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Kenya's options in the Sudan Crisis

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The warning signs were overt to analysts. Following the acrimony over Sudan's transition to democracy, many had warned of an imminent clash between the government forces, known as Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and a paramilitary group called Rapid Support Forces (RSF). On Saturday, 15 April, 2023, fighting erupted between army forces loyal to the leader of Sudan's ruling Sovereign Council, Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and his deputy leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who is also the commander of a paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Force (RSF). The Sovereign Council is a committee of military leaders governing Sudan that was formed in 2021 after Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan removed Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and dissolved the Transition Sovereign Council that had been constituted in 2019, following the ouster of Sudan's president Al-Bashir. Again, Sudan now stares at the possibility of another coup within a coup, being a third ouster in a span of less than four years.

Sudan's security degeneration is not only a direct risk to Kenya but also the entire IGAD region.

A key plank of Kenya-Sudan relations is regional security. The two countries have been part of the diplomatic negotiations aimed at building peace in South Sudan through the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Both countries are founder members of IGAD (former IGADD), a sub-regional body in Eastern Africa, whose mission is "...to add value to Member States' efforts in achieving peace, security, and prosperity." In fact, Kenya-Sudan ties are based on three key priorities areas, namely security, regional stability and trade. So, Kenya cannot afford indifference nor feeble response to the escalating violence in Sudan. Then, what should Kenya do following the swelling Sudan crisis? The options to Kenya are discernible, yet limited and cryptic.

To begin with, Kenya should approach the Sudan crisis as an opportunity to revitalise its regional leadership in peace and security. By now Kenya should be consolidating its pool of special envoys and suave mediators. Some of them like Hon Kalonzo Musyoka are still energetic, while others like Lt Gen (Rtd) Lazaro Sumbeiywo (with rich experience on Sudan/South Sudan peace fabric) and Lt Gen (Rtd) Daniel Opande would give the much



needed peer mediation with the warring Sudan Generals.

Kenya's approach to the conflict should be within the multilateral diplomatic tracks already in motion. These include the Trilateral Mechanism for Sudan which comprises the African Union (AU), IGAD and UN. The end point for Kenya is to be the arrow-head of the regional mechanisms, especially IGAD, towards Sudan conflict. By so doing, Kenya will not only contribute to regional stability but also guarantee its strategic interests. Already, the



IGAD Heads of State teleconference meeting

Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has set the pace by selecting Kenya's President William Ruto, South Sudan's Salva Kiir, and Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti to help broker a ceasefire in the conflict in Sudan. Of the three, Kenya is not only a regional power but enjoys optical advantage of neutrality because it does not border Sudan. This advantage coupled with the fact that President Ruto is newly elected with no entrenched ties to any regional leader, gives Kenya an aura of an impartial and mutually acceptable arbiter.

As a first precautionary step, Kenya needs to conduct an actor analysis so as to identify and understand key players in Sudan, in the IGAD region and those from outside the continent. This geopolitical sensitivity analysis will enable Kenya to know its allies, to identify the opposing interests and seek diplomatic harmony and avoid high voltage confrontation with great powers. In this respect, perhaps the biggest high risk in the Sudan crisis is the geopolitical

dimensions that have drawn in external great power interference. Indeed, the communique adopted by the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU), held on 16 April 2023, among other actions, "Strongly rejects any external interference that could complicate the situation in Sudan." Analytical pointers reveal a worrisome coincidence between the Russia–Sudan military agreement and the furious warning by the U.S ambassador to Sudan, John Godfrey, of consequences if Khartoum allows Russia to establish a military base at the strategic Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast. In February, 2023, Sudan's ruling military concluded a review of an agreement with Russia to build the navy base on the Red Sea. Reports indicated that the agreement now awaited Sudan's transition to a civilian government and formation of a legislative body to be ratified. The agreement is set to last for 25 years, where in exchange, Russia will equip Sudan with military weapons. Noteworthy are the twofold pointers to proxy wars in Sudan. First, the Russia-Sudan military deal was initiated during the former president Al-Bashir government. Second, Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, commander of the paramilitary RSF, ostensibly created by Al-Bashir, has been on the forefront in the negotiations of the Sudan-Russia military pact.

