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Geopolitics and Strategic options for Sudan and South Sudan Relations

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In analyzing geopolitics and strategic options for Sudan and South Sudan Relations: It is important to pay attention to the changing nature of international politics. In the current international political climate there is the re-emergence of the realist perspective of international relations based on power politics. A realist view of international relations would assert that the foreign policy decisions of a state are predictable because the overwhelming desire of all states is to survive.

Foreign policy of all states is therefore, driven primarily by the pursuit of national interests of states and use of diplomacy as a means of achieving those national interests. This is based on the notion of external influence where one state seeks to influence another state on the international stage to get what it wants. Therefore are those interests that a state defines and articulate for its survival. No state can dictate to another state what its national interests are or should be.

In the current context of regional geopolitics, states including Sudan involved in finding a solution to the conflict in South Sudan where there is shuttle diplomacy between Addis Ababa, Khartoum, Kampala/Entebbe and Nairobi, each country is inserting its own agenda into the peace effort, which indicates that all the neighboring countries are pursuing their national interests in South Sudan. The loser in all this geopolitical game is South Sudan, which is seen as weak and needing help. It could therefore, be argued that South Sudan has lost its leverage in the peace process. The only thing left for South Sudan in this game of higher geopolitics is perhaps asking the countries of the region to respect its sovereignty when trying to find a solution to the conflict. South Sudan is seen as a fragile and conflict – affected state. The people of South Sudan first began to experience violent conflict in August 1955 when Southerners serving in the military rebelled against British decision to grant Sudan independence in 1956. South Sudan is seen as a fragile and conflict – affected state. The people of South Sudan first began to experience violent conflict in August 1955 when Southerners serving in the military rebelled against British decision to grant Sudan independence in 1956.

That rebellion was transformed into the Anya nya Liberation movement, which lasted for 17 years and ended with the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement in February 1972 in which South Sudan was offered Self-rule or Autonomy within a united Sudan. A second wave of violent conflict erupted in May 1983 when the then President of Sudan Jaffar Mohammed Nimeiri abrogated the Addis Ababa agreement by dissolving the government and parliament in Juba and imposing direct rule of Southern Sudan from Khartoum. This decision again prompted Southerners serving in the Sudanese army Battalions No.104 and 105 in Bor and Ayod in Jonglei state to rebel against the Sudan government and quickly transformed themselves into a liberation movement known as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/SPLA). Its objectives were to fight for a unified reformed Sudan or the independence of South Sudan and the war lasted for 21 years and ended in an Agreement signed between the Sudan Government and the SPLM/SPLA in Naivasha – Kenya in 2005 allowing for an internationally monitored referendum in 2011 for the people of South Sudan to decide whether to remain united with Sudan or to become independent.

In the referendum of the people of South Sudan voted for independence from Sudan. South Sudan was declared independent and became the newest nation in the world on 9th July 2011. It was recognized by Sudan; all the African countries and all Member countries of the United Nations.

Two years into independence on 15th December, 2013, South Sudan was again plugged into a third wave of another violent conflict. This time it was between Dr. Riek Machar Teny, Vice President who disagreed with President Salva Kiir Mayardit over reforms in the SPLM ruling party. Dr. Riek Machar was demanding for a general overhaul of the SPLM and changes in the Constitution. President Salva Kiir Mayardit would have none of it. Military shootout erupted between the SPLA forces loyal to Dr. Riek Machar and those loyal to President Salva Kiir. A Peace Agreement between the two was signed in Addis Ababa mediated by IGAD on 17th August 2015 which Salva Kiir signed in Juba on 26th August 2015 but violence again erupted between the two rivals in July 2016 marking a fourth violent conflict in the history of South Sudan.

