



China's diplomacy in post-partition Sudan and South Sudan

Martina Bassan

► To cite this version:

Martina Bassan. China's diplomacy in post-partition Sudan and South Sudan. China Analysis, 2013, pp.6 - 8. hal-03470571

HAL Id: hal-03470571

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03470571>

Submitted on 8 Dec 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

2. China's diplomacy in post-partition Sudan and South Sudan

Martina Bassan

Sources:

Liu Hongwu and Xiao Yuhua, "Reflections on the security situation in the Horn of Africa", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi – Contemporary International Relations*, No. 3, 2012, pp. 32-38.¹⁴

Zhang Chun, "How can China judge the internal affairs of North and South Sudan?", *Dongfang Zaobao – Oriental Morning Post*, 2 May 2012.¹⁵

Yang Zhenfa, "Opportunities and challenges in petroleum cooperation between China and South Sudan", *Xiya Feizhou – West Asia and Africa*, No. 3, 2012, pp. 90-106.¹⁶

In 2011, Sudan split into two countries. The north of the country remained the Republic of Sudan (often simply referred to as Sudan) and the south became the new state of South Sudan. Although the region is unstable and divided, it is still a key element in China's Africa policy. Yang Zhenfa says that because of its large-scale cooperation with Beijing on oil, Sudan offers a model for Chinese companies operating in Africa, and represents a potential strategic base for expansion into other parts of the continent. China sees internal instability in the Sudan region, whether economic, political, or social, as a potential threat to its interests. So, in response to the Darfur conflict, the Chinese government appointed a Special Representative on African Affairs in May 2007. The first envoy, Liu Guijin, was replaced by Zhong Jianhua in 2012.

South Sudan's declaration of independence on 9 July 2011 opened up new opportunities for Chinese engagement in the region, but so far it has not advanced China's position in either the new or the old Sudan. The authors analyse the new challenges facing China's diplomacy since the partition of Sudan. China has to deal with a political, economic, and security landscape that is becoming more and more unstable because of South Sudan's domestic problems, the growth of tensions between the two Sudans, and the attitude to the two Sudans of other foreign powers, particularly the United States.

South Sudan's risky dependence on oil

Yang Zhenfa and Zhang Chun agree that one of South

¹⁴ Liu Hongwu is director of the Institute for African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University. His research is particularly focused on China-Africa relations and questions of development in Africa. Xiao Yuhua is a researcher at the Institute for African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University.

¹⁵ Zhang Chun is deputy director of the Centre for West Asian and African Studies at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS).

¹⁶ Yang Zhenfa is a researcher at the School of International Studies at Yunnan University.

Sudan's main problems is its over-dependence on oil. South Sudan inherited more than 80 percent of Sudan's pre-partition oil reserves. Its economy is almost exclusively based on oil income: in 2011, 98 percent of taxation revenue came from the petroleum sector. But although it is rich in resources, South Sudan does not have the infrastructure needed to transport and export oil, such as pipelines, ports, and so on. All of its exports are controlled by the Republic of Sudan, which owns the two main pipelines that enable South Sudan's crude oil to be carried to the Red Sea. This extremely unstable situation led to an interruption of trade between the two countries that lasted for more than a year, from January 2012 to March 2013, because of a dispute over oil transit fees.¹⁷ This "suicidal act" (自杀式行动, *zishashi xingdong*), in Zhang Chun's phrase, is thought to have cost both sides several billion dollars.¹⁸

Yang points out that the profit margin on international oil sales depends on external variables. This means that as long as South Sudan's public revenues are dependent on exports, the country and its oil industry's development will remain compromised or under threat. Yang says that the prospects for oil exploration in South Sudan are limited. According to World Bank statistics, South Sudanese oil production reached its peak in 2012, at roughly 527,000 barrels a day. If no other wells are discovered, oil production could start to decline drastically as early as 2015. Only the southern parts of the country have not been targeted for oil exploration, and their exploration potential is uncertain. And a solution needs to be found to border disputes and the distribution of resources in the disputed areas, particularly in the Abyei area.¹⁹ If Sudan and South Sudan cannot reach an agreement on the disposition and management of the border territories, regional stability will remain under threat, as will China's investments and security of supply.

Western intervention and "proxy war" in Sudan

Liu Hongwu and Xiao Yuhua say that the West has taken an ambiguous position on the region's affairs. After South Sudan's independence, the Republic of Sudan lost one quarter of its land, one fifth of its population, and the majority of its oil resources. In spite of that blow, Liu and Xiao say that the West has not yet lifted sanctions on Sudan, and has taken South Sudan's side in the border conflict. The writers think that sanctions have worsened the Republic of Sudan's security problems and have strengthened the Sudanese government's authoritarian tendencies.

¹⁷ Because of an on-going dispute on transit fees, Khartoum seized shipments of South Sudanese oil in December 2011. As a result, Juba decided to suspend its oil production and announced its intention to look for new export routes. The transportation of oil resumed more than a year later and exports resumed.

¹⁸ See AFP, "Soudan: le pétrole du sud traverse le pays" [Sudan: oil from the South crosses the country], *Le Figaro – Flash Eco*, 14 April 2013, available at <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-eco/2013/04/14/97002-20130414FILWWW00088-le-petrole-sud-soudanais-par-le-soudan.php>.

¹⁹ This oil-rich region is coveted by both states and is currently considered part of both Sudan and South Sudan.

