

The Red Sea as a Theatre of Strategic Competition: Sudan's Civil War and the Struggle for Regional Order, 2023–2026

Itakpe, Mohammed Jimoh

PhD Student Department of Political and
Administrative Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Port Harcourt

<https://doi.org/10.56201/jpaswr.v11.no9.2026.pg183.195>

Abstract

The Sudanese civil war that began in April 2023 has become a major disturbance within the wider Red Sea–Horn of Africa security environment. This study examined how the war affected the geopolitical balance of the Red Sea region, identified the strategic interests pursued by external powers through engagement with Sudan, assessed the implications of conflict for the country's Red Sea coastline and ports, and analysed what the war revealed about the emerging regional order. The study was anchored in Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and adopted a qualitative documentary research design based on content analysis of recent scholarly literature, United Nations documents, government and intergovernmental records, policy studies and credible international reporting published mainly between 2023 and September 2026. The analysis found that Sudan's strategic importance derived not simply from its coastline but from the intersection of maritime access, port infrastructure, Nile politics, gold and agricultural resources, border security and competition among Gulf, Middle Eastern, African and extra-regional powers. The war intensified regional security interdependence by connecting Sudan's domestic conflict to Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Russia, Türkiye, Yemen and wider Red Sea maritime security. The study further found that the conflict has not produced a single new regional hierarchy; rather, it has reinforced a more fragmented and competitive order characterised by multi-alignment, external penetration and overlapping security relationships. The paper argued that the most significant transformation was therefore institutional and relational: Sudan became an increasingly important node through which regional actors pursue access, influence and security, while the war simultaneously constrained Sudan's capacity to manage its own coastline and external relationships. The study concluded that a durable Red Sea order requires Sudanese sovereignty, regional dialogue and coordinated mechanisms for maritime, economic and conflict security.

Keywords: Red Sea; Sudan; regional security complex; geopolitical competition; Horn of Africa; maritime security; regional order

1. Introduction

The Red Sea has become one of the most consequential geopolitical spaces linking Africa, the Middle East, Europe and Asia. Its strategic significance derives from the interaction of maritime trade, energy transportation, ports, military facilities, political rivalries and conflicts along both shores. The renewed importance of the Red Sea has been reinforced by insecurity around the Bab el-Mandeb, the war in Yemen, competition among Gulf states, expanding external military

presence in the Horn of Africa and renewed interest in ports and logistics. Recent scholarship describes the Red Sea as a space in which geopolitical and geo-economic agendas increasingly overlap with security developments in the Horn of Africa (Liyew, 2024). The House of Commons Library similarly identifies the Horn of Africa and Red Sea as an interconnected strategic environment affected by conflict, shifting political alignments, food insecurity and attacks on maritime shipping (Brooke-Holland, 2024). Within this environment, Sudan occupies an unusually consequential position. Its coastline extends along the western Red Sea, while its territory connects North Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Nile basin. Port Sudan became the principal wartime centre of the Sudanese state after the outbreak of war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023. The city consequently became simultaneously a political centre, humanitarian logistics hub and strategic maritime node. In May 2025, RSF drone attacks reached Port Sudan, demonstrating that the geographical separation between Sudan's western battlefields and its Red Sea coast could no longer be assumed to provide strategic insulation (Al Jazeera, 2025). The central international-relations question is therefore not simply why foreign powers have intervened in Sudan. It is what the Sudanese war reveals about the changing security structure and regional order of the Red Sea–Horn of Africa system. A 2025 study by Salim examined whether the Sudan war was producing regional instability or a search for a new balance of power and concluded that the conflict had not fundamentally reshaped the Red Sea balance because competing external interests had constrained robust foreign naval presence on Sudan's coast (Salim, 2025). This paper takes that important finding as a starting point but develops a different argument. Rather than treating the balance of power as the sole indicator of regional transformation, it examines changes in security interdependence, strategic access, external penetration, port politics and patterns of regional alignment. The paper argues that the Sudan war has not created a new Red Sea hegemon. Instead, it has accelerated the transformation of the Red Sea from a relatively bounded maritime space into a densely interconnected regional security complex in which African, Gulf, Middle Eastern and extra-regional actors pursue overlapping but sometimes contradictory interests. Sudan's war has increased the strategic importance of the western Red Sea coast while simultaneously weakening Sudan's ability to exercise autonomous control over its security environment. The result is an emerging regional order characterised by multipolar competition, flexible alignments and the increasing fusion of domestic conflict with maritime and geopolitical calculations. This argument is important because regional order is often measured through formal institutions, alliances or military capabilities, whereas contemporary Red Sea politics increasingly operates through infrastructure, ports, investment, security partnerships, commercial networks and flexible diplomatic coalitions. Terreffe and Verhoeven (2024) demonstrate that infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn of Africa are deeply interconnected, while recent work on the Red Sea emphasises the importance of ports and military bases in the wider geopolitical competition (Liyew, 2024). Sudan therefore provides a useful case for examining how civil war can alter the regional security environment without necessarily producing a dramatic change in formal power hierarchy. The study addresses four research questions. How has the Sudanese civil war affected the geopolitical balance in the Red Sea region since 2023? What strategic interests have external powers pursued through their engagement with Sudan? How has the war affected competition over Sudan's Red Sea coastline, ports and maritime security? What are the implications of Sudan's conflict for the emerging regional order in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa? The paper contributes to the literature by making three connected moves. First, it shifts the analytical focus from foreign intervention in

