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Chad Navigates Multipolar Disorder

The Perils of Playing Geopolitics for Regime Survival

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Interim President Mahamat Deby is seizing the multipolar disorder engulfing Chad's neighbourhood as an opportunity to improve his chances of consolidating power. Deby is seeking to conclude a transition from the unconstitutional takeover he engineered following his father's violent death in April 2021. He has coopted selected dissidents while imposing tight limits on opposition activities and relied on an increasingly controversial French military presence as the ultimate deterrent against his overthrow by force. Turmoil and Russia's perceived expansion in neighbouring countries have allowed the Deby regime to capitalize on its status as one of the region's last remaining partners of Western states. However, Deby's cooperation with the United Arab Emirates in channelling military assistance to the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan via Chad, poses serious domestic and external risks. This Policy Brief examines the perils associated with Chad's navigation of the current multipolarity. It is based primarily on interviews with political actors that were conducted in N'Djamena in October 2022 and October 2023.

When Mahamat Deby took over as acting head of state following his father's death, the chances of his holding onto power appeared slim. His main asset was military backing: officers from Deby's Zaghawa ethnic group dominated the core of the regime – that is, the army and the security services – while France had already proved that it was ready to defend what President Macron called Chad's "stability and territorial integrity" through its military presence. But the Zaghawa military elite was hardly united in supporting Deby, and Macron declared himself, both publicly and privately, opposed to a dynastic succession. Moreover, Deby's arrogation of power galvanized opposition movements. To add a veneer of legitimacy, the regime staged a tightly controlled National Dialogue between August and October 2022, which was boycotted by key opposition forces and ended up alienating many participants. For their part, the main rebel groups, whose fighters were based mostly in neighbouring Libya, rejected Deby's agreement with dozens of self-styled armed movements with limited or no firepower. Thus, hereditary succession faced an array of obstacles from within and outside the ruling elite.

The regime showed its true colours on 20 October 2022, when security forces killed at least 128 people – although the actual death toll could be as high as 400 – in the violent suppression of opposition protests against the regime's decision to prolong the transition

under Deby in his capacity as interim president.¹ Hundreds of people were arrested; key opposition leaders and activists fled the country; opposition parties were temporarily banned from operating; and public gatherings were prohibited.²

From the regime's perspective, this hardline approach proved successful: there were no further protests and, following a year in exile, leading opposition figure Succès Masra returned after having pledged to reconcile with the regime and support an amnesty for those responsible for the 20 October killings.³ That deal has likely neutralized much of Masra's mobilizing potential, which was founded on his image as the sole incorruptible opposition leader. The rebels in Libya have been unable to exploit the closure of the political space; rather, they have been weakened by defections, Deby's cooperation with the Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar in dividing the rebels and periodic airstrikes from Chad's newly acquired Turkish drones.

Spending lavishly on the military, Deby has cultivated support by making hundreds of promotions and retiring senior officers to well-paid posts as advisers.⁴ At the same time, high oil prices in 2022–23 have allowed Deby to expand patronage networks in order to hold onto power;⁵ this includes co-opting opposition politicians and former rebels. Even so, the perception that prevails within the political elite is that the spoils from embezzlement and influence trading are concentrated in an increasingly narrow circle around Deby and his chief of staff, Idriss Youssouf Boy.

Since October 2022, the regime has dropped any pretence of an open-ended transition. The constitutional referendum scheduled for 17 December 2023 ignores the main demand made during the National Dialogue: that Chadian citizens be allowed to choose between federalism and a unitary state. The constitution to be put to the public vote provides for one option only: a "unitary decentralized" state that differs little from Chad's 1996 constitution.⁶ There is little doubt that the referendum will result in the new constitution being adopted; the only question is how large the turnout will be – several opposition parties have already announced they are boycotting the referendum. Thereafter, presidential elections, which Deby is widely expected to win, are to be held no later than October 2024. For their part, Western diplomats are contenting themselves by making demands for cosmetic improvements to the voting process while being under no illusion that there will be the same widespread electoral irregularities as under Deby the father.