Liu and Xiao say that the Western powers' involvement must be seen in the context of the "proxy war" strategy (代理人战争, *dailiren zhanzheng*) of the states of the Horn of Africa, which are relying on Western intervention to conduct indirect wars against their troublesome neighbours. Liu and Xiao say that South Sudan is seeking to "create opportunities for Western intervention" (在给西方的干涉制造机会, *zai gei xifang de ganshe zhizao jihui*) so as to put pressure on the government of the Republic of Sudan. South Sudan's armed forces regularly ask the international community to prevent humanitarian crisis by backing the army's actions in the region. Liu and Xiao say that this was the strategy used at the time of the deadly bombardment of the border zones by Sudanese forces.²⁰ This conflict brought the situation in Sudan to the attention of the international community and set off a heated debate on the need for humanitarian intervention.

The influence of the US

Liu and Xiao contend that the US represents the "key external factor" (关键外部因素, *guanjian waibu yinsu*) in the region. Zhang Chun says the partition of Sudan, together with the ensuing conflicts and tensions, have their roots in the peace agreement that ended the Second Sudanese Civil War in 2005. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) is a set of protocols signed by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, representing South Sudan, and the government of Sudan. Zhang says the agreement was signed under pressure from the US. The CPA is often criticised for its lack of clarity on measures that would ensure a peaceful partition. But Liu and Xiao go further, criticising the outcome of the agreement itself. They say that the original objective of the talks was to speed up the unification of Sudan, not bring about its partition.

Yang says that the US was responsible for the change in objective. The US, he says, is the "main player behind the scenes in the independence of South Sudan" (美国是南苏丹独立的主要幕后推手之一, *meiguo shi nan sudan duli de zhuyao muhou tuishou zhiyi*). The US intervention in the partition of Sudan signals a US return to the Sudan region where, according to Liu and Xiao, the US has interests connected to its anti-terrorist strategy. The US wants to strengthen cooperation with regional allies in the Horn of Africa and increase military training and logistical support for friendly regimes. It wants "to align its development aid in Africa with its diplomatic and strategic interests" (其目的, 就是将美对非的发展援助与美外交利益和国家安全整合在一起, *qimudi, jiushi jiang meiduifei de fazhan yuanzhu yu meiwaizhao liyi he guojia anquan zhenghe zaiyiqi*). To this end, South Sudan is today a major recipient of US development assistance. In 2010, the US government provided \$300 million in aid to South Sudan. In 2011, the US Department of Commerce adjusted its export policy on

South Sudan, with the aim of encouraging US companies to invest in the country.

Even so, the US commitment to South Sudan remains limited. Washington favours a "wait and see approach" (观望状态, *guanwang zhuantai*), which seems to contradict the US's stated good intentions and promises. Yang believes the US is worried that the Republic of Sudan might benefit from American investment in South Sudan's oil, through profits that would accrue from cooperation between the two countries. That would explain why US diplomacy towards South Sudan "remains complicated and contradictory" (外交心态上是复杂和矛盾的, *waijiao xintai shang shi fuza he maodun de*). Yang thinks the US is continually "procrastinating" (犹豫不决, *youyubujue*) about its return to Africa. Zhang sees a gap between China's "genuine support" (真诚支持, *zhencheng zhichi*) for an African solution to the tensions and the "empty promises" (空头支票, *kongtou zhipiao*) of the US. Washington talks about its willingness

to support Africa, but in fact it wants to duck out of its obligations. The Western powers calls on China to assume its responsibilities, but the US is the one most to blame for Sudan's chronic instability.

but the US is the one most to blame for Sudan's chronic instability.

China's role in resolving the dispute

China is now the main investor in and purchaser of oil from South Sudan. For this reason, China was asked to play the role of mediator after tensions rose between the Republic of Sudan and South Sudan. But Beijing is wary of taking on this role. Zhang Chun says that China has to think about its interests in this part of the world. Any intervention by Beijing in the relationship between the Republic of Sudan and South Sudan could affect China's image in the region as well as contradicting its fundamental principles of being responsible in taking action abroad and of non-interference in the internal affairs of third states. So, Zhang explains, China cannot impose itself as the arbitrator of disputes between the two Sudans. Unlike the West, China has never set conditionalities on its aid allocation process in Sudan, and China's principle of non-interference remains the cornerstone of oil cooperation between China and the two Sudans.

In the wider context of the continent as a whole, Liu and Xiao say that some African countries hope that China will take a more active part in building peace and security in Africa. However, the writers do not believe this will happen. Beijing's logistical capacity is limited, since China cannot easily deploy troops so far from home. And the major powers' distrust of China significantly limits China's potential space for action.

²⁰ The author does not give a precise date for the bombardments, but he probably refers to either (or both) the bombardment of Jau bombing in February 2012 or that of Bentiu in April 2012.

Even so, Beijing's political will to resolve the dispute between the two countries through consultation and dialogue has proved itself effective on several occasions.²¹ Liu and Xiao say China must continue to respect the principle of non-interference, even as it becomes more actively and "constructively" (建设性, *jianshexing*) involved. Zhang Chun agrees, saying that because of China's limited scope for unilateral action, it must support a multilateral approach and help provide more flexibility for the United Nations and the African Union. The UN is often accused of being "paralysed" (瘫痪, *tanhuan*) and the African Union of being "slow" (迟钝, *chidun*). But China still needs both these players and must continue to support them, not only in the "microcosm of Africa" that is South Sudan (非洲的缩影, *feizhou de suoying*), but also across the rest of the continent.

²¹ Between 10 and 13 March 2012, a few months after the interruption of oil trade between South Sudan and the Republic of Sudan, Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, the Chinese government's special envoy to Africa, made two separate visits to the Sudan and South Sudan, with the aim of encouraging both parties to solve their differences through dialogue. On 13 March 2012, the representatives of both countries met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where they signed a preliminary agreement, which made special reference to the demarcation of the border.