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# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines how the political and security dynamics surrounding South Sudan's civil war underscore the shifting political and security fault lines in the Horn of Africa, their impact on US interests, and their consequences for US efforts to address armed conflict in the broader Red Sea region. This report, supported by the Middle East and Africa Center at the United States Institute of Peace, is part of the Institute's ongoing effort to understand and explain the conflict trends in the region.

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*Payton Knopf*

## South Sudan's Civil War and Conflict Dynamics in the Red Sea

### Summary

- The regional political and security dynamics that surround South Sudan's ongoing civil war and its dissolution as a state have underscored the shifting political and security fault lines in the Horn of Africa, their overlooked impact on US interests, and their consequences for US efforts to address armed conflict in the broader Red Sea region.
- The competition for influence among the states of the Horn of Africa; the contest over the use of the Nile among Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia; and the implications for the Horn of Africa of the rift between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt on the one hand and Qatar and Turkey on the other all exacerbate the armed conflicts afflicting the region, including South Sudan's.
- As the United States' role as the dominant external actor in the Horn of Africa is increasingly challenged, the jostling for influence among other states has led to the militarization of the Red Sea region and has further fractured an already fragmented political and security landscape.
- Despite the nascent but historic rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, ending South Sudan's civil war and mitigating the region's other interstate hostilities and intrastate conflicts will require the United States to break out of the geographic and thematic silos that currently constrain its strategic vision and action, to recognize how its influence is best applied at the regional level, and to reinvigorate its diplomatic efforts in the region.

### Introduction

Despite two peace agreements brokered within the framework of the East Africa regional bloc, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), South Sudan's civil war has persisted. The result is now an unparalleled humanitarian and security crisis on the African

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continent: the largest exodus of refugees since the Rwandan genocide, with over a third of the population displaced and two-thirds of the population severely food insecure.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the human toll on South Sudan's long-suffering citizens, the country's unraveling has underscored the shifting fault lines in the Horn of Africa; the "negative synergy" of conflicts generating or intensifying other conflicts; the implications for US interests in a fast-evolving global security environment; and the consequences of the United States' withdrawn approach to the region, which preceded the Trump administration but has accelerated under its watch.<sup>2</sup> The competition among the Horn's states for influence; the perceived zero-sum contest over the use of the Nile among Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia; and the impact on the Horn of the rift between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt on the one hand and Qatar and Turkey on the other all exacerbate the armed conflicts afflicting the region, including in South Sudan.

## South Sudan as Regional Pawn

Competition between Sudan and Uganda over the disposition of South Sudan long predated the country's independence in 2011, manifesting primarily in their support for armed proxies. This competition deepened as the relationship between Sudan and the regime of South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, worsened as a result not only of historic tensions but of ongoing disputes over the shared border, support for armed groups, and the distribution of oil revenues. Kiir has also become increasingly reliant on Ugandan patronage to remain in power and to prosecute the civil war. The Ugandan People's Defense Forces, with tacit US support, rescued Kiir's regime from an opposition attack on Juba at the outset of the civil war in 2013, and Uganda remains the main transit point and facilitator for arms and ammunition to the regime. By consistently blocking censure of Kiir's regime, Uganda also functioned as South Sudan's principal diplomatic supporter within IGAD.

As IGAD's efforts to rescue the 2015 agreement stalled in June 2018, the IGAD heads of state delegated Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir to convene the next round of talks in Sudan. Within days of these talks getting underway, the warring parties signed an accord on security arrangements, reportedly after considerable pressure was brought to bear on Kiir by both Uganda and Sudan and a number of opposition leaders were coerced and threatened by the Sudanese security services. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni flew to Khartoum to endorse the agreement. A number of South Sudanese and international observers immediately criticized the accord as an attempt by Sudan and Uganda to seize and divide South Sudan's oil revenue, providing an equilibrium between Khartoum and Kampala's competing interests at the expense of South Sudan's sovereignty—*de facto* if not *de jure*. This accord was followed by subsequent deals on power-sharing and governance that the United States and its European partners characterized as "not realistic or sustainable," and, ultimately, the signing on September 12, 2018, of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, which received tepid acknowledgement from the United States and Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, Ethiopia and Uganda have long competed for regional hegemony. The death in 2012 of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi left a leadership vacuum in the region that, combined with more recent domestic unrest and political instability in Ethiopia, led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018 and the selection by the ruling party of Abiy Ahmed Ali as his successor. These developments had fueled Museveni's ambitions to displace Ethiopia as the regional hegemon. Uganda's penchant for unilateral action on South Sudan is illustrated not just in the deployment of the Ugandan People's Defense Forces in 2014 and 2015, but by diplomatic initiatives to obstruct or act outside of the then Ethiopian-led IGAD mediation process. Although it is too soon to predict