Deby's efforts to ensure his dynastic succession have taken place in a regional context marked by turmoil and growing multipolarity: the US-led, Western-dominated international order has eroded as China, Russia and an increasing number of regional powers exert a growing influence.⁷ In neighbouring Libya, Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), states such as Russia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have become key players in recent or ongoing conflicts. So far, such regional instability has proved a boon to Deby. There are similarities between the interim president's approach and his father's strategy of boosting the regime's chances of survival by turning Chad into an indispensable regional

¹ Clément Boursin, "Au Tchad, le régime de l'impunité", *afriquexxi*, 20 October 2023, all links accessed 1 December 2023.

² Human Rights Watch, "Tchad : Un an après, les victimes toujours en attente de justice", 20 October 2023.

³ *Le Monde*, "Après son retour au Tchad, l'opposant Succès Masra prône la 'réconciliation'", 20 November 2023.

⁴ For background on the politics of the Chadian army, see International Crisis Group, *Les défis de l'armée tchadienne*, Africa Report No. 298, 22 January 2021.

⁵ Oil typically accounts for 50–60% of government revenue; see IMF, *Chad: First and Second Reviews Under the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement*, 12 January 2023.

⁶ Leubnoudji Tah Nathan, "Chad's Proposed New Constitution: Between Hopes for Refoundation and an Uncertain Future", *Constitutionnet*, 4 October 2023.

⁷ On multipolarity and violent conflicts, see Barry Posen, "Civil Wars and the Structure of World Power", *Daedalus* 146, No. 4 (2017), 167–79; Wolfram Lacher, "African Conflicts amid Multipolarity", *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief*, April 2022.

partner of France.⁸ But today's domestic and the international context are different: Chad is navigating a new multipolar disorder at a time when Mahamat Deby is seeking to consolidate power.

Challenges to France's role

Since mid-2022 France has had to withdraw its soldiers from Mali and Burkina Faso following military coups in both countries; and in October 2023 it began pulling its troops out of Niger for the same reason. That leaves Chad as the last country in the region to host French troops: the headquarters of France's military operation in the Sahel had been based there since 2014.⁹ French deployment in Chad is vital for Paris's ability to project both military power in a conflict-ridden region and the image of a leading actor on the continent at a time of intense soul-searching regarding its Africa policy.¹⁰

Thus, Chad's strategic importance for France has increased, which means that the leverage of French diplomacy has decreased. As early as 2022, Deby successfully resisted French efforts to ensure he would exclude himself from running for president and to persuade him to appoint Succès Masra as prime minister. All of which leaves France in a bind: if it intends to stay in Chad, it is condemned to facilitate Deby's dynastic succession – whether it wants to or not – by deterring attempts to topple him by force.

However, similar to what has happened in other countries in the region, public opinion in Chad is shifting decisively against France's military presence.¹¹ The demand for the French army to leave the country is now far more widespread among the political elite than it was just two years ago. A coalition of activists, including the Wakit Tamma movement, has announced that it will begin staging protests if France does not start withdrawing its troops by the end of this year. Rumours and misinformation are rife about an increase in the number of French bases and the hidden motives of the French military. But it would be wrong to dismiss the shift in the political discourse as based on ill-informed gossip, let alone as the result of foreign manipulation. Political actors and activists are now almost unanimously decrying what they see as French arrogance, paternalism and double standards. They point to Macron's very public backing of Mahamat Deby's unconstitutional takeover just days after his father had been killed. Or they refer to the deadly airstrikes on a rebel column in February 2019 that were carried out by French fighter jets, whose declared purpose is to combat terrorism in the region.

