USD 64 billion for trade with the United States (Al Jazeera, 2022b). In total, 46 African states have signed on to the BRI, which represents China's framework for investment in the continent (CGTN Africa, 2021). China's development banks lent more than twice as much for public-private infrastructure projects in sub-Saharan Africa as France, Germany, Japan, and the United States combined (Center for Global Development, 2022).

These developments catapulted China to the status of a major global economic power, but the country has also expanded its standing in the Global South, having lifted 800 million people from abject poverty (World Bank, 2022). Compared to some Western donors and international finance institutions, China imposes far fewer political and economic restructuring conditions on its loans and investments. China is also attractive because of its stated commitment to non-interference in other countries' internal affairs. It does, however, expect partners to acknowledge the One China principle and discourages criticism of its domestic policies, particularly with respect to Xinjiang and Taiwan.

China endeavours to set itself apart from Western countries by stressing solidarity with developing countries, South-South cooperation, and identification with the principles of the Bandung Conference and NAM (Fowdy, 2021). China's role in facilitating the 2023 rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia is also viewed by some as an indication of its growing diplomatic profile (Gadzo, 2023).

China, the Russian Federation, and the changing international order

The Russian Federation lacks the economic weight of China, but the late

Senator John McCain's claim that 'Russia is a gas station masquerading as a country' and therefore easy to influence with sanctions (Terbush, 2015) proved mistaken when Western sanctions failed to crash the Russian economy or end its invasion of Ukraine. The Russian Federation has the fourth-largest GDP in terms of PPP, surpassing that of Japan in 2024 (Aris, 2024), which suggests that Western sanctions have ironically helped the country's economy to grow. The Russian Federation is the second-largest exporter of crude oil behind Saudi Arabia (IEA, 2022). It dominates the global grain export market (Bouderbala, 2023) and is the largest exporter of fertilizers in the world (OEC, 2024). SIPRI reported that the Russian Federation had overtaken China as the leading arms seller in sub-Saharan Africa, with its share growing to 26% as of 2022, and Sudan being a major importer (Wezeman, Gadon, and Wezeman, 2023). Although the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine led to a decline in the Russian arms trade, it still dominates weapons sales to Africa (Karabektas, 2024).

The Russian Federation derives legitimacy in Africa because the Soviet Union was never a colonial power and supported anti-colonial liberation movements. The Russian Federation used the Wagner Group to respond to counterterrorism failures, particularly in the former French colonies in West Africa (Aina, 2023). Grigory Lukyanov, a Russian security analyst, argues, however, that Africa's embrace of the Russian Federation is largely because '[t]he anti-French, anti-British, anti-colonial agenda is once again dominant in Africa', and is being stimulated by Western demands that African states follow its leadership in the Ukraine war, long-standing objections to the demands of the Bretton Woods agencies, and the grievances of former French colonies in West Africa (Trenin, 2023).

While US relations with Sudan went from one crisis to the next, China's relations with the country were much less turbulent. Beijing aligned with ruling parties in Sudan regardless of their political orientation, focusing primarily on economic cooperation and commercial engagement; only when pressed, such as after the killing of Chinese oil workers, did China develop more nuanced approaches to its commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of countries. In contrast, due to US sanctions and efforts to punish Sudan, American companies had a negligible role in the economy, which undermined US influence.

Sudan at the end of unipolarity

While the United States played the leading role in the Sudan peace process that produced the CPA, under Trump it only played a minor part in shaping the post-Bashir transitional government and, instead, prioritized gaining Sudan's recognition of Israel; as a result, it increasingly left the field to its clients in the Middle East. During the cold war, the United States and the Soviet Union largely controlled their clients in the Global South. States such as Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the UAE, however, have more freedom to engage in Sudan—even when their objectives clash with those of the United States—while Iran has opposed the United States since its revolution in 1979.

The declining power of the United States in the Horn is also due to the demands placed on governments by Washington. Prior to Trump's second presidency, the United States demanded adherence to the stipulations of the Bretton Woods agencies, its liberal international order, and US foreign policy. When states failed to comply, the United States imposed economic retributions and sanctions and even carried out military action, such as the many bombings in Somalia, the bombing of the Al-Shifa plant in Khartoum, and military support for SPLA. China has maintained a much more limited military footprint in Africa and the Middle East. While the United States has hundreds of overseas military bases, China has only one—in Djibouti. While the United States presses the Global South to view it as a model (Mearsheimer, 2018, p. 1), China frames its engagement around respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in countries' affairs.