Similarly, there are other extra-Africa continent actors such as Gulf states. Sudan, just like most Muslim-majority states in Africa, is a member of the Arab League and has active interactions with Gulf states namely Saudi Arabia, UAE, Yemen

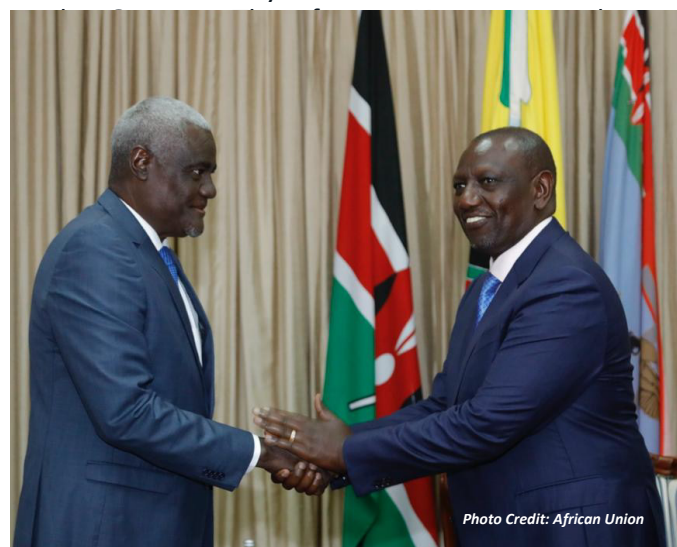


Photo Credit: African Union

AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat(left) and H.E. Dr William Ruto(right)



and Qatar. Therefore, Kenya needs to expeditiously engage in teleconference diplomacy with its ally the UAE and other selected Gulf states in order to have a common approach to the Sudan conflict.

Regarding the intra-Africa actors in Sudan, Kenya should adopt diplomacy of pragmatism, if not indifference. Regionally, since Kenya will be dealing with a complex web of alliances and interests between its neighbours in the IGAD region, it should make pragmatic decisions based on current situations; what really works in practice, without drastically shifting its existing foreign policy towards states in the region. Regionally, the Ethiopia-Egypt tussle over the Nile waters has entrenched alliances within Sudan conflict. While Egypt is explicitly allied to the SAF, including joint military trainings, Ethiopia could mostly likely lean towards RSF's Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) or strategically build ties with both fighting groups in Sudan so as to gain from any outcome. Currently, African and Gulf states seem to hold sway over Sudan compared with international actors.

The IGAD provides a better track for Kenya to take a leading role as well secure its national interests through peace diplomacy. Here, Kenya needs to seek consensus of AU, IGAD and other relevant stakeholders for it to lead the peace process. Particularly Kenya should quickly persuade two actors for support: USA and South Sudan. The USA, being not so popular among Sudanese people would not directly mediate, thus it will most likely give Kenya the much



Photo Credit: Bloomberg

needed global backing. South Sudan's internal security challenges could possibly limit the country's role in the wider regional peace and security. There might be need for a negotiation within the negotiation to have Djibouti allow Kenya to lead the IGAD intervention in Sudan. Noteworthy still is the conflicting position of Sudan's Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan as the current chair of IGAD as per the rotation election mechanisms. An immediate consensus should be sought to have Sudan's term truncated so that Kenya can assume the rotational leadership of the sub-regional body.



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At Least 270 People Killed in Sudan Conflict – WHO Reports

Further, concerning actor analysis, even if all actors including Kenya seem to favour an inclusive peace process, however Kenya needs to weigh between the two warring parties, SAF and RSF, which one is good for Sudan's peace and regional stability. The parameter for reaching this decision will depend on the following: which side is committed to peaceful transition to democratic civilian government in Sudan? The side that has the backing of Western powers, specifically USA; the history of the warring groups in terms of commitment to peace and security, this will include whether the group is relatively inclusive or is driven by sectarian objectives in its formations; and finally the popular legitimacy of the faction in the general perception of Sudanese people. Although both groups have claims to joint administration through unconstitutional change of government, it is explicit that Sudan has throughout been led by the military except once. But the grim reality is that the RSF has a negative history having transmuted from a genocidal



Janjaweed militia operated by former president Al-Bashir. In fact, the International Criminal Court prosecutors accused Bashir and his government officials and the Janjaweed militia (changed into RSF in 2013) commanders of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur.



Bottom-line, amidst widespread international attention to the Sudan crisis, Kenya's position should reinforce the stand of the AU and IGAD as espoused in the organizations' separate communiques both released on 16 April 2023. This includes a clarion call to the two parties to: immediately and unconditionally cease hostilities and resume negotiations on all outstanding issues including security and military reform; allow a humanitarian pause especially in this Holy Month of Ramadhan so that evacuations, relief aid and support to civilians caught up in the conflict could be undertaken. Overall, Kenya should lead in advocating for Africa-led solutions to the Sudan crisis. In a Pan-African spirit, while embracing international partners' support, the continent should come together and find a lasting solution to Sudan conflict.

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