It is unclear whether France's decision-makers fully grasp the extent to which the French military presence has become unwanted outside the narrow circle surrounding Deby. Like in the other Sahelian states, France appears reluctant to preempt its being dislodged from Chad by initiating a drawdown itself. Clearly, however, resentment of the French military presence could make it easy for opposition forces or dissident factions within the regime to mobilize against Deby. Any random incident could light the fuse of protests. There is little reason to believe that Chad is immune to the challenges France has faced in one Sahelian country after another. The tenuous continued military presence of France is a sword of Damocles hanging over Deby's dynastic succession.

⁸ Jérôme Tubiana and Marielle Debos, *Déby's Chad: Political Manipulation at Home, Military Intervention Abroad, Challenging Times Ahead*, United States Institute of Peace, Peaceworks Report No. 136, 2017.

⁹ Cyril Bensimon, Jean-Baptiste Chastand and Elise Vincent, "Les armées suspendues aux arbitrages de l'Elysée pour l'avenir de leurs bases en Afrique", *Le Monde*, 17 November 2023.

¹⁰ Denis M. Tull, "France's Africa Policy under President Macron", SWP Comment No. 51 (September 2023).

¹¹ *The Economist*, "Will Chad be the next Western ally in Africa to fall?", 23 November 2023.

The spectre of Russia

For France, a military presence in Chad has become all the more important as the argument about Russia filling any void in the region has gained traction in Paris and other Western capitals. France, the US and other Western states are increasingly alarmed about surging Russian activities in the region, particularly through the Wagner Group. For several years now, Wagner has maintained a military presence in two of Chad's neighbours – Libya and CAR. In a third neighbouring state, Sudan, the Russian group partnered on security assistance and gold mining with actors that are now on opposing sides of the country's civil war.¹² More recently, in late 2021, the Malian coup leaders began hosting Wagner fighters, while Burkina Faso's putschists, too, have gravitated towards military cooperation with Russia.¹³ In December 2023, Niger became the latest country to sign a defence cooperation agreement with Russia and terminate its security partnership with Europe.¹⁴ Thus, Chad appears surrounded by countries that have – or will have – a Russian military presence.

The Deby regime is acutely aware that fears of growing Russian influence has raised Chad's status – leading US newspapers now describe the country as a “key Western ally in Africa”.¹⁵ It has deliberately stoked such fears both by feeding foreign media outlets information about alleged Wagner plots against Chad and by sharing such information with French and US intelligence, whose reports have formed the basis of articles in major Western media outlets.¹⁶ For its part, the US appears to have informed the Chadians about possible Wagner plots, although it remains unclear what the ultimate source of such information was or whether US officials might have exaggerated the group's activities.¹⁷ Ultimately, the rumoured Russian-backed Chadian rebellion in CAR failed to materialize. But in the meantime, this apparent media campaign has helped increase the geopolitical rent that Deby derives from acting as a bulwark against perceived Russian expansionism.

In reality, Chad's relations with Russia are more ambivalent than such reports suggests. The Chadian army continues to procure arms from Russia, something it has been doing for a long time. Several officials accepted the invitation to attend the July 2023 Russia-Africa summit, where two minor ministers signed cooperation agreements. More intriguingly, one of Deby's half-brothers repeatedly visited Moscow in 2022 and allegedly met with the then head of Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin.¹⁸ Finally, the Russian embassy has become noticeably more active in N'Djamena over the past year, reaching out to youth associations and opening a cultural centre. Should rifts deepen among Chad's ruling elite or in the political landscape more broadly, such ties could acquire greater significance.

¹² Khadija Sharife, Lara Dihmis, 3Ayin, Erin Klazar and *Le Monde*, “Documents Reveal Wagner's Golden Ties to Sudanese Military Companies”, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), 2 November 2022; Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon and Julian Rademeyer, *The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa*, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Research Report, February 2023.

¹³ Olorin Maquindus and Anna Sylvestre-Treiner, “Le Burkina Faso resserre son alliance avec la Russie”, *Le Monde*, 15 November 2023.