Sudan to regional-order transformation. Second, it applies Regional Security Complex Theory to show how Sudan's security is interconnected with Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Yemen and the wider Red Sea. Third, it conceptualizes ports and maritime infrastructure as components of regional security rather than merely economic assets. The analysis covers April 2023 through September 2026 and therefore captures both the early internationalization of the war and the later phase in which the conflict reached the Red Sea coast through long-range drone warfare.

2. Conceptualizing Red Sea Geopolitics

Red Sea geopolitics refers to the competition and cooperation generated by the strategic location, maritime connectivity, resources, ports and security relationships surrounding the Red Sea. The concept is broader than naval competition. It encompasses access to maritime corridors, port infrastructure, commercial routes, food security, energy flows, military logistics, migration, political influence and the security consequences of conflicts on both shores.

The Red Sea is particularly important because it connects the Suez Canal with the Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden. The House of Commons Library notes that the attacks on commercial shipping from Yemen have reinforced the perception of the Red Sea as a major geostrategic space (Brooke-Holland, 2024). By September 2026, renewed instability around the Bab el-Mandeb had again prompted international concern about maritime navigation, illustrating that Red Sea security cannot be separated from conflicts in Yemen and the wider Middle East (Reuters, 2026a). The geopolitical importance of the Red Sea has also encouraged the proliferation of foreign military facilities and naval activity. The 2024 review by Liyew identifies competition involving international, regional and local actors over ports and military bases and argues that these rivalries have implications for the security trajectory of the Horn of Africa. The proliferation of external actors means that states along the Red Sea increasingly operate within an environment of external penetration, in which local security calculations are affected by the presence and competition of outside powers. Sudan's importance within this system derives from its western coastline and from its position between several overlapping geopolitical spaces. Its northern relationship with Egypt connects Red Sea security to Nile politics; its eastern position connects it to Eritrea and Ethiopia; its southern and western borders connect it to South Sudan, Chad and Libya; and its maritime position connects it to Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Sudan is therefore a geographical hinge between several security environments rather than a peripheral Red Sea state. Ports are central to this geopolitical structure because they transform geography into strategic capability. A port can support trade, humanitarian operations, military logistics, energy infrastructure and diplomatic influence. Consequently, competition over ports can become competition over regional order. The political geography literature shows that infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn of Africa are mutually constitutive, particularly around Red Sea ports and corridors (Terrefe & Verhoeven, 2024).

3. Regional Security Complex Theory and Sudan

Regional Security Complex Theory, developed principally by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, provides the principal theoretical framework for this study. RSCT argues that security interactions tend to cluster regionally because threats travel more easily over short distances and because states' security concerns are often mutually dependent. A regional security complex is therefore a set of states whose security processes are so interconnected that their national security cannot be reasonably analysed separately (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The theory is particularly appropriate for the Red Sea–Horn of Africa environment because security interactions cross the conventional boundary between Africa and the Middle East. Gebru (2023) argues that the Middle East and Horn of Africa constitute distinct but interdependent regional security complexes whose interaction has intensified through Gulf and Middle Eastern involvement. The study found that external involvement driven by rivalry and national-security interests has affected conflict dynamics in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. This provides a theoretical basis for treating Sudan’s war as a component of wider regional security interdependence. RSCT also directs attention to the distinction between regional security dynamics and external penetration. Buzan and Wæver (2003) identify external penetration as a process through which actors outside a region become involved in regional security relationships. The Red Sea is characterised by precisely this pattern because Gulf states, Iran, Türkiye, Russia, the United States, China and European powers have interests or security activities in the region. Applied to Sudan, the theory generates four expectations. First, changes in Sudan’s security environment should produce consequences for neighbouring states and maritime actors. Second, external involvement should be mediated through existing regional relationships rather than operating independently of them. Third, strategic competition over Sudan’s ports should reflect wider regional security calculations. Fourth, the war should intensify the interconnectedness of Sudan’s security with the security of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. The study therefore conceptualises Sudan as a nodal state within a regional security complex. The term ‘nodal’ does not imply regional dominance. It means that developments in Sudan have multiple outward security linkages and that external actors can use Sudanese territory, ports and political relationships to pursue broader regional interests.

