

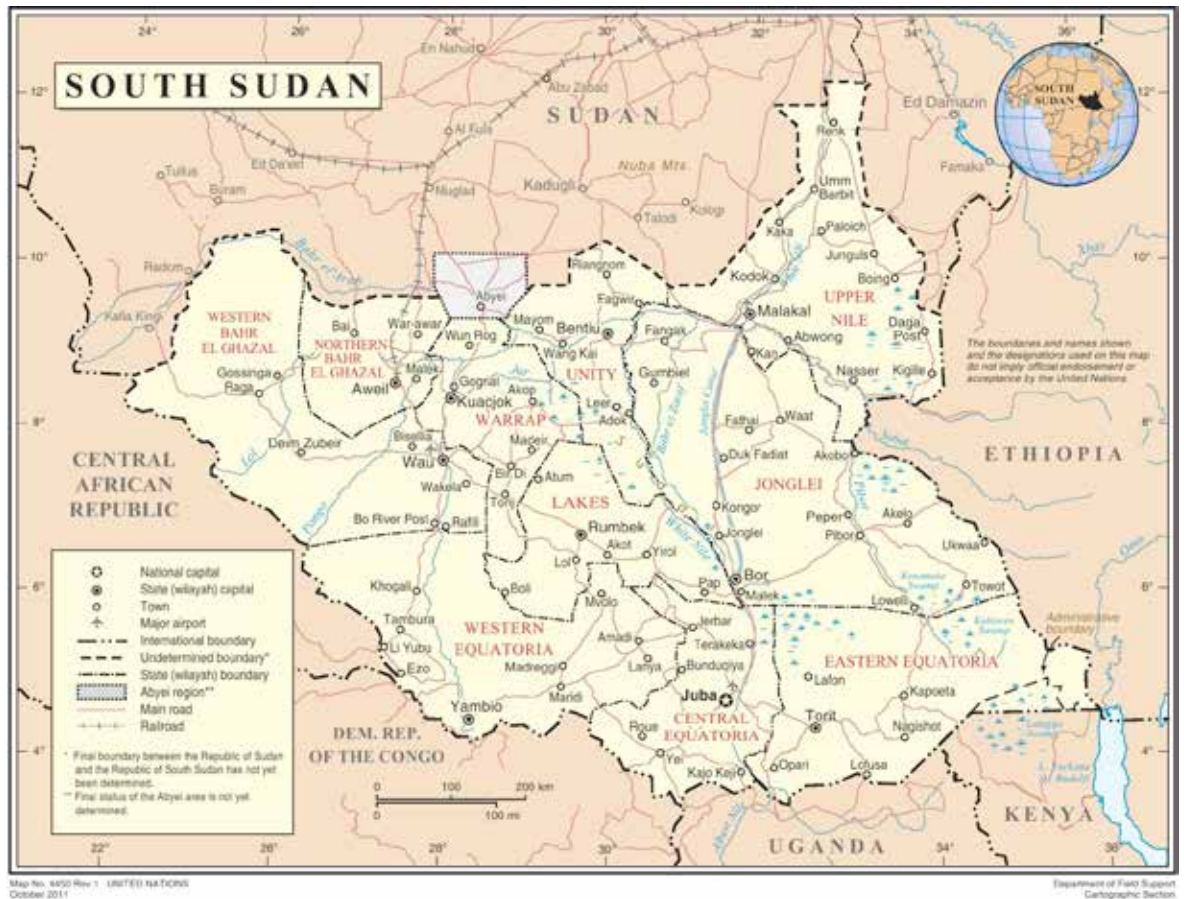
Strategy of ‘Parallels’: China in the South Sudanese armed conflict

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Introduction

South Sudan, the newest country in Africa has seemingly become China's test ground for its foreign policy and security strategies. The complexity of South Sudan's war of independence and subsequent secession from the Sudan in 2011 tested China's ability to turn a hostile relationship with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), chaired by Salva Kiir, now South Sudan President, into a mutually beneficial one. The Juba-Khartoum conflict over oil transit fees resulting in oil production shutdown in 2012 challenged Beijing's conflict mediation strategies and its ability to coordinate the volatile Beijing-Juba-Khartoum triangular relationship. In addition, before Chinese oil companies recuperated from the oil production disruptions, or fully came to terms with the complexities of working with the two antagonistic *Sudans* in their interdependent oil sector, a civil war broke out between the South Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement - In Opposition (SPLM-IO) led by former vice-president Riek Machar, further challenging China's foreign policy and security strategies in Africa.