**Map 1. The Greater Red Sea Region**



Adapted from artwork by Cartarium and taras79/iStock

the extent to which Abiy's energetic diplomacy during his first few months in office will reorder the region's political landscape, including the nascent but historic rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Museveni's aspirations are unlikely to diminish.<sup>4</sup>

South Sudan is also front and center in the contest between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Nile basin. Ethiopia could begin filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) at any time (see map 1).<sup>5</sup> A core narrative of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government, however, is that Ethiopia exploited Egypt's weakness during Mohammed Morsi's presidency (2012–13) to secure the acquiescence of the region's other states to the GERD project, isolate Egypt, and violate long-standing agreements on the use of the Nile's waters that date to British colonial rule.

More than fifteen rounds of regional talks failed to resolve the impasse, including an April 2018 trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers, water ministers, and intelligence chiefs of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. After that meeting, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry declared that "Egypt will not accept the status quo...and continues to defend the interests of its people regarding the Nile by several means."<sup>6</sup> In June 2018, however, Abiy's first visit to Cairo as prime minister culminated in a joint announcement with Sisi of a new push for an agreement that will accommodate each country's interests, including the establishment of an investment fund between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan.<sup>7</sup>

Sisi has been reasserting Cairo's influence in sub-Saharan Africa since he took power, not only to increase his leverage vis-à-vis Addis Ababa but to reestablish Egyptian prestige on the continent following the year-long suspension of its membership in the African Union (AU) after Sisi deposed former president Morsi in 2013.<sup>8</sup> In a remarkable comeback, Sisi is slated to assume the chairmanship of the African Union in 2019.

As the only upstream head of state not to have sided with Ethiopia on the dispute, Kiir has exploited these Egyptian-Ethiopian dynamics by playing his advantage with Cairo.

In exchange for Juba's support of its position, Egypt consistently used its seat on the UN Security Council (from 2015 to 2017) and the AU Peace and Security Council to deflect pressure from Ethiopia and others to accept a negotiated settlement to the civil war. Egypt has also facilitated South Sudan's request to join the Arab League and provided military support—including arms, ammunition, and training—to Kiir's forces.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Cairo and Juba have discussed reviving the long-dormant project to develop the Jonglei Canal in South Sudan in order to compensate for Egypt's potential loss of water from the GERD, though such a significant infrastructure project would require third-party financing and would face a number of other hurdles, including ongoing insecurity in Jonglei.

Sudan and Ethiopia have forged an increasingly close political and security partnership rooted in a shared position on the GERD and the use of the Nile, among other issues. Both countries heralded the three-day visit of Ethiopia's then prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn to Khartoum in August 2017 as a watershed in their improving bilateral relationship. By contrast, Sudan and Egypt have been at loggerheads over a sensitive border dispute as well as the political future of Libya. In a steep escalation of rhetoric, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir also publicly criticized Egypt's provision of weapons to Kiir's regime and to Darfuri opposition groups that have launched attacks on Sudan from inside Libya and South Sudan.<sup>10</sup> In December 2017, allegations that Egypt had deployed military advisors to Asmara and was conspiring with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, possibly to overthrow Bashir, precipitated a regional crisis that included the withdrawal of Sudan's ambassador from Cairo and the massing of Sudanese militia on its border with Eritrea. Although the crisis was defused through a series of trilateral discussions on the margins of the AU summit in January 2018 and subsequent diplomatic efforts, including the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement, the Sudanese-Ethiopian relationship remains a pivotal axis in the region.

