

Revising Our Strategic Outlook in the Two Sudans

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DANIEL SOLOMON, SEP 15 2011

In the months since South Sudan's declaration of independence from Sudan, the international community's gaze has regrettably shifted from ongoing instability in the two Sudans. While the U.S. government reconfigures post-referendum strategic partnerships with the Khartoum and Juba regimes, clashes between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)-aligned forces have plagued Sudan's South Kordofan and Blue Nile regions. Meanwhile, in South Sudan, political tensions between marginalized ethnic communities continue to strain the South Sudanese security sector.

The U.S. and international community have proven uniquely incapable of addressing the intertwined challenges of political instability and civilian protection in the post-independence Sudans. U.S. diplomatic engagement has done little to coax Sudan and South Sudan toward civilian protection policies, and UN-initiated ceasefires in South Kordofan have been tenuous, at best. As has become imminently clear in the short post-independence period, a path toward comprehensive conflict resolution within and between the two Sudans will necessitate a profound shift in policy priorities, approaches, and partnerships.

The South Kordofan Crisis: A Case Study in Misguided Policy Approaches

The wane of U.S. policy leverage with Khartoum and the persistent schizophrenia of U.S. policy toward emerging crises continue to limit the effectiveness of U.S. conflict resolution and civilian protection initiatives in Sudan and South Sudan. The recent and ongoing conflict in the Sudanese border region of South Kordofan is emblematic of the limits of U.S. influence, and the necessity of a reconfigured policy approach toward civilian protection in Sudan.

The present conflict in South Kordofan began in mid-May, following the contested election of Ahmed Harun, an International Criminal Court (ICC) indictee, as the National Congress Party (NCP) governor of the Sudanese state. Rejecting the results of the gubernatorial elections, Abdelaziz al-Hilu and his SPLM-North (SPLM-N) allies withdrew from the South Kordofan government, creating a power vacuum in the state legislature. Responding to the perceived threat of a SPLM-N rebellion against the Harun's state regime, the SAF mobilized forces against SPLM-N in Kadugli town, the state capital.

Clashes between SAF and SPLM-N forces began on June 5. The ensuing conflict lasted until South Sudan's declaration of independence on July 9, when the political dilemma of a new South Sudanese state sparked a brief lull in violence. The Khartoum regime quickly placed restrictions on humanitarian access, UN peacekeeping operations, and press reporting in the Kadugli area, limiting international exposure to the full scale of atrocities perpetrated by the SAF. Reports by human rights organizations and the now-defunct UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) have clarified the scope of Khartoum's targeted attacks against South Kordofan's civilian population, including house-to-house arrests of SPLM activists, intentional strikes on civilian population centers, and extrajudicial killings. Whether or not the much-discussed mass graves actually exist, the fact of grave humanitarian trauma throughout the South Kordofan crisis remains.

Facing the twofold context of a successful intermediary peace process in Sudan's volatile Abyei region and the looming prospect of South Sudan's independence, the international community mounted an unimpressive response to the South Kordofan crisis. The United States offered rhetorical objections to the uptick in SAF violence against

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civilians, stating the Obama administration's support for civilian protection, conflict resolution, and restraint on both sides. Meanwhile, Russia and China thwarted the UN Security Council's attempts to condemn Khartoum's civilian targeting in South Kordofan, providing the NCP regime with a diplomatic victory. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir finally declared a ceasefire in mid-August, though reports of SAF airstrikes persisted.

Parsing International Policy Leverage

The UN Security Council kerfuffle surrounding civilian protection in Sudan, and the simultaneous U.S. and international policy impasse on the South Kordofan crisis, reflect the continuous challenges of civilian protection and conflict resolution policy in an increasingly multipolar international sphere. Both recent U.S. diplomatic history in Sudan and, from a macro-perspective, shifting power dynamics in the international system have restricted the tangible impact of U.S. policy on the Khartoum regime. Where U.S. credibility coaxed Khartoum to the negotiating table at the end of the two-decade North-South civil war in 2005, the Obama administration's perceived backsliding on its benchmarks for diplomatic normalization has reduced the effectiveness of U.S. incentives for civilian protection. China's decade-long emergence as Sudan's primary great-power patron has out-muscled U.S. policy leverage, creating an infertile environment for effective economic sanctions threats, diplomatic signaling, and rhetorical condemnations of mass atrocities.

Although Beijing remains, as a rule, unwilling to pressure Khartoum toward civilian protection and tangible human rights policies, recent diplomatic history has offered a succession of exceptions. In the context of Darfur, examples abound: China abstained from the UN Security Council's referral of the situation in Darfur to the ICC, allowing the Court to move forward with an investigation into Khartoum's abuses in the embattled region of western Sudan. Additionally, China abstained from the Security Council's vote on the deployment of a joint UN-African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur, and subsequently contributed troops to the deployed force. China-Sudan relations throughout the Darfur crisis were far from benign, but China remained a key contributor to the multilateral response to the crisis.

Similarly, during the months prior to South Sudan's January independence referendum, high-level U.S. policy leadership on civilian protection and conflict resolution in South Sudan facilitated a robust and ultimately effective policy response. In the absence of overwhelming influence with the Khartoum regime, U.S. leadership in the international arena succeeded in mobilizing political leverage from emerging powers in support of peaceful independence referendum. In the year leading up to the referendum, U.S. policymakers remained engaged with their international partners on a high level, indicating the prioritization of conflict resolution in South Sudan. As Bec Hamilton has noted, the absence of bilateral and multilateral policy prioritization surrounding the South Kordofan crisis, the completion of unresolved components of the North-South Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), and civilian protection in the two Sudans has limited the international community's response.

As the international community's ineffectual response to the South Kordofan crisis indicates, U.S. policy toward Sudan necessitates a profound reconfiguration. Where the pre-referendum mobilization of bilateral, multilateral, and international-institutional partnerships demonstrated the importance of maximizing non-U.S. leverage for civilian protection and conflict resolution in Sudan, the South Kordofan response demonstrated the pitfalls of unilateral U.S. leverage. This lesson is well-applied to a comprehensive set of conflict resolution processes in the new Sudans, particularly as the United States and China vie for regional economic, political, and military influence, Khartoum and Juba continue to face significant crises in governance, and festering conflicts in the border regions of South Kordofan and Blue Nile State continue.

As with the full spectrum of U.S. foreign policy decision-making, U.S. policy effectiveness over the next decade will require a distinct adjustment in U.S. relations with the international political sphere. The essential dilemma between unilateral U.S. power and multilateral leverage will remain at the core of the U.S. strategic outlook; nowhere is the necessity of this shift more clear than in the two Sudans.

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