RSCT concept	Application to Sudan	Observable indicator
Security interdependence	Sudan’s war affects neighbouring and maritime states	Refugees, borders, trade, maritime security
External penetration	Non-Horn powers shape regional security dynamics	Gulf, Iranian, Russian, Turkish, US and Chinese engagement
Regional subsystem	Sudan interacts with Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Yemen and Gulf states	Diplomatic and security linkages
Securitisation	Domestic instability becomes framed as regional threat	Border, migration, terrorism and maritime-security narratives
Regional order	Patterns of alignment and competition structure interactions	Port access, mediation, military cooperation, investment

4. Sudan’s Strategic Importance in the Red Sea

Sudan’s Red Sea coastline is strategically important because it combines geographic access with political vulnerability. Unlike the small coastal states of the Red Sea, Sudan possesses substantial territory extending deep into the African interior. Its ports can therefore connect maritime routes with inland markets and resource corridors. This makes coastal access valuable not only for naval purposes but also for logistics, food security, commercial trade and political influence. Port Sudan became particularly important after the outbreak of war because the SAF-controlled

government relocated major state functions there. This increased the strategic value of the city and made its security central to the survival of the state authorities controlling the Red Sea coast. The May 2025 drone attacks on Port Sudan demonstrated the changing geography of the conflict, as the RSF was able to project violence far from its main western and central theatres (Al Jazeera, 2025). The Russian naval-base question illustrates the strategic significance of Sudan's coast. In February 2025, Sudan's foreign minister stated that an agreement allowing Russia to establish a naval facility remained active pending ratification. By December 2025, however, Sudanese sources reported that the project had been frozen. The changing status of the proposal illustrates how port politics is conditioned by domestic conflict, regional diplomacy and competing external interests rather than being a straightforward bilateral bargain (Reuters, 2025; Sudan Tribune, 2025). Gold and other resources reinforce the importance of Sudan. Chatham House has shown that gold is deeply connected to the conflict economy and to regional networks involving Sudanese armed actors and external commercial interests (Chatham House, 2025). The resource dimension means that Red Sea geopolitics cannot be separated from inland political economy: access to ports is valuable partly because ports connect resources to international markets. The strategic significance of Sudan should therefore be understood through a corridor perspective. Coastal infrastructure, inland resource zones, borders, commercial networks and political authority are connected. Control over a port does not automatically produce regional influence, but control combined with political alliances and economic networks can create long-term strategic leverage.

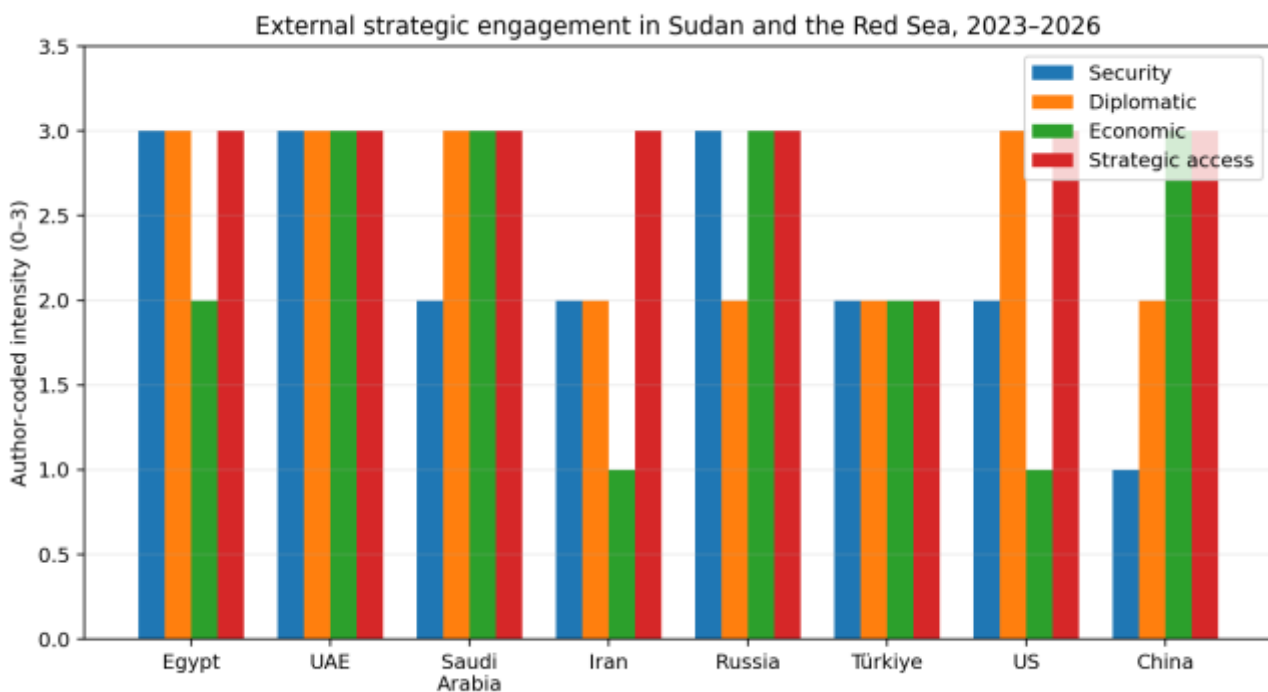


Figure 1. External strategic engagement in Sudan and the Red Sea, 2023–2026. Source: Author's qualitative coding of the documentary evidence. The scores indicate salience, not quantities of military or financial assistance.