China's primary concerns are economic engagement, strategic access, and the promotion of a multipolar international order. China, like the Russian Federation, backs central governments no matter what their ideological orientation, providing they do not undermine its fundamental security concerns (Jian, 2026). This allowed them to accommodate transitions in Sudan between Bashir and the transitional government, as well as between the Sudan government and the independent South Sudanese government, relatively easily. But Chinese support was ultimately insufficient and, with its interests ensured (South Sudanese oil continued to flow to China), it was not prepared to come to the defence of a

regime that had gained the enmity of the majority of the population.

NIF/NCP longevity was therefore only partially due to Chinese and Russian Federation support. Nor was it due to Khartoum's agency, since it had virtually none in its relations with the United States. Bashir repeatedly failed in his efforts to gain US acceptance and end the sanctions that posed an existential threat to his regime. Even if US governments wanted to improve relations with Sudan—which was the view of the intelligence community—they were stymied by a Congress and civil society adamantly opposed to the NCP. As a result, successive US governments demanded more concessions from the regime but did not risk overthrowing a submissive government, as this might have given rise to a regime or movements less cooperative than that of Bashir. In the event, Sudanese civil society brought down the regime, and the result was a far-reaching civil war and the domination of the country by two generals over whom the United States has little influence.

Sudan in a fragmented regional order

The lengthy survival of the Bashir regime can be attributed to its success in suppressing and manipulating a weak domestic opposition and establishing militias to reduce the threat of a coup. The government concentrated on repressing civil society, co-opting and dismissing dissidents in universities, and crushing trade unions—groups that had been at the forefront of the 1964 and 1985 uprisings. Meanwhile, the hopes of many Sudanese that the SPLM would displace the NCP in the 2010 elections ended when SPLM leader Salva Kiir prioritized the independence of southern Sudan, which necessitated the NCP retaining power (Young, 2012).

Bashir understood that, in addition to a popular uprising, his greatest internal threat came from his own security forces. His response was twofold: first, to ensure that state security agencies were well-funded and their leadership duly rewarded; and second, to coup-proof his regime through the fragmentation of the internal security apparatus, using the various security organs as counterweights, giving them intersecting duties, reducing their lines of communication and coordination, and establishing militias such as RSF outside the formal security apparatus (Hassan and Kodouda, 2019).

While the biggest threats to Bashir's regime were posed by his own military, civil society, and the United States, the main threat to Burhan's rule has been RSF and the support it receives from the UAE. Although the UAE and Saudi Arabia were agreed on opposing Sudan's democratic uprising, they fell out over Abu Dhabi's military support of RSF and Riyadh's political support for Burhan as the best means to ensure regional security. After tensions grew between Saudi Arabia and the UAE for a variety of reasons, however, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman urged President Trump in November 2025 to support a peace deal in Sudan and to press Abu Dhabi to stop supplying RSF (Ibrahim, 2025). This was a hard call for Trump, who viewed the UAE as a close regional ally, a statelet with which he and his family have major business ties (Bazzi, 2026), and a partner with Israel since its formal diplomatic recognition in 2020 under the Abraham Accords (BBC News, 2020).

The Trump administration has done little beyond issuing statements, while the war has become increasingly internationalized. Supporters of SAF include China, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Qatar, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye (Dent, 2026; Maalim and Abdullahi, 2025; *Sudan Tribune*, 2024). Supporters of RSF, led by the UAE, include the Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan, along with General Haftar in eastern Libya (Al-Omrani, 2025; Dent, 2026; Maalim and Abdullahi, 2025; Nova News, 2025). Also fighting against SAF are UAE-supported Colombian mercenaries (Human Rights Watch, 2026).

Burhan's foreign backers share an opposition to the UAE and RSF, but there are also other reasons for their support: Egypt fears Sudan breaking up and supports the regime for its opposition to Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam; Türkiye has an affinity for Sudan's Islamists; the Russian Federation and China typically support central governments over perceived secessionist threats, such as RSF;⁶ Saudi Arabia and Qatar support stability in the Red Sea area; Eritrea is concerned with border security; and Iran wants friendly relations with a state on the Red Sea.

The UAE's support for RSF is primarily based on maintaining a lucrative trade channel that funnels gold from Darfur to Dubai, opposing an Islamist-influenced Burhan regime, and engaging in a proxy war against Saudi Arabia (Khansa, 2025). RSF claims to be fighting Burhan's regime because it betrayed

“With so many actors involved in the conflict, there is reason to fear that it could spread across multiple fronts.”

the 2019 uprising and has ties to Islamists (Darfur24, 2026). Support for RSF, however, relies almost entirely on the largesse provided by the UAE, which, despite having only one million people, has become the fourth-largest investor in Africa (Ata, 2025). This line-up of forces suggests that in the turbulent Middle East, where alliances can change quickly, Burhan could weather the loss of an ally or two and still count on considerable support, while RSF would be severely harmed if the UAE stopped providing finances and weapons.

