FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 08.05.2023 | Richard Probst & Anna Reuß

Violence knows no borders

The conflict in Sudan is impacting its neighbours. A look at the situation in Egypt and South Sudan

Egypt

Events in Sudan have been a constant topic of conversation in Cairo's coffee houses since the violence erupted there four weeks ago. The images of almost 30 Egyptian soldiers briefly detained in Sudan by Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militias and the death of an Egyptian diplomat in Khartoum caused a stir in Egypt. The detained soldiers were at the Merowe air base in northern Khartoum, run by Sudanese armed forces – officially for no more than an agreed training mission. However, the RSF and international observers assessed their presence as long-term support for the Sudanese army led by General Burhan. For many Egyptians, these humiliating images produced a rally 'round the flag effect. In a tragic way, they pointed to not only the geographical proximity but also the bond between the two neighbours.

In addition to the over 1,200-kilometre-long border in southern Egypt, the two countries have a multi-layered relationship visible not only in a common colonial past but also in the political developments of the past decade. The outbreak of conflict between the RSF militias and the Sudanese army put an abrupt end to political developments led by the Sudanese military – a scenario with which the Egyptian leadership was comfortable.

With all attention focused on the successful evacuation of international personnel from Sudan, the protection and support of the Sudanese refugees in Egypt

In any case, Egypt has no interest in a destabilisation of Sudan and is calling on all sides for a permanent ceasefire. Political uncertainties on the country's southern border and Sudan sinking into civil war are a worst-case scenario for Egypt. Sudan, which borders the Nile, is not only an important ally for Egypt on the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (*GERD)* project. The Egyptian leadership is betting on the Sudanese military, seen by

and the other neighbouring countries must not be forgotten.

them as the best guarantor of their own interests.

The geopolitical jigsaw puzzle of different supporters for the two sides in the Sudanese conflict has placed Cairo in a diplomatic quandary. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), an important Egyptian ally, also supports the RSF, as does Libyan General Haftar, a close ally of Cairo in the conflict in Libya. Egypt, which is right now in a severe economic and financial crisis, is dependent on investment from the Gulf region and in particular from the UAE. The conflict in Sudan has therefore a domestic political dimension as well. All this makes the conflict difficult for Egypt's diplomacy to navigate. Egypt can play an important and constructive role in the short term, in particular in persuading General Haftar not to deliver weapons from Libya to the crisis region. In the long term, it will be crucial for the region's stability for civil actors to be involved in resolving the conflict in Sudan. This should also be in Egypt's long-term interest as it could avoid the scenario of an ongoing civil war.

The situation on the Sudanese-Egyptian border is very tense at the moment. Thousands of refugees are making the long and costly journey from Khartoum to Cairo. The few border crossings between Egypt and Sudan are the bottlenecks through which thousands of Sudanese refugees squeeze their way. The unresolved border conflict between the two countries in the Halaib Triangle further reduces the number of possible crossing points. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated some 50,000 people to have crossed the border into Egypt in recent weeks. Even before the conflict broke out, around five million Sudanese were living in Egypt, most of them already for tens of years. Of these, just some 60,000 are registered with the UNHCR as refugees. The Sudanese community – especially in Cairo – is therefore an important contact point and is playing a central role in taking in the refugees. In the long term, however, this will not be feasible. The longer the conflict lasts, the more important it will be to stand by Egypt and the UN organisations working in Egypt to support the refugees. With all attention focused on the successful evacuation of international personnel from Sudan, the protection and support of the Sudanese refugees in Egypt and the other neighbouring countries must not be forgotten.

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South Sudan

More than 30,000 people have fled Khartoum and the western Darfur region across the South Sudanese border since fighting broke out. The

vast majority of them are South Sudanese, who, in the past, sought refuge in the north from violence and conflict south of the border. The small border town of Renk, where most of those fleeing Khartoum arrive, is overwhelmed by the sheer amount of people. Humanitarian organisations are trying to get those arriving at the small airport in Paloch to continue their journey to Juba as quickly as possible. But there are not enough flights, so, to prevent a humanitarian crisis in the border area, the government is now considering using barges on the Nile to take the refugees to other parts of South Sudan.

The crisis in Sudan is also endangering the peace process in South Sudan.

The arrival of tens of thousands of refugees is the most visible impact of the war between the two Sudanese generals on the country's southern neighbour. The two Sudans remain deeply interlinked even after South Sudan gained independence in 2011. But what worries the government in Juba most is the risk that Sudan's oil export infrastructure will be deliberately destroyed in the course of the fighting. More than 90 per cent of South Sudan's government revenue is generated from oil production. The 'black gold' reaches the international markets via Sudan. There is no alternative pipeline. Currently, the Sudanese National Army is reportedly controlling the revenues from the pipeline user fees, no doubt to the chagrin of the RSF militia. An attack on the pipeline would have devastating economic consequences for Juba. The responsible ministry is already complaining that the market price for South Sudanese oil has fallen owing to the situation in Sudan, with buyers taking advantage of the instability to drive down prices. The joint interest of the South Sudanese government and the Sudanese army under General Burhan in maintaining oil exports is in turn likely to impact South Sudanese President Salva Kiir's peace efforts. He has invited both parties to the conflict to mediation talks in Juba, so far without success.

South Sudanese activist Edmund Yakani warns that the crisis in Sudan is also endangering the peace process in South Sudan. Sudan is one of the two regional guarantors of the peace agreement that formally ended the civil war in 2018 and the actor with the most powerful leverage over the

peace parties in Juba. There is now a danger that the parties will continue to delay the peace process – also with the attention of the international community and other regional players now focused on Sudan. In addition, the instability in Sudan threatens to flush even more small arms across the border, while the brisk trade in everyday goods between North and South is suffering, further worsening the precarious supply situation.

All parties to the South Sudanese peace treaty, as well as armed groups fighting the transitional government, have links with various civilian and armed players in Sudan. How the conflict ends and who ultimately gains the upper hand will directly impact power dynamics in the political mêlée in Juba and the conflict landscape in the wider country. Should the conflict continue and widen, both sides could also recruit keen-to-fight forces from South Sudan's fragmented conflict landscape, who could later return with more weapons, combat experience and new external political backing.

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