5. The Sudanese Civil War and External Power Projection

The war has transformed Sudan from a state seeking external investment and security partnerships into a central arena of regional competition. The shift is visible in the intensity of

diplomatic engagement, the importance of Port Sudan, the strategic relevance of external support to the belligerents and the increasing concern that the conflict could produce wider regional spillovers. Egypt has maintained a close security relationship with the SAF, reflecting its concerns about border stability, state fragmentation and the wider Nile environment. From an RSCT perspective, Egypt's engagement illustrates security interdependence: developments in Sudan are interpreted through their potential consequences for Egypt's national security.

The UAE represents a different pattern of regional penetration. Its Sudan-related interests encompass gold, agriculture, logistics, food security and Red Sea influence. Chatham House characterises Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia as major regional actors whose competition for resources and influence is central to understanding Sudan's conflict (Chatham House, 2025). The UAE has denied allegations that it supplies the RSF, while external sanctions and policy assessments have identified UAE-linked financial and commercial networks associated with the RSF. The analytical point is that the UAE's relationship with Sudan is structurally significant even where individual allegations remain contested. Saudi Arabia occupies a distinctive position because it combines strategic interests with mediation. Riyadh has sought to protect Red Sea stability while participating in the Jeddah mediation process. Its role demonstrates that regional powers can simultaneously pursue national interests and conflict-management objectives. This is not contradictory within RSCT because states can seek to reduce insecurity while preserving influence over the regional security environment. Iran's renewed relationship with the SAF demonstrates the expansion of Red Sea competition into the military-technology domain. The reported provision of drones and military cooperation increased the technological dimension of the conflict. Russia's interests in naval access and resources likewise demonstrate the role of extra-regional powers in shaping the regional security complex. Türkiye has maintained economic and diplomatic relationships with Sudan, while the United States has used sanctions, diplomacy and humanitarian instruments to influence the conflict. The consequence is not a single bloc system. Instead, Sudan has become a site of overlapping alignments in which regional powers cooperate in some areas while competing in others. Chatham House's analysis captures this complexity by noting that external actors can be allies and adversaries depending on the issue (Chatham House, 2025). This flexibility is a defining feature of the emerging Red Sea order.

6. Ports, Maritime Access and Military Presence

Ports are central to the transformation of the Red Sea security order because they combine physical infrastructure with political sovereignty. Sudan's Port Sudan has humanitarian, commercial and strategic functions, and the war has elevated its significance because it became the principal maritime gateway for the SAF-aligned authorities. The Russian naval-base debate illustrates how port infrastructure can become a geopolitical bargaining instrument. Moscow's longstanding interest in a facility on the Sudanese coast has been linked to its wider strategic search for maritime access. In February 2025, Sudan's foreign minister confirmed that the agreement remained on the table, while later reports indicated that the project had been frozen. The uncertainty itself demonstrates that regional-order formation is contested rather than predetermined (Reuters, 2025; Sudan Tribune, 2025). Port competition also has a commercial dimension. Gulf states have pursued agricultural, livestock, mineral and logistics interests in Sudan and across the Red Sea. Such investments can create influence without requiring permanent military presence. The resulting order therefore combines military and geo-economic competition. The 2025 attacks on Port Sudan provide a further insight. When long-range drone

strikes reached the city, the Red Sea coast became directly exposed to the military logic of the civil war. This reduced the distinction between Sudan's inland conflict and its maritime security environment. The implication for RSCT is significant: the conflict increased the degree of security interdependence between Sudan's domestic war and the wider Red Sea system.

The wider Red Sea also demonstrates why Sudan cannot be treated separately from Yemen. The Bab el-Mandeb connects the western and eastern shores of the region and has become a major security concern due to Houthi attacks on shipping. In September 2026, renewed fighting around the Red Sea prompted renewed calls for increased naval protection of maritime navigation (Reuters, 2026a). Sudan's instability therefore exists within a maritime environment already exposed to conflict-driven insecurity.