¹⁴ Morgane Le Cam, “Le Niger renforce sa coopération avec la Russie et tourne le dos à l'Europe”, *Le Monde*, 6 December 2023.

¹⁵ Benoit Faucon, “U.S. Intelligence Points to Wagner Plot Against Key Western Ally in Africa”, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 February 2023.

¹⁶ Mathieu Olivier, “[Exclusif] Déby Itno face à la crainte d'une nouvelle rébellion soutenue par Wagner”, *Jeune Afrique*, 1 March 2023; Rachel Chason, “As Russians Plot against Chad, Concerns Mount over Important U.S. Ally”, *The Washington Post*, 24 April 2023.

¹⁷ Declan Walsh, “A 'New Cold War' Looms in Africa as U.S. Pushes Against Russian Gains”, *The New York Times*, 19 March 2023; Alex Thurston, “Wagner Group Accused of Plotting a 'Confederation of States' in Africa”, *Responsible Statecraft*, 2 May 2023.

¹⁸ Walsh, “A 'New Cold War' Looms”.

A Faustian bargain with the UAE

Of far more consequence for stability in Chad than the alleged Russian threat is the government's policy towards the civil war in Sudan – and, in particular, Deby's cooperation with the UAE in channelling support to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) for its fight against the Sudanese Armed Forces.

Since 16 May 2023 – one month after fighting erupted in Sudan – there have been dozens of cargo flights each month from Abu Dhabi to N'Djamena and Amdjarass, the small, remote hometown of Idris Deby, which is about 60km from the Sudanese border. Between May and September 2023, no fewer than 168 flights were tracked through open sources alone. Most of the flights were made by heavy transport planes, such as the Ilyushin Il-76 or the Antonov An-124. Many could be traced to the military apron of Abu Dhabi airport.¹⁹ Previously, the companies involved had used several of the same aircraft to send UAE military assistance to Khalifa Haftar during the 2019–20 Libyan civil war and to Ethiopia during the Tigray war in 2021.²⁰

The UAE has claimed that the flights are delivering humanitarian aid, including for a newly established Emirati field hospital at the Amdjarass airport.²¹ However, numerous Chadian officials and Western diplomats confirmed in interviews that the UAE has been supplying arms, ammunition, vehicles and other military assistance to the RSF via Chad. The field hospital is located far from the main regions hosting refugees from Darfur;²² reportedly, its real purpose is to provide medical treatment to wounded RSF fighters. Media reports support these claims.²³ Besides Chad, support provided to the RSF by the UAE and the Wagner Group comes through eastern Libya and CAR.

Emirati backing for the RSF leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo “Hemedti”, is deeply problematic – and not just because the RSF is notorious for committing war crimes or because such support constitutes a blatant violation of the UN arms embargo against Darfur.²⁴ The fact that Deby is facilitating UAE support for Hemedti poses grave risks for Chad itself. Officially, Chad has adopted a neutral position towards the war in Sudan, precisely because of what might happen if it were to take sides. The RSF, whose core is recruited from Rizeigat and other Arab communities, includes many fighters of Chadian origin; and thousands of Chadian Arabs are said to have joined Hemedti since the latest war erupted. Thus, the initial prevailing assessment in N'Djamena after the start of the war was that neither Hemedti's defeat nor his victory would be in the regime's interest: defeat would lead large numbers of RSF fighters to seek refuge in Chad, where they could then challenge the Zaghawa's pre-eminence; victory could prompt Hemedti or his lieutenants to shift their ambitions to Chad. Furthermore, refugee flows from the conflict risk destabilizing Chad. By November 2023, the fighting in Darfur had driven 450,000 people to seek refuge in eastern Chad – most of them ethnic Masalit who have been forcibly displaced by the RSF and allied militias – thereby putting an significant strain on the region's socioeconomic capacities.²⁵

¹⁹ Gerjon, “A New Mystery Airlift between the UAE and Africa”, *Gerjon's Aircraft Finds*, 30 June 2023.