Egyptian-Sudanese tensions also seemed to ease somewhat in mid-2018 in the context of the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Sisi visited Khartoum in July, at which time he and Bashir announced a new determination to overcome their differences, and Sisi endorsed Khartoum's "vision" for ending South Sudan's civil war.<sup>11</sup>

## The Red Sea "Arena"

Effective US diplomacy to shepherd an end to South Sudan's civil war must account for the political and security dynamics in the broader Red Sea region—encompassing not just the Horn of Africa but the Gulf states across the Red Sea—which have evolved significantly since Washington played an instrumental role in brokering the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended Sudan's civil war in 2005.<sup>12</sup>

In 2002, Ethiopia's then prime minister Meles Zenawi presciently wrote of a "nightmare scenario" for the Horn of Africa involving an unstable South Sudan and Egyptian-Ethiopian competition.<sup>13</sup> Yet the current geopolitical landscape is even more complicated—and potentially lethal—than he predicted. The distinction between the political and security dynamics of the Horn of Africa and the political and security dynamics of the greater Red Sea region—never as strong as often supposed by outside observers due to long-standing cultural, historical, and trade ties—has faded substantially in recent years due to the increasing political, economic, and military commitments in the Horn by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on one side and by Turkey and Qatar on the other.

In the last five years, these countries have established, or are in the process of constructing, a dozen ports and bases along the western Red Sea coast, from Sudan in the north to Somalia in the south. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, have provided significant financial incentives to Eritrea in exchange for using the port of Assab as a base from which

to prosecute the war in Yemen. Sudan has also received Saudi and UAE inducements in exchange for its shift away from Iran and, subsequently, for its commitment of ground troops in Yemen.<sup>14</sup> In late 2017, Turkey signed a long-term lease on Sudan's Suakin Island to operate a naval dock there, and Qatar reportedly signed a \$4 billion agreement with Sudan in March 2018 to develop and operate Suakin's port.<sup>15</sup>

Qatar has in fact invested substantial political and financial capital in Sudan over the last decade, including direct mediation in the Darfur conflict, and both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have purchased enormous tracts of agricultural land in Sudan and Ethiopia as part of their long-term food-security strategies. A recent study published by the Clingendael Institute estimated that, between 2000 and 2017, the Gulf's investment in the Horn totaled \$13 billion, with an additional \$6.6 billion provided as official development assistance.<sup>16</sup> Egypt, Sudan, Qatar, and the UAE are also deeply engaged in Libya—albeit on different sides.<sup>17</sup>

The Gulf states are also competing for influence in Somalia. The Emirati-owned DP World now operates ports in the semiautonomous areas of Somaliland and Puntland as well as in Baarawe and Kismaayo. In addition, the UAE has several military facilities along the Somali coast. Meanwhile, Turkey is expanding its military base in Mogadishu. Both Qatar and Turkey are backing the federal government of Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed even as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are providing direct support to Somalia's regional governments.<sup>18</sup>

Amid this complexity, the failure of US policy to delineate and prioritize its interests in the broader Red Sea arena and to respond to the various interstate tensions unfolding there has eroded its leverage and ability to contribute meaningfully to conflict resolution in South Sudan and elsewhere.

Despite the nearly \$5 billion invested each year by the United States in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, development programs, and security assistance in the Horn of Africa—in addition to the cost of covert and overt military operations in Somalia and elsewhere—the absence of a connection to a clear political strategy has made the region more susceptible to competition for influence by other external actors, including China, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. While none of these actors are capable of becoming the dominant external power, their jostling for influence is further fracturing an already fragmented political and security landscape across a conflict-prone region of weak, ineffective states whose population is projected to more than double by 2050.

Given that the basic framework for US policy in the Horn of Africa, including the delineation of partners and adversaries, was established in the 1990s and has remained largely unchanged in the intervening decades, this strategic incoherence should not be surprising. There have been attempts to refresh US policy on individual issues, such as the Obama administration's late-stage normalization strategy toward Sudan and the Trump administration's decision to continue that effort (which has included the easing of sanctions), or the more recent explorations of improved relations with Eritrea. But these attempts have lacked a well-considered end game, have been disconnected from any broader regional strategy, and have failed to fully take into account fundamental power shifts in the region and their impact on US interests, including the increasing involvement of the Gulf states, Turkey, and China.

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## **Rebooting US Policy to Support Conflict Resolution and Regional Stability**

These intersecting trend lines portend more conflict in the Red Sea region just as US strategic incoherence is hamstringing its ability to respond to regional shocks, such as the sinkhole created by South Sudan's civil war.

