

Can France Be Dragged Into the Sudan War?

Déby's Omnibalancing Strategy, the Russia-France competition, and the Limits of Non-Intervention in the Sahel-Sudan Corridor



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ABSTRACT

The return of French military officers to N'Djamena in 2026 looks, on the surface, like a bilateral recalibration between Chad and France after a year of diplomatic rupture. This article argues that such a reading badly understates what is actually taking place. Instead of treating Chad's external patrons, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Khalifa Haftar's Libya, Russia, and France itself, as independent actors each pursuing separate interests in Sudan's civil war, this article follows a single Chadian decision maker, President Mahamat Idriss Déby, through his transactions with every one of them. Applying the theory of omnibalancing, which holds that leaders facing internal threats manage external patrons as instruments of regime survival rather than as ideological allies, the article shows that Déby has modernized and multiplied the single-patron strategy his father once ran with France alone. It traces how Déby profited from, and is now restricting, an Emirati logistics corridor that once ran through Chadian territory; how he cultivates Saudi Arabia as a financial and political alternative even as he keeps courting Abu Dhabi directly; why he cannot fully sever his dependence on Khalifa Haftar despite their fathers having fought as enemies; how he manufactures the appearance of a Russian pivot to extract concessions from Paris; and what France specifically supplies him in return for a foothold it has fought to keep since 1986. Drawing on a recent investigative account of the weapons and training network running through eastern Libya, and on the long arc of the France-Chad security relationship, from Operation Épervier through the CIA's engineering of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army to France's deliberate stand-down that let Idriss Déby seize power in 1990, the article demonstrates that Déby's present maneuvering is the newest and most sophisticated iteration of a pattern in which Chadian leaders convert external rivalry into personal leverage. It concludes with an assessment of the escalation threshold that could turn French intelligence support into operational entanglement, and of what that threshold means for the Horn of Africa.

Omnibalancing is an international relations theory explaining that leaders in fragile states prioritize their own political survival over the security of the country. Instead of just focusing on foreign rivals, these leaders simultaneously balance against internal threats (like military coups or rebellions) and external threats. To stay in power, they often ally with powerful foreign nations, trading international cooperation for the money, weapons, and backing needed to crush their domestic enemies.

In this context, Mahamat Idriss Déby serves as a quintessential case of omnibalancing because he leveraged this exact strategy to exploit external alliances, converting international capital into the domestic leverage necessary to survive acute internal crises and institutionalize his presidency

1. Introduction

France's relationship with Chad ranks among the most enduring and self-contradictory security partnerships to survive postcolonial Africa's political turbulence. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso all severed their French military ties amid coups and rising anti-French sentiment, yet the Franco-Chadian bond has proved remarkably resilient even when officially severed on paper. Understanding why French officers have quietly begun returning to N'Djamena in 2026, barely a year after their formal departure, requires tracing a long arc: colonial domination, Cold War interventionism, two generations of strongman succession, and the catastrophic civil war next door in Sudan that is now reshaping the region's entire security architecture.

France's presence in Chad dates to the colonial era, when the territory formed part of French Equatorial Africa. Chad became independent in 1960, but France kept a substantial military foothold there, treating the country as a critical anchor for projecting power across Central Africa, the Sahel, and the Sahara. Military planners have long called Chad France's desert aircraft carrier, sitting midway between the Atlantic Sahel and the Red Sea coast, and that geographic logic has never changed. What has changed is the price of maintaining it, a price that Sudan's civil war is now driving upward, and that price is what France is currently being asked to pay.

The question of whether France can be dragged into Sudan's war might look, at first glance, like a hypothetical exercise. Paris withdrew its last permanent troops from Chad in January 2025 and has consistently described the Sudan conflict as an internal African affair. Yet French officers have returned to N'Djamena all the same, and President Mahamat Idriss Déby has begun folding French capabilities into his own management of Sudan's supply-chain dynamics. Both facts point to the same conclusion: the war is not waiting for French permission. It is already arriving in N'Djamena through refugee flows, border incursions, and the calculations of a Chadian president who plans to use France, among several other patrons, to manage a conflict he cannot publicly admit to shaping.

This article reads Déby's strategy through the lens of omnibalancing, a theory developed to explain why leaders in fragile states court multiple, often rival, external patrons simultaneously rather than aligning with one bloc against another. Where classical alliance theory expects states to balance against the most threatening external power, omnibalancing recognizes that for a leader like Déby the more dangerous threats sit inside his own borders and inside his own officer corps. Read this way, his engagement with France, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Khalifa Haftar's Libya stops looking like five separate foreign-policy stories and starts looking like a single survival strategy with five moving parts, an evolved and considerably more elaborate version of the single-patron arrangement his father, Idriss Déby, once ran with France alone.

This article proceeds through six analytical registers. First, it maps the transnational corridor connecting Libya, Chad, and Sudan into a single strategic space. Second, it traces the historical

foundation of the Franco-Chadian security relationship, including France and the CIA's Cold War engineering of both Idriss Déby and Khalifa Haftar, and shows how that history created the structural conditions for today's crisis. Third, it examines France's own contradictory strategy in Libya and Chad. Fourth, it situates the broader France-Russia rivalry across the Sahel-Sudan corridor. Fifth, and most centrally, it follows Mahamat Déby himself across every one of his external relationships, applying the omnibalancing framework directly to the Emirati corridor he once tolerated and is now restricting, the Saudi alternative he is cultivating, the Libyan frenemy he cannot do without, the Russian card he plays against Paris, and the French insurance policy he is once again drawing on, to show that these are not separate stories about separate powers but a single story about one president's strategy for survival. Sixth, it traces the threshold beyond which French technical support risks becoming operational entanglement, and assesses the implications for the Horn of Africa.

2. The Transnational Conflict Corridor: Libya, Chad, and Sudan as a Single Strategic Space

The Sudan war was never contained within Sudanese borders. The war that began between the two Generals rapidly evolved into one of the most heavily externally financed conflicts in recent African history, drawing in Gulf capitals, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and a network of Sahelian armed actors whose logistical infrastructure runs directly through Chad. The corridor connecting Libya's southern airfields to the Rapid Support Forces' Darfur strongholds passes through the same desert highways that France has spent decades trying to monitor and control. When France returns to Chad, it does not return to a bilateral relationship with a stable partner. It returns to the epicenter of a transnational conflict architecture.

Is the Sudan war simply a Sudanese crisis, or has it already become a French strategic emergency?

The lawless tri-border region connecting Chad, Libya, and Sudan serves as a highway for mercenary recruitment, weapons trafficking, and illicit gold smuggling, networks that supply warring factions across the region, and which extends to the Horn. The weapons and gold flows sustaining the Rapid Support Forces cross seamlessly through Libya and Chad, turning the entire belt from the Atlantic to the Red Sea into a single interconnected conflict corridor. For France, whose military footprint spans both endpoints of this corridor, N'Djamena in the west and Djibouti on the Red Sea, this geography is not background context. It is the defining strategic reality.

