Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Beyond a Binary Proxy War: Multipolar External Competition and the Asymmetric Roles of Russia and the United States in Sudan

Nagmeldin Karamalla-Gaiballa

n.karamalla-gaiballa@uw.edu.pl

University of Warsaw

Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł

University of Warsaw

Research Article

Keywords:

Posted Date: November 20th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10929558/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

How should Sudan's war be characterized when external actors shape battlefield capabilities, revenue, diplomacy, and legitimacy, but the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) retain their own political projects and resources? This article examines the war from 15 April 2023 through 31 December 2024 and asks how the conflict reorganized external involvement and what that reveals about the limits of a conventional proxy-war model. It argues that Sudan is best understood as an internationalized civil war marked by multipolar external competition. External relationships are differentiated, fluid, and issue-specific: the United Arab Emirates is associated with the strongest publicly documented case of material enablement of the RSF, Egypt and Iran are important to the SAF in different ways, Russia combines security, resource, diplomatic, and maritime interests, and the United States operates primarily through diplomacy, sanctions, humanitarian assistance, and civilian support. China and Saudi Arabia further demonstrate that economic and mediating roles do not map neatly onto battlefield alliances. The article therefore retains proxy warfare as a mechanism of external enablement, but rejects the claim that the war constitutes a symmetrical US–Russia proxy contest. This reframing preserves the importance of global-power rivalry while restoring domestic agency and bringing regional battlefield enablers into the explanation.

1. Introduction

Sudan's war began on 15 April 2023 as a struggle between two Sudanese security actors: the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), commanded by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). The immediate dispute concerned the political future of the post-2019 transition and, especially, the terms and timetable for integrating the RSF into the regular army. The conflict nevertheless cannot be explained by the generals' rivalry alone. External money, weapons, logistical corridors, diplomatic recognition, and mediation have affected the resources available to both sides and the incentives surrounding the war (Kurtz 2024; Mustasilta 2025).

The analytical difficulty is not simply that foreign powers are involved. It is that their relationships with Sudanese actors do not form two stable camps. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been identified as a major external enabler of the RSF, while Egypt and Iran have been associated with the SAF in different periods and through different instruments. Russia has maintained security and resource ties with Sudanese military networks and moved toward a more explicit relationship with the SAF-led authorities during the period examined here. The United States has sought to shape the war through diplomacy, sanctions, humanitarian assistance, and support for civilian actors, but there is no comparable public evidence that it armed a Sudanese belligerent. China has combined economic and diplomatic engagement with a preference for institutional continuity. These relationships overlap without constituting a coherent alliance system.

This article addresses a problem in how Sudan's war is often framed in public debate. Calling the war a proxy war can draw attention to the consequences of external support, but it can also imply that SAF and

RSF are dependent instruments of outside principals. Kurtz (2024) cautions against describing the war as a simple contest between two generals or as a proxy war, because such labels can obscure domestic political agency. Salih (2024) likewise maps a wide field of regional and international actors, rather than a single external dyad. Mustasilta (2025) makes the strongest version of this argument: Sudan is highly internationalized, but the external actors are not locked into a conventional bipolar proxy conflict.

I agree with that caution, but not with the conclusion that proxy analysis is therefore unnecessary. External actors still use local relationships to pursue interests that they do not wish or cannot pursue directly. The useful question is consequently not whether Sudan is simply a proxy war or simply a civil war. It is how different forms of external enablement interact with local agency, and whether the resulting pattern resembles a conventional proxy relationship, an internationalized civil war, or both at different points and levels of analysis.

The article asks: How did the war that began on 15 April 2023 reorganize external involvement in Sudan, and what does the contrast between Russia's security and resource engagement and the United States' diplomatic and coercive instruments reveal about proxy competition in a multipolar international order? Three subsidiary questions guide the analysis. First, what forms of material, financial, diplomatic, and political support reached SAF and RSF during the period? Second, how did external relationships interact across the battlefield, political-economy, and mediation arenas? Third, do these patterns fit a classical proxy-war model, or do they point to a different form of internationalized conflict?

The central argument is that Sudan is best understood as an internationalized civil war marked by multipolar external competition, not as a symmetrical US–Russia proxy war. External powers affect military capability, access to revenue, diplomatic legitimacy, and the bargaining environment, but they do so through differentiated and sometimes shifting relationships. The SAF and RSF are not passive proxies: each has its own coercive organization, domestic networks, commercial resources, and political objectives. Russia and the United States remain important to the conflict's global-power layer, but their roles are asymmetric. Russia has pursued more direct security, resource, and maritime access, whereas the United States has primarily used diplomacy, sanctions, aid, and civilian-facing instruments. The immediate battlefield pattern is therefore more strongly explained by regional enablers and cross-border networks than by a bilateral Washington–Moscow confrontation.