With so many actors involved in the conflict, there is reason to fear that it could spread across multiple fronts. This danger became evident when Ethiopia constructed a UAE-financed base in the Benishagul-Gumuz region of Ethiopia on the border with Sudan to train RSF fighters (Paravicini and Levinson, 2026). In late March 2026, this contingent joined the SPLM-N, which is allied with RSF, and captured the southern Blue Nile town of Kurmuk defended by SAF (*Sudan Tribune*, 2026). The UAE is deeply involved in Ethiopia, and this project would have tapped into Ethiopian anger at Burhan's opposition to the Renaissance Dam and exploited the opportunity provided by the Tigray war to expel Ethiopian farmers from the rich border agricultural area of Al-Fashaga (Horn Review, 2025).

Most Sudanese appear critical of both Burhan and Hemeti. Although forces under both men have repeatedly committed serious human rights abuses, the scale and brutality of RSF atrocities have drawn particular attention, most recently during its 18-month siege and capture of El Fasher in Darfur in October 2025. Amnesty International concluded that this assault involved ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, systemic rape, and forced abductions (Amnesty International, 2026). Neither general offers any real prospect of a transition to civilian rule and, given their dependence on autocratic foreign backers, the democratic transformation the youth fought for is not on the horizon.

Amid the increasing involvement of Middle Eastern states in the Sudan conflict and the threat of a multi-state war, the Trump administration announced in February 2026 that it will present a peace plan to Trump's Board of Peace (Politics Today, 2026). If this development follows the same course as the Board's involvement in Gaza, it will undermine the UN, and peacemaking will be secondary to business interests (Ioanes, 2026).

As well as rising death tolls from Middle Eastern-supplied drones, the World Food Programme reported that the situation in Sudan is 'dangerously compounded' by the US–Israeli war on Iran, which has disrupted supply chains for aid groups, forcing them to use more expensive routes (Al Jazeera, 2026). Adding to Sudan's woes, an estimated 800,000 Sudanese migrants were working in the Gulf and, due to the Iran war, their remittances, upon which millions depend, have been cast into doubt (Pesquet, 2026).

When President Biden withdrew US troops from the 20-year-long failed war in Afghanistan, he promised that there would be no more 'forever' wars (Smith, 2021). Shortly after, however, he led the United States into a major proxy war in Ukraine and supported Israel's multiple wars, including Gaza. In his presidential victory speech, Trump said, 'I am not going to start a war, I am going to stop wars' (Dickerson, 2024). Yet, within months of his inauguration in 2024, he was supporting Israel's wars in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen; decapitating the Venezuelan government; and threatening Canada, Cuba, Greenland, and Mexico.

Until recently, the greatest challenge to the legitimacy of the United States stemmed from its support for Israel amid allegations of genocide in Gaza that were brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ, 2024a). This was followed by the ICC prosecutor requesting arrest warrants for Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, and leaders

of Hamas (Bubola, Savage, and Mpoke Bigg, 2024). The third judicial shock was the advisory ruling by the ICJ that Israel's continued presence in the occupied Palestinian territory was illegal and must end as rapidly as possible (ICJ, 2024b). These rulings have been ignored by the United States.

Against this background, the 'peace president' and Israel launched an unprovoked war on Iran on 22 June 2025, followed by another war on 28 February 2026, which began amid ongoing negotiations with the bombing of Iran and the killing of most of its leadership. But despite a US defence budget in 2025 of USD 997 billion, 126 times larger than that of Iran with USD 8 billion (GlobalMilitary.net, n.d.), the United States has fared poorly in the war and its international reputation and that of its military has suffered.

Conclusion

Sudanese have often turned to the United States to resolve their conflicts, but Washington's previous engagements in the country have not benefitted its people.⁷ In the present era of multipolarity, the United States has neither the interest nor the capacity to lead a peace process, particularly when it pits key regional clients against one another. While multipolarity allowed Sudan's unaccountable generals to challenge the United States, it also facilitated the involvement in Sudan of powerful regional states, which has made ending the civil war more difficult.