The spillover of the Sudan war into Chad has effectively paralyzed the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, which traditionally manages crises in the Horn. Because Chad is pulled westward toward the Sahel and eastward toward Sudan simultaneously, its destabilization acts as a bridge linking the insurgencies of the Lake Chad basin with the geopolitical fractures of the Red Sea coast. Eastern Chad currently hosts more than a million Sudanese refugees, various armed factions use the border

for smuggling and recruitment, and French intelligence in N'Djamena is already, whether Paris acknowledges it or not, monitoring dynamics tied directly to the outcome of Sudan's war.

3. From Operation Épervier to FACT: How History Built the Current Crisis

3.1 Operation Épervier and the Making of Two Generals

To understand how France became structurally entangled in today's crisis, it helps to begin in February 1986, when France launched Operation Épervier, a continuous military deployment in Chad that would last, in various forms, until 2025. France initially designed the operation to defend Chad against Muammar Gaddafi's Libyan forces, which had invaded and occupied the Aouzou Strip in the country's north. French Mirage jets and ground forces supplied the aerial dominance and intelligence that Chadian ground forces lacked, and that support halted the Libyan advance and eventually enabled a Chadian counteroffensive during the Toyota War of 1987.

During the decisive Battle of Ouadi Doum in 1987, two men crossed paths in a way that would define the next four decades of regional politics. The Chadian army, commanded by General Idriss Déby, crushed the Libyan forces and captured their commanding general, Khalifa Haftar. Gaddafi publicly denied that Libyan troops were even present in Chad, and Haftar, abandoned by the leader he had served, defected while still in Chadian custody. The CIA, operating alongside France's Épervier infrastructure, saw an opportunity in that abandonment. With the consent of the Chadian government, American intelligence funded, trained, and organized Haftar and his captured soldiers into the military wing of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, an anti-Gaddafi proxy force based on Chadian soil. Haftar formally declared the creation of this force on June 21, 1988, naming it the Libyan National Army, the same name his organization still carries in Libya today. Several accounts of the operation report that Saudi Arabia supplied a significant share of the funding behind the venture, while American and Israeli instructors handled the training, an arrangement Reagan-era officials reportedly nicknamed the Libyan Contras, echoing the CIA's contemporaneous operation in Nicaragua. For a brief window, the general who had invaded Chad on Gaddafi's behalf and the general who had defeated and captured him were both hosted on Chadian soil, sheltered under the same strategic umbrella of French military infrastructure.

Haftar's path back into Libya ran through a second Chadian strongman, and that connection carries directly into the multi-patron structure this article traces below. Chad's president at the time, Hissène Habré, had come to power in 1982 with American backing as a bulwark against Gaddafi, and he governed through a political police force, the Documentation and Security Directorate, that Chadian and international investigators later linked to a campaign of killing and torture on a mass scale. Human Rights Watch would eventually call him the "African Pinochet," a label his victims themselves invited by modeling their pursuit of him abroad on the London arrest of Chile's Augusto Pinochet. It was Habré's government that released Haftar and his fellow prisoners from detention in 1988, clearing the

way for the CIA's plan to proceed, and the Reagan administration's underlying objective was straightforward: train Haftar's men in the encampments ringing N'Djamena and eventually send them across the border to help topple Gaddafi. For roughly three years, from 1988 until the airlift that followed Habré's own fall from power, Haftar's Libyan National Army trained in those Chadian camps, waiting for a deployment that never came. The regional map shifted before the operation could launch. Idriss Déby's rebellion against his former patron Habré succeeded in December 1990, and the new Chadian government had no interest in hosting an anti-Gaddafi militia on its soil, so Washington abruptly wound the covert project down and airlifted Haftar's fighters out of the country instead.

When the CIA and French intelligence organized that airlift, the United States granted Haftar citizenship, and he spent roughly two decades near Langley before returning to Libya in 2011. France's role in that rehabilitation, turning a captured enemy general into a Western-backed warlord, is the foundational act of the Franco-Libyan relationship, and it carries direct consequences for the Sudan war today. It is worth holding this precedent in mind through the rest of this article as the clearest available example of how quickly a narrow military mission can outgrow its original mandate.

3.2 The 1990 Transfer of Power and France's Pattern of Succession

France executed an equally consequential act inside Chad itself the same year that Haftar's forces were evacuated. Idriss Déby, who had served as Habré's army commander and led the victory against Libya, fled to Sudan in 1989 after falling out with Habré and fearing a political purge. In Sudan, he formed a rebel movement, the Patriotic Salvation Movement, and received funding from Libya and Sudan. Most critically, French intelligence had already identified him as a more stable and reliable partner than the increasingly erratic and internationally embarrassing Habré, whose political police, the Documentation and Security Directorate, had massacred an estimated forty thousand political opponents and civilians.

When Déby's rebel forces launched their offensive from Sudan toward N'Djamena in November 1990, Habré pleaded with France to use Épervier's Mirage jets to stop the advance. France refused, citing the operation's official mandate as defense against external threats, not internal rebellions. The legal distinction was technically accurate. The political calculation was unmistakable. Deprived of French air support, Habré's army collapsed, and Déby marched into the capital unopposed on December 2, 1990. France did not fire a shot to install him. It simply chose not to fire the shots that would have stopped him. The pattern this established, France as the silent architect of Chadian leadership transitions, working through deliberate inaction as readily as through intervention, has not changed since.

Once Déby took power, France resumed full military and financial support. Operation Épervier became, in effect, a personal security guarantee for the Déby regime. French Mirage jets bombed rebel columns advancing on N'Djamena in 2006, 2008, and 2019, stopping three separate threats to Déby's government. When FACT rebels killed Idriss Déby at the front in April 2021, during fighting that had

advanced from Libya, France responded within hours. Macron flew to N'Djamena for the funeral, bypassed constitutional succession norms, and ensured that Mahamat Idriss Déby, the late president's son, assumed power through a transitional military council. The third generation of the Franco-Chadian security compact had begun.

3.3 Who Is FACT, and Why Does Its Relationship With the RSF Matter

Who is FACT, and why does its relationship with the RSF matter for understanding France's position?

The Front for Change and Concord in Chad, known as FACT, is not a peripheral actor in either the Chadian or the Sudanese conflict. It is the structural link between the Libyan front, where France has long-standing interests, and the Chadian front, where France is re-engaging. Composed largely of Daza Gorane fighters from the Bahr el-Ghazel and Kanem regions, FACT has operated from Libya since 2016, where it fought alongside Haftar's Libyan National Army during its 2019 to 2020 Tripoli campaign. That affiliation gave FACT training, weapons, and access to the same external backers supporting Haftar's forces, including Russian military assets. Wagner Group fighters operating from the Al Jufra airbase in central Libya are widely believed to have trained FACT's rebels and supplied the capabilities behind the April 2021 invasion of northern Chad, the same invasion that killed Idriss Déby.

