

Athens Institute

Working Paper No. 2025-2789-34

20 November 2025

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Shaltout, Hoda (2025) The Neoclassical Realist Face of the UAE's Foreign Policy towards the Sudanese Crisis. Published by the Athens Institute: Working Paper No. 2025-2789-34, 20 November 2025. Pages 1-18

No.: 2025-2789-34

Date: 20 November 2025

DOI:

ISSN: 2241-2891

Previous Working Papers available at: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

This series began in 2012 and was known as the Conference Paper Series until 2024. In 2025, the series was renamed and is now called the Working Paper Series.

Athens Institute (www.atiner.gr)
2025

The Neoclassical Realist Face of the UAE's Foreign Policy towards the Sudanese Crisis

*By Hoda Shaltout**

Since the rise of Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) in 2004, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as an essential regional actor in the Middle East and Africa (MEA). There was a distinct approach, particularly evident in the ongoing Sudanese crisis. This research utilizes Neoclassical Realism (NCR) to explain why foreign policy (FP) choices are made and under which systemic structural conditions unit-level factors are likely to intervene between systemic stimuli and state FP choice. The research adopts a qualitative case study design, drawing exclusively on secondary data to enable an in-depth, contextually grounded analysis of the selected case and to generate theoretically informed insights. Through analyzing the UAE's statements and media reports, the research argues that the UAE's FP in Sudan is a byproduct of systemic variables, such as regional dynamics and strategic contemplations, unit-level variables that determine the security imperatives and economic interests shaping the UAE's FP towards Sudan, as well as explanatory variables such as the perceptions of MBZ. The key question the research seeks to answer is: How did the above factors shape the UAE's FP? The findings of this research contribute to the understanding of the UAE's FP behavior towards Sudan. It provides insights into the complex dynamics of regional politics, highlighting the role of power and the prioritization of self-interest in shaping regional interventions. It also signals the UAE's leverage as a key regional player, enabling it to influence the trajectory of the Sudanese crisis to protect its own interests, signifying realism.

Keywords: Neoclassical Realism, Foreign Policy, UAE, Sudan

Introduction

Since 2004, the UAE has actively pursued a comprehensive FP strategy in the MEA. This approach has been driven by a range of factors, including economic diversification, regional security concerns, and aspirations for regional leadership. By exploring the neoclassical realist FP approach adopted by the UAE towards the ongoing conflict in Sudan, this study contributes to the emerging understanding of the UAE's evolving FP in the region, thereby helping elucidate the fluid regional dynamics in the MEA. This is crucial for gaining insights into the UAE's role as a major regional player in navigating complex regional developments.

The study provides an overview of NCR as a theory of international relations that guides the FP of the UAE, offering insights into the motivations and strategic considerations behind this engagement, while considering the interplay between the UAE's domestic politics, regional dynamics, and its engagement with Sudan. It

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seeks to answer the question of how synergies and tensions among systemic and unit-level factors contribute to the UAE's FP towards Sudan.

This paper examines the case study of the UAE's involvement in Sudan, focusing on its economic ties, historical alliances, and geopolitical positioning. Through qualitative analysis of official statements, government documents, and media reports, the study reveals that the UAE's realist FP in Sudan is driven by a combination of systemic variables, such as the turbulence caused by the Sudanese case and the perceived threats emanating from Sudan's political instability and radical groups that could potentially destabilize the region, domestic unit variables such as the UAE's direct economic interests and security imperatives, and the explanatory variables, primarily relating to the perceptions of MBZ. It unpacks how systemic incentives are filtered through domestic and perceptual factors.

This research also sheds light on the UAE's calculated engagement with various political actors in Sudan, both government and non-state interests. It highlights the UAE's support for General Muhammad Hamdan 'Hemedti' Dagolo, who is at odds with international recognition and with its closest allies, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Egypt.

The findings of this research contribute to the understanding of the UAE's FP behavior within the broader MEA region.

In the first part, the paper outlines the theoretical framework and the rationale for adopting a realist approach. The second part sheds light on the current Sudanese crisis. The third part explains the region's systemic and structural dynamics. The fourth part examines the unit factors that define the UAE's direct interests in Sudan. It then explains the Emirati FP's approach to the current Sudanese crisis as an outcome and concludes with a final section.

Theoretical Framework

NCR is an FP theory that gained momentum in the 1990s as a response to the limitations of other international relations theories, presenting itself as a middle ground between realism and global politics, and examining the effect of domestic politics on FP (Helayel, 2009).¹ Unlike other realists, such as Waltz for example, who defines the international system by anarchy and the distribution of capabilities (polarity), which is a purely systemic level of analysis, excluding domestic politics, leaders, and ideas, NCR acknowledges that systemic pressures are filtered by domestic politics and leader perceptions, which require interpretive methods to study (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016).²

NCR typically focuses on interstate competition rather than cooperation (Ripsman 2017) and extends the neorealist approach by underscoring the role of the international system in shaping the constraints and opportunities for states' FP

¹Helayel, S. (2009). Responding to constraints: Foreign policy behavior in the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East (Unpublished master's thesis). Concordia University, Department of Political Science, Montreal.

²Ripsman, N. M., Taliaferro, J. W., & Lobell, S. E. (2016). *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics*. Oxford University Press.

actions. Unlike neorealism, NCR addresses the uneasy relationship between systemic variables and external outcomes for states, acknowledging state agency (Donelli and Pericoli 2024). It retains an eclectic nature that allows for the consideration of domestic variables such as perceptions, ideology, public opinion and political culture, in conjunction with external inputs (Foulon and Meibauer 2020). Among the intervening variables that neoclassical realism identifies are the perceptions of leaders: leaders do not always respond rationally to external stimuli and while they may rightfully perceive the threats and gains of the international system, they may fall into “traps and mental shortcuts” that instigate “suboptimal or irrational decisions” (Lobell 2018).