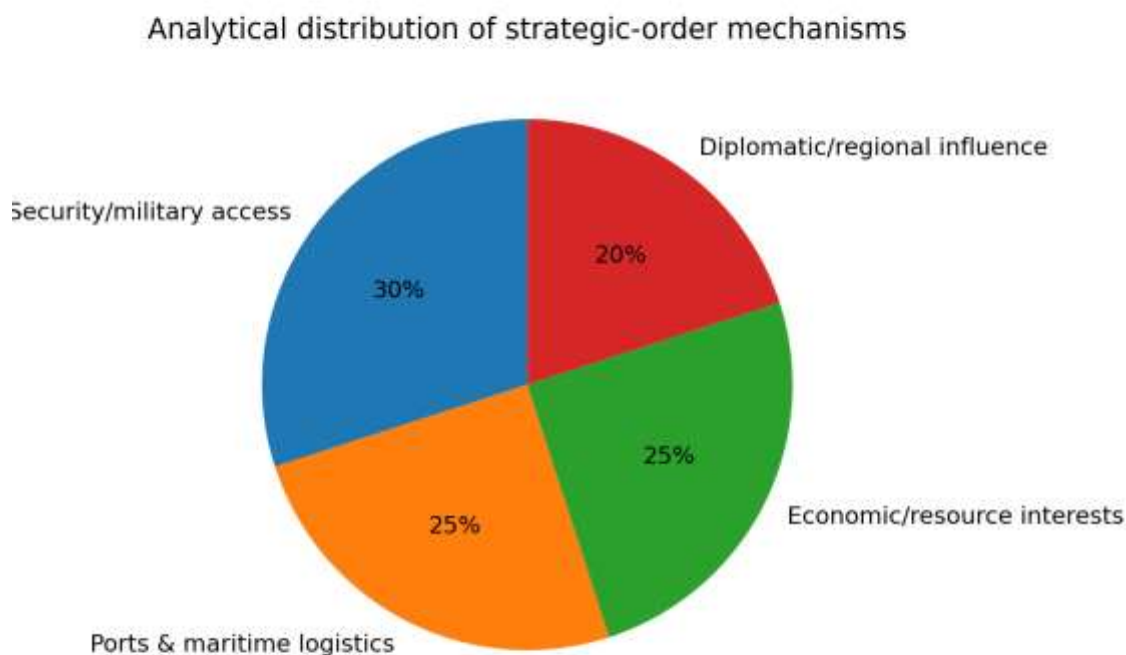


Figure 2. Author-generated analytical distribution of mechanisms shaping Red Sea regional order. Source: documentary synthesis; percentages are conceptual weights rather than statistical estimates.

7. Egypt, Gulf States, Iran and Russia: Competing Regional Interests

Actor	Red Sea/Sudan interest	Regional-order effect	Primary instrument
Egypt	Border stability, Nile politics, state-centric Sudan	Reinforces state-security orientation	Security/diplomacy
UAE	Gold, agriculture, logistics, Gulf influence	Strengthens multi-alignment and competition	Economic/diplomatic networks
Saudi Arabia	Red Sea security, investment, mediation	Supports managed regional stability	Diplomacy/mediation
Iran	Regional reach and Red Sea access	Adds strategic competition and military technology	Security cooperation
Russia	Naval access, resources, geopolitical influence	Adds extra-regional strategic penetration	Military/economic diplomacy
Türkiye	Trade, diplomacy, Red Sea/Horn influence	Expands middle-power multi-alignment	Commercial/diplomatic
United States	Maritime security, regional stability, transition	Uses economic and diplomatic pressure	Sanctions/diplomacy
China	Trade, infrastructure, non-interference, stability	Reinforces geo-economic dimension	Investment/diplomacy

The table demonstrates that no single external actor possesses a comprehensive strategy capable of defining the Red Sea order. Instead, different actors contribute different forms of influence. Egypt contributes geographic and security weight; Gulf states contribute finance and economic connectivity; Iran contributes strategic competition; Russia contributes military and geopolitical penetration; Türkiye contributes middle-power diplomacy and commercial relations; and the United States contributes diplomatic, financial and security leverage. China's role is more strongly associated with trade, infrastructure and stability than direct military involvement. This pattern corresponds to a multipolar rather than bipolar regional order. Multipolarity does not necessarily imply equality among actors. Rather, it means that several actors possess sufficient resources to shape outcomes and that their interests overlap without forming a single stable hierarchy. The competition also has an important African dimension. The Red Sea order is not simply imposed by external powers because Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and other regional states retain agency. Yet their choices are constrained by the resources and strategic preferences of external actors. This combination of agency and constraint is central to understanding the current regional order.

8. Sudan and the Transformation of the Red Sea Security Order

The Sudan war has transformed the Red Sea security order primarily by intensifying existing security interdependence rather than by replacing one regional hegemon with another. The war

has connected domestic political violence to maritime security, migration, food security, resource flows, border politics and foreign military access.