For China, South Sudan assays its long-standing foreign policy principles and development ideologies in Africa - the non-interference principle and the idea that economic development brings peace and security. But beyond that, it ostensibly unveils the intricacies of Beijing's foreign policy strategies, especially the efficacy of its non-interference

principle when faced with intrastate armed conflicts in Africa. In a space of three years, China's position in the South Sudanese civil war revolved around strict adherence to its non-interference principle, urging parties in the conflict to seek political solutions, direct mediation and deployment of combat troops under the auspices of the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan. At face value, the shift from one strategy to the other suggests the absence of a coherent strategy, implying that Beijing is being opportunistic, crafting its strategies as it goes. Although it might be the case that Beijing is 'learning on the job', its strategy in South Sudan is not linear but rather a deliberately convoluted strategy of 'parallels'. This article, accordingly, explores this strategy of 'parallels' and the implications it may have on Beijing's future engagement with civil wars in Africa.



South Sudan's strategic significance to China

China's response to intrastate armed conflicts in Africa varies with each country. For instance, while it vehemently argued that in Libya "there must be no attempt at regime change or involvement in civil war by any party under the guise of protecting civilians"¹, it was largely silent on

1- UN Security Council 2011, *6531st meeting*, S/PV.6531, 10 May 2011, p. 20, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/POC%20S%20PV%206531.pdf>

military intervention by French Special Forces that led to the capture and ouster of Laurent Gbagbo in Côte d'Ivoire. As might be the case with the other global powers such as France and the United States, geopolitical concerns, domestic pressure for China to protect its overseas nationals, and an expansion of its economic interests and security concerns as its global power increases influences its response to foreign conflicts. But more importantly, contrary to the past, as China's interests expand abroad, conflicts in Africa are increasingly impinging on its national interests. The implication is that on a case-to-case basis, depending on the strategic importance of a country to China's national interests, there is an emerging pattern in its foreign policy and security strategy.

To China, South Sudan is strategic for two main reasons: its oil wealth, and its strategic location in the East African region. First, as China sought to keep the engine of its economy running, multiplication and diversification of its sources of energy became a matter of national interest. Although the SPLM and China had frosty relations at first, in the years preceding South Sudan's independence, China had successfully courted the SPLM, making a case that it was in the interest of both parties to maintain cordial relations. China wanted returns to its oil investments, and the government of South Sudan needed the oil revenue, the majority of which came from Chinese operated oil fields, and accounted for 98 per cent of South Sudan's state revenue. It made sense because at independence, South Sudan had seceded with 75 per cent of Sudan's known oil wealth, and the majority of oil fields that Chinese companies had invested in were located in South Sudan's territory. As of 1 January 2014, South Sudan has approximately 3.5 billion barrels of proved oil reserves with an estimated value of US\$38 billion based on existing oil fields making South Sudan's oil reserves three times more than Sudan's. The majority of that oil is under the control of Chinese state-owned enterprises such as the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). CNPC has a majority stake (41 percent share) in both Dar Petroleum Operating Company (DPOC) and in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC) (41 percent share), both of which are the major oil companies operating in South Sudan. Sinopec, another Chinese oil company, has a 6 percent stake in DPOC², which makes China, South Sudan's major oil investor and leading importer.