The article makes three contributions. Conceptually, it distinguishes internationalization from proxy warfare and proposes multipolar external competition as an analytic category for cases in which several external actors provide different forms of support while maintaining cooperation or mediation in other arenas. Empirically, it uses a common coding scheme to compare external actors rather than presenting a sequence of disconnected country profiles. Substantively, it requalifies the US–Russia relationship: it is a consequential strategic contrast, but not a balanced sponsor–client dyad. This distinction keeps Russia and the United States in view without marginalizing the UAE, Egypt, Iran, and the neighboring states through which material support and political influence move.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the conceptual framework. Section 3 explains the research design, evidence, actor selection, and limits of the analysis. Section 4 gives a concise account of the domestic conflict and the external networks inherited by the 2023 war. Sections 5 and 6 examine regional battlefield enablers and the global-power layer, respectively. Section 7 synthesizes the findings and assesses the US–Russia claim. The conclusion returns to the research question and identifies the implications for proxy-war analysis.

2. Analytical framework: from proxy war to multipolar external competition

The concept of proxy warfare is useful because it draws attention to the strategic purpose of external support. A state may pursue influence indirectly by providing arms, money, intelligence, training, diplomatic cover, or logistical assistance to a local actor. Yet the concept is often used too broadly. External involvement in a civil war does not automatically make the war a proxy war, and the presence of a proxy relationship in one arena does not mean that the entire conflict is controlled by a foreign principal.

The literature provides two correctives to a narrow, Cold War-derived understanding. First, proxy relationships are principal–agent relationships marked by unequal resources, information problems, and divergent objectives; the local actor can influence or resist the principal rather than simply follow instructions (Mumford 2013; Fox 2019). Second, external support is shaped by both supply and demand: external states choose where to intervene, but armed groups also seek, filter, and bargain over assistance (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). These points make local agency a condition of good proxy analysis, not a reason to abandon it.

For this article, a classical proxy-war model is an ideal type with four characteristics: at least two external principals use local belligerents to compete indirectly; the external relationship is substantially military or security-oriented; the local belligerents are sufficiently dependent on outside support for the relationship to shape their strategic options; and the external competition is organized around relatively stable adversarial alignments. These criteria are not a claim that every historical proxy war satisfies them perfectly. They provide a transparent benchmark against which Sudan can be assessed.

Sudan falls short of that ideal type in three respects. The external field is plural rather than bipolar. The instruments range from arms and drones to gold networks, sanctions, mediation, and humanitarian assistance. Finally, the relationships are cross-cutting: an actor may support one Sudanese side, mediate between both sides, trade with state institutions, or cooperate with a supposed rival in another arena. This is why Mustasilta (2025) describes the war as highly internationalized without treating it as a conventional proxy war.

2.1. Defining multipolar external competition

I use multipolar external competition to describe a pattern in which several external actors seek influence in the same conflict through different and partly overlapping channels, without forming a single coherent coalition. The term is not a claim that Sudan is a miniature balance-of-power system with equal poles. It is an analytic category for comparing relationships that vary in intensity, instrument, recipient, and political purpose.

The category has four dimensions. The first is plurality: more than two external actors matter, and their interests cannot be reduced to a single global cleavage. The second is instrument differentiation: military supply, finance, commercial access, diplomatic recognition, sanctions, aid, and mediation have different effects and should not be collapsed into the generic word support. The third is cross-cutting alignment: external actors may compete in one arena and cooperate or mediate in another. The fourth is domestic agency: local belligerents possess their own resources and objectives and can bargain with, redirect, or outlast their external partners.

This framework yields a more precise interpretation of the proxy concept. Proxy-like relationships remain visible where a foreign actor provides material support to a local belligerent in order to pursue external objectives. What changes is their status: they are mechanisms within a wider internationalized civil war, not proof that the whole war is a binary proxy conflict. This distinction also permits a difference between Russia's security relationship with Sudan and the United States' diplomatic influence. Both can shape the war, but they do not do so through equivalent principal–agent relations.

2.2. The US–Russia question

The US–Russia relationship deserves focused analysis, but it must be specified. The claim tested here is not that Washington and Moscow have no competing interests in Sudan. They do: Red Sea access, regional order, relations with military authorities, the political future of Sudan, and the wider distribution of influence in Africa all matter. The stronger claim—that the war is principally a US–Russia proxy contest in which the two powers back opposing Sudanese camps—requires evidence of comparable military sponsorship and stable alignment. The available public record does not establish that stronger claim.

Russia's role is more directly connected to security and political economy. Moscow has supplied arms, cultivated ties with Sudanese military elites, maintained relationships with networks associated with gold extraction and security, and pursued possible access to the Red Sea. During the period examined, Russian officials increasingly signaled support for the SAF-led authorities. The relationship has nevertheless included earlier contacts with Hemedti and the RSF, which is better interpreted as strategic hedging and adaptation than as membership in a fixed anti-US bloc.