That Libyan pedigree explains where FACT came from. What matters for the argument here is where its loyalties now point, and how closely they run alongside Sudan's own war. FACT and the Rapid Support Forces share no formal command structure, but they inhabit the same ecosystem, and a third actor bridges the gap between them. The Union of Resistance Forces, a Chad-focused rebel group with a substantial foothold in Sudan's Darfur region, operates in the same overlapping desert corridors as FACT and the RSF, draws on the same smuggling networks moving fuel, weapons, and illicit gold between southern Libya, northern Chad, and western Sudan, and shares with both groups a common adversary in the Chadian state under Mahamat Déby.

Beyond FACT, Hemedti holds two further advantages over Mahamat Déby that deserve separate attention. The first runs through the Tama tribal militias straddling the Chad-Sudan border, a community carrying a decades-long grievance against the Zaghawa clan that dominates Chad's ruling elite. Thousands of young Chadian Tama men have already joined the Rapid Support Forces to fight the Sudanese Armed Forces, and Hemedti could redirect these fighters back into Chad at relatively low cost. They would bring exactly what a cross-border campaign requires: intimate knowledge of eastern Chad's terrain and a strong personal motive to see the Déby regime fall.

The second advantage runs through Chadian Arab fighters from the so-called Baggara Belt, recruited along much the same lines as the Tama militias. Scholars studying this pattern classify it as a form of ethno-mercenarism: because Hemedti himself descends from Baggara Arab stock, these fighters

regard him as a kind of regional champion, and years of RSF supply lines have left them well armed. Hemedti can weaponize this trans-border ethnic loyalty just as easily as the Tama networks, pointing both toward N'Djamena in a bid to strip power from Chad's non-Arab Zaghawa military leadership.

For FACT, any destabilization the Rapid Support Forces cause along Chad's eastern border is a strategic dividend. If RSF pressure ties down the Chadian military on two fronts simultaneously, it creates the security vacuum FACT requires to advance from the north. Neither group needs a formal alliance. The structure of their shared enemies and shared geography does the coordinating work for them.

Today FACT maintains an estimated force of fifteen hundred to two thousand fighters, reduced from its 2021 peak following heavy losses and a subsequent Libyan National Army crackdown. Its financing derives from controlling smuggling checkpoints, taxing commercial truck routes across the border, and artisanal gold extraction in southern Libya. Its position is currently defensive, boxed in by Chad's fortified northern border and by Haftar's forces, which turned on FACT after the 2021 political fallout. But containment is not elimination, and FACT's survival in the Libyan-Chadian borderlands ensures that the threat to N'Djamena remains latent for as long as the Rapid Support Forces continue to press on Chad's eastern flank, a point this article returns to when it turns to Déby's own calculations.

Hemedti's capacity to threaten Chad, in other words, does not depend on any coordination with FACT at all. Acting alone, simply by funding and directing the Tama and Baggara Belt networks described above, he can force Déby into a multi-front war, splitting the Chadian army across three simultaneous fronts: the eastern border with Sudan, the northern border with Libya, and the volatile southern frontier with the Central African Republic.

4. France's Self-Contradicting Strategy: From Covert Support to Dynastic Diplomacy

Did France inadvertently construct the architecture of its own entrapment?

The question cuts to the core of a paradox France has never fully confronted. For years, France pursued parallel security relationships in Libya and Chad that were structurally incompatible. In Libya, France covertly provided weapons and intelligence to Haftar, viewing him as a bulwark against Islamist groups and a protector of Total's oil concessions in eastern Libya, even as it officially backed the United Nations-recognized government in Tripoli. In Chad, France sustained the Déby dynasty as the anchor of its pan-Sahelian counterterrorism architecture. By backing Haftar, France was simultaneously empowering the man whose territory served as the operational base for the Russian forces that trained the FACT rebels who eventually killed France's own Chadian partner. The complicity was structural, not intentional, but its consequences were existential.

Once Idriss Déby was killed in April 2021, France took rapid corrective action. Macron used French diplomatic leverage to press Haftar into an ultimatum: turn on FACT or lose French political backing. In September 2021, Haftar's Libyan National Army launched targeted operations alongside French special forces to track and kill FACT commanders in southern Libya. France simultaneously shared intelligence with Washington to monitor Russian logistics, used electronic warfare to disrupt communications, and fortified Chad's northern border through aerial assets. The response was fast and effective in the short term, and structurally unchanged from the same pattern of personalized great-power patronage that had produced the crisis in the first place.

That episode revealed something more durable than a successful counterterrorism operation: it showed that France's entire regional architecture already ran on personal relationships with individual strongmen rather than on institutional agreements between states. Paris did not resolve the Haftar-Déby entanglement by building a treaty or a multilateral framework. It resolved it by leaning on one man, Haftar, to discipline another set of men, FACT's field commanders, through a direct political ultimatum. That habit of governing through personalities rather than institutions was about to become France's only remaining option elsewhere in the region.

Faced with the collapse of its broader Sahel presence following the expulsions from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, France adapted its strategy accordingly. Rather than continuing to seek institutional treaties with states as such, it shifted toward cultivating personalized relationships with the next generation of the region's leadership families. In Chad, that means President Mahamat Idriss Déby, who took power in 2021 under French sponsorship. In Libya, with Khalifa Haftar aging, France has bypassed United Nations diplomatic channels to actively cultivate his son and chosen successor, Saddam Haftar, the deputy commander of the Libyan National Army. Saddam Haftar has been received as a high-level guest at the Élysée Palace, meeting French military chiefs and diplomats to coordinate border security and counterterrorism, while the French ambassador holds regular security talks with the Haftar family in their Benghazi stronghold. France is not operating through institutions any longer. It is operating through families, and the durability of that strategy depends entirely on those families surviving, a dependency this article will show Déby understands and exploits at least as well as Paris does.

5. France and Russia in the Sahel-Sudan Corridor

The competition between France and Russia in the Sahel and Sudan is one of the defining geopolitical contests on the continent, but it is best analyzed as a clash between two powers with entirely different interests and strategies. Their rivalry plays out in very different ways. For France, the focus is structural, since France maintains ties with its former colonial dependencies. For the Russians, who have no significant historical links with those countries outside of the Cold War, the engagement is driven entirely by their broader competition with the West. Despite these different motivations, both powers

have pursued objectives with destabilizing consequences, and both have exploited local political vulnerabilities for strategic gain. Ultimately, the cumulative weight of these choices might find both capitals drawn deeper into Sudan's volatile dynamics, pushing their presence far beyond the original Sahelian borders.

Could France and Russia both be drawn into a proxy confrontation in Sudan, regardless of their intentions?

Almost every power has an interest in Africa; it is no different for the Russian state, so Russia's interest in the Sahel and Sudan is primarily strategic and extractive. Through the Wagner Group, rebranded as the Africa Corps under direct Kremlin control following Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, Russia expanded its military presence in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, the Central African Republic, and Sudan, offering unconditional security support in exchange for mining rights, basing access, and geopolitical influence. In each of these countries, Wagner's entry followed the departure or expulsion of Western security actors, and in each case the model was the same: offer a regime its survival, extract its resources, and use the territory as a staging ground for wider operations.