The outbreak of the civil war in South Sudan in December 2013, and its subsequent intensification resulted in oil installations in the Unity State and Upper Nile State being targeted, thus dragging China into the conflict. Oil fields in Unity and Upper Nile State were forced to shut down, and the Adar Yale oilfield came under attack on several occasions. Some of the shutdowns were so sudden and done so hastily that machinery was damaged and oil leakages were severe causing both economic losses and environmental damage. Apart from the loss of 45,000 bbl./day of oil produced at fields in Unity State, "satellite images taken by the U.S. – funded Satellite Sentinel Project show[ed] that key oil infrastructure was severely damaged, including oil storage tanks and

2- EIA. 2014, 'Country analysis brief: Sudan and South Sudan', U.S. Energy Information Administration, 3 September 2014. Available at: https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/countries_long/Sudan_and_South_Sudan/sudan.pdf

manifolds."³ South Sudan's plan to construct refineries at Bentiu, located in Unity State and another "planned 10,000-bbl/day refinery in the Upper Nile near Blocks 3 and 7,"⁴ with support from CNPC were abruptly put to a halt as the civil war intensified. The refineries had been meant to increase production and avoid further disruptions due to conflicts with Khartoum. As a result of the armed conflict, oil production initially dropped by almost 20%, and then due to falling oil prices (from US\$110 per barrel in July 2014 to US\$35 per barrel in January 2016) and escalation of the fighting, oil production further reduced to more than 40 per cent in 2014-15. South Sudan's oil revenue also plummeted from US\$7.4 billion in 2011 to US\$4.2 billion in 2016, bringing losses to both China and the government of South Sudan.

Second, apart from its investments in South Sudan's oil industry, China views South Sudan as being strategic to its expansion into the East African region. This is partly because of South Sudan's comparatively more developed oil sector, but more importantly because a spillover of the conflict from South Sudan into Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia will effectively destabilize the whole region - possibly with the same devastating effect as the Libyan conflict had on Chinese interests in the Sahel region. In Ethiopia, China has extensive investments in manufacturing, infrastructure development and railway construction. In October 2016, the first fully electrified railway in Africa linking Addis Ababa to the Red Sea port in Djibouti was launched. The project was funded by China to the tune of US\$3.4 billion. In Kenya, China began the first phase of a US\$3.8 billion Standard Gauge Railway linking Nairobi with the port city of Mombasa. The railway is being constructed by a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company limited and is expected to be completed in 2017-8. A second phase of the project will expand the Standard Gauge Railway to link Kenya, Uganda, Burundi and South Sudan establishing what has been termed as the East African Railway Network. Both the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway and the East African Railway Network will connect the East African hinterland to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean maritime trade routes, strategically fitting into Beijing's One Belt, One Road initiative. A spillover of the civil war in South Sudan into other East African countries will therefore jeopardize China's regional and maritime trade interests.

Other factors that make South Sudan important to China are that besides oil companies, Chinese private and state-owned construction and telecommunication companies that were active in South Sudan found their operations threatened by the armed conflict. Media reports suggest that more than 100 Chinese companies were operating in South Sudan in sectors related mainly to petroleum, construction and communications as of December 2013. Chinese companies with major projects in South Sudan at the time of the armed conflict included: Zhong Hao Overseas, a privately owned construction firm in Beijing built water and sanitation facilities, housing for government officials, a hospital and roads in South Sudan. State-owned Sinohydro Corporation dominated South Sudan's engineering and infrastructure sector; it also "provided a water plant in Western Equatorial, a thirty seven kilometer road in Malakal and highway construction linking the North

3- Ibid.

4- Ibid.

and the South.”⁵ China Harbour Engineering Corporation also won the tender to renovate the Juba International Airport estimated to cost US\$1.6 billion. ZTE set up the Sudan Telecommunication Network through a €200 million loan from China Exim Bank⁶. Although some of the companies had completed their projects, the majority were forced to either suspend operations or scale down operations.