The influence of the international system on state behaviour, coupled with regional/global threats and fluid alliances, produces effects comparable to those seen in situations of clear and imminent threats (Donelli and Pericoli 2024). These conditions often present a spectrum of state policy options, rather than a single optimal policy dictated by international circumstances (Ripsman 2017).

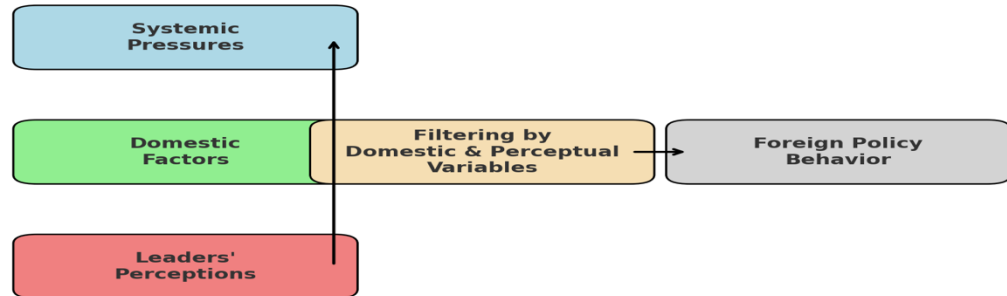
Despite the relevance of the geopolitical dynamics, the intervening variables at the unit level interact with the external dimension and define the ways the latter is interpreted and acted upon and the level of threat assessed (Donelli and Pericoli 2024). Threat assessment determines the behaviour of different states in response to the same international stimuli by shaping the geopolitical contours within which they conduct their foreign policy (Foulon 2015). According to the model developed by NCR, threat assessment is nested and segregated. Three different levels can be identified: systemic, subsystemic and domestic (Lobell 2009). Their borders are blurred and often overlap (Cooper 2003).

And while NCR recognizes that systemic factors shape a state's security environment, domestic politics and elite preferences also influence its decision-making process. Gideon Rose argues that “a theory of foreign policy limited to systemic factors alone is bound to be inaccurate much of the time.”³ Therefore, to analyze how states interpret external threats and systemic pressure, the analysis must include unit-level intervening variables, such as the decision-maker's perceptions and domestic state structures, since internal as well as external politics can constrain state leaders.⁴

³Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy. *World Politics*, 51(1), 144–172. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100007814>

⁴ibid

Flow of Neoclassical Realism (Gideon Rose)



The above figure illustrates Gideon Rose's (1998) conceptualization of NCR, which situates FP outcomes at the intersection of systemic, domestic, and perceptual variables. While systemic pressures—such as the distribution of material capabilities and structural constraints—establish the broad parameters of state behavior, they do not determine FP directly. Instead, these external stimuli are filtered through domestic factors, including institutional configurations, interest-group pressures, state capacity, and political leaders' perceptions and interpretations. The resulting interaction generates distinct FP choices that cannot be fully explained by systemic theories alone.

This provides a solid theoretical framework that bridges the spatial (domestic–international), cognitive (matter–ideas), and temporal (present–future).⁵ This can be considered NCR's primary contribution, as it introduces intervening variables between the independent (system-level) and dependent (state behavior) variables.⁶ NCR has many merits. It supplies the state's complete picture by detailing how system-level independent variables are translated through the mediating variables of state power into dependent variables of FP decision-making and security strategies.⁷ Ripsman et al. (2016, pp. 59–71) broadly group the intervening variables under the NCR approach into a four-way typology: 'perceptions of state leaders, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutional arrangements'; out of these principal types, the 'state-society relations' cluster contains 'elite consensus' as a mediating variable that can help or hinder FP choices.⁸ Moreover, neoclassical realists believe that the structure of the system does not predetermine

⁵Foulon, M. (2015). Neoclassical realism: Challengers and bridging identities. *International Studies Review*, 17(4), 635–661. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12252>

⁶Duan, X., and Aldamer, S. (2022). The Saudi Arabia–China relationship is at a crossroads. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 14(1), 114–128.

⁷Taliaferro, J. W. (2006). State building for future wars: Neoclassical realism and the resource-extractive state. *Security Studies*, 15(3), 464–495. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410601028370>

⁸Ripsman, N. M., Taliaferro, J. W., & Lobell, S. E. (2016). *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics*. Oxford University Press.

the state's decisions. Instead, it provides the actors with opportunities and constraints “within the predefined geopolitical context.”⁹

This framework is particularly useful for this study, as it provides insight on the factors that compel regional powers to intervene beyond their established regional order and foster increased interaction across different regional spaces. Scholars have increasingly underlines the need to examine FP policy decision-making processes within Middle Eastern states to understand their regional strategy (Salloukh 1996; Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2014; Darwich and Kaarbo 2019). The interplay between international and domestic dimensions, often referred to as “intermestic” (Korany 2013), is an enduring variable in the political and security dynamics of the Middle East (Lynch 2016).

Applying this framework to the UAE-Sudan relationship allows us to consider numerous factors, including the UAE's strategic priorities, concerns, perceptions of threats and opportunities, and regional power competition in the MEA.