Chad is the natural next target for this approach. Libya to the north, the Central African Republic to the south, and Sudan to the east are all, to varying degrees, already inside Russia's orbit, and the resulting pressure on N'Djamena from three directions at once follows a clear strategic logic. Chadian security services arrested Russian operatives at N'Djamena's airport as they attempted to infiltrate Chadian intelligence, Russian disinformation campaigns actively cultivated anti-French sentiment in Chadian public discourse, and Russian diplomatic engagement with Mahamat Déby, including a formal state visit to Moscow in January 2024, aimed to position Russia as an alternative to Western security partnerships, not a complement to them.

France's strategic interests in Africa are deeply material, reflecting its historical role as the continent's self-appointed gendarme. Beyond counterterrorism alone, Paris has anchored its military presence in the Sahel to secure vital uranium deposits, which feed the nuclear plants generating roughly seventy percent of French electricity, while simultaneously extracting financial leverage through the CFA franc architecture. As a result, the recent military expulsions from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger inflicted a severe blow to both French energy security and its claim to global power status. In this fracturing landscape, Chad emerges as more than France's final Sahelian ally: it is the indispensable geopolitical anchor keeping its western network connected to the vital Djibouti base in the Horn of Africa.

5.1 The Sahel's Human Cost as a Measure of the Geopolitics

The competition between these two powers is not an abstraction; it registers in a rising human toll, and the trend has only hardened in the most recent data. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, political violence killed more than ten thousand people across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in 2025 alone, and militant Islamist violence across the Sahel has averaged close to

ten thousand five hundred deaths a year over the past three years, more than double the annual toll recorded between 2020 and 2023. A single faction, the al-Qaeda-linked JNIM, now accounts for roughly eighty three percent of all Sahel fatalities tied to militant Islamist groups, a level of dominance that illustrates how concentrated the violence has become around one network rather than diffused across many. The violence is also spreading beyond its traditional core: ACLED recorded a sharp rise in fatalities in coastal Benin through 2025, and Niger's Tillabéri region became the deadliest single region in the central Sahel that same year. Read plainly, these numbers describe a security order in visible collapse, one whose trajectory tracks closely with the retreat of French structures and the parallel advance of Russian-linked alternatives into the resulting space, a shift analysts increasingly treat as one continuous process rather than two separate stories of departure and arrival.

5.2 Sudan as the Convergence Point

As a direct result, Sudan has emerged as the primary battleground for direct Franco-Russian competition, eclipsing their broader friction across sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel. Reporting indicates that Russia's Africa Corps has historically leveraged its partnership with the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces to extract and illicitly traffic Sudanese gold through Darfur, funneling it directly into Moscow's established logistics networks in Libya and the Central African Republic. Seeking to disrupt this pipeline, France has used its reestablished intelligence hub in Chad to map and monitor these precise transnational corridors. This intelligence friction reaches its sharpest point at the Maaten al-Sarra airbase in southern Libya; while Russian technicians and Syrian-recruited fighters use the facility just north of the Chadian border to coordinate clandestine weapons shipments into Sudan, French reconnaissance aircraft staging from N'Djamena maintain continuous airborne surveillance over the exact same logistics vectors.

If France's footprint in Chad deepens, Paris will almost certainly share more intelligence with the Chadian military. Because of Mahamat Déby's complex alignment with the anti-RSF coalition, it is highly speculative whether this tactical data actually makes its way to the Sudanese Armed Forces. Beyond this direct route lies a second, indirect one, running through Saudi Arabia (itself a key external backer of the SAF against the RSF, primarily through a checkbook diplomacy strategy that buys off paramilitary defectors and secures political concessions from Port Sudan). Since Riyadh maintains deep, institutional relationships with Western capitals, it remains highly speculative whether the tactical data France feeds to Chad might potentially face backchannel leakage. It is analytically plausible to suggest that French border reconnaissance originally meant only to secure N'Djamena might quietly find its way into SAF hands through these Saudi intermediaries, even if there is no public proof of this pipeline yet. Alternatively, Déby himself or his intermediaries might facilitate this transfer, routing the intelligence not directly to the SAF but to the place he went for quiet diplomacy during the Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. By using the Hajj as a diplomatic backdrop, Déby can maintain a convenient political cover with his other major Gulf financiers; instead of cutting off his multi-aligned engagements or showing any visible sign that those relationships are deteriorating, he can quietly pivot

to a new strategy of transferring intelligence to the other side, much as he previously did with physical weapons shipments.

Russia, meanwhile, is reportedly playing a double game. Moscow publicly backs the SAF to secure its promised naval base at Port Sudan, while multiple reports allege that it has simultaneously kept the RSF afloat through gold trafficking and weapons pipelines. If accurate, this two-track strategy would do more than give Russia leverage over the warring Sudanese factions; it could also position Moscow to intercept, monitor, and harvest the intelligence exchanges occurring among these various external actors. Visibility into what France, Chad, and Saudi Arabia are communicating behind closed doors would hand Russia a further layer of leverage over the external powers themselves, and, if this multi-layered intelligence contest is real, it raises the possibility that Paris and Moscow could find themselves on an escalating collision course, transforming the Franco-Russian rivalry into a more direct confrontation over the future of Sudan. More importantly, as the next section shows, it is a conflict that Mahamat Déby has learned to leverage masterfully to his own advantage, not simply survive.

6. Déby's Regional Chessboard: Playing Patrons Against Each Other

The preceding sections have described a landscape crowded with external actors, France, Russia, Haftar's Libya, and, waiting just beyond the frame, the Gulf capitals whose money keeps Sudan's war funded. It would be easy to treat each of these as a separate story with its own logic. But doing that completely misreads the real game playing out in N'Djamena. Every one of these relationships runs through a single decision maker, and understanding the Franco-Chadian reconciliation means understanding what Mahamat Idriss Déby specifically wants from each patron, what he has already extracted, and what it costs him to keep the arrangement standing. The next subsection sets out the theoretical key to that arrangement before the article turns to each patron in turn.

6.1 Omnibalancing as the Analytical Key

None of the individual relationships traced in this section make full sense read in isolation. Read together, through the lens of omnibalancing theory, they resolve into a single coherent strategy. The political scientist Steven R. David coined the term in a 1991 study of Third World alignment, arguing that leaders of fragile, coup-prone states do not choose foreign patrons the way great powers do. Omnibalancing departs from classical alliance theory in one crucial respect: it treats a ruler's foreign patrons as instruments for managing threats that are substantially internal, rather than as partners chosen for shared ideology or as a counterweight to a single dominant external rival. For Mahamat Déby, the primary dangers are not French, Russian, Emirati, Saudi, or Libyan in origin. They are Chadian: FACT rebels operating from Libyan soil, the possibility of mutiny within his own Zaghawa ethnic elite, and a deep well of public discontent that a wrong move with any single patron could ignite. Seen through that frame, Déby's foreign policy is not a search for allies. It is a search for service

providers, each supplying a specific tool against a specific domestic vulnerability, and each kept close enough to be useful without ever gaining the leverage to dictate his internal choices.