In addition, there was growing domestic pressure for China to proactively protect its nationals in South Sudan because in what also turned out to be a repeat of the Libyan experience for Chinese workers: several Chinese companies had to evacuate their workers. For example, China National Petroleum Corporation “evacuated 97 of its staff in December 2013 because of the conflict.”⁷ In a statement, CNPC announced in December 2013 that it was arranging for the orderly evacuation of its workers from the affected oil fields to Juba, the capital city of South Sudan⁸, as they were forced to shut down oil fields in the Unity State and Upper Nile State, which were controlled by Riek Machar’s rebel fighters⁹. As put by Luke Patey, the evacuation of CNPC workers from the Palogue oilfield, South Sudan’s largest oilfield, led to extensive losses in production, affecting both South Sudan’s government and CNPC because, as he puts it, “without Chinese and other foreign staff, a limited number of South Sudanese technicians... struggled to keep production levels high.”¹⁰

Finally, aside from economic implications of the intrastate armed conflict in South Sudan on China’s interests, the conflict tested Beijing’s commitment to upholding peace and security in Africa. At the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) China had presented the Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015) underscoring for the first time the importance of China-Africa cooperation in the fields of peace and security. A specific clause in the Beijing Action Plan acknowledged efforts of the Chinese government’s Special Representative for African Affairs, then Liu Guijin, who actively engaged in mediation efforts in Africa’s hotspots, and “welcomed his continued constructive role in peace and security endeavors.”¹¹ It is not a coincidence that the commitment was made hardly a year after

5- Anthony, R & Jiang, H 2014, ‘Forum: Security and engagement: the case of China and South Sudan’, *African East-Asian Affairs*, no. 4, p. 81.

6- Wang, X & Lu, X 2014, ‘Investment in South Sudan: The opportunity and the challenge coexist’, *People’s Daily*, April 16, <http://en.people.cn/102774/8599301.html>; Embassy of People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Zimbabwe 2011, *China announces diplomatic ties with South Sudan*, 9 July, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.zw/eng/xwtd/t841090.htm>

7- ‘97 Chinese workers evacuated from South Sudan to Khartoum’ 2013, *People Daily*, 25 December, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/8495532.html>

8- Rose, A & Chen, A 2013, ‘China to evacuate South Sudan oil workers to capital’, *Reuters*, December 20, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/12/20/southsudan-unrest-china-idUKL3N0JZ24K20131220>

9- ‘S. Sudan provides assurances for safety of Chinese oil workers’ 2015, *Sudan Tribune*, 15 January, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article53658>

10- Patey, L 2014, ‘South Sudan: fighting could cripple oil industry for decades’, *Sudan Tribune*, 28 January, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article49741>

11-FOCAC 2012, ‘The Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015)’, *FOCAC*, 23 July, <http://www.focac.org/eng/zxxx/t954620.htm>

the Libyan crisis that resulted in loss of significant Chinese investments. In many respects the commitment to peace and security in Africa signified a growing recognition in China that African intrastate armed conflicts threaten its economic interests on the continent. The South Sudan intrastate armed conflict was therefore the first test to China’s commitment to assist in resolving peace and security issues in Africa, and an important platform to build its reputation as a responsible global power.

Strategy of ‘parallels’

China’s response to the civil war in South Sudan was multidimensional and multifaceted in a way that resembled a convoluted strategy based on contradictory elements. It combined principle with pragmatism; multilateralism with bilateralism; and *power politics* with mediation. The strategy is influenced by Beijing’s desire for flexibility and maneuverability in its foreign policy and security strategies. Combining different strategies regardless of their apparent contradictions, gives China the flexibility to balance different interests and still achieve its national objectives. For instance, since NATO exceeded its UN mandate in Libya, China has grown increasingly wary of any purely multilateral arrangements that it does not have total control of. In addition, regional political dynamics at play among Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, each of whom has divergent interests in South Sudan complicated regional multilateral efforts to resolve the conflict in South Sudan, hence China’s strategy to balance multilateralism with bilateralism - taking care to balance its own interests in South Sudan with the diverse interests of the other East African regional powers and various stakeholders in the civil war. The result was therefore a deliberately convoluted strategy of ‘parallels’, giving Beijing enough maneuverability to maintain its rhetoric of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, while exercising enough influence to achieve peace and security. As noted by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei, China’s strategy is to stop wars and keep peace, and turn hostilities into friendship “by running in parallel peaceful settlement and compulsory measures.”¹²