Sudanese governments have also failed to successfully defend the country's national sovereignty. In a context of declining US power, however, that is changing. Under Bashir, Sudan became a vassal of the United States. Burhan and Hemeti appeared to be following a similar path and were quick to comply with US demands that they share power with civilians in a transitional government in 2019 and recognize Israel despite popular opposition. After Burhan carried out his second coup in October 2021, however, he rejected US demands. Although Bashir broke relations with Iran to win the favour of the United States, Burhan delivered a blow to the United States and Israel by again exchanging ambassadors with Iran in July 2024 (Al Jazeera, 2024). Following the State Department designation of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization (Tilsley, 2026), US Envoy Massad Boulos reaffirmed Washington's recognition of the Burhan-led administration as

Sudan's 'existing government', apparently due to fears of state collapse (Sudan War Monitor, 2026). It was also a response to the weak US position in the Red Sea in the wake of the 28 February 2026 Iran war. As a result, Washington found itself on the same side as the Sudanese Islamists and Iran.

The United States emerged from the Second World War as the dominant power internationally and, through periods of bipolarity, unipolarity, and now multipolarity, it has been devoted to maintaining global dominance; however, in contrast to previous governments that considered the post-war US-created institutions of liberal internationalism to be the bedrock of US global power, the Trump administration views them as threats to American interests. National sovereignty, which has underpinned international law since the Treaties of Westphalia in the 17th century, has been displaced first by a US-determined 'rules based international order', and then by President Trump's devotion to US global hegemony and support for Israel—running roughshod over international law.

The new thinking of the second Trump administration is reflected in his 2025 National Security Strategy, which concedes that the post-cold war era of unipolarity has ended and considers Africa (in less than half a page) solely as a source of natural resources (White House, 2025). But Trump's multiple wars, global sanctions, and support for Israeli aggression make it clear that the administration has not accepted multipolarity and sovereign equality. Addressing the February 2026 Munich Security Conference, US Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Marco Rubio presented five centuries of Western colonial expansion as an era of civilizational ascendancy and declared the restoration of Western dominance a central goal of US foreign policy (Rubio, 2026). Rubio's appeal to Europeans to join the United States in implementing a new imperialist order won him a standing ovation from the assembled Western elite.

China and the Russian Federation are, however, challenging the United States at the global level, while a growing number of states from the Global South have become powerful at the regional level. Even long-time clients and allies of the United States are joining BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa)—including Sudan's neighbours Egypt and Ethiopia—which clearly illustrates the widespread desire to establish a post-US dominated world order that highlights national sovereignty. Meanwhile, attempts to turn back the

clock will be resisted, as Iran aptly demonstrated. This situation was poignantly expressed by one of America's foremost political scientists, Samuel Huntington, who held that 'the failure of the United States would inevitably be seen as the failure of democracy', and that 'the central problem in the relations between the West and the rest [is] America's efforts to promote a universal Western culture and its declining ability to do so' (Huntington, 1996, p. 183). ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
GDP	Gross domestic product
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NCP	National Congress Party
NIF	National Islamic Front
PPP	Purchasing power parity
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SCP	Sudanese Communist Party
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM-N	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North
UAE	United Arab Emirates
USD	United States dollar

Notes

- 1 Author correspondence with Ahmed Dirdeiry, 13 March 2024.
- 2 This understanding is drawn from the author's 17 visits to the Khartoum sit-in opposite the military headquarters in the month before it was disbursed by the military on 3 June 2019.

- 3 Author interview with Siddig Yousef, SCP Politburo member, Khartoum, 8 May 2019.
- 4 Sudan's opposition to Israel dates back to 1958, when it became illegal to establish relations with Israel or conduct business with Israeli companies because of the denial of Palestinian rights (Arab News, 2021), and, because of the United States' support of Israel, Sudan broke relations with it in 1967 (US DoS, 2008).
- 5 Port Sudan became the primary hub for embassies, UN agencies, and relief organizations working with Sudanese authorities (Geeska, 2026). The army recaptured Khartoum in March 2025 and, in January 2026, Burhan's government returned to the capital.
- 6 The UAE has been called the 'axis of secession' for establishing a network of non-state actors who have supported secessionist movements in Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen (Krieg, 2025).
- 7 The United States supported the Abboud and Nimeiri dictatorships, welcomed the overthrow of the democratically elected Sadiq al-Mahdi government, did not fulfil the CPA's commitment to support democratization, and offered little support to the 2018–19 uprising. It subsequently placed an additional burden on Hamdok's fragile transitional government by requiring it to pay USD 335 million in compensation for attacks attributed to the Bashir regime before removing Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism (Burke and Holmes, 2020; Young, 2024).

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