This is, in a very real sense, his father's playbook rebuilt for a more crowded and more dangerous regional environment. Idriss Déby ran a version of omnibalancing with a single instrument: France, and France alone, propped up his government against successive rebel columns for three decades. Mahamat Déby has kept that French instrument but multiplied it. Where his father needed only one patron because Chad's threats were comparatively simple, an insurgency here, a border incursion there, his son faces a threat environment complicated by Sudan's civil war, and he has built a five-sided portfolio to match it. France anchors his eastern surveillance and buys him insurance against Haftar. Russia, engaged more by choice than by necessity, gives him a credible pivot threat that keeps Paris competing for his loyalty instead of assuming it. The Emirates reportedly supplied him with early-war financial liquidity and patronage capital, tolerated for as long as the costs stayed manageable and restricted once the internal backlash grew too dangerous to absorb. Saudi Arabia is rising to fill exactly the space that Emirati retrenchment has opened, offering money and legitimacy without the same domestic security liability. Khalifa Haftar, an old enemy turned necessary partner, is neither courted nor discarded, simply managed carefully enough that his territory never becomes a staging ground against N'Djamena. Every one of these relationships performs a specific job. None of them is allowed to become so indispensable that its withdrawal could hold Déby hostage, and that, more than any single alliance, is the substance of his strategy. Scholars have already applied omnibalancing to the elder Déby's own record, arguing that his troop contributions to international interventions were themselves a survival tool rather than a foreign-policy conviction. The son's innovation is not the logic itself, which he inherited, but the scale at which he now runs it.

6.2 The Existential Stakes: Why Déby Cannot Stay Neutral

Can Déby's survival strategy be separated from the Sudan war?

This survival logic is not abstract theory; it shapes Déby's single most consequential recent decision. His choice to re-engage France is not primarily a counterterrorism calculation. It is a calculation of regime survival, one inseparable from the regional trajectory of Sudan's war and from the specific way that war has begun reshaping Chad's own ethnic security balance. The Rapid Support Forces draw predominantly from Arab tribes in Darfur that share deep kinship ties with influential Arab factions inside Chad. Conversely, the Chadian ruling elite, dominated by the Zaghawa ethnic group, belongs to the exact community the Rapid Support Forces have systematically targeted across the border in Darfur.

This cross-border ethnic friction has provoked profound outrage among Déby's own military brass. Zaghawa officers crossing into Darfur have discovered their kin among the victims of RSF atrocities. By initially tolerating the Rapid Support Forces' logistics network on Chadian soil, even while reaping

the financial dividends that pipeline provided, Déby inadvertently triggered an existential mutiny within his own palace guard. Ultimately, this left him dangerously exposed, trapped simultaneously between an ethnically driven security threat on his eastern border and an imminent domestic political collapse if he failed to act against it.

The pressure compounded when the Rapid Support Forces' cross-border incursions turned direct and deadly. Multiple skirmishes in eastern Chad and a drone strike on the town of Tiné killed Chadian soldiers and civilians, forcing Déby to confront a military threat he had previously tried to manage through diplomacy alone. Having played a dangerous double game, publicly neutral while privately permitting a foreign patron's weapons to move through his territory, Déby found the strategy backfiring on every front at once: a furious officer corps, a border under direct attack, and a financial patron whose interests were actively endangering his own ethnic base. What follows in this section is an account of how he is now trying to extract himself from that trap, patron by patron, without losing any of them entirely.

6.3 Déby and the Emirati Corridor: What He Allowed, and What He Is Now Restricting

For roughly the first two years of Sudan's war, Déby's most consequential external relationship was with the Gulf financier that had become Chad's principal external backer. Multiple investigative reports and United Nations Panel of Experts findings have raised detailed concerns about that patron's role in sustaining the Rapid Support Forces, including the use of Amdjarass airport in eastern Chad and the Maaten al-Sarra airbase in southern Libya as transit hubs for weapons and financial transfers. These are contested findings that the government in question disputes, but the pattern they describe runs directly through territory Déby controls, and for a period he allowed it to run, in exchange for investment and financial support that a chronically cash-poor Chadian state badly needed.

What has changed is Déby's own calculation, not the underlying facts of the corridor. Facing the internal fury described above, and facing mounting international scrutiny, Déby has scaled back the logistics arrangement that once moved through Chadian territory, restricting flights and tightening oversight of his southern border. He has not, however, achieved anything close to a clean break, and a recent joint investigation by Lighthouse Reports, the outlet Evident, and Sudan War Monitor, published in the final days of June 2026, explains why.

Reporters working in the Kufra region of eastern Libya, along the border triangle with Egypt and Sudan, documented four previously unidentified Rapid Support Forces training camps, including a facility labeled Camp 17, where defectors described training alongside Libyan National Army personnel and foreign contractors. The investigation traced regular convoys of fuel and modified vehicles moving between eastern Libya and Darfur, sustained by the same Gulf financing network that once ran through Chad. Restricting his own territory reduces Déby's exposure and his domestic political cost, but it does not meaningfully choke off his patron's ability to reach the Rapid Support

Forces, since the Libyan route, run by a different set of actors entirely, absorbs whatever Chad no longer carries. Déby's retreat from the corridor is real, but it buys him distance, not leverage.

None of this has stopped Déby from continuing to court Abu Dhabi directly, and the timing of his most recent trip there is instructive. In early July 2026, Déby traveled to the UAE for a working visit, where President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan received him and the two governments advanced negotiations on a UAE-Chad Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement covering trade, development, and renewable energy. The visit did nothing to reverse Déby's restrictions on the logistics corridor tied to the Rapid Support Forces; if anything, it confirmed that he can tighten the military dimension of the relationship while deepening its economic dimension in the same breath. That is the omnibalancing instinct in its purest form: Déby is not choosing between the UAE and its rivals so much as unbundling the relationship itself, keeping the investment and trade ties that serve his treasury while cutting the specific logistics function that was endangering his own officer corps.

6.4 Déby and Riyadh: Building the Alternative

Omnibalancing requires a substitute whenever a patron's utility starts to decline, and Saudi Arabia is emerging as exactly that substitute. If distancing himself from his Gulf financier costs Déby leverage rather than gaining it, he needs another source of both money and legitimacy to fill the space, and that is the specific function Riyadh now serves in his calculations. As a co-sponsor of the 2023 Jeddah peace process, Riyadh maintains explicit support for the Sudanese Armed Forces as the sole legitimate state authority in Sudan. From the Saudi perspective, a victory by the Rapid Support Forces would establish a destabilizing precedent of paramilitary ascendancy capable of refracting across the Red Sea toward Yemen.