The United States has also influenced the conflict, but mainly through a different toolkit. In May 2024, Special Envoy Tom Perriello described US policy in terms of diplomacy with the parties and regional actors, humanitarian assistance, sanctions, pressure for humanitarian access, and support for Sudanese civilian aspirations (U.S. Department of State 2024). This is consequential influence, especially over

legitimacy, mediation, and the costs of continued violence. It is not equivalent to arming and directing a local military client. The US–Russia contrast is therefore analytically important precisely because it is asymmetric.

2.3. Positioning the contribution in the Sudan literature

Recent analyses have already established that Sudan's war is internationalized. Kurtz (2024) shows why descriptions such as a simple "war of two generals" or a conventional proxy war can conceal the conflict's domestic origins and the agency of Sudanese actors. Salih (2024) maps a wide set of regional and international actors, including Egypt, the UAE, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Russia, China, and neighboring states. Mustasilta (2025) places these developments in the context of a more multipolar international order and argues that external actors are entangled in Sudan's political economy and conflict management without forming fixed adversarial camps. Actor-specific studies of Russia, China, and the Gulf add detail about security, commercial, and institutional strategies (El Obeid 2024; Mason 2022; Shinn and Eisenman 2023).

The contribution of this article is therefore not the discovery that foreign actors influence Sudan. It is a more specific analytical intervention. First, it brings the literature on external support and proxy warfare into direct conversation with the recent Sudan debate. Second, it compares relationships using the same dimensions—recipient, instrument, objective, cross-actor interaction, evidentiary confidence, and plausible effect—over a defined period. Third, it uses the US–Russia relationship as a focused test of analytical asymmetry: Russia's security and resource engagement is compared with the United States' diplomatic, coercive, humanitarian, and civilian instruments. This produces a conclusion that is narrower than a general claim about global rivalry but more precise about how different forms of external power operate in Sudan.

3. Research design, evidence, and scope

The article uses structured qualitative documentary analysis. The empirical window runs from 15 April 2023, when the current war began, through 31 December 2024. This cutoff captures the first twenty months of the war and prevents later developments from being read back into the period under study. Mustasilta's 2025 briefing is used as a subsequent analytical intervention with which the findings engage; it is not treated as evidence of events after the cutoff.

The source corpus combines four types of material. First are primary and quasi-primary sources, including the United Nations Security Council Panel of Experts' final report, official US testimony and policy statements, and public statements by governments and international organizations. Second are investigative and wire-service reports that reconstruct weapons transfers, flights, and diplomatic contacts. Third are specialist research reports on Russia, China, the Gulf, and Iran. Fourth are scholarly works on Sudanese political history, external support, and proxy warfare. Sensitive allegations are retained only with explicit qualification and are not treated as established facts merely because they appear in a single report.

Each actor relationship is coded against the same questions: (1) who is the apparent recipient or counterpart; (2) what instrument is used—military, financial, logistical, commercial, diplomatic, coercive, humanitarian, or informational; (3) what strategic objective is documented or plausibly inferred; (4) how does the relationship interact with other external actors; (5) how strong is the evidence; and (6) what effect is observable or plausibly linked to the relationship? The final question is deliberately cautious: the article identifies mechanisms and changes in the bargaining environment, but does not claim to estimate the causal effect of each external actor on battlefield outcomes.

Actor selection is purposive and theoretically driven rather than exhaustive. The UAE, Egypt, and Iran are examined as regional actors with the clearest links to battlefield enablement or military alignment. Russia, the United States, and China represent different global-power instruments. Saudi Arabia and Türkiye are included as actors whose mediation, economic, or Red Sea roles complicate a simple supporter–client map. Chad and Libya are treated as border and transit environments rather than as equivalent principals. Kenya, Ethiopia, Qatar, and other states appear where relevant to mediation or regional networks, but they are not given standalone chapters because the available evidence does not show comparable material enablement during the period.

This selection also explains why Israel and France are not retained as standalone cases. Claims of Israeli or French support for Hemedti have sometimes been presented as evidence of a strategic network, but the public sources available for this study do not establish a state-directed military relationship comparable to the relationships examined below. Commercial technology, private actors, or diplomatic interest should not be converted into state sponsorship without corroboration. Those claims are therefore excluded rather than allowing a weakly evidenced relationship to distort the comparison.

The design has three limitations. Access to classified intelligence and wartime financial records is unavailable, so clandestine support cannot be ruled out. Public reporting is uneven across actors and may reflect the strategic narratives of the parties. Finally, a structured comparison of a single conflict cannot establish a general law of external intervention. Its contribution is instead to make the categories, evidence standards, and limits of inference explicit.

