On 15 April 2023, violent armed clashes flared up again in Sudan between the main two military factions battling for control of the country: the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by former Sovereign Council leader General Muhammad Hamdan ‘Hemedti’ Dagolo; and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), headed by Sudan’s de facto President, General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan. The armed attacks are causing numerous civilian casualties as well as massive population displacements to neighbouring countries, while foreign powers are evacuating their citizens. Despite a succession of ceasefires, the conflict seems likely to continue for the near future, with major repercussions for the regional balance of power.

Background
After Al-Bashir was deposed by a coup d’état in April 2019, Sudan attempted a transition to democracy. A transitional government led by a civilian Prime Minister, Abdualla Hamdok, and a Sovereign Council, headed by Lieutenant General Abdel-Fattah Al-Burhan and General Muhammad Hamdan ‘Hemedti’ Dagolo, 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 chief of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – a paramilitary group in control of the mining sector (mainly gold in Darfur).

In November 2021, the military dissolved the Sovereign Council and the transitional government fell. After weeks of mass protests, Hamdok was reinstated as Prime Minister, but resigned in January 2022 due to a political deadlock. Al-Burhan took control of the government and established a new ruling Sovereign Council, declining African Union (AU) and EU-Norway-UK-US mediation to resolve Sudan’s political crisis. After months of negotiations and peace talks, political and military leaders and civilians signed a framework agreement 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, the same stakeholders agreed to adopt a new constitution and to transfer the power to a civilian administration the following month.

The power struggle continued, however, and these deadlines were not met. One of the main disputes between the two military factions is the integration of the RSF into the national armed forces: Hemedti wants to postpone this procedure for 10 years, while Al-Burhan aims to unite the two military forces within 2 years.

Current political and humanitarian situation
Fighting between the two military factions reached a new level of violence in the capital on 15 April 2023. Khartoum emerged as the epicentre of the uprising, as it hosts some key locations, including the national intelligence services, the international airport and institutional buildings. The fighting quickly spread around the country, becoming a serious threat to regional stability. Some analysts have also reported a sharp increase in inter-tribal violence in the country’s west and south, owing to the current political and economic instability. Furthermore, they warn about the repercussions of refugee displacement to neighbouring countries, such as Egypt, Chad, Ethiopia or the Central African Republic. On 27 April 2023, the two sides agreed to extend a 72-hour Saudi-US-mediated humanitarian ceasefire (which began on 24 April), for another 72 hours. On 1 May 2023, the United Nations envoy in Sudan, Volker Perthes, announced that Al-Burhan and Hemedti were willing to enter into talks. On 2 May, South Sudan announced it had brokered a 7-day ceasefire between the RSF and SAF from 4 to 11 May.

The ceasefires failed and the spiral of violence is increasing daily. Air attacks and shooting persists and neither the RSF nor the SAF have manifested an intention to withdraw. Meanwhile, living conditions for civilians are dramatic. Civilian deaths are estimated at over 400, but statistics are difficult to gather. On 2 May 2023, UN agencies estimated that over 100 000 people had fled Sudan to neighbouring countries,
including refugees from these countries – and this figure may quickly amount to 800,000. More than 330,000 people have been displaced within the country. Most of the hospitals are closed, or operate only in some emergencies. Stores, markets and banks have halted business, fearing bomb attacks. Accordingly, food prices are rising and the already acute food and drinking water shortage is worsening. The humanitarian needs are escalating rapidly as 65% of Sudan's population lived below the poverty line even before the latest clashes. Western embassies are evacuating their nationals.

Regional and international repercussions
Sudan's power struggles will have severe repercussions on the country's attempts to transition to democracy, as well as on stability at regional level. Previously, the AU, the EU and the US have strongly supported the implementation of democratic reforms and provided considerable funding. However, this has failed to help achieve the negotiated targets (which included establishing a transitional civilian government, transitional justice and security and military reform).

Both sides have been trying to strengthen alliances inside and outside the country. Al-Burhan has the support of veteran Darfuri rebels and some Islamist groups. Hemedti won 'the favor of some democrats by criticizing the Islamists' strong return', according to a Sudanese editorialist. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as the Wagner Group, reportedly provided weapons, training and troops for Hemedti's RSF.

Several regional and international powers have economic and political interests in the sub-Saharan country, which a democratic transition could have threatened. Egypt has sided with Al-Burhan, until recently an ally against the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the River Nile, and 'probably to try to prevent a dangerous precedent of successful transition from military autocracy to civilian democracy', according to one security expert.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the overthrowing of Al-Bashir in 2019, and have sided with Hemedti, who provided them with troops to fight in Yemen. China and Russia have invested heavily in extracting Sudanese natural resources and it is expected that they will try to preserve their economic and security interests. According to experts, the fighting will continue for the foreseeable future. Strong diplomatic efforts involving regional players, such as the AU, the Arab League and the Horn of Africa's Inter-Governmental Association for Development (IGAD) may play a significant role in preventing the escalation of the conflict and in providing humanitarian help for civilians to overcome the crisis. An International Crisis Group expert suggests that one of the Arab countries might drive the dialogue for the cessation of hostilities, as these countries are the most affected by the crisis.

EU involvement
The day before the outbreak of the crisis, the EU and its partners expressed concern about the tensions. Shortly after, the EU High Representative called for a ceasefire and for humanitarian corridors to be set up. The EU special representative for the Horn of Africa has entered discussions with the AU and other stakeholders on ending the conflict. On 24 April 2023, the EU Foreign Affairs Council discussed evacuation plans and mediation possibilities to prevent the escalation of the conflict. EU Member State-led operations have evacuated most of the 1,700 EU citizens present in Sudan, as well as non-EU citizens. Humanitarian supply distribution and refugee corridors are among the first EU humanitarian priorities. During the 24 April Council meeting, Finland's Minister for Foreign Affairs Pekka Haavisto, (Special EU Envoy to Sudan in 2021), highlighted the risks of further Wagner Group engagement in the region, considering the lack of involvement from Western democracies. Some analysts recommend that the EU should take on a mediator role to support civilian actors in the political process.

Members from the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) visited Sudan in September 2022, to urge ‘all parties to come to an agreement’ to resume the path to democracy. They also expressed their concern that ‘further delay in agreeing on the way out of the crisis [would...] aggravate the already immense challenges that the people of Sudan are facing’.

AFET and the Committee on Development (DEVE) discussed the situation in Sudan on 26 April 2023. A particular focus was on evacuation plans activated for EU citizens living and working in the country. The committees urged cooperation with regional powers, to reach an agreement to enhance peace, development and humanitarian access. The committees also highlighted the importance of avoiding the regionalisation of the conflict, or a prolonged ceasefire that would allow both militias to resupply.