As NCR emphasizes, systemic imperatives are mediated by domestic and perceptual filters. Domestically, Sudan's gold sector provides a crucial material incentive for the UAE, which has sought to secure access to gold through partnerships with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), thereby linking FP to national economic interests and the regime's rentier political economy. At the perceptual level, Emirati leaders perceive Sudan not as a strategic theater but also as an arena where supporting local proxies, such as the RSF, advances their broader vision of countering political Islam, containing democratic movements, and positioning the UAE as a decisive regional actor.

Engaging with NCR's internal debates further refines the analysis. Critics argue that NCR risks becoming “too eclectic,” since it integrates multiple levels of analysis (Ripsman et al., 2016). However, the UAE's Sudan policy exemplifies why such eclecticism is necessary: Systemic competition explains why Sudan matters geopolitically, but only by incorporating domestic economic incentives (gold) and leader perceptions (fear of Islamist resurgence, and desire for regional prestige) can we fully explain the divergence from the KSA's more stability-oriented approach. In this sense, the Sudan case highlights NCR's analytical strength: the ability to account for both the material and ideational factors that condition state responses to systemic pressures.

The UAE's response to the Sudanese crisis and the resulting changes in the strategic environment are driven by both systemic and unit-level factors. By conceptualizing the UAE's strategic choices employing NCR, this paper examines the independent and unit factors in the UAE's FP towards the Sudanese crisis.

The paper also draws on Schweller's theory that alliances are motivated not only by threats but also by opportunities and profits to understand the UAE's previous bandwagoning policies toward the KSA, which have shifted to a divergent position in the Sudanese case. He emphasizes that balancing and bandwagoning are not opposite behaviors, since “bandwagoning is commonly done in the expectation

⁹Foulon. Ibid., p. 635

of making gains; while balancing is done for security, and it always entails costs.”¹⁰ His framework posits that alliances are not only dependent on external threats but are also shaped by opportunities and material incentives.

The UAE's consistent adherence to most of the KSA's positions exemplified its bandwagoning tendencies, driven by its own interests and aimed at its own profits, including the progressive interdependence with Riyadh in Yemen (Ulrichsen, 2017).¹¹ However, this bandwagoning has shifted over time, and the UAE has become aware of its relative military power and has thus begun trying to overbalance the KSA.

In the case of Sudan, the UAE distances itself from the KSA to pursue distinct interests in Sudan's gold, while engaging with the paramilitary group RSF, which offers opportunities for both economic profit and geopolitical gain (Prendergast Lake, 2024).¹² Although both countries operate in the same geopolitical sphere, the FP of the UAE stands in contrast, reflecting a revisionist versus status quo stance by the leadership and the KSA's hegemony over the Gulf region (GCC) over the past decade. This divergence from the KSA supports Schweller's characterization that bandwagoning and balancing are not simply opposite sides of the same coin, where Riyadh's interests in Sudan have primarily focused on the regime's security; in contrast, the UAE is displaying a bandwagoning logic based on potential gains.

Background on the Sudanese Crisis

While tribal and ethnic conflicts were never uncommon, the situation escalated in 2003 when rebels, primarily the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), took up arms against the Sudanese Government, protesting the unequal distribution of economic resources. This conflict pitted Sudanese Government forces, supported by allied militia known as the Janjaweed, against rebel groups resisting the autocratic rule of the then President Omar al-Bashir. The result was a devastating toll on Darfur, including some 300,000 fatalities and millions of displaced, including 400,000 refugees who were forced to flee to camps in neighbouring Chad. In response to these atrocities, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants against several Sudanese senior officials, including Omar al-Bashir, on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur. Although Darfur has experienced intermittent periods of reduced violence in recent years, especially during the period when the joint UN-African Union mission UNAMID was operating in the restive region, the situation took a drastic turn with the outbreak of conflict in April 2023 (UN News 2023).

Four years earlier, an April 2019 military coup deposed former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. Since then, Sudan has attempted a transition to democracy through an interim government led by a civilian Prime Minister, Abdalla

¹⁰Schweller, R. L. (1994). Bandwagoning for profit: Bringing the revisionist state back in. *International Security*, 19(1), 72–107. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539149>

¹¹Ulrichsen, C. C. (2017). *The United Arab Emirates: Power, politics, and policymaking*. Routledge.

¹²Prendergast, J., & Lake, A. (2024, July 31). The UAE's secret war in Sudan: How international pressure can stop the genocidal violence. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sudan/uaes-secret-war-sudan>

Hamdok, and a Sovereign Council led by Lieutenant General Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan and General Muhammad Hamdan 'Hemedti' Dagolo, who shared the power. The two military officers represented the competing military pillars of al-Bashir's government: al-Burhan is a former Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) commander in Central Darfur State and in Yemen, and Hemedti is the chief of the RSF—a paramilitary group, formerly known as Janjaweed, in control of the mining sector (mainly gold in Darfur).¹³

Since the case of al-Bashir, Sudan has been experiencing political turmoil and tension between two rivals, General al-Burhan, who seized power following the 2019 coup and further solidified his position with the 2021 coup, and General Hemedti and his RSF. In the November 2021 coup, the military dissolved the Sovereign Council, and the transitional government fell. In January 2022, Prime Minister Hamdok resigned due to a political deadlock. Al-Burhan took control of the government and established a new ruling Sovereign Council. After months of negotiations, a framework was signed in December 2022, envisaging the removal of the military's involvement in the government and economy and establishing a 2-year transition period with a civilian-led administration prior to elections. In March 2023, an agreement was reached to adopt a new constitution and to transfer the power to a civilian administration the following month. Nevertheless, on the ground, the power struggle continued, and deadlines were not met. A major, central, significant area of dispute was the integration of the RSF into the national armed forces. While Hemedti wanted to postpone this for years, al-Burhan aimed to unite them within two years.