Principle versus pragmatism

China operates on a principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Civil wars, matters of state-society relations, and for instance, engaging opposition groups or rebel forces are matters strictly *ultra vires* Beijing’s non-interference principle. China has consistently emphasized on this principle to the extent that

12- People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Regular Press Conference on July 20, 2016*, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1383126.shtml

African countries now identify China as a non-interfering power distinct from interventionist Western powers like France and the United States. The implication of this non-interfering identity is that Beijing is more constrained than the West from taking any action that might be considered as interventionist by African countries. African countries expect global powers such as the United States to intervene in African matters but do not expect the same of China. The consequent dilemma for China is, therefore, that it can no longer relinquish its non-interfering identity without the risk of losing the support of African countries. Yet, continued strict adherence to the principle has proved, at times, to be detrimental to its interests abroad, and international reputation as a responsible global power. To avoid losing the trust of African countries by being seen as interfering in South Sudan's internal conflict, while at the same avoiding being labelled a 'free rider' by the United States, or a power unable to protect its nationals and businesses abroad, Beijing sought to balance the non-interference principle with pragmatism.

Two weeks after the conflict began on 15 December 2013, Chinese diplomats including its ambassador in Ethiopia met representatives of rebel forces led by Riek Machar at a hotel in Addis Ababa. By admission of its own Special Envoy for African Affairs, meeting rebels of any country is interference into that country's internal affairs. The absence of government representatives of South Sudan at the Addis Ababa meeting raised concerns that the meeting had other objectives besides mediation. One of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) mediators in the South Sudan conflict thinks China used the meeting to achieve two objectives, first to get assurances from Riek Machar whose forces had taken over control of oilfields in Unity and Upper Nile State that Chinese investments were secure. The Upper Nile and Unity State oilfields are strategic to China, the government of Sudan and Riek Machar rebel forces because, as put by Luke Patey, they represented 80% and 20% of oil production, respectively. Secondly, the meeting was used by Chinese diplomats to gather information and intelligence on the goings on in South Sudan in order to determine its course of action, and possibly which side of the conflict to support.



Bilateralism and multilateralism

In Africa, China seems to prefer bilateral rather than multilateral cooperation. At the 2009 Fourth Ministerial Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Libya's then Foreign Minister Moussa Koussa complained about China's 'divide and rule' of African countries. He remonstrated that Beijing does "not want the African Union, or African unity, but rather China wants to cooperate

with Africa as separate nations, rather than as a union..."¹³ A major reason why China prefers dealing with separate countries is that bilateralism and multilateralism are not clearly defined in China's foreign policy. In terms of China's position paper on the New Security Concept, cooperation "should be flexible and diversified in form and model. It could be a multilateral security mechanism of relatively strong binding force or a forum-like multi-lateral security dialogue. It could also be a confidence-building bilateral security dialogue or a non-governmental dialogue of an academic nature. The promotion of greater interaction of economic interests is another effective means of safeguarding security." The implication is that for China, bilateral security dialogue is included in its conception of cooperation, thus obscuring the line between bilateral and multilateral security cooperation. Based on that position, in South Sudan, China pursued both, improvising, extending and merging bilateral negotiations with multilateral negotiations to achieve its national interests.

Accordingly, Beijing has engaged with IGAD to the extent that IGAD facilitates its bilateral negotiations with South Sudan for the safety of Chinese nationals and businesses. For example, in January 2015, China facilitated a meeting attended by foreign ministers of China, Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia, as well as representatives of Riek Machar in Khartoum, Sudan under the 'Special Consultation in Support of South Sudan Peace Process' led by IGAD. At the end of the meeting South Sudan's Foreign Minister Barnaba Benjamin said: "we welcome the Chinese role which we believe is constructive and seeks to resolve the conflict in South Sudan. We hope these consultations, under China's patronage, would put the IGAD-led negotiations on the right track."¹⁴ Seyoum Mesfin, Ethiopia's Foreign Minister said that "we have no objection toward what China is doing and we believe the Chinese role is in the interest of the initiative of the IGAD which is patronizing the negotiations between the two conflicting parties in South Sudan."¹⁵ The same sentiments were echoed by Sudan's Foreign Minister Ali Karti who pointed out that "China, as a permanent member state in the UN Security Council, is working seriously and sincerely to end the conflict in South Sudan. It is acting on the base of its international responsibility and not to achieve any other purposes."¹⁶ Albeit, China's main objective at the meeting was to get guarantees that Chinese national and oil installations were going to be secured. This raised concerns among other IGAD member states that China was using IGAD's good offices to protect its interests. Similarly, there were rumours that China had also tried to negotiate with the UN that Chinese peacekeepers be deployed to protect Chinese oil investments.