Table 1
Comparative coding of external roles, 15 April 2023–31 December 2024

Actor(s)	Relationship in period	Primary instruments	Analytical role
UAE	Strongest public case of material enablement of the RSF; allegations remain contested.	Finance, arms and ammunition networks, air bridge, political ties	Regional battlefield enabler; not reducible to a US-aligned proxy
Egypt	Long-standing state and military relationship with SAF-led institutions.	Political support, security ties, diplomacy	Regional state alignment shaped by border, Nile, and state-continuity interests
Iran	Re-engagement after October 2023; reported military support to SAF.	UAVs, military cooperation, Red Sea diplomacy	Proxy-like material support, with evidence qualified and partly contested
Russia	Security/resource networks; increasingly explicit relationship with SAF-led authorities.	Arms, Wagner-linked networks, gold, diplomacy, proposed maritime access	Global-power layer; asymmetric hedging and adaptation
United States	Engagement with both parties and regional actors; no comparable public evidence of arming a side.	Mediation, sanctions, humanitarian aid, civilian support	Indirect and coercive influence; not a military sponsor
China	Economic and diplomatic engagement without a fixed battlefield alignment.	Trade, investment, institutional diplomacy, UN engagement	Non-aligned global actor and comparator
Saudi Arabia / Türkiye	Issue-specific diplomacy, economic interests, and mediation.	Mediation, investment, political ties	Cross-cutting relations that weaken a two-camp model
Chad / Libya	Border, transit, recruitment, and logistics environments.	Cross-border routes, facilitation, sanctuary networks	Networked corridors; not treated as unitary external principals

Note: The table is an analytical summary, not a ranking of external power. "Contested" refers to claims for which relevant governments deny or dispute the reported relationship.

4. Sudan's domestic conflict and inherited external networks

External involvement matters only in relation to the conflict it enters. Sudan's political order has long been shaped by militarized governance, uneven center–periphery relations, and the concentration of economic power in security institutions (Collins 2008; de Waal 2019). The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium and post-independence state-building produced institutions that were both territorially uneven and heavily dependent on coercive authority. These legacies help explain why political transitions repeatedly placed armed institutions at the center of the state rather than treating them as subordinate to civilian government.

The 2019 removal of Omar al-Bashir opened a contested transition, not a settled democratic order. SAF and RSF leaders participated in the transitional arrangements while preserving separate chains of command and economic interests. The October 2021 coup further weakened civilian institutions. The dispute over RSF integration was therefore not an isolated technical question about military administration. It was a struggle over coercive authority, access to the state, and the distribution of political and commercial power (Kurtz 2024; Mustasilta 2025).

This domestic foundation is important for interpreting foreign support. Neither SAF nor RSF was created by an external actor for the 2023 war. Both had organizational histories, domestic recruitment bases, and access to revenue before the current escalation. The UN Panel of Experts documented substantial internal financial resources on both sides: RSF networks included gold and companies associated with the force, while the SAF retained military-commercial networks and access to state institutions (United Nations Security Council 2024, paras. 115–117). External support could amplify these capacities, but it did not supply the entire political or financial basis of either belligerent.

The geography of the war creates several routes for internationalization. Sudan connects the Red Sea to the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, Egypt, and the Gulf. Port Sudan has political and logistical significance, while western Sudan is connected to routes through Chad and Libya. Gold, livestock, agriculture, ports, and prospective infrastructure make the country relevant to actors whose objectives are commercial or maritime as well as military. This geography does not produce a single external strategy. It creates several points at which different actors can intervene, hedge, or profit.

The war should therefore be understood as a domestic struggle that became more internationally consequential, rather than as a foreign conflict imported into Sudan. That sequencing also clarifies the meaning of internationalization: outside actors change the resources and opportunity structure of an internally rooted war, while local actors continue to determine its political stakes.

5. Regional battlefield enablers and cross-border networks

Regional actors are central to the explanation because they are closer to the routes, armed organizations, and political institutions that shape the battlefield. Their role is not secondary to a supposedly more important US–Russia confrontation. The evidence instead points to a regional layer in which state interests, commercial networks, border dynamics, and military relationships intersect.

5.1. The UAE and the RSF

The UAE–RSF relationship is the clearest case in the available record of external material enablement affecting the war. The UN Panel described supply routes into Darfur and identified flights from the UAE to Am Djarass in eastern Chad in connection with allegations that arms and military materiel reached the RSF. The Panel assessed the allegations as credible on the basis of interviews, documentary material, imagery, and source triangulation, while noting the UAE's denial and its claim that the flights carried humanitarian assistance (United Nations Security Council 2024, paras. 41–49).

The analytical point is not to turn a contested supply chain into a settled legal finding. It is that the relationship plausibly connects regional logistics and finance to the RSF's ability to sustain operations. The UAE has its own interests in gold, food supply, ports, commercial access, and regional influence; those interests need not be identical to the RSF's political project. The relationship is therefore proxy-like in one important sense—external resources can be used through a local force—but it is not evidence of a fully controlled client or of a UAE–US alliance directed against Russia (El Obeid 2024; Mason 2022).

This distinction also changes how the phrase "Gulf proxy war" should be used. The UAE's relationship with the RSF has reportedly affected military capacity, while Saudi Arabia has invested more visibly in mediation and Red Sea diplomacy. The Gulf states should not be treated as a single actor, and the UAE's cooperation with the United States in some regional arenas does not make its Sudan policy an instrument of Washington.