First, the war has increased the securitisation of Sudan's coastline. Port Sudan is no longer only an economic gateway; it is a strategic wartime centre. The 2025 drone attacks demonstrated that the coast is vulnerable to the military dynamics of the interior conflict. This development increases the incentive for external actors to monitor, protect or influence Sudanese maritime infrastructure. Second, the war has increased external penetration. RSCT expects regional systems to be shaped by interactions among local states and external powers. Sudan illustrates this strongly because Gulf states, Iran, Russia, Türkiye, the United States and China all possess interests that intersect with the conflict and its consequences. The 2024 literature on Red Sea military and port competition similarly identifies a dense pattern of external involvement (Liyew, 2024). Third, the war has strengthened the importance of flexible regional alignment. Sudanese actors have maintained multiple external relationships, while regional powers have avoided permanently committing themselves to a single regional coalition. This produces what can be described as strategic multi-alignment: actors seek several relationships simultaneously to maximise autonomy and bargaining power. Fourth, the war has strengthened the geo-economic dimension of regional security. Gold, agricultural land, livestock, ports and logistics are not peripheral to security. They provide resources that can finance armed mobilisation and create long-term external interests. Chatham House's research on gold demonstrates how commodity networks can connect conflict, finance and regional competition (Chatham House, 2025).

Fifth, the war has increased the importance of regional institutions while simultaneously exposing their limitations. The African Union, IGAD, Arab League, United Nations and regional mediation initiatives have all attempted to influence the conflict. Yet the persistence of competing external interests complicates collective action. A 2025 regional-security assessment noted that the Horn remains characterised by weak institutional integration and significant external penetration (Davies & Matheri, 2025). The transformation should therefore be understood as a shift from a relatively segmented regional security environment toward greater interconnection. Sudan's war has not created every source of Red Sea competition; rather, it has brought several existing rivalries into a single conflict ecosystem.

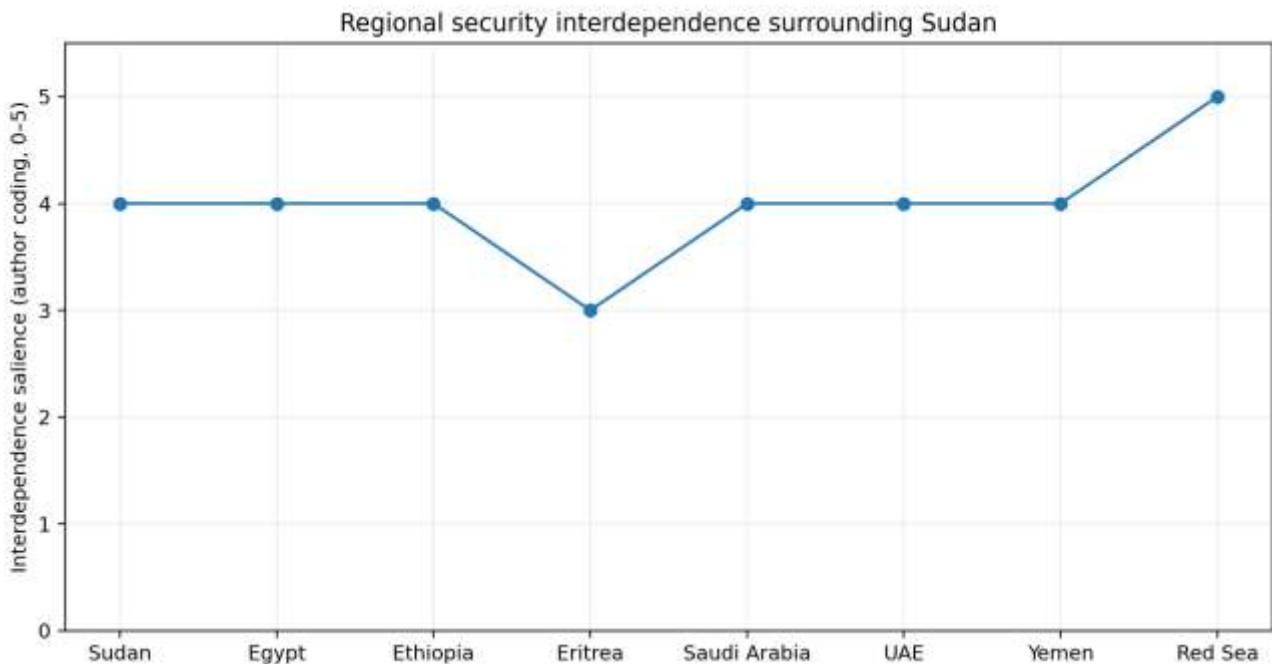


Figure 3. Regional security interdependence surrounding Sudan. Source: Author's qualitative coding based on the intensity and number of documented security linkages; scores are analytical, not statistical.