Throughout the IGAD-led political process, it became clear that the United States was drifting away from its long-standing role as the dominant external actor in the Horn of Africa. Between 2001 and 2011, the United States had been instrumental in the negotiations that led, in 2005, to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and in seeing through its implementation, which culminated in the referendum on South Sudan's independence. Since then, however, US diplomatic efforts in Sudan and South Sudan have not benefited from a clearly defined strategic objective within a broader regional vision, relegating US policy since the outbreak of war in South Sudan to a combination of intermittent sanctions designations and funding for the multibillion-dollar humanitarian response.<sup>19</sup> The United States consistently failed over this time to seize the opportunity to define the basic outlines of a settlement in South Sudan that account for the evolving geopolitical landscape and accommodate the legitimate political and security interests of its neighbors while also ensuring the country's sovereignty and the security of South Sudan's citizens. Instead, it haplessly backed mediation efforts riven by regional discord and vulnerable to manipulation by the warring parties and other external actors.

The case of US policy toward Uganda illustrates the broader point. Uganda has been one of the largest recipients of US security assistance in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade—primarily because of Ugandan engagement in Somalia—and yet it is the main facilitator for arms and ammunition to Kiir's regime in Juba, which continues to perpetrate mass atrocities, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, against its own people. The massive humanitarian response precipitated by these actions, including to provide assistance to the hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese refugees who have fled to Uganda as a result of the war, costs the United States approximately a billion dollars a year, which is in addition to its nearly \$250 million annual contribution to the UN peacekeeping mission as well as other funding aimed at mitigating the conflict.

Ending South Sudan's civil war and addressing the region's other interstate hostilities and intrastate conflicts will require that the United States address these and other, similar policy contradictions—which are rife in the Red Sea region—by restructuring its engagement in three ways.

***Instead of developing individual policies focused on individual states and conflicts, the United States must conceptualize and execute an overarching regional strategy.***

**First, the United States must break out of the geographic silos that currently constrain its strategic vision.** Instead of developing individual policies focused on individual states and conflicts, the United States must conceptualize and execute an overarching regional strategy that accounts for the overlapping political and security dynamics between and within the region's states and does not fall victim to an anachronistic distinction between the politics of the Horn of Africa and those of the greater Red Sea region. Critical to this effort will be institutional reforms that facilitate such an approach rather than reinforce a false logic that each state—and each state's conflicts—can be dealt with in isolation.

These reforms should include the designation of a single senior US official with primary responsibility for the Red Sea Region. This official need not be a special envoy; Robert Zoellick led the US diplomatic effort on Sudan and South Sudan while serving as President George W. Bush's deputy secretary of state. Nor must this official necessarily serve at the State Department; Robert Blackwill served as Bush's envoy for Iraq out of the National Security Council. However, he or she must have the stature to work directly with the region's heads of state, who are constantly horse-trading with each other over different priorities on different issues at different moments.

For example, even with a more comprehensive regional perspective, the United States will have competing interests to balance, particularly with regard to the region's many ongoing conflicts. US relations with Egypt are a prime example. Even as Egypt may play a destabilizing role in South Sudan, Washington's interests with respect to Cairo are linked to Israel, Libya, Iran, counterterrorism, and other issues. The United States will need to discourage

adventurism and induce more cooperative policies from the region's powers. Only a US official with a regional mandate will be in a position to chart a course through these volatile currents and navigate the broader Red Sea political and security environment.

Similarly, while inducing a shift in Kampala's support for Juba will be integral to ending the war in South Sudan, there is no evidence to suggest that the United States must acquiesce to Ugandan whims in South Sudan in exchange for its ongoing cooperation in Somalia; agile diplomacy can achieve US objectives in both countries. To contribute to and sustain conflict resolution efforts in South Sudan and elsewhere, it will be equally important to untangle the issues around the Nile basin, Egyptian-Ethiopian-Sudanese relations, and the influence of the Gulf states. Outreach by Ethiopia's new prime minister to Egypt, Uganda, and Eritrea may alleviate some of the tensions in the region, but persistent tensions among elites and different communities within Ethiopia will not dissipate overnight and will necessitate carefully calibrated US responses to Abiy's initiatives. Elsewhere, the United States should consider how to use its leverage on Khartoum in the context of the second phase of the bilateral normalization process—a degree of leverage unparalleled among external actors given that US support for the debt relief Sudan is desperately seeking is essential to help its cratering economy—to shape the political dispensation for South Sudan as well as to discuss its troop deployments in Yemen and reinforce the UN-led mediation process to defuse that conflict.