²⁰ Gerjon, “The UAE-Ethiopia Airlift: Fly Sky Airlines”, *Gerjon's Aircraft Finds*, 9 October 2021.

²¹ United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *UAE to Establish Field Hospital in Amdjarass, Chad to Support Sudanese Refugees*, 4 July 2023.

²² UNHCR, *Emergency Situation in Chad: Update on Arrivals from Sudan as of 17 November 2023*, 21 November 2023.

²³ Nicholas Bariyo and Benoit Faucon, “A U.S. Ally Promised to Send Aid to Sudan. It Sent Weapons Instead”, *Wall Street Journal*, 10 August 2023; Declan Walsh, Christoph Koettl and Eric Schmitt, “Talking Peace in Sudan, the U.A.E. Secretly Fuels the Fight”, *The New York Times*, 29 September 2023.

²⁴ Amnesty International, *‘Death Came to Our Home’: War Crimes and Civilian Suffering in Sudan*, London: Amnesty International, 2023; Maggie Michael and Ryan McNeill, “Sudan Refugees Detail Second Wave of Bloody Ethnic Purge by Arab Forces”, *Reuters*, 22 November 2023.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, “The Fallout in Chad from the Fighting in Darfur”, 10 August 2023.

Significant RSF gains in Darfur in October and November 2023 suggest that both the UAE and Deby have backed the winning side. Those gains could also mean that Chad will no longer play such a vital role in channelling UAE assistance to the RSF, as the latter now controls airports in Nyala and El Geneina. However, this by no means lowers the risks associated with Deby's policy. Many Chadian Zaghawa politicians and military officers harbour deep resentment towards the RSF owing to their family ties with former Zaghawa rebels in Darfur. In the 2000s, those rebels fought against the Janjaweed militias from which the RSF would later emerge. Having maintained neutrality for months during the latest war, several have warned that they would take up arms if the RSF attempted to capture the key city of El Fasher.²⁶ Thus, Deby's alignment with the UAE in support of Hemedti has fuelled anger and fear within the Zaghawa elite. Both leading Zaghawa political figures and Arab politicians said in interviews that they firmly expected Chadian RSF fighters to return sooner or later with their UAE-supplied weapons to overturn the balance of power in Chad.

Asked about the calculations behind a policy that so evidently jeopardizes the regime's medium-term chances of survival, interlocutors in Chad's governing circles all pointed to the money Deby has received from the UAE. Many attributed this apparent short-termism to what they described as the youth and inexperience of Deby and his chief of staff. During Deby's visit to Abu Dhabi in June 2023, the Chadian Presidency announced that it had received a \$1.5bn loan from the UAE – a figure equivalent to 75% of the Chadian government's projected 2023 expenditure.²⁷ But only a \$150m concessional loan, together with \$50m of in-kind assistance, has materialized to date and the lending terms remain murky.²⁸ Still, for the Chadian government, this is a substantial amount of money. In addition, Chad has increasingly looked to the UAE (and Israel) for weapons procurement.²⁹ It remains unclear whether some of the military equipment delivered by the UAE in its effort to back the RSF could also be going towards strengthening the Chadian army.

Conclusions

At first sight, it appears that today's multipolar disorder is opening up new opportunities for Chad – a quintessentially peripheral state. Deby's regime has been able to convert regional turmoil and declining French and US influence into a geopolitical rent. Chad's importance for France and – to a much lesser extent – the US has increased. Western governments and the UN have noticeably softened their stance towards Chad's transition even as the political space in the country has continued to shrink.³⁰ The same applies to the European Union and its members. In April 2023, Chad expelled the German ambassador, who had spoken out against the moving goalposts and repressions that were marring the transition. For its part, the EU suspended €10m earmarked for military capacity-building in Chad but rescinded that decision in November 2023.³¹ In the meantime, vocal criticism from European

²⁶ Mat Nashed, "Fears of All-out Ethnic War Rise in Sudan's Darfur", Aljazeera, 20 November 2023.