9. Implications for the Horn of Africa and Regional Peace

The first implication is that Sudan's war increases the likelihood that instability will travel across borders. Refugee movements, arms trafficking, commodity smuggling and armed-group mobility affect neighbouring states. The Horn's existing political tensions therefore interact with Sudan's conflict rather than remaining separate from it. The second implication concerns Egypt–Ethiopia relations. Sudan's location between the two states gives the conflict relevance to Nile politics and the wider balance of influence in Northeast Africa. Instability in Sudan can complicate regional cooperation over water, borders and infrastructure. The regional security complex therefore links apparently separate disputes. The third implication concerns Eritrea and the eastern Sudan borderlands. The eastern corridor connects Sudan to Eritrea and Ethiopia and has strategic relevance for Red Sea access. Prolonged instability may increase incentives for neighbouring states to cultivate relationships with Sudanese political and security actors, potentially deepening external penetration. The fourth implication concerns the Gulf–Horn relationship. Gebru (2023) argues that Middle Eastern and Gulf involvement has become an important source of instability and competition in the Horn. Sudan demonstrates how Gulf competition can interact with African domestic conflict. The Red Sea therefore functions as a transregional security complex in which Africa and the Middle East are deeply interconnected. The fifth implication concerns maritime security. Sudan's war coincides with insecurity around Yemen and the Bab el-Mandeb. A fragmented or unstable Sudan could become another source of insecurity along the western Red Sea coast, particularly if armed groups acquire greater long-range capabilities or if port infrastructure becomes contested. The sixth implication concerns regional governance. If external powers continue to pursue separate bilateral relationships with Sudanese actors, regional institutions may struggle to coordinate a common security framework.

A more durable order requires mechanisms that include Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Yemen-related stakeholders and relevant international powers.

The seventh implication concerns sovereignty. Infrastructure projects and military access arrangements can generate economic benefits, but they may also become instruments of geopolitical competition. The literature on Horn infrastructure and sovereignty suggests that corridors and ports can reshape political authority itself (Terrefe & Verhoeven, 2024). Sudan therefore requires a framework in which external investment is transparent and aligned with sovereign national and regional priorities.

10. Discussion

The findings broadly support RSCT's central claim that security is regionally interconnected, but they also suggest an important refinement. In the Red Sea–Horn of Africa environment, regional security cannot be confined to the geographic boundaries of a single African region. Gulf states, Iran and extra-regional powers are deeply involved, creating a transregional complex in which security dynamics cross the Africa–Middle East boundary. The Sudan case also demonstrates that regional-order change does not require a dramatic redistribution of military capabilities. Salim's 2025 analysis is important because it finds that the Sudan war had not fundamentally reshaped the Red Sea balance of power. This study does not reject that finding; instead, it distinguishes balance-of-power change from regional-order transformation. The order can change through greater interdependence, new forms of external penetration, altered port politics and shifting alignments even when no single actor becomes dominant. The second theoretical implication is that infrastructure should be incorporated more explicitly into regional-security analysis. Ports are simultaneously economic assets, sovereignty instruments, military logistics nodes and diplomatic bargaining tools. Sudan's Port Sudan illustrates this intersection. The politics surrounding Russian naval access, Gulf investment and wartime state relocation demonstrate that infrastructure can mediate security relationships. The third implication is that civil war can act as a catalyst for regional restructuring. Domestic conflict creates opportunities for external actors to expand relationships, but it also creates risks that encourage neighbouring states to intervene or mediate. The resulting feedback loop means that regional actors influence the war while the war simultaneously changes their regional strategies. The final implication is that the Red Sea order is likely to remain characterised by competitive pluralism. No single actor appears capable of monopolising Sudan's coastline or the wider Red Sea security environment. The region is therefore likely to remain shaped by overlapping partnerships, commercial investments, diplomatic coalitions and security arrangements.

11. Conclusion

This study examined what Sudan's civil war reveals about the changing geopolitical balance and regional order of the Red Sea–Horn of Africa system. The analysis demonstrated that Sudan's strategic importance is derived from the intersection of coastline, ports, resource corridors, Nile politics, border security and wider regional competition. The war has intensified security interdependence across Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Russia, Türkiye and Yemen. It has also increased the importance of Port Sudan and transformed the coastline into a more directly securitised space. The 2025 attacks on Port Sudan demonstrated that the Red Sea coast could no longer be treated as detached from the inland war.