On 15 April 2023, violent armed clashes erupted again between the two rivals, RSF, led by former Sovereign Council leader Hemedti, and SAF, headed by Sudan's internationally recognized *de facto* President, General al-Burhan. RSF was redeployed around the country in a move that the army saw as a threat, which also resulted in thousands of deaths as well as the displacement of 13 million people, including internally displaced people (IDPs), asylum seekers, and refugees. Despite a succession of ceasefires, the conflict has continued to have major repercussions for the regional balance of power.¹⁴

At the regional level, the KSA supports Burhan, who has international legitimacy. This was coordinated with the KSA's ally, the Egyptian President al-Sisi, who was concerned about Egypt's direct national security.

On the other hand, the UAE has backed Hemedti. The UAE has been engaged in protecting its national and economic interests, particularly those related to gold in Sudan. Over the past decade, the UAE has been aiming to enhance its regional influence by establishing strong alliances with key actors in Africa, in response to rival powers' growing presence in the region. Sudan's strategic location and historical ties with the UAE make it an important partner in countering Islamist

¹³European Union, European Parliament. (2023). *Sudan crisis: Developments and implications* (EPRS At a Glance, PE 747.884). [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/747884/EPRS_ATAG\(2023\)747884_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/747884/EPRS_ATAG(2023)747884_EN.pdf)

¹⁴Ibid.

extremism and preventing the expansion of Iran's influence.¹⁵ The UAE gained trust in Hemedti because RSF fighters had been active in southern Yemen since 2015 and, in 2019, expanded to Libya to back Gen. Khalifa Haftar, one of the country's rival leaders backed by Abu Dhabi.¹⁶

Given the above-mentioned regional ramifications of the Sudanese war, the research will examine additional systemic factors in the region that may have contributed to the UAE's stance in the Sudanese crisis.

The Systemic Variables in the Middle East and the GCC

The post-2011 Arab Spring witnessed the trajectory of a new regional role for the UAE. It marked itself as a counterweight. Sudan has been at the center of regional and international concerns since the Sudanese revolution in 2018.

At the systemic level, the NCR assumption of the anarchic nature and relative distribution of material capabilities in the world system is key to understanding regional politics and the dynamics of the UAE-Sudanese bilateral relations, particularly through the lens of the geopolitics of the GCC and the Middle East. Among the regional triggers that stimulated the UAE's assertiveness in FP is the increase in international oil prices at the beginning of the 21st century, when the price of a barrel rose from USD20 in 2002 to stabilize around USD100 in 2014.¹⁷

Given its geostrategic position between Asia and Europe, the Middle East has always been coveted by colonial empires, a desire further fueled by the discovery of oil in the twentieth century. Since the end of the Cold War, the USA has become the sole hegemon in the region. However, after the war on terror post-9/11 and the associated questionable accomplished missions in the region, the American appetite for regional involvement has been declining under the Biden administration, in line with rising competition and the aim of increasing relative gains to fill the vacuum left by other regional actors such as Iran, Turkey, and the KSA.¹⁸ The latter powers were also joined by the UAE, which began to participate in the escalating competition for regional dominance.

Those intra-region competitions across several domains are again aligned with NCR due to the anarchic nature.¹⁹ Moreover, with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, the UAE was concerned about the strengthening of Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood and thus decided to favor the old regional order of pro-Western

¹⁵Oxford Analytica. (2020). Israel-UAE deal will expand existing security ties. Oxford Analytica Expert Briefings. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB254905>

¹⁶Jeffrey, E. (2013, September 6). Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA): Special focus. *Euromoney*. <https://www.euromoney.com/article/b12kxbgts07j/abu-dhabi-investment-authority-aida-special-focus>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸Marina, O., & Ottaway, D. (2020). *The changing geopolitics of the Middle East. In A tale of four worlds: The Arab region after the uprisings* (Chapter 4). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190061715.003.0004>

¹⁹Bianco, C. (2017). The intra-GCC crisis: Domestic, regional and international layers (Commentaries No. 17). *Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)*. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/intra-gcc-crisis-domestic-regional-and-international-layers>

authoritarian regimes.²⁰ In Yemen, the UAE has been the second largest contributor to the KSA-led intervention launched in March 2015, with the primary objective of restoring the authority of the Yemeni government and pushing back the Houthis, who are close to Iran.²¹

The 2017 diplomatic rift among GCC states, triggered by the KSA, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt ending ties with Qatar due to Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, had further implications beyond the GCC, influencing secondary states in the Middle East, such as Sudan. The rupture itself was a shift in the GCC's geopolitical structure and dynamics, with important consequences for states that relied on financial assistance and political support from the various disputants. In the case of Sudan, the crisis was especially complicated because Qatar had been one of its main supporters, providing substantial financial assistance during a period of severe economic weakness. At the same time, President Omar al-Bashir's domestic coalition was heavily influenced by domestic Islamist actors that preferred to maintain alignment with Doha, given their ideological and historical ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Systemically, Qatar faced a blockade that repositioned power dynamics in the GCC and forced peripheral states, like Sudan, to rethink their allegiances to stay afloat economically and politically. In the early stages, al-Bashir adopted a posture of neutrality, enabling Sudan to benefit from Qatari financial contributions and avoid the possibility of retaliation by the KSA and the UAE. However, in March 2018, Sudan publicly announced a \$4 billion deal with Qatar to develop the Red Sea port of Suakin, which, in effect, altered the way Sudan's coastline contributed to the strategic calculus of all GCC States and reinforced a partnership with Doha. For the UAE, this deal directly challenged its regional maritime and port interests. Abu Dhabi has been expanding across the Red Sea and Horn of Africa to secure trade routes and military access. So, Qatar's entry into Suakin was perceived by the UAE as a strategic encroachment, especially with the UAE's investments in Sudan. By late 2018, however, following a significant shift in his posture, al-Bashir increasingly aligned with the KSA–UAE position due to Sudan's reliance on GCC financial assistance and the risks of alienating the regime's dominant bloc in the regional system.