5.2. Egypt and the SAF

Egypt occupies a different position. Cairo's relationship is primarily state-to-state and security-oriented, and it has longstanding stakes in the survival of Sudanese state institutions, border security, the Nile basin, and the Red Sea. Recent actor mappings identify Egypt as one of the SAF's most important regional partners, while Egyptian policy has publicly emphasized Sudan's unity and institutional continuity (Salih 2024; Mustasilta 2025).

Egypt's role should not be presented as identical to the UAE's alleged support for the RSF. The public record is more straightforward about political and military affinity than about a single, documented Egyptian supply chain that determines SAF battlefield performance. Claims about direct Egyptian combat involvement or particular weapons transfers require separate corroboration. What can be stated with greater confidence is that Egypt's proximity and relationship with SAF-led institutions give it influence over the conflict's regional diplomacy and over how the threat of state fragmentation is interpreted.

Egypt also illustrates why a two-camp model is misleading. Cairo may share concerns with Washington about regional stability while pursuing its own preferences regarding Sudan's military institutions and Nile politics. It can thus be proximate to US policy on one issue and divergent from it on another. Its relationship with the SAF is best classified as regional state alignment, not as proof that Egypt is a US proxy.

5.3. Iran and reported military support to the SAF

Iran's re-engagement with Sudan after October 2023 added a distinct military dimension. Reports based on military, regional, and diplomatic sources, as well as flight-tracking and imagery, linked Iranian-made Mohajer and Ababil drones to SAF operations. Reuters reported that these systems improved surveillance and strike capacity around Khartoum, while noting denials and the limits of publicly available evidence (Reuters 2024a). Analysis by Zenn (2024) similarly identifies Iranian drone employment by the SAF.

The evidence supports a cautious conclusion: Iranian military technology appears to have strengthened SAF capabilities during the period, but the exact terms, scale, and command relationship of the support are not fully public. Iran's interests include Red Sea access, re-entry into an old relationship, and competition with Gulf networks (Ahmed 2024). These interests intersect with the SAF's immediate need for surveillance and strike capacity, but neither side's objectives can be reduced to the other's.

Iran therefore supplies a stronger example of proxy-like military enablement than the United States, but not of a stable global bloc. It also demonstrates why the unit of analysis should be the relationship and its instrument rather than the identity of the alleged sponsor. A reported drone transfer, a diplomatic visit, and a commercial agreement carry different implications and should not be aggregated into the same category of "foreign support."

5.4. Chad, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye

Neighboring states are not passive geography. Chad has received refugees, hosted mediation efforts, and been implicated in allegations about routes into Darfur. The UN Panel also described recruitment and cross-border dynamics involving Chad and identified southern Libyan routes connected to fuel and logistical networks (United Nations Security Council 2024, paras. 41–49, 146–147). These findings should not be translated automatically into a claim that the Chadian or Libyan state acted as a unitary sponsor. Border areas contain official, commercial, and armed intermediaries whose interests may not coincide.

Saudi Arabia has combined an interest in Red Sea security and regional stability with a visible mediation role. This makes it analytically different from an actor whose principal contribution is battlefield supply. Türkiye has maintained economic, political, and Red Sea interests in Sudan and has appeared in diplomatic and security discussions, but the evidence in the period does not justify placing it in the same material-enabler category as the UAE or Iran. The important finding is not that every actor has equal weight; it is that their roles are not commensurable.

The regional pattern is consequently networked rather than alliance-based. Some relationships deliver capabilities, some protect access to revenue, some provide diplomatic cover, and some create corridors through which assistance may move. Regional actors can also mediate while retaining preferences about the military balance. This combination of support and mediation is exactly what a fixed two-camp model cannot explain.

6. The global-power layer: Russia, the United States, and China

The regional analysis does not make Russia and the United States irrelevant. It changes the level at which their importance should be understood. They represent a global-power layer that affects the strategic meaning of Sudan's conflict, the diplomatic environment, and the possibility of a foreign military foothold. Their roles are asymmetric, however, and should not be presented as two equivalent sponsors of opposing Sudanese clients.

6.1. Russia: security, gold, and maritime access

Russia's relationship with Sudan combines older arms ties, military contacts, resource interests, and Red Sea strategy. The Wagner Group and companies associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin were linked in public reporting to gold and security activities before the 2023 war. Such networks mattered because they could connect commercial extraction, elite relationships, and security assistance outside conventional state-to-state channels (Siegle 2021; Ramani 2020).

The proposed Port Sudan naval logistics facility is an important indicator of Russian intent, but it must be described accurately. Russia discussed and approved a draft arrangement for a logistics facility; the proposal was not the same as an operating naval base. Ramani (2020) identifies potential benefits in resupply, maritime power projection, and the protection of Russian interests, while also noting uncertainty about feasibility. The facility should therefore be treated as a strategic objective and bargaining resource, not as an established Russian base.