13- Al-Awsat, A 2009, 'Q & A with Libyan Foreign Minister Musa Kusa', *Asharq al-Awsat*, 10 November, viewed 18 May 2014, <http://english.aawsat.com/2009/11/article55252921> ; Hook, L & Dyer, G 2011, 'Chinese oil interests attacked in Libya', *Financial Times*, 24 February, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/eef58d52-3fe2-11e0-811f-00144feabdc0.html>

14- 'China-supported consultations reactivate peace process in S. Sudan' 2015, *China Daily*, 13 January, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-01/13/content_19304551_2.htm

15- Ibid.

16- 'China-supported consultations in Khartoum reactivate peace process in South Sudan', *Xinhua*, 13 January, http://news.xinhua-net.com/english/china/2015-01/13/c_133915537.htm

A Norwegian diplomat in Addis Ababa who participated in the IGAD meetings on South Sudan dismissed China's presence in IGAD as a nuisance, arguing that they never meaningfully contributed to the peace deliberations. He suspected they only came to the meetings to gather information and keep abreast with latest developments in South Sudan's conflict. The same remarks were recounted by several IGAD officials and diplomats from Uganda. For instance, in an interview, an IGAD official complained that although China was heavily involved in the mediation process and peace monitoring mechanism and had seconded some Chinese officials to be part of the peace monitoring mechanism, Beijing allegedly provided funds off the record to rebels to protect their investments. Her argument was that China was in IGAD simply to protect its oil investments. However, she quickly added that Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan and Uganda also had interests in South Sudan. Nevertheless, as admitted by Zhong Jianhua, the Chinese government's Special Representative for African Affairs from 2013 to 2016, mediation of African intrastate armed conflicts in multilateral frameworks was still a new experience for China therefore they often struggled to balance their interests with the common objective of bringing peace to South Sudan.



Mediation and Power Politics

China also combined mediation with power politics, exercising its economic preponderance in South Sudan and leveraging on the asymmetrical relations between the two countries to achieve its objectives. To enhance its mediation efforts in South Sudan, China promptly appointed a special envoy, Zhong Jianhua, a diplomat considered to have extensive knowledge of Sudan and South Sudan. In a statement, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said: "On behalf of the Chinese government, special envoy Zhong Jianhua is currently visiting South Sudan and neighboring countries, and actively carrying out mediation efforts. China is willing to continuously enhance communication and coordination with all the relevant parties and jointly push for restoration of stability in South Sudan."¹⁷ As a result of the negotiations, the first ceasefire agreement between South Sudan's warring parties was signed. However, it has been noted by Harry Verhoeven that "Chinese diplomats took unprecedented steps in publicly pressuring belligerents Salva Kiir and his former vice president, Riek Machar, to sign a ceasefire agreement."¹⁸

A common feature in China's mediation efforts and bilateral talks with South Sudan government officials and rebel forces was demand for protection of its assets and economic investments. For instance, following reports of rebel attacks on oil facilities, the South Sudanese

17- 'China sends envoy to South Sudan to push peace talks' 2013, *Voice of America*, 27 December, <http://www.voanews.com/content/reu-china-sends-envoy-south-sudan-push-peace-talks/1818388.html>

18- Verhoeven, H 2014, 'Is Beijing's non-interference policy history? How Africa is changing China', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No.2, p. 64.