At a systemic level, NCR argues that Sudan's shift between Qatar and the KSA–UAE bloc demonstrates the combined effect of structural pressures from the international system and domestic constraints, especially in relation to al-Bashir's decision not to undermine Islamist factions within his own regime for fear of destabilization and future blowback. Thus, his eventual shift to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi was a precarious balancing act: complying with systemic incentives from the region's power structure while simultaneously containing internal political opposition from Islamic networked mobilization.

²⁰Kirkpatrick, D. D. (2015, March 1). Recordings suggest Emirates and Egyptian military pushed ousting of Morsi. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/world/middleeast/recordings-suggest-emirates-and-egyptian-military-pushed-ousting-of-morsi.html>

²¹Ulrichsen, C. C. (2017). *The United Arab Emirates: Power, politics, and policymaking*. Routledge.

From Russia's perspective, it shifted its FP focus to Africa to balance the USA and regain influence lost since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This involved resuming efforts to build economic and political relations with Africa and to create allies, aiming to achieve its strategic goal of ending the isolation imposed by Western sanctions. Among those allies, Sudan emerged as a key one due to its geographical location, which is crucial to Russia's security interests in the region.²² Bilateral relations and the proximity between Russia and Sudan reached their peak in 2017, when former Sudanese President al-Bashir visited Russia, requesting Putin's protection against US hostility and, in return, offering to make Sudan Russia's gateway to Africa.²³ This granted the Wagner group mining rights approved by al-Bashir, as well as the stationing of Wagner soldiers to secure Russia's gold mining interests.²⁴ Those forces assisted RSF in 2018 to suppress anti-al-Bashir protests.²⁵ After the ouster of al-Bashir, Russia supported military generals against civilians who were denouncing the Russian influence in Sudan and aligned with the RSF and SAF. Russia also joined China to block United Nations Security Council resolutions condemning the killings of civilians by the Sudanese military.²⁶ This was driven by Russia's economic interests in Sudan, which led to its alignment with Sudan's military governments. In May 2024, Moscow entered an agreement with the SAF to establish a Russian logistical support base on the Red Sea in exchange for weapons and equipment.

Russia's Reconnaissance of Sudan and its trajectory to Africa, as well as the mining and gold extraction controlled by Wagner Group, bordered on a direct Russian economic and security stake in Sudan. This pushed the UAE closer to RSF, both to reinforce its anti-Islamist agenda and to secure a partnership with Moscow against competing powers.

Additionally, the involvement of the three key regional actors — Egypt, the KSA, and the UAE — gave the case an immense regional dimension. From Egypt's perspective, Sudan shares a populous border region with some 2.2 million residents. In the three southern governorates of Aswan, New Valley, and Red Sea.²⁷ It is thus a direct threat to Egypt's national security, which makes Egypt's ultimate objective, in line with its own national security, to fully support al-Burhan in fighting RSF.²⁸

²² Abdalla, S. (n.d.). Emerging stage for great power competition: Russia's influence in Sudan amid political turmoil. *Security in Context*. <https://securityincontext.com/emerging-stage-for-great-power-competition-russias-influence-in-sudan-amid-political-turmoil>

²³ Associated Press. (2017, November 23). Sudan's president visits Russia, asks for protection from the US. *Voice of America*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/sudan-president-visits-russia-asks-for-protection-from-us/4131704.html>

²⁴ Ali, I. M. (2022, June 10). The Russian Wagner and the gold of Sudan: A mining concession or plundering. *Sudan Tribune*. <https://sudantribune.com/article260157>

²⁵ Walsh, D. (2022, June 5). From Russia with love: A Putin ally mines gold and plays favorites in Sudan. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/world/africa/wagner-russia-sudan-gold-putin.html>

²⁶ Ramani, S. (2019, July 11). Moscow's hand in the future of Sudan. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79492>

²⁷ Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics. (2020, March). Adad Sukan Masr al-An [Egypt current population]. <https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/populationClock.aspx>

²⁸ State Information Service. (n.d.). Sisi: Egypt supports Sudan security, stability, unity. <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/185451?lang=en-us>

Widespread allegations that Egypt trained al-Burhan's forces, stationed military in Darfur, and blocked Sudan's airspace against RSF attacks indicate Egypt's support for the SAF (Helayel, 2009).

Meanwhile, both the KSA and the UAE see the Sudanese war as an opportunity to increase their regional influence and pursue hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East. However, both have divergent positions in the Sudanese case.

The KSA was trying to consolidate its regional hegemony aspirations by framing itself as a liberal peacemaker and humanitarian actor in Sudan, supporting the legitimate government. Riyadh thus sponsored cease-fire talks with the USA, provided aid to the Sudanese people both inside and outside the country, and helped evacuate many civilians from Khartoum.²⁹

The above-mentioned points illustrate how the Sudan crisis has demonstrated the dynamics of regional and international actors' intervention, transforming it into a proxy war stage and an arena for power competition to expand those actors' influence in Africa.