In assessing the geopolitical and strategic options for Sudan and South Sudan Relations, it is important to consider the above historical relations between the two countries. Equally important is to look at the interests of the countries bordering Sudan and South Sudan. To begin with, these countries belong to five regional blocks or grouping. (1) East African Community (EAC) in which South Sudan is a member and Sudan is not a member; (2) The Horn of African states Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in which South Sudan and Sudan are members; (3) The Nile Basin Countries in which South Sudan and Sudan are members; (4) The Arab League in which Sudan is a member and South Sudan is not a member and (5) the African Union (AU) in which Sudan and South Sudan are members. All these regional blocks bring into interplay the two countries' pursuit of their respective national and security interests in the geopolitics of the region.

An assessment of how each of the two countries uses these regional groupings as options in the pursuit of their geopolitical strategic national interests would reveal the following:

SUDAN

Sudan repeatedly, whether knowingly or unknowingly, invokes its colonial policies when it comes to issues to do with South Sudan. It portrays itself as godfather or an elder reflected in its behavior towards South Sudan. This attitude is clearly visible in the current mediation efforts to end the conflict in South Sudan, in which the President of Sudan Omar el Bashir considers himself as an elder to Salva Kiir and Riek Machar. That explains why President el Bashir decided to take up the mediation and ask the South Sudanese leaders to go to Khartoum and dictate the agenda for the peace process by including oil as a factor in resolving the conflict.

It should be remembered that when South Sudan broke away from Sudan in July 2011 and became independent, it took with it the oil and other natural resources which Sudan was largely depended on for its economic survival. Three quarter of the old Sudan resources are located in South Sudan.

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It should be remembered that when South Sudan broke away from Sudan in July 2011 and became independent, it took with it the oil and other natural resources which Sudan was largely dependent on for its economic survival. Three quarter of the old Sudan resources are located in South Sudan. Indeed Sudan’s President Omar el Bashir in evoking the African notion of elders who should be consulted whenever problems arise in the community and this might explain why he decided to invite President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni of Uganda to join him in Khartoum. The two leaders regard themselves as elders in the region and have taken over the peace process for South Sudan. All the other leaders in the region are younger to them. One key observation in the current effort is that the two Presidents Omar el Bashir of Sudan and President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni of Uganda decided to change the agenda by inserting their respective national interests into the peace process in South Sudan which are not necessarily the root causes of the conflict. For example, the inclusion of oil as a factor in the conflict by el Bashir of Sudan.

The two leaders el Bashir and Museveni eventually persuaded President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar to sign a ceasefire agreement and security arrangements with themselves as supervisors of the implementation process. President el Bashir of Sudan even went further by demanding that the Sudanese armed forces be deployed in the oilfields to secure the flow of the oil which President Salva Kiir and Dr. Riek Machar have allowed in violation of the sovereignty of the Republic of South Sudan. It is to be recalled that the issue of border between Sudan and South Sudan is still to be resolved including the status of Abyei. Three issues stand out as a result of Sudan-Uganda security arrangements;

- I. The question of sovereignty of South Sudan versus peaceful settlement of the conflict
- II. Incursion of the two countries into unsettled borders in South Sudan
- III. Increasing suspicion of South Sudanese over the hidden geopolitics influence of the two countries

SOUTH SUDAN

South Sudan as mentioned above is seen in the region as a fragile and conflict – state that needs support. This perception of South Sudan in a competing international and regional strategic political environment where each country is pursuing its national interests, has disadvantages. In addition, the government in South Sudan is seen as weak.

First, throughout the negotiations in Addis Ababa and Khartoum there was no fulltime Foreign Minister in the Government of South Sudan to handle matters to do with its regional and international relations.

Second, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation has no White Paper that spells out the foreign policy objectives for South Sudan that are deemed as national interests, which should be protected and pursue regionally and internationally.