People's Liberation Army (SPLA) announced on 16 January 2015 that "oil fields have never been under control of anybody. They have been under full control of the SPLA and the general command assured the oil companies in Adar and Faluj that their protection is 100%."¹⁹ That announcement was a response to pressure from China, which had demanded an assurance at a meeting held in Khartoum between China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi and his South Sudanese counterpart, Barnaba Mariel Benjamin that South Sudan was committed to protecting Chinese oil workers and assets. According to the South Sudanese Minister of Information, Michael Makuei Leuth the meeting was initiated by China and was attended by members of the opposition faction led by former president Riek Machar. After the meeting, Barnaba Mariel Benjamin told the media that "I think it is a very, very important thing – that they (the Chinese) wanted the assurance that these institutions are properly protected and not to be destroyed in any form."²⁰ The assurances were a confirmation of earlier commitments made in a telephone conversation on 14 April 2014 when the Foreign Minister of South Sudan, Barnaba Mariel Benjamin, China's Minister of Commerce, Gao Hucheng stated that Chinese enterprises were still operating in South Sudan and that the "government of South Sudan could take *forceful measures* to protect the safety of lives and properties of Chinese people and enterprises, and render more facilitation and guarantee for business production and operation, material transportation and personnel entry and exit."²¹ The use of language that seem to imply a command to South Sudan's government to "take forceful measures to protect" Chinese nationals and assets in South Sudan suggests a more assertive China confident in its ability to pressure the Juba government into protecting its economic interests.

As noted by Luke Patey, the author of *The New Kings of Crude: China, India and the Global Struggle for Oil in Sudan and South Sudan*, "China's concern regarding South Sudan is not energy per se but rather a corporate investment from a major Chinese national oil company in jeopardy."²² Foreign Minister Wang Yi's had refuted that notion arguing that "China's mediation of South Sudan issues is completely the responsibility and duty of a responsible power, and not because of China's own interests."²³ While that might have been part of the reason, the major one was, as he had admitted earlier that "war and conflicts hurt the oil industry..., an area in which China, Sudan and South Sudan have worked closely

19- "South Sudan army says oil fields under full protection" 2015, *Sudan Tribune*, January 18, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article53675>

20- S. Sudan provides assurances for safety of Chinese oil workers' 2015, *Sudan Tribune*, 15 January, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article53658>

21- People's Republic of China Ministry of Commerce 2014, *Minister Gao Hucheng holds telephone talks with South Sudan's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation on bilateral ties and cooperation*, 6 April, <http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/newsrelease/significantnews/201404/20140400553492.shtml>

22- Feng, B 2014, 'China to send its first infantry troops to U.N. Mission in South Sudan', *New York Times*, December 23, http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/23/china-to-send-its-first-infantry-troops-to-u-n-mission-in-south-sudan/?_r=0

23- 'China's motive in South Sudan?' 2015, *Al Jazeera*, January 23, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2015/01/china-motive-south-sudan-201511319545502114.html>

together.”²⁴ He had then argued that the mediation was not meant for China to benefit alone - it was a mutually beneficial intervention aimed at getting a win-win solution to the conflict. It was therefore apparent that China’s efforts toward direct mediation in the South Sudan civil war “runs parallel with its interest in ensuring billions of oil investments in South Sudan stay out of harm’s way.”²⁵ This was confirmed by Ma Qiang, the Chinese Ambassador to South Sudan, who told Reuters that “we have huge interests in South Sudan so we have to make a greater effort to persuade the two sides to stop fighting and agree to a ceasefire.”²⁶