Unit-level Variables

From an NCR perspective, unit-level variables explain how domestic imperatives shape the UAE's interpretation of systemic pressures and, ultimately, its decision to support the RSF in Sudan. These factors include economic imperatives, security considerations, and regime legitimacy needs, which shape the external environment and inform interventionist choices.

Based on economic imperatives and diversification strategy, the UAE's long-standing investments in Sudan reflect a domestic need to secure diversified economic resources. As part of its food security and investment strategy, Abu Dhabi is investing in Sudan's agricultural lands, infrastructure, and real estate projects, alongside extractive industries such as gold and minerals (Almezaini, 2018).³⁰ These interests were achieved through a combination of approaches, including financial assistance, extensive infrastructure projects, and private investment initiatives. After 2014, with oil price volatility pressuring GCC economies, Sudan's resource wealth became more attractive. Since the RSF controlled significant portions of Sudan's lucrative gold sector, backing this faction was a rational way for the UAE to safeguard domestic economic interests and supply chains (Gallopini, 2021).³¹

²⁹European Parliamentary Research Service. (2023). Agreement on a short-term ceasefire and humanitarian arrangements in Sudan (EPRS At a Glance, PE 747.884). European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/747884/EPRS_ATAG\(2023\)747884_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/747884/EPRS_ATAG(2023)747884_EN.pdf)

³⁰Almezaini, K. (2018). The transformation of UAE foreign policy since 2011. In M. Kamrava (Ed.), *The changing security dynamics of the Persian Gulf* (pp. 191–204). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190877385.003.0011>

³¹Gallopini, J. (2021). How the UAE is using its gold trade to exert influence in Africa. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/29/how-uae-is-using-its-gold-trade-to-exert-influence-in-africa-pub-84813>

Due to security concerns and the Islamist threat, the UAE has long seen political Islam to be an existential threat to regime stability, a concern aggravated by the Arab Spring, when Islamist movements associated with political Islam gained traction regionally and domestically (Roberts, 2017).³² Sudan, with historical ties to Islamist networks under al-Bashir, was viewed as a vessel for a revived Islamist presence. Teaming up with the RSF, a militarized secular actor, fits with Abu Dhabi's domestic security imperative to contain Islamist movements and curtail their diffusion to the GCC. This further reinforced Abu Dhabi's domestic narrative of safeguarding national security and, by extension, promoting order against the chaos associated with Islamism and a weak civilian government (Barakat Milton, 2021).³³ Hence, intervention in Sudan is not simply about securing material interests: it is also about framing the UAE as a decisive actor defending stability in the Arab world.

In addition, the presence of joint military training exercises, military cooperation agreements, and continued engagement in Sudan's political transitions demonstrates the UAE's desire to solidify its strategic position (Ulrichsen, 2017).³⁴ Historically, during the era of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan's reign (1970-2004), the UAE FP generally favored moderation, relied on alliances with the USA and the KSA, and preferred mediation for regional disputes – the latter of which reflected Zayed's personal preference for dialogue related to these matters (Ulrichsen, 2017).³⁵ This orientation began changing in the early 2000s, and the change continued. However, it underwent an unmistakable reorientation after the Arab Spring in 2011, when the UAE transitioned to an FP approach emphasizing control over its national security interests and working autonomously in the region.

By 2014, MBZ consolidating power, this transformation intensified. MBZ's background in the military and realist vantage point was conducive to a more sharply Hobbesian orientation in the UAE's policy, emphasizing hard power, interventionism, and a willingness to act unilaterally whenever he felt necessary (Fathi, 2018).³⁶

The Leader's Perception and Strategic Framing

NCR highlights how leaders' perceptions are important in transforming pressures into FP choices. MBZ consistently framed Islamist movements—whether the Muslim Brotherhood, Sudanese Islamists, or the broader currents of political Islam— as existential threats to regional stability and the UAE's internal security

³²Roberts, D. B. (2017). Qatar and the UAE: Exploring divergent responses to the Arab Spring. *Middle East Journal*, 71(4), 544–562. <https://doi.org/10.3751/71.4.13>

³³Barakat, S., and Milton, S. (2021). The UAE's foreign policy in an age of strategic uncertainty. *International Affairs*, 97(3), 707–727. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab045>

³⁴Ulrichsen, C. C. (2017). *The United Arab Emirates: Power, politics, and policymaking*. Routledge

³⁵Ibid

³⁶Fathi, A. (2018, November 13). Portraits of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ): Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and the chairman of the Executive Council of Abu Dhabi. Institut Moutaigne. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/portraits-mohammed-bin-salman-mbs-and-mohammed-bin-zayed-mbz-crown-prince-saudi-arabia-and-chairman>

(Assal, 2019).³⁷ This perception — an armed force opposed to Islamists — even at the cost of Sudan's long-term institutional stability. The conditionality of the Sudanese context sharpened this logic. President Omar al-Bashir's Islamist junta coupled Islamist influence with the core of the state and its institutions, including the military and intelligence community, before and since 1989, on the condition that he would curb Islamists (Assal, 2019).³⁸

In return, MBZ invested approximately \$7.6 billion in Sudan (Affan Hammoud, 2020).³⁹ The conditionality of these funds was connected to Sudan's contribution of ground troops to the Yemen war to help the KSA-UAE coalition fight against Iran. However, once al-Bashir refused the UAE's pressure to unequivocally break ties with the Islamist elements, the UAE recalibrated its approach. The latter stopped fuel shipments in late 2018, and al-Bashir's overtures to Qatar further distanced him from the UAE. By early 2019, the UAE supported opposition forces and floated transition plans that included Bashir's eventual withdrawal. The UAE shifted support to the Transitional Military Council following al-Bashir's ousting in April 2019 and developed relationships with RSF commander Hemedti. This ensured the continuation of Sudanese military participation in Yemen while Abu Dhabi safeguarded its strategic and economic interests.