²⁷ Presidency of the Republic of Chad, *Visite d'amitié et de travail à Abu Dhabi: Plusieurs accords de coopération signés*, 14 June 2023; IMF, *Chad: First and Second Reviews*.

²⁸ Malick Mahamat, "Tchad: le gouvernement sollicite un financement de 200 millions \$ d'Abu Dhabi pour le budget 2023", *Al Wihda*, 22 September 2023.

²⁹ Joan Tilouine, "Idriss Youssouf Boy and the Sinuous Arms Routes of Chad's Junta", *Africa Intelligence*, 16 October 2023.

³⁰ See, for example, the declarations and joint statement at a side event about Chad during the 2023 UN General Assembly, UN Web TV, "The Journey towards Constitutional Order in Chad: Challenges & Perspectives", video recording of meeting, 18 September 2023; *Joint Statement following the High-Level Side Event on the Margins of the 78th United Nations General Assembly on 'The Return to Constitutional Order in Chad: Challenges & Perspectives'*, United Nations Headquarters, New York, September 18, 2023.

³¹ Africa Intelligence, "EU Resumes Military Aid to N'Djamena", 22 November 2023.

governments has become less likely. In a reflection of Chad's growing relevance, Italy is set to open an embassy in N'Djaména in 2024. And Hungary has gone as far as to establish a military presence, whose planned deployment in Niger was preempted by the military coup and whose ostensible aim is to curb migration to Europe by training Chad's army.³² According to Hungary's defence minister, Chad is now the "only stable state in the region".³³ From a Chadian perspective, the Hungarian deployment is another welcome step towards diversifying security cooperation.

But Deby's attempt to harness multipolarity for regime survival poses risks. These are most obvious in his alignment with the UAE – a state that epitomizes the growing interventionism of regional powers amid receding US dominance and whose interventions have been highly destabilizing without having had any meaningful consequences for itself.³⁴ As a result of its frontline position in the Sudanese civil war, Chad has not only become a major host of refugees – a role for which it receives praise;³⁵ it has also secured for itself the opportunity to profit from Emirati largesse. Chad's role in channelling Emirati assistance to Hemedti could fuel growing discontent within Deby's Zaghawa constituency; and in the medium term, RSF fighters of Chadian origin could even end up turning their UAE-supplied weapons on the Deby regime.

At the same time, today's multipolarity renders the French military presence – on which Deby's rule ultimately relies – increasingly untenable. Amid the shifts in public sentiment across the region, that presence has become an anachronism. As France doubles down on a deployment to which it now sees no alternative in the region and as Deby exploits his country's monopoly as France's only remaining regional ally to his own advantage, the likelihood of a turbulent denouement to the French military presence is bound to increase. To date, the competitive international environment has facilitated Deby's consolidation of power, but it may soon engender the emergence of challenges to his rule.

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³² Bensimon, Chastand and Vincent, "Les armées suspendues".

³³ Hungary Today, "Government to Launch Military Mission to Chad", 16 October 2023; Hungary Today, "Continuous Presence in Chad to Tackle Security and Migration Problems at the Source", 22 November 2023.

³⁴ Jean-Loup Samaan, "Les Émirats arabes unis en Afrique: Les ambitions parfois contrariées d'un nouvel acteur régional", Notes de l'IFRI, September 2021; Andreas Krieg, "Security assistance to Surrogates: How the UAE Secures its Regional Objectives", *Mediterranean Politics* (online first), 24 February 2023.

³⁵ USAID, Administrator Samantha Power Travels to Chad; Visits Refugee Camp to Support the Humanitarian Response to Crisis in Sudan, 20 May 2023; United States Mission to the United Nations, Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a U.S. Department of State Joint Regional Media Hub Briefing, 12 September 2023.

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