To force the belligerents in South Sudan to cease fire, and in a marked departure from its “business is business, no politics involved” precept that it had used to defend weapon sales to Khartoum, in the case of South Sudan, China took a more assertive but firm position. It halted the sale of US\$38 million worth of arms to South Sudan government by its state-owned arms manufacturer, China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO). According to Lan Kun, an attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Juba, the Chinese government decided it was not appropriate to deliver the consignment of weapons to South Sudan, therefore “no more weapons are heading to South Sudan... There are some media reports that were alleging that the Chinese government was behind this business operation and wants to undermine this peace process. That is totally untrue.”²⁷ Chief of the Political Section at the Embassy of China in South Sudan reiterated that since the beginning of the armed conflict, the Chinese government ordered all relevant Chinese companies to halt weapon trade with South Sudan²⁸. The *South China Morning Post* described China’s embargo on sale of weapons to Juba by Chinese companies as indicative of a swap of “its reserved diplomacy for a hands-on approach to help resolve a... rebellion in South Sudan that threatens Beijing’s oil investments.”²⁹ In addition, Beijing creatively fitted its South Sudan mediation within its foreign policy objective of sustaining its economic development and protecting overseas citizens and national interests from external threats, of which the intrastate armed conflict in South Sudan was one. The explanation was sufficient to silence dissenting voices in China, reassure Chinese citizens worried that the Libyan experience was going to be repeated in South Sudan, but most importantly, the message preempted concerns in Africa that China was moving toward intervention in African countries’ internal affairs.

24- ‘Visit celebrates ‘priceless’ friendship’ 2015, *China Daily*, February 16, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/touchroad/2015-01/22/content_19379710.htm

25- Porter, T 2014, ‘Oil behind China’s UN Peacekeeping troop deployment to South Sudan’, *International Business Times*, 23 December, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/oil-behind-chinas-un-peacekeeping-troop-deployment-south-sudan-1480770>

26- Jorgic, D 2014, ‘China takes more assertive line in South Sudan diplomacy’, *Reuters*, 5 June, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/06/05/uk-southsudan-china-insight-idUKKB-N0EG01Z20140605>

27- Gridneff, I 2014, ‘China halts arms sale to South Sudan after NORINCO shipment’, *Bloomberg*, 30 September, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-09-29/china-halts-weapons-sales-to-south-sudan-after-norinco-shipment>

28- Ibid.

29- ‘China adopts a more hands-on approach to the conflict in South Sudan’ 2014, *South China Morning Post*, 10 June, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1528859/china-adopts-more-hands-approach-conflict-south-sudan>

Conclusion

In post-independence Africa, South Sudan seems to have provided China with some unfettered testing ground for its foreign policy and security strategies. Seeking to maintain its cordial relations with developing countries such as South Sudan that are riddled with political instability while at the same time safeguarding its national interests (Chinese national and companies operating in those countries), China’s intervention, camouflaged in the non-interference rhetoric has allowed it to intervene in the internal armed conflict in South Sudan in a non-threatening manner. It has also shown less restraint in using its economic preponderance to dictate terms. Using its dominance in the South Sudan oil sector, and South Sudan’s reliance on China for revenue, China was able to compel the warring parties in South Sudan to guarantee protection of its assets and oil-facilities. It also used its leverage on South Sudan to persuade Riek Machar and Salva Kiir to sign the first peace agreement on 23 January 2014, and played a key role in further peace negotiations. In addition, it consistently restrained the U.S from imposing sanctions on actors in South Sudan arguing that such action would be detrimental to peace talks. Combined, these efforts reflected China’s impact in attempting to end the civil war in South Sudan. But intensified competition for power in Juba, ethnicisation of the conflict, multiplicity of rebel factions fighting against the government and each other, and meddling by Kenya and Uganda in the civil war is gradually waning China’s impact in ending the civil war in South Sudan, confining its role to UN peacekeeping operations.

Nonetheless, the strategy of balancing principle with pragmatism, mediation with power politics, and bilateralism with multilateralism has to a greater extent enabled China to revise its engagement strategy with African countries in conflict. The apparent effect of the strategy is that Beijing is subtly but creatively employing its economic, political and diplomatic influence on African states and critical stakeholders to determine the duration, direction and outcomes of their intrastate armed conflicts. Thus, as more conflicts in Africa impinge on China’s interests, China is likely to be more proactive and assertive to ensure that conditions remain favorable to its nationals and businesses. China is therefore no longer defined by its historical non-interference policy that most African countries are still obsessed with. As its global interests expand and its security concerns simultaneously increase, China will likely be taking more assertive action that borders on intervention.