In addition to Islamist containment, MBZ's policies also reflect his broader ambition for establishing strategic autonomy in international affairs from the KSA. Whereas Riyadh was interested in preserving Sudanese state institutions, MBZ was focused on using Sudan as a laboratory to demonstrate the UAE's influence, free of the KSA's prerogatives (Fathi, 2018).⁴⁰ The gold sector was also vital: MBZ not only used Sudan's gold as a source of material wealth, but also as a measure of financial statecraft aimed at extending the UAE's control into Africa (Affan Hammoud, 2020).⁴¹ In this sense, MBZ's perception-based strategies used perceived material interests alongside a Hobbesian security focus to shape a distinctly interventionist policy.

³⁷ Assal, M. A. M. (2019). Sudan's popular uprising and the demise of Islamism (CMI Brief No. 2019:3). Chr. Michelsen Institute. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6898-sudans-popular-uprising-and-the-demise-of-islamism>

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Affan, M. A., and Hammoud, R. (2020, July 10). Searching for a second chance: The dilemma of the Islamists in post-Bashir Sudan. Al Jazeera Centre for Studies. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/searching-second-chance-dilemma-islamists-post-bashir-sudan>

⁴⁰ Fathi, A. (2018, November 13). Portraits of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ): Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and the chairman of the Executive Council of Abu Dhabi. Institut Montaigne. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/portraits-mohammed-bin-salman-mbs-and-mohammed-bin-zayed-mbz-crown-prince-saudi-arabia-and-chairman>

⁴¹ Affan, M. A., & Hammoud, R. (2020, July 10). Searching for a second chance: The dilemma of the Islamists in post-Bashir Sudan. Al Jazeera Centre for Studies. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/searching-second-chance-dilemma-islamists-post-bashir-sudan>

The FP of UAE towards the Sudanese Crisis: The Outcome

The UAE's FP towards the Sudanese crisis is the outcome of a complex interplay of strategic interests, security considerations, and domestic priorities, analyzed through the lens of NCR. It is an outcome of the systemic and domestic variables. It is not conducted solely in a diplomatic way; it involves a more direct military and economic intervention. Therefore, NCR has been selected as the most suitable lens to analyze the UAE's FP towards Sudan.

On the systemic level, the UAE's engagement in Sudan and its FP towards it are highly driven by its economic interests, regional power aspirations, and the strategic influence it aims to exert. The regional dimensions highlighted four key actors related to this issue: the KSA, Qatar, Egypt, and the UAE (Abdulhasan Moeh, 2016).⁴² Thus, the UAE has been rising as an important regional actor, which has been conducive to its offsetting scheme. The regional systemic environment has proven advantageous to the UAE's counterbalancing the KSA, with which it bandwagons most of the time. This has also been advancing in a period of tense relations between the KSA and the USA, for instance, following the case of Jamal Khashoggi, which the UAE used to instigate its deeper proximity to the USA. Yet, external systemic factors do not solely guide nor explain the strategic behavior of the UAE towards Sudan.

On the strategic level, the UAE is also aiming to safeguard its strategic interests in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. Hence, in December 2022, it signed a \$6 billion investment deal with Sudan to construct a new port on the Red Sea coast.⁴³ As the UAE is also heavily reliant on external sources for its food supply (90% of its food is imported), it has a cooperative domestic agricultural policy following the 2013 coup (Mason, 2013).⁴⁴

Domestically, at the unit level, the UAE's FP towards the Sudanese crisis is driven by MBZ's vision and regional aspirations, as well as by the UAE's interests, driven by pragmatism. It is also driven by MBZ's personality, which is a realist practitioner with a more assertive, martial, and self-reliant FP. His main aim is to advance the UAE's national interests and position the UAE as a key regional actor.

From this perspective, Hemedti acts as a custodian of the UAE's interests in Sudan, guarding gold mines controlled by Wagner, the group that became active in Sudan in 2017; gold from these mines is then shipped to the UAE en route to Russia. The tripartite connection between the UAE, the RSF, and Russia via the Wagner Group was consolidated by Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, where Moscow's reliance on gold and other sources became more critical to reduce the impact of Western sanctions.⁴⁵ The UAE's dominant role in Sudan's gold sector,

⁴²Abdulhasan Moeh, H. (2016). Regional players' influence on Iraq-Kuwait relations in the post-Saddam era (2003–2011) (Master's thesis).

⁴³Al-Anani, K. (2023, May 11). The Sudan crisis: How regional actors' competing interests fuel the conflict. Arab Center, Washington, DC. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-sudan-crisis-how-regional-actors-competing-interests-fuel-the-conflict>

⁴⁴Mason, R. (2013). Economic factors in Middle East foreign policies: The case of oil and gas exporters with special reference to Saudi Arabia and Iran [PDF]. Qatar University.