**Second, the United States must break out of the thematic silos that perpetuate tactical rather than strategic interventions.** Many of these interventions—whether “retail conflict resolution,” reactive counterterrorism operations, or humanitarian and development responses—are often not well-coordinated across the civilian, intelligence, and defense institutions of the government.<sup>20</sup> As USIP President Nancy Lindborg explained in a July 2017 report for the Brookings Institution, the world community has responded to rising violence with ever larger packages of humanitarian and peacekeeping assistance or military action. “What remains missing,” Lindborg wrote, “is a concerted focus on the underlying dynamics of fragility”—meaning the breakdown of the social contract between people and their governments.<sup>21</sup>

Finding durable solutions to the region's entwined conflicts will require a cooperative political and security framework between the Horn and the states of the broader Red Sea to channel—and in some cases constrain—external actors' political engagement in ways that these social contracts can emerge rather than be undermined.<sup>22</sup> The United States is the only state with the power and influence to conceptualize and garner support for such a regional framework.

**Third, the United States must recognize how its influence is best applied and reclaim its role in asserting and sustaining a regional political and security framework.** The US approach to South Sudan since December 2013 has shown not only that the United States can play a determinative role in defining the “rules of the game” but the consequences for regional peace and security when it fails to do so effectively. Furthermore, the United States is the only external actor with the requisite leverage to induce compliance with the terms of any political settlements among the competing regional states—that is, to *enforce* the rules of the game.

Again, South Sudan provides a cautionary tale. Had the United States decided in the early days of the war that both Salva Kiir and Riek Machar—Kiir's one-time vice president and now leader of the rebel faction opposing the government—were not likely to be part of any viable solution, it could have created the conditions for a serious (and still long overdue) interrogation of whether power-sharing is a realistic mechanism for ending the civil war or if other approaches would have been better suited to South Sudan's unique circumstances.<sup>23</sup> Instead, through a series of unforced errors—including the failure at key

intervals to secure a UN arms embargo or to use US leverage on Uganda, Egypt, and Ukraine to cease arms shipments to Juba; the decision to isolate Machar in 2016; and the support for a transitional government that was never transitional nor a “unity government” in any meaningful sense—the United States emboldened Kiir to pursue military rather than political solutions to the conflict, and narrowed rather than expanded the range of policy options debated in the region.

## Conclusion

The United States remains well positioned to serve as the broker and guarantor of any understandings reached between states or between belligerents in a region rife with competition and distrust. While other external actors can play a positive role in managing some of the region’s conflicts—such as the UAE’s recent efforts to facilitate Ethiopia’s rapprochement with Eritrea—the United States alone has the capacity to sustain stabilizing arrangements over time and guarantee them against co-optation or manipulation by other actors for more transactional purposes.<sup>24</sup>

The US failure to assume this role in South Sudan is one of the principal reasons that a political settlement to the war has proven so elusive. The United States has failed to devise and support a durable political solution that accommodates and balances the region’s various interests in South Sudan, such as those between Sudan and Uganda or among Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, for which it could build outside support (from China, for example) and to which it could then hold each of the regional states accountable. Instead, US diplomacy has foundered on the minutiae of negotiating, implementing, and now “revitalizing” the irreparably flawed 2015 peace agreement. In this vacuum, regional mediation efforts have ultimately served more as a tool for managing—though not meaningfully addressing—the often-competing interests of South Sudan’s neighbors than as a political process to end the war.

The United States must also lead an effort to update the multilateral architecture for the region that is fit for these purposes. A format based on the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus the UN and the European Union, would provide a new center of gravity for external diplomacy toward the Red Sea region, including South Sudan, situated within a diplomatic framework that derives legitimacy from the Security Council. This format would more accurately reflect the power dynamics at play in the Red Sea than some of the current diplomatic groupings. The “Troika” for Sudan and South Sudan, for example, was conceived nearly fifteen years ago, before China became deeply engaged—and influential—in both countries. Nor does it include Russia, which has steadily been deepening its engagement in East Africa. Bashir visited Russia in November 2017 and again in July 2018, and there are reports of the possible establishment of a Russian naval installation in Sudan.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Russian security contractors have deployed to the Central African Republic.<sup>26</sup>

Ending South Sudan’s civil war and promoting regional stability in the long term will require more than short-term crisis management. Instead, the United States must update its entire approach to the Red Sea region, break out of the geographic and policy silos that have governed US efforts to date, and recognize how its influence is best applied in the broader Red Sea political and security zone. None of this will be possible without reinvigorated, high-level diplomacy.



## Notes

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