

## Chinese maintain influence in Sudan as US delays lifting of sanctions

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China has been consolidating its economic, military and political foothold in Africa just as the United States delayed a decision on whether to permanently lift economic sanctions on Sudan.

China's first permanent overseas military deployment in almost six decades has set sail for Djibouti, marking the first time a long-term garrison of the People's Liberation Army was established beyond China's borders since its withdrawal from North Korea in 1958.

This follows the Chinese Navy's anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden in 2012 and China's foreign deployment of combat troops in

### China's Djibouti base

► The base will be used for military exercises, maintaining seaway security and evacuating overseas Chinese in emergencies, Xinhua reported, as well as humanitarian aid and peacekeeping in Africa and western Asia.

► More than 10,000 Chinese companies are believed to be operating across Africa.

► In April 2015, the Chinese Navy evacuated more than 500 nationals from Yemen. It also helped more than 200 others, including people from Europe, Pakistan and Singapore, escape to safety. That same year it deployed troops on a peacekeeping mission in South Sudan where two Chinese peacekeepers were killed last year.

(The Arab Weekly)

2015 as part of a UN peacekeeping mission to South Sudan. Analysts said Beijing is using the South Sudan mission as a testing ground as it stretches its formal policy of non-intervention in the affairs of other countries.

The Trump administration delayed a decision for at least three months on whether to permanently revoke sanctions on Khartoum, disappointing many Sudanese who hoped for greater leeway in doing business with the West.

Further complicating the picture is the Qatar crisis, with reports suggesting that Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Egypt asked Washington to delay the lifting of sanctions on Sudan to pressure Khartoum to sever relations with Doha. The four countries accuse Qatar of supporting Islamist terrorist groups and Iran.

Sudanese Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour dismissed the reports, saying Khartoum backed Kuwait's attempt to mediate a solution to the Qatar crisis.

Beijing has abstained from taking sides in the Qatar dispute. Saudi Arabia is China's top trade partner in the Middle East and the UAE is the largest market in the region for Chinese goods.

The absence of US businesses in Sudan allows China a dominant position. Sudan was the first country to recognise China in 1959 and Beijing is the biggest investor there while expanding its footprint across Africa. Sudan signed an oil development deal with China in 1995, soon after US sanctions were imposed because of Khartoum's previous ties with terrorists such as Osama bin Laden. China controls an estimated 75% of Sudan's oil industry.

It has not been clear sailing for Beijing, which has failed to see the return on large loans it provided to Sudan.

"What is important to note about Chinese loans to Sudan is that they were contracted during the decade of the oil boom of 1999-2011, when Sudan earned an estimated \$60

billion to \$70 billion while at the same time borrowing billions from China," said Suliman Baldo, a senior adviser at the Enough Project, a US-based human rights group.

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"It's important to know also that many of the projects for which the loans were contracted didn't materialise. Sudan has reportedly fallen behind in repayment of instalments that came for payment, causing China to suspend new loans. The main reason for these anomalies is grand corruption and mismanagement of development projects."

The independence of South Sudan in 2011 forced Beijing to recalibrate its policy, given much of the region's oil was in the world's newest country, which was soon mired in civil conflict.

"Sudan was the Chinese oil industry's first overseas success and retains symbolic importance. It was there that China's oil corporation and its subsidiaries cut their teeth on international operations, proved their mettle and gained operational experience," said a report titled "China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan" by the International Crisis Group.

"When South Sudan's civil war broke out in late 2013, Chinese advocates of a more flexible interpretation of the non-intervention policy saw an opportunity to try new approaches to protect their nation's interests," the report said.

Luke Patey, senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies, said Beijing's policy of dealing only with Khartoum backfired. "Oil revenues in Sudan reinforced longstanding practices of economic mismanagement, political patronage, militarisation and



A testing ground. A South Sudanese soldier stands next to the infrastructure of an oil field processing facility in Unity State. (AFP)

corruption of the Sudanese elite in Khartoum and oil companies became the targets for disenfranchised groups," he argues in a forthcoming article, the Financial Times reported.

Beijing's base in Djibouti, which opened the same week that China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, made its first port of call outside of mainland China with a voyage to Hong Kong, has important regional implications, not least the scope for future conflict.

Djibouti already hosts US and French military forces and Saudi Arabia is to open a base there. The

UAE has a base in Eritrea and is planning another in Somaliland.