Déby's recent diplomatic realignment toward Riyadh, exemplified by travel during the Hajj season that regional observers interpreted as a venue for backchannel negotiations, does not reflect an ideological alignment with the SAF. Instead, it operates on a framework of mutual strategic convergence. N'Djamena offers to obstruct the Chadian supply corridors crucial to RSF logistics. In return, Déby secures Saudi financial assistance and the political insulation provided by a major regional patron whose interests do not conflict with the security of his domestic ethnic constituency. Where the Emirati relationship exposed Déby to the anger of his own military, the Saudi alternative delivers necessary state liquidity without incurring those immediate internal security liabilities, at least for now.

6.5 Déby and Haftar: The Necessary Frenemy

No relationship in Déby's portfolio carries more historical irony than the one he maintains with Khalifa Haftar, the same Libyan general his father captured on the battlefield in 1987 and whom French and American intelligence subsequently rehabilitated into a regional power in his own right. Today the two men manage a joint border force in the Tibesti region, a pragmatic arrangement built to contain gold-smuggling cartels and prevent a direct Libya-Chad confrontation even as their

respective external patrons back opposing sides in Sudan's war. Déby needs this arrangement precisely because the Lighthouse Reports investigation makes clear that Haftar's territory, not Chad's, has become the more resilient half of the corridor feeding the Rapid Support Forces. Reporting from the same investigation, along with regional coverage, indicates that Egypt and Saudi Arabia have pressed Haftar directly to curtail the network operating from his side of the border, yet his own financial and military dependence on his Gulf patron has kept the corridor functioning despite that pressure. Déby cannot force Haftar's hand any more than Cairo or Riyadh has managed to, which leaves him structurally dependent on a working relationship with the one regional actor whose territory could otherwise be used to punish him.

Haftar's patronage structure carries a historical footnote that could matter again. When the CIA and the National Front for the Salvation of Libya organized his original fighting force in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia supplied a substantial share of the funding alongside Israeli training teams, well before Abu Dhabi became his signature Gulf patron during the post-2014 civil war. That older Saudi-Haftar channel gives Riyadh a plausible, historically grounded route back into eastern Libya's patronage structure, should it choose to use one. Riyadh's institutional weight in Washington and other Western capitals, considerably heavier than Abu Dhabi's despite the UAE's own deep security relationships, would let Saudi Arabia offer Haftar a form of financial backing that carries less of the reputational exposure now attached to Emirati support for the Rapid Support Forces. Were Riyadh to expand its role in Haftar's court substantially, the Emirates would not simply disappear from eastern Libya; more likely, Abu Dhabi would look for a hedge of its own, and the most available one runs toward Moscow, whose Africa Corps already operates from bases inside Haftar-controlled territory. A UAE hedge toward Russia would add an entirely new axis to the corridor this article traces, layering a Gulf rivalry between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on top of the France-Russia competition already unfolding across the same territory. Nothing in the public record confirms that this realignment is underway, but the historical precedent for a Saudi return to Haftar's ledger is real, and Déby, who tracks every shift in his neighbors' patronage arrangements as closely as he tracks his own, would be the first regional actor to notice it.

That dependency carries a specific risk that Déby cannot fully hedge away. If he moves to close the Chadian corridor entirely, the same financial network that once moved supplies through his own territory could, with modest redirection, fund the FACT rebels still operating from southern Libya, or reactivate other northern Chadian dissident networks, using exactly the desert infrastructure that Haftar's own territory already provides. A direct Haftar-Déby confrontation remains unlikely given their joint border arrangement, but a hybrid proxy response, in which Haftar simply looks away while others act, is entirely plausible, and it is this scenario, more than any conventional military threat, that keeps Déby from pushing his restrictions on the Emirati corridor any further than he already has.

6.6 Déby and Moscow: The Threat He Manufactures

Of all five relationships in Déby's portfolio, Moscow is the clearest case of omnibalancing as manufactured leverage rather than genuine alignment. While Déby acts out of necessity when dealing with Abu Dhabi and Haftar, he uses Moscow entirely by choice. His January 2024 trip to meet Vladimir Putin, where he expanded cultural deals and let Russian military instructors into N'Djamena, served as a clear warning to the West. By showing he could easily pivot to Russia, just as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger did before pushing France out, Déby forced French negotiators to offer him better terms to keep his loyalty. He made sure Paris had to compete for Chad instead of taking his alliance for granted. Déby knows exactly how to manage this balance. He keeps Moscow at a low, visible simmer to retain advantage with Western powers, while avoiding the deep structural dependency that now characterizes the relations between Mali, Niger, and Russia's Africa Corps.

6.7 Déby and Paris: Cashing In the Insurance Policy

Within this broader landscape, France offers Mahamat Déby a unique advantage that his other external partners simply cannot match. Even though France keeps its presence small by sending only drone specialists and intelligence personnel, this limited support gives N'Djamena a massive advantage. These French teams provide the aerial surveillance and signals intelligence that Chad needs to watch its eastern border with Sudan. Because France handles this high-tech monitoring, Déby does not have to pull his soldiers away from the northern border with Libya. This technical assistance allows Déby to handle two active security threats at the exact same time. He can watch the Rapid Support Forces fighting to the east, while also keeping an eye on a potential alliance between General Haftar and the FACT rebel remnants to the north.

Crucially, France is the only international partner that can position itself strategically between Déby and Haftar. Haftar continues to run cross-border logistics networks in the region and shows no signs of stopping his activities. The French presence therefore serves as an essential security insurance policy for the Chadian government. France acts as a direct physical and diplomatic buffer between the two leaders. This buffer protects Déby if Haftar decides to look the other way and let rebel forces cross the border to threaten N'Djamena. Furthermore, because this military cooperation relies on a quiet, low-profile footprint instead of a massive, highly visible military base, it does not harm Déby's political standing at home. Both capitals intentionally chose this limited setup to avoid triggering the kind of public nationalist protests that caused diplomatic breakups in the past.

6.8 The Asymmetric Retaliation Risk

Omnibalancing carries a cost that classical alliance theory does not have to price in. Every patron Déby uses as leverage against another is also a patron he could someday need to defend against, and read across the five relationships this section has traced, that retaliation risk does not sit with a single country. It sits, in different forms and different intensities, with nearly all of them.

The most direct risk still runs through his estranged Gulf financier and the Libyan networks it can reach via Haftar. If Déby closes Chad's own corridor entirely, that financial network could, with modest redirection, fund FACT's fifteen hundred to two thousand fighters in southern Libya, or reactivate other northern Chadian dissident networks, using the same desert infrastructure Haftar's own territory already provides. Russia's leverage is more diffuse but no less real: the Africa Corps' presence in Libya, the Central African Republic, and Sudan gives Moscow several indirect routes to pressure N'Djamena without ever declaring hostile intent, a card it does not currently appear to be playing but plainly retains the capacity to. Saudi Arabia's risk profile is the mildest of the five, precisely because Riyadh's interests in Chad align with Déby's own moves against the Rapid Support Forces rather than against him. Haftar's risk is structural rather than deliberate: he does not need to turn on Déby actively, he only needs to keep looking away while others use his territory, which is functionally almost as dangerous. France, finally, functions as Déby's insurance against all of the above rather than a retaliation risk in its own right, though the arrangement carries a quieter cost of its own: it makes him dependent on a partner whose patience for Chad's multi-aligned hedging could shift for reasons entirely outside his control.