⁴⁵Mohamed, T. O. (2023, July 12). How Sudan became a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and the UAE: Gulf heavyweights see the conflict as an opportunity to cement their hegemonic status

which included the purchase of all \$1.315 billion in Sudanese gold exports in the first half of 2022, has historically enriched Hemedti.^{46 47} Algunade, a gold company that al-Bashir bequeathed to Hemedti's family, was revealed by Reuters to have shipped \$30 million in gold to Dubai in one four-week period in late 2018.⁴⁸

It is also a direct national interest of the UAE to exterminate the residues of the former Sudanese regime, with its Islamists, that the UAE perceives as a core adversary and threat. Hemedti solidly positioned himself as the key figure against Islamists in Sudan, framing his dispute with al-Burhan as one against radical Islamists.

Militarily, the Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, a significant ally of the UAE, is providing military support to the RSF, sending fuel, weapons, and other resources to aid Hemedti's faction against al-Burhan's.⁴⁹

Returning to the original questions, how do the synergies and tensions of systemic and unit-level factors shape the UAE's FP towards the Sudanese crisis? As these factors, operating at various levels, generate mixed impacts on their bilateral relations, the UAE's strategic choices have halted its bandwagoning with the KSA in the Sudanese crisis. The UAE's choices were primarily driven by pragmatism to serve its interests.

Conclusion

In conclusion, realism (NCR) offers a solid lens for understanding the UAE's approach to the Sudanese crisis. A nuanced analysis of the UAE's policy (FP) through the NCR perspective offers valuable insights for managing ongoing regional instability. It is not simply about grand systemic pressures, but domestic factors matter just as much. The UAE leadership, its priorities, and the country's sense of identity all combine to shape policy decisions (FP). In Sudan, this means the UAE is motivated by a tangle of strategic interests: security concerns, economic goals, and ambitions to shift the regional balance, sometimes even against the KSA's preferences.

Rather than rigidly sticking with allies, the UAE has shown broader interests. This backs up Schweller's point that balancing and bandwagoning are not strictly black-and-white choices. The UAE's policy toward Sudan demonstrates pragmatic flexibility, shaped by both external pressures and internal calculations, and fits well within the NCR framework. In short, the UAE engagement in the Sudanese crisis reflects a calculated pursuit of security, economic advantage, and regional

in the Middle East. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/12/sudan-saudi-arab-uae-proxy-war-middle-east/>

⁴⁶The Arab Weekly. (2022, October 12). Sudan posts \$1.315 billion in gold sales in the first half of 2022. *The Arab Weekly*. <https://thearabweekly.com/sudans-posts-1315-billion-gold-sales-first-half-2022>

⁴⁷Ramani, S. (n.d.). GCC countries and Sudan's conflict: Navigating mediation and regional stability. Gulf International Forum. <https://gulffif.org/gcc-countries-and-sudans-conflict-navigating-mediation-and-regional-stability-by-samuel-ramani/>

⁴⁸Ibid

⁴⁹Al-Anani, K. (2023, May 11). *The Sudan Crisis: How Regional Actors' Competing Interests Fuel the Conflict*. Arab Center, Washington, DC.

leverage—all filtered through the unique dynamics of its leadership and domestic context.

While critics like Sterling-Folker (1997) claim that NCR lacks parsimony and can slip into ad hoc theorizing, the UAE example highlights why NCR matters—explaining why two close allies, the UAE and the KSA, took different approaches to Sudan when looking only at the international system or domestic politics. The systemic incentives, domestic economic pressures, and leaders' perceptions must be weighed together to explain why two usual allies, the UAE and the KSA, adopted divergent policies towards Sudan.

The UAE's trajectory in the Sudanese crisis shows a complex interplay. Initially, the UAE took a proactive stance, intervening energetically in Sudan's turmoil. This early engagement reflected a belief in seizing perceived opportunities and managing threats, motivated in part by concerns over domestic legitimacy. In these early days, the UAE's alignment with the RSF was quite public—almost as if the UAE wanted to broadcast its role as a regional powerbroker.

However, as the situation in Sudan deteriorated, with multiple governments competing for control and accusations of international law violations piling up, the UAE began to recalibrate. When it became clear that overt support for the RSF (and, by association, actors such as the Wagner Group) risked alienating influential international players and regional heavyweights, the UAE dialed back its backing. Their policy (FP) became noticeably more reserved, with less public endorsement of their prior allies. Instead, the UAE shifted toward a more neutral posture, aligning itself with Egypt and KSA's mediation efforts to broker a ceasefire. To maintain credibility—both internationally and with the Sudanese government and population—the UAE must exhibit that it is channeling resources and humanitarian aid in accordance with accepted norms. Essentially, their continued influence hinges on proving they can be a constructive rather than a disruptive actor in the evolving Sudanese crisis.

Currently, and after more than two years of conflict, Hemedti has declared that the RSF is forming a parallel administration in Darfur, consolidating its position there following the SAF's recent recapture of Khartoum. In response, the SAF has brought a case before the International Court of Justice, alleging the UAE's violation of the Genocide Convention through support for the RSF. Nevertheless, the Court dismissed the case, finding insufficient grounds for the allegations against the UAE.

The ongoing situation provides little optimism for a negotiated settlement in the near term. The conflict has intensified ethnic divisions, and documented atrocities by the RSF, compounded by competing international interests backing different factions, have entrenched the deadlock. Should both sides remain unwilling to negotiate a ceasefire, Sudan risks descending into a scenario reminiscent of Libya or Yemen—marked by de facto territorial fragmentation and the proliferation of new armed groups.

At its core, the conflict remains a contest for regional influence. Given these dynamics, the prospects for Sudan to achieve a unified political vision appear remote for the foreseeable future.