The evidence does not support the conclusion that the Sudan war has produced a new Red Sea hegemon. Instead, it has reinforced a more fragmented and competitive regional order. Multiple

states pursue overlapping strategic interests, while Sudanese actors retain agency in negotiating relationships with them. This produces a pattern of multi-alignment and external penetration rather than a stable bloc structure. Regional Security Complex Theory provides a strong explanation of this transformation because it captures the interconnected nature of security relationships across the Africa–Middle East divide. Sudan’s conflict demonstrates that regional security is produced through interaction: domestic instability generates regional effects, while external regional competition feeds back into domestic conflict. The wider implication is that Sudan’s peace and the Red Sea’s security cannot be addressed through separate policy frameworks. A sustainable settlement requires coordination among Sudanese political actors, neighbouring states, Gulf powers, African regional organisations and relevant international actors. The future regional order will depend not only on military balance but also on how ports, infrastructure, resources, maritime security and sovereignty are governed. Sudan’s war therefore represents more than a national tragedy or a conventional civil war. It is a revealing case of how domestic conflict can become embedded within a changing regional system. The Red Sea is becoming an increasingly interconnected theatre in which African and Middle Eastern security processes converge. Sudan’s position at the centre of that convergence makes the trajectory of its war consequential for the wider regional order.

12. Policy Recommendations

- 1.** A Red Sea–Horn of Africa security dialogue should be institutionalised around the principle that Sudan’s territorial integrity and sovereignty are regional security interests. The dialogue should bring together Sudanese representatives, the African Union, IGAD, Red Sea littoral states, Gulf states and relevant international actors to address maritime security, borders, humanitarian access and conflict prevention.
- 2.** Port Sudan and other strategic coastal infrastructure should be placed within a transparent regional governance framework. External military-access agreements and major port investments should be subject to clear legal procedures, public disclosure and safeguards against their use to deepen the Sudan conflict.
- 3.** Regional powers should coordinate rather than compete through parallel sponsorship of Sudanese armed actors. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Türkiye and other influential states should use their relationships to support ceasefire diplomacy and civilian political participation rather than reinforce fragmentation.
- 4.** Red Sea maritime security should be linked to inland conflict resolution. The experience of Port Sudan demonstrates that attacks on coastal infrastructure can emerge from an inland civil war. Maritime-security planning should therefore incorporate early-warning mechanisms for conflict spillover from Sudan.
- 5.** Regional economic cooperation should address the conflict economy. Gold, agricultural commodities, livestock, fuel and logistics networks require transparent monitoring because they can connect regional trade to armed mobilisation. Economic governance should be incorporated into peacebuilding rather than treated as a post-conflict issue.
- 6.** Regional organisations should strengthen their capacity to mediate across the Africa–Middle East boundary. The Sudan crisis demonstrates the limitations of fragmented diplomatic initiatives. A coordinated African–Arab–international framework would better reflect the transregional structure of the security complex.

References

- Al Jazeera. (2025, May 13). Drones, gold, and threats: Sudan's war raises regional tensions. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/5/13/drones-gold-and-threats-sudans-war-raises-regional-tension>
- Brooke-Holland, L. (2024). The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10000/>
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). Regions and powers: The structure of international security. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491252>
- Chatham House. (2025a). Gold and the war in Sudan. Royal Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/gold-and-war-sudan>
- Chatham House. (2025b). Gold and the war in Sudan: Conclusion and policy implications. Royal Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/gold-and-war-sudan/conclusion-and-policy-implications>
- Davies, J., & Matheri, F. (2025). *Regional security complexes: Africa 2024–2025*. Centre for International Security.
- Gebbru, T. A. (2023). The impact of the Middle East and Gulf states' involvement on the Horn of Africa's peace and security: Applying regional security complex theory. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 32(2), 181–198. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12301>
- Liyew, E. B. (2024). The new global superpower geo-strategic rivalry in the Red Sea and its implications for peace and security in the Horn of Africa. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 9, 100834. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100834>
- Salim, A. (2025). The Sudan war and its reflections on the Red Sea: Regional instability or search for a new balance of power? *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, 17(1), 131–148. <https://doi.org/10.47932/ortetut.1774033>
- Terrefe, B., & Verhoeven, H. (2024). The road (not) taken: The contingencies of infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn of Africa. *Political Geography*, 110, 103070. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103070>
- Reuters. (2025, February 12). Russian Red Sea base deal still on the table, Sudanese FM says. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-sudan-agree-red-sea-naval-base-sudanese-foreign-minister-says-2025-02-12/>
- Reuters. (2026, September 18). Italy's minister calls for more ships to protect Red Sea navigation. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/italys-minister-calls-more-ships-protect-red-sea-navigation-2026-09-18/>
- Sudan Tribune. (2025, December 6). Sudan freezes plans for Russian naval base on Red Sea. <https://sudantribune.com/article/307846>
- United Nations. (2025). Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan (S/2025/239). United Nations Security Council. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4081224>
- United Nations. (2026, September 16). Press conference ahead of the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly. United Nations. <https://transcripts.un.org/en/asset/k1j/k1jcdjp82o>
- United States Department of the Treasury. (2025, January 7). Treasury sanctions Sudanese paramilitary leader, weapons supplier, and related companies. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2772>