None of these risks is severe enough on its own to force Déby's hand, and that is the point of running five patrons instead of one. Omnibalancing spreads exposure the same way it spreads leverage: no single relationship, however strained, can by itself end his presidency, but the cumulative weight of all five, mismanaged at once, could.

7. The Escalation Threshold: From Intelligence Support to Active Intervention

What happens if Déby's border strategy provokes a counter-response from RSF-affiliated networks?

This strategic setup is exactly where France faces its highest risk of becoming involved in the conflict in Sudan. If Déby completely closes the Chadian border to convoys heading to the Rapid Support Forces, the networks he disrupts have powerful ways to react. These actors could redirect their financial resources to fund political instability inside Chad. At the same time, because of broader strategic competition in the region, Russian Africa Corps forces operating from the Maaten al-Sarra base in southern Libya might increase their involvement and offer support to border raiders. Furthermore, the situation becomes highly volatile if French intelligence teams share live tracking data with Chadian forces during a cross-border raid by the Rapid Support Forces. This action would represent actual indirect participation by France, which could quickly lead to direct military entanglement if rival powers decide to ramp up their own proxy-war support in the area.

In military reality, sharing live battlefield intelligence frequently leads to direct combat engagement, and France has crossed this line in the past. French Mirage fighter jets previously bombed rebel columns to defend Chadian sovereignty against internal threats. The operational steps that led to those

historic airstrikes match the current setup perfectly. French equipment provided the tracking data, Chadian forces asked for emergency air support, and France launched strikes to protect the partner government. If French surveillance detects a massive cross-border raid that Chadian forces cannot stop on their own, this same cycle will likely repeat.

This potential danger raises a critical question that French leaders need to answer: how exactly will France handle this situation if a border crisis breaks out? France could easily find itself in the middle of the Sudanese conflict without ever intending to join it. The rules of the military alliance that Paris promised to honor would automatically pull French forces into the fighting. Ultimately, France will find itself stuck in this war because Mahamat Déby is simply much better than his father at using this Western alliance to protect his own presidency.

The engagement of the European Union adds a further dimension to this strategic landscape. France's return to Chad has been accompanied by European-funded surveillance flights and a broader European interest in Chad's stability. This interest serves as a buffer against the migration pressures generated by the conflict in Sudan. While the largest displacement crisis is unfolding inside Sudan instead of Chad, its effects are already reshaping Chadian demographics, security structures, and domestic political stability. European actors are beginning to treat these shifts as a direct European security concern. France's bilateral re-engagement in Chad functions, in this sense, as an informal European border-management operation. This framing provides Paris with political cover domestically while deepening the structural commitments underlying the alliance.

This European effort connects directly to a broader, highly realistic Western strategy that extends into neighboring Libya. European nations maintain an active dialogue with General Khalifa Haftar because his forces control vast coastal and desert territories. This control makes him a critical gatekeeper for curbing irregular migration into Europe. Moving beyond European policy, the United States has also deepened its engagement with Haftar, specifically focusing on initiatives to strengthen border security and address shared threats. This overlapping Western approach creates a complex scenario for Chad. While Western powers use surveillance and intelligence to help Déby protect his borders, they simultaneously work with Haftar to manage migration and stabilize regional borders.

This dual engagement highlights a major contradiction in Western policy. France and the European Union back Déby to secure Chad against northern threats. At the exact same time, Washington and Brussels treat Haftar as an indispensable partner for North African and Mediterranean stability. For Déby, this environment means that his ultimate safety guarantee against Haftar does not come from a Western promise to stop the Libyan commander. Instead, it relies on the fact that France and the United States are deeply embedded on both sides of the border. This reality provides Déby with a crucial security option. It ensures that any sudden, unprovoked move by Haftar would directly disrupt the broader, multi-billion-dollar Western border-control system that spans from N'Djamena all the way to the Mediterranean coast.

Will France be drawn into the Sudan war through the logic of its own interests, regardless of its stated intentions?

Available empirical evidence strongly indicates that France is moving toward a highly probable strategic entrapment, not a remote operational risk. When Paris initiated its military return to Chad, French planners operated under a narrow, self-limiting mandate designed purely to restore a faltering geopolitical foothold in Central Africa and insulate the vulnerable Déby regime from domestic collapse. These strategists explicitly sought to avoid any direct entanglement in the neighboring Sudanese civil war.

However, this tactical re-engagement has generated an independent strategic momentum that French officials can no longer effectively restrain. President Déby recognizes that France's broader regional survival depends heavily on his cooperation, and he is moving to deploy French military assets in support of a unilateral border strategy of his own design. This frontier policy directly empowers the Sudanese Armed Forces coalition, an alliance Déby has strategically chosen to reinforce. Militarizing and sealing this border would, in consequence, choke off rival transnational networks, which would logically interpret the closure as an overt act of geopolitical hostility.

When these targeted networks inevitably launch a retaliatory response, France's official "intelligence-only" operational protocol will be pushed to a definitive breaking point. While Paris insists its troops will maintain a strictly non-combat posture, historical reality refutes this ambition. The specific defensive interventions of 2008, 2019, and 2021 prove that whenever the Chadian state faces an existential threat, France consistently abandons its passive surveillance mandate and deploys direct kinetic force to preserve its partner in N'Djamena.

While France confronts a high probability of involuntary escalation, the strategic implications for Russia run in the opposite direction but point toward the same volatile conclusion. A deeper French commitment to monitoring Chad's eastern border directly threatens the Africa Corps' gold logistics and the Rapid Support Forces' supply-chain sustainability. If French surveillance exposes Rapid Support Forces convoys to Chadian or Sudanese Armed Forces interdiction, Russia's primary African revenue source faces immediate risk.

Moscow therefore has a structural incentive to strike back, whether through rebel activation, disinformation escalation, or direct pressure from Libyan and Sudanese positions. This threat remains active even if the Kremlin has not yet made a formal decision to escalate. The competition in Sudan, in other words, does not function as an accidental backdrop to the France-Chad story. It drives the entire conflict. Déby stands directly at the center of this friction, deciding, transaction by transaction, how far each of his patrons can go.

8. France's Structural Economic and Geographic Interests in the Sahel-Sudan-Horn Axis

8.1 Energy, Currency, and the Irreplaceable Sahel

France's presence in the Sahel rests on tangible economic advantage, not abstract geopolitics. Paris relies on nuclear energy for roughly seventy percent of its domestic electricity generation and historically extracted a critical share of its raw uranium from Niger through the state-backed mining conglomerate Orano. The nationalization of these French-linked mining concessions following the 2023 Niger coup delivered a direct energy-security shock to the French state.