Russia's position during the war shows adaptation rather than a simple, consistent sponsorship choice. Moscow had prior relations with Hemedti and the RSF, but it also maintained ties with the SAF and the state apparatus. On 29 April 2024, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov met Burhan in Port Sudan and expressed support for the "existing legitimacy" represented by the Sovereignty Council (Reuters 2024b). The visit signaled a more explicit relationship with the SAF-led authorities, whose control of Port Sudan and state institutions made them important to Russia's military and diplomatic objectives.

This sequence supports a qualified interpretation of Russian strategy. Russia has sought to preserve access and leverage across multiple Sudanese networks, then adjusted its public posture as the war altered the distribution of territory and institutional legitimacy. That is compatible with proxy-like relationships, but it is not evidence of a fixed Russian–Iranian–Chinese camp confronting a US–Western–Gulf camp. China has not acted as a Russian military proxy in Sudan, and the UAE's alleged relationship with the RSF cannot be explained simply by its cooperation with Washington.

Russia is therefore a more direct external security actor than the United States in the period examined. Its role links military relationships to resource extraction, maritime access, and diplomatic recognition. This makes Moscow central to the global-power layer, but not sufficient to define the war's overall character.

6.2. The United States: diplomacy, sanctions, aid, and civilian leverage

The United States has significant interests in Sudan and the Red Sea, including regional stability, humanitarian protection, civilian governance, and preventing the consolidation of hostile external military access. It also has an interest in limiting the spread of war across the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. These interests make Sudan strategically important even when Washington does not regard either SAF or RSF as a military client (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies 2024).

US influence in the period was exercised through a different set of instruments. The May 2024 testimony of Special Envoy Perriello described engagement with SAF, RSF, regional governments, and international partners; pressure for humanitarian access; sanctions against actors connected to abuses; substantial humanitarian funding; and support for the civilian aspirations of Sudanese society (U.S. Department of State 2024). The US therefore shaped the diplomatic and economic environment in which the parties operated. It did not need to supply a proxy army for its policy to have strategic effects.

This is where a common claim needs both correction and preservation. It is inaccurate to describe the United States as a military sponsor equivalent to Russia or as the head of a stable camp backing one Sudanese faction. It is also inaccurate to treat US policy as irrelevant because Washington did not enter the war directly. Diplomatic recognition, sanctions, mediation, humanitarian finance, and the ability to pressure regional partners are forms of power. They operate through bargaining and legitimacy rather than through battlefield command.

The US–Russia relationship is consequently best described as an asymmetric strategic contrast. Russia's influence is more closely connected to direct security and resource networks and the possibility of maritime access. US influence is more closely connected to diplomatic pressure, sanctions, aid, and the political future of Sudan. These instruments can compete over the direction of Sudan's international relationships, but they do not constitute a classic proxy war between Washington and Moscow.

6.3. China: economic engagement without a fixed battlefield alignment

China complicates the idea that every major power must choose a Sudanese military client. Chinese engagement in Africa has generally combined commercial interests, infrastructure and trade, diplomatic relations, and a public emphasis on non-interference (Shinn and Eisenman 2023). In Sudan, these preferences have encouraged engagement with state institutions and economic continuity rather than an overt military sponsorship strategy.

This does not mean that China is neutral in the sense of having no interests. Sudan's location, resources, and state-to-state relations matter to Beijing, and Chinese diplomacy can affect the legitimacy available to Sudanese authorities. But economic and diplomatic engagement should not be coded as equivalent to arms transfers or command influence. Wang's (2024) analysis of Chinese official statements shows how discourse about sovereignty and institutional continuity can coexist with pragmatic engagement.

China therefore acts as a comparator that tests the framework. A multipolar conflict contains actors that seek influence through different instruments and may benefit from a functioning state without selecting a battlefield side. Its presence weakens the claim that Sudan can be divided into a Russia-led camp and a US-led camp.

7. Synthesis: what kind of internationalized war is Sudan?

The evidence answers the research question in two stages. The war reorganized external involvement by converting pre-existing relationships into war-related channels. Some actors supplied or facilitated military capabilities; some aligned with state or paramilitary institutions; some pursued revenue and maritime access; and some tried to mediate while applying sanctions or humanitarian pressure. The conflict did not simply add foreign actors to an unchanged domestic war. It altered the value of Sudanese territory, ports, resources, and institutions for external actors, and it gave Sudanese belligerents incentives to seek, diversify, and manipulate foreign ties.

The resulting pattern is best captured as multipolar external competition. It has four observable features. First, several external actors matter, but they do not have equal weight. Second, their instruments differ: the UAE and Iran are relevant to material enablement in different ways; Egypt and Russia combine security and political relationships; the United States relies on diplomacy, sanctions, and aid; China emphasizes institutional and economic engagement; and Saudi Arabia invests in mediation. Third, alignments are fluid and issue-specific. Fourth, SAF and RSF retain enough independent resources and objectives to bargain with external actors rather than simply execute their preferences.