"All these parties within a stretch of coast a few hundred kilometres long... don't need to rub up against each other at the moment but you could easily see a situation in which these parties get a lot more antagonistic towards each other," Edward Paice, director of the Africa Research Institute, told the Cipher Brief, an online security news site.

Sharmila Devi is a former British correspondent in the Middle East and writes on political and social issues in the region.

## Sudan: The Arab world's and Africa's forgotten conflict

### Viewpoint



Claude Salhani

Unlike conflicts in the Middle East and parts of Africa that grab the spotlight and make front-page news in the world's leading media outlets, the armed conflicts that have plagued Sudan since its independence have a hard time getting the world's attention.

Sudan, a predominately Arab country in northern Africa, is one of the poorest places in the world. Its infrastructure and public services leave much to be desired and the country ranks among the world's lowest in key domains such as human rights, economy and education.

While the conflict in Sudan is very real and murderous, it at times appears to belong more in an Evelyn Waugh novel.

After gaining its independence from Great Britain and Egypt in 1956, Sudan had decades of civil conflict, with the people voting to allow the south to secede in 2011. This split Sudan, then Africa's largest country, into two sovereign states: Sudan and South Sudan. Three times the size of France, Sudan claims to have a road network of some 17,000km but only 200km are paved.

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The referendum in January 2011 indicated overwhelming support for the south's independence. South Sudan officially gained independence on July 9, 2011. Sudan and South Sudan have yet to fully implement security and economic agreements signed in September 2012 to normalise relations. The final disposition of the contested Abyei region has also yet to be decided.

The underlying causes of Sudan's multiple wars are many. There is the religious war between the Christian south and the Muslim north. The north is mostly Arab and Muslim, whereas the south is Christian and Animist. Despite having some of Africa's largest oil reserves, South Sudan is poorer than Sudan. Second, there are wars between various tribes and militias, such as the Janjaweed, which operates in western Sudan and eastern Chad.

Following South Sudan's independence, fighting broke out between the government forces and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, which is active in Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile (together known as the Two Areas). The clashes resulted in the death of tens of thousands of people and created a refugee crisis, displacing nearly 1.1 million people.

In 2003, Janjaweed went on a killing spree in the western Sudanese region of Darfur, displacing nearly 2 million people and claiming thousands of more lives. While fighting between

government and opposition forces has largely subsided in both regions, civilians are threatened by low-level violence, including inter-tribal conflicts and crime, which is largely a result of the weak rule of law.

For all intents and purposes, Sudan is a failed state incapable of providing security for its citizens. Efforts to quell the violence by the United Nations and the African Union have not succeeded. Peacekeeping forces from the United Nations and the African Union have been dispatched to Darfur.

Already weighed down by massive social and economic problems, including the provision of housing for millions of refugees from its own country, Sudan is further troubled by an influx of refugees from neighbouring countries, primarily Ethiopia, Eritrea, Chad, Central African Republic and South Sudan. Armed conflict, poor transportation and the inability of the central government to offer any tangible solutions to the country's problems have contributed to Sudan's dire condition.

In the past, Khartoum was accused of aiding and abetting terrorism. Former al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden sought refuge in Sudan until, under international pressure, he fled to Afghanistan.

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warned US citizens not to travel to Sudan:

"US citizens should avoid all travel to the Darfur region, Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan states and consider carefully before planning travel to other areas of Sudan due to the risks of terrorism, armed conflict and violent crime," reads the agency's travel warning.

"The US embassy's ability to provide services outside of Khartoum is extremely limited. Terrorist groups are active in Sudan and have stated their intent to harm Westerners and Western interests through suicide operations, bombings, shootings and kidnappings. Violent crime targeting Westerners, including kidnappings, armed robberies, home invasions and carjackings occur everywhere in Sudan but are particularly prevalent in the Darfur region."

"Despite numerous ceasefires declared by the government of Sudan and opposition forces, tensions in the Darfur region... remain high and violence continues. In addition to risking injury or death, US citizens who go to these areas without the permission of the Sudanese government may be detained by security forces," the travel warning stated.

These embassy warnings may well be the only media coverage that the tragic story in Sudan receives. There is no end in sight for the country, its conflicts and its many problems.

Claude Salhani is a regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.