Simultaneously, the structural architecture of the CFA franc, which historically granted France decades of monetary leverage over West African economies by requiring member nations to deposit half of their foreign exchange reserves directly into the French Treasury, faces an unprecedented existential challenge. The newly formed Alliance of Sahel States, comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, is actively moving to dismantle this post-colonial monetary framework and establish sovereign currencies.

This institutional fracture also carries heavy commercial penalties. The extensive gold reserves of Burkina Faso and Mali, two of the continent's primary producers, are slipping entirely beyond French commercial reach. Newly discovered lithium deposits, vital to Europe's green-energy transition, are being rapidly absorbed into competitive Chinese and Russian state-backed economic networks instead. Because of these systemic losses, France faces a compounding strategic retreat across the continent. Paris cannot afford to abandon the Sahel entirely, and Chad functions as its last significant anchor of leverage against a broader expulsion from the region.

8.2 The N'Djamena-Djibouti Axis and the Geographic Impossibility of Neutrality

What does the geography of French military presence reveal about the structural impossibility of neutrality?

Military planners have long described Chad as France's desert aircraft carrier in the Sahel, serving precisely the same force-projection function that Djibouti serves in the Horn of Africa. On a map of Africa, N'Djamena and Djibouti form a near-perfect horizontal line across the continent's belly. By maintaining both anchors simultaneously, France historically commanded a continent-spanning military axis capable of projecting power across North, West, East, or Central Africa within hours. The Adjani air base in N'Djamena functioned as the command center for Operation Barkhane, France's five-country counterterrorism deployment, while France's Djibouti base monitors the Bab el-Mandeb and Red Sea shipping lanes that carry roughly twelve percent of global trade.

The Sudan war sits directly on this axis. Houthi strikes on Red Sea shipping, in which France's Djibouti base is operationally involved through the European Union's Operation Aspides, are financed through

networks that regional analysts trace to some of the same Gulf capitals sustaining the Rapid Support Forces. The cross-border pressure threatening Chad's eastern flank affects the same territory France's N'Djamena re-engagement is designed to secure. France's reentry into Chad in 2026 is therefore also a partial restoration of its continental axis. Whether Paris acknowledges it or not, maintaining that axis requires having a position on Sudan's conflict, because the conflict runs through the middle of the axis itself.

8.3 The Africa Forward Summit and France's East African Pivot

France's Africa strategy has shifted markedly since the Sahel expulsions. Rather than attempting to reclaim its colonial backyard through force or treaty, Paris has pivoted toward East Africa, investing in what it describes as anchor-state relationships with non-Francophone powers. This reorientation was solidified at the Africa Forward Summit in Nairobi in May 2026, which Macron co-hosted as a signal of France's repositioning toward dynamic East African partners, particularly Ethiopia and Kenya. The Chad re-engagement and the East Africa pivot are not separate strategies. They are two elements of a single, if fragile, response to the loss of the western Sahelian network. Chad functions as the firewall against further Russian expansion toward the Red Sea, while Djibouti and the newer East African partnerships serve as the forward positions from which France seeks to remain relevant in the continent's most strategically dynamic region.

9. Thematic Assessment: Implications for the Horn of Africa

The most substantial insight arising from this analysis is that the Sudan war is not contained within Sudanese borders. It is the eastern node of a transnational destabilization architecture whose western dimension runs through FACT's Libyan bases, whose financial circuits run through Gulf capitals that Déby is actively working to play against one another, whose Russian dimension runs through Africa Corps logistics in Libya, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan, and whose French dimension runs through the intelligence and surveillance capabilities Paris provides to a Chadian president using them to manage a war he cannot publicly acknowledge shaping.

For the Horn of Africa, the implications extend well beyond Sudan's immediate neighbors. The same Gulf financing networks implicated in sustaining the war in Sudan have built comparable port and military infrastructure elsewhere along the Red Sea coast. The UAE's DP World holds a majority stake in Somaliland's Berbera port under a 2018 development deal, and the Emirates ran a substantial military and logistics base at Eritrea's Assab port between 2015 and 2021 before scaling it back. More recent reporting suggests Eritrea has since opened preferential access at Assab to Saudi Arabia, a shift that would extend the same Gulf rivalry already visible in Sudan and Libya into a third Red Sea location. Together, these footholds mean that the external architecture shaping Sudan's war is not confined to Sudan's borders; it is being built, port by port and base by base, along the entire Red Sea coastline. The weapons and gold flows sustaining the Sudan war cross through Libya, Chad, and

Egypt, connecting the Atlantic Sahel to the Red Sea in a single smuggling corridor. Mass migration, with nearly a million Sudanese refugees already inside eastern Chad and further waves moving east toward the Horn, is altering demographics, shifting armed-group recruitment patterns, and creating resource competition that directly threatens South Sudan's own fragile border areas. The collapse of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's mediation capacity, paralyzed by the Sudan conflict's polarizing effect on its own member states, leaves the Horn without a functional regional security architecture at precisely the moment its challenges are intensifying most sharply.

10. Conclusion

The question of whether France can be dragged into the Sudan war has, in a real sense, already been answered by the logic of events. France returned to Chad because Chad's security is collapsing under pressures that originate substantially in Sudan, and because Mahamat Déby has proven a considerably more sophisticated operator of great-power patronage than his father ever needed to be. Idriss Déby ran a single-patron version of omnibalancing, leaning on France alone to manage every external threat his government faced. His son has rebuilt that same survival logic for a five-patron world: he manages France, Russia, Saudi Arabia, his estranged Gulf financier in Abu Dhabi, and Khalifa Haftar simultaneously, extracting something specific from each while allowing none of them full control over his choices. That is the essence of omnibalancing as this article has applied it: foreign patrons treated not as allies bound by shared values but as service providers, each solving a distinct internal problem, none permitted to grow so central that its withdrawal could topple him.

French intelligence assets will keep monitoring the corridors through which Rapid Support Forces-bound supplies reportedly move, because that is precisely what Déby needs them to do. If that monitoring leads to interception, and interception leads to confrontation, the sequence that follows will not be a French choice. It will be a French consequence, set in motion by a Chadian president executing a strategy considerably older than the crisis it now serves.

The history of the Franco-Chadian relationship suggests this consequence will arrive not through a deliberate political decision made in Paris but through an operational incident at the border: a moment when French surveillance detects a threat, Chadian forces call for support, and the precedents of 2008, 2019, and 2021 reassert themselves. France will not have chosen to enter Sudan's war. The mechanics of an alliance it has honored for four decades will have carried it there, an alliance that two generations of Chadian leaders have learned to instrumentalize with increasing sophistication, and that Mahamat Déby now runs across five patrons rather than one. The broader lesson, one great powers consistently underestimate, is that states do not always choose their wars. Sometimes wars travel down supply corridors, across porous borders, and through the accumulated weight of alliance obligations until the threshold between observer and participant disappears. France has already crossed that threshold in

the Sahel. Sudan's war, guided by Mahamat Déby's own hand more than either Paris or its rivals may care to admit, is moving it further every day.

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