7.1. Why alliances are the wrong organizing concept

A title's reference to "alliances" implies more formal and coherent relationships than the evidence supports. In the period examined, the relevant patterns are better described as networks, partnerships, alignments, and channels of enablement. An alliance would ordinarily imply a durable commitment and some expectation of coordination. The relationships documented here are often transactional, partly deniable, and limited to a particular instrument or arena.

The absence of formal alliances does not make external involvement unimportant. It changes the causal question. Instead of asking which bloc controls Sudan, the analyst should ask which relationship changes which capability, resource flow, legitimacy claim, or bargaining option, and how other actors respond. This formulation is more demanding empirically because it requires evidence about mechanisms rather than a list of countries. It is also more faithful to the cross-cutting pattern identified by recent analyses (Kurtz 2024; Mustasilta 2025; Salih 2024).

7.2. Are Russia and the United States the key competing actors?

The answer depends on what "key" means. At the level of global strategic order, Russia and the United States are important contrasts. Russia's effort to combine security relationships, gold networks, diplomatic recognition, and possible Red Sea access has implications that exceed Sudan's domestic politics. The United States' capacity to shape sanctions, mediation, humanitarian assistance, and external legitimacy likewise gives Washington influence beyond direct military involvement. A study of Sudan that omits these two powers would miss how the war is embedded in wider geopolitical competition.

At the level of battlefield enablement, however, they are not the dominant bilateral dyad. The UAE, Egypt, Iran, and cross-border networks are closer to the material flows and regional relationships that change the parties' immediate capabilities. Russia's role is more direct than Washington's, while the United States' influence is primarily diplomatic and coercive. The appropriate claim is therefore that Russia and the United States constitute an asymmetric global-power contrast whose effects are mediated through regional actors—not that they wage a conventional proxy war through SAF and RSF.

This qualification preserves the author's substantive intuition while making it testable. Russia matters not only because it competes with Western influence but because its specific security and resource relationships can alter Sudan's options. The United States matters not only because it opposes a Russian foothold but because diplomacy, sanctions, aid, and civilian support shape the costs and legitimacy of the war. Their rivalry is real at the strategic level; its translation into a two-sided proxy war is not demonstrated.

7.3. Implications for proxy-war analysis

Sudan suggests three qualifications to conventional proxy-war analysis. First, the existence of external support should be disaggregated by instrument. A drone transfer, gold network, sanctions regime, and mediation initiative do not create the same type of dependence or influence. Second, researchers should analyze the local actor's resources and choices before labeling it a proxy. External assistance can amplify a belligerent that is already organizationally and financially autonomous. Third, the external field should be mapped as a network of relationships rather than divided into presumed camps.

The implication is not that the word proxy must disappear. It remains useful for identifying specific relationships in which an external actor uses a local force to pursue an external objective. In Sudan, the UAE–RSF and Iran–SAF relationships can be examined for such mechanisms, subject to different levels of evidentiary confidence. Russia's relationship with Sudan also contains proxy-like elements, but is broader than battlefield sponsorship because it joins security, resource, and maritime objectives. The United States influences the conflict, but the evidence supports a different category of indirect statecraft.

This approach also avoids a false choice between domestic and international explanations. The war's origins lie in Sudanese institutional and coercive politics. Its duration, territorial fragmentation, military capabilities, and diplomatic environment have been affected by external relationships. An explanation can therefore recognize internationalization without erasing the political agency of Sudanese actors or treating foreign interests as the sole cause.

8. Conclusion

This article asked how the war that began on 15 April 2023 reorganized external involvement in Sudan and what the contrast between Russia and the United States reveals about proxy competition in a multipolar order. The answer is that the war internationalized a domestic struggle without becoming a

symmetrical US–Russia proxy war. External actors have affected military capacity, revenue, diplomatic legitimacy, and mediation, but they have done so through different instruments and with different relationships to SAF and RSF.

Russia and the United States are important, but their roles must be separated. Russia's engagement is more directly tied to military relationships, resource networks, and possible maritime access. The United States has shaped the diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, and civilian political environment. This is an asymmetric strategic contrast, not evidence of two equivalent principals directing opposing Sudanese clients. Regional actors—especially the UAE, Egypt, and Iran—are more immediate to the battlefield dimension, while Chad and Libya illustrate how routes and intermediaries internationalize the war without necessarily constituting unitary state sponsors.

The article's conceptual contribution is to treat proxy warfare as a mechanism within an internationalized civil war and to use multipolar external competition to describe the wider configuration. The framework directs attention to plurality, differentiated instruments, cross-cutting alignments, and domestic agency. Its empirical contribution is a structured comparison that makes evidentiary confidence and causal limits visible. Its substantive contribution is to retain the importance of the US–Russia relationship while rejecting a binary account that sidelines the regional actors most closely connected to battlefield support.

The analysis remains limited by the opacity of wartime finance, restricted access to the country, and the uneven reliability of public reporting. Future research should combine open-source investigation with interviews, financial tracing, and systematic event data to test whether specific external inputs changed the duration or territorial trajectory of the war. It should also examine how Sudanese civilians and political networks navigate external competition, rather than treating the conflict only as a contest among armed organizations and foreign powers.

Declarations

Author Contribution

N.K.-G. conceived the study, developed the core analytical framework, conducted the primary research, drafted the main manuscript text, and led the geopolitical and historical analysis. H.R.-A. contributed to the conceptual refinement, theoretical framing, critical revisions, and editorial development of the manuscript. N.K.-G. and H.R.-A. jointly reviewed, revised, and approved the final manuscript.

References

1. Ahmed, Mostafa. 2024. Iranian Influence in Sudan: Balancing Drone Diplomacy and Conflict Pressures. Al Habtoor Research Centre. https://www.habtoorresearch.com/programmes/iranian-influence-in-sudan/

2. Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. 2024. The US and the Sudan Conflict: Motives and Ability to Influence Events. Arab Center Washington DC. https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-us-and-the-sudan-conflict-motives-and-ability-to-influence-events/
3. Bernal, Victoria. 1997. Colonial Moral Economy and the Discipline of Development: The Gezira Scheme and 'Modern' Sudan. *Cultural Anthropology* 12(4):447–479.
4. Collins, Robert O. 2008. *A History of Modern Sudan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. de Waal, Alex. 2019. *Sudan: A Political Marketplace Framework Analysis*. World Peace Foundation.
6. Obeid, El. 2024. Selma. Gulf States: A Paradoxical Economic Lifeline for Sudan. Ifri. https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/studies/gulf-states-paradoxical-economic-lifeline-sudan
7. Fox, Amos C. 2019. Conflict and the Need for a Theory of Proxy Warfare. *Journal of Strategic Security* 12(1):44–71. https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.12.1.1701
8. Kurtz, Gerrit. 2024. How (Not) to Talk About the War in Sudan. *SWP Megatrends Spotlight* 30:22. https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/mta-spotlight-30-how-not-to-talk-about-the-war-in-sudan
9. Mason, Robert. ed. 2022. *The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: Interests, Influences and Instability*. Manchester: Manchester University.
10. Mumford, Andrew. 2013. *Proxy Warfare*. Cambridge: Polity.
11. Mustasilta, Katariina. 2025. The War in Sudan in the Era of a Multipolar World: Mismanaged Rather than Forgotten. FIIA Briefing Paper 417. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs. https://fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/BP417_The-war-in-Sudan-in-the-era-of-a-multipolar-world.pdf
12. Ramani, Samuel. 2020. Russia's Port Sudan Naval Base: A Power Play on the Red Sea. Royal United Services Institute, 7 December. https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-port-sudan-naval-base-power-play-red-sea
13. Reuters. 2024a. Are Iranian Drones Turning the Tide of Sudan's Civil War? 10 April. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/are-iranian-drones-turning-tide-sudans-civil-war-2024-04-10/
14. Reuters. 2024b. Russian Envoy Meets Sudan's Army Commander in Show of Support. 29 April. https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-envoy-meets-sudans-army-commander-show-support-2024-04-29/
15. Salehyan, Idean, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham. 2011. Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups. International Organization 65 (4): 709–744. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/explaining-external-support-for-insurgent-groups/5BD53FA2D095F6B6283AEEC6DF895DDE
16. Salih, Zeinab Mohammed. 2024. Conflict in Sudan: A Map of Regional and International Actors. Wilson Center, 19 December. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/conflict-sudan-map-regional-and-international-actors

17. Shinn, David H., and Joshua Eisenman. 2023. *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement*. New York: Columbia University.
18. Siegle, Joseph. 2021. Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/security-article/russia-and-africa-expanding-influence-and-instability/
19. United Nations Security Council. 2024. Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Sudan Established Pursuant to Resolution 1591 (2005). S/2024/65. New York: United Nations. https://undocs.org/S/2024/65
20. U.S. Department of State. 2024. Statement of Special Envoy for Sudan Tom Perriello: Conflict and Humanitarian Emergency in Sudan: An Urgent Call to Action. Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 1 May. https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/bbea568f-a5f9-2b0f-746a-6f86ca5b5dc7/050124_Perriello_Testimony.pdf
21. Wang, Gioia S. 2024. What Motivates Chinese Foreign Policy in Sudan? A Discourse Analysis of Chinese Official Statements on the Darfur Conflict from 2004 to 2023. *The Grimshaw Review of International Affairs* 1(2):1–56.
22. Zenn, Jacob. 2024. Sudanese Armed Forces Employ Iranian Drones in Civil Conflict. Foreign Military Studies Office. https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/sudanese-armed-forces-employ-iranian-drones-in-civil-conflict/