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Third, all the leaders in South Sudan are perceived as weak and have run out of new ideas, because they have stayed too long in the government, some since 2005. There is also a perception, whether rightly or wrongly, that the President of South Sudan has stopped getting advice from his Ministers because there are no new ideas coming out from them. Therefore, the President is perceived to be operating on his own and the leadership is unable to come up with new ideas to pull the country out of its difficult situation. Even the Transitional National Legislative Assembly is viewed in the same manner, and that is why whatever legislation it passes is rejected by the region and the international community. For example, the recent extension of the term of office of the President, Government, and Transitional National Legislative Assembly for three years to 2021. If South Sudan has to regain its credibility regionally and internationally, it must address its weaknesses and this applies to its relations with Sudan as well.

Threats and Vulnerability of South Sudan in its geopolitical and strategic relations

1. Settlement of its borders with neighboring countries;
2. South Sudan must secure its borders and control cross – border activities; this is because border security is a precondition for interacting with neighboring countries;
3. The biggest external threat to South Sudan’s national security is from its northern neighbor and need to normalize its relationship with Sudan over disputes related to border and resources;
4. It is in South Sudan’s interest that Sudan remains stable;
5. Infiltration of small arms into the country;
6. Must secure its resources such as oil in the border areas;
7. South Sudan should develop alternative oil pipe lines. This is important for South Sudan to gain economic independence from Sudan;
8. Cattle rustling in the border areas are seen as another security threat to South Sudan with a wider regional conflict dimension in the East and Horn of Africa;
9. State weakness and internal rebellion are considered major threats to national security of South Sudan;
10. The consequences of the ongoing rebellion in South Sudan resulted in inefficient institutions, parts of the population do not have faith in the institutions of the state, there is lack of services, poor law enforcement as well as poor policing resulting in personal insecurity and fear and people feel more attached to local authorities than the government in Juba;
11. Internal instability can also affect regional instability as in most cases external actors are blamed for causing internal conflicts which can also affect international stability/security.

The above factors can determine the impact and influence that a state has in international affairs and South Sudan needs to pay attention and develop these capabilities particularly its economic power, which is critical in the current world climate and may continue to dominate in influencing the state’s power to contribute in international affairs. Under the present world order, the capacity for smaller states, including South Sudan, to influence international affairs are almost limited unless internal weaknesses are addressed and people centered politics are adopted.

ETHIOPIA

There is no doubt that Ethiopia has a strong interest in a peaceful coexistence of Sudan and South Sudan and in upholding good relationship with both countries. Instability in Sudan and South Sudan and the possibility of renewed conflict between the two countries pose a threat to Ethiopia’s national security. Ethiopia has economic and trade interests in natural resources of Sudan and South Sudan. Moreover, given that Ethiopia has military presence in Abyei, it views the largest risk of conflict between Sudan and South Sudan over the unresolved status of Abyei and strives to see a political solution. For Ethiopia, any policy that leans towards a regime change either in Khartoum or Juba constitutes a threat for Ethiopia which is also not prepared for the situation of a coup d’état in either country.

UGANDA

Uganda perceives Sudan as a serious threat to its national security. In 1990s and 2000s Khartoum supported the LRA in Uganda and Uganda supported the SPLA as a way of undermining Khartoum. Moreover, Uganda supported the independence of South Sudan to create, inter alia, a buffer state, which would limit the direct influence and threat of aggression from Khartoum. Thus, in terms of national security calculations, instability in South Sudan is also perceived as an immediate security threat to Uganda. Indeed, the support by Uganda for the SPLM/A in South Sudan’s liberation struggle was connected to the personal relationships of political leaders. President Museveni and late Dr. Garang, who led the SPLM/A, had been friends since their university years in Dar es Salaam. In contrast, the relationship between Museveni and Bashir was for decades until recently hostile. Infact, it is often argued that Uganda’s support for South Sudan has ideological dimensions – a “pan – African cause.” According to Uganda, Khartoum discriminated against the population in South Sudan because they were perceived as “Africans” as opposed to the “Arab” population of northern Sudan. That is why Uganda argues that its support for South Sudan is tied to the question of race and justice.

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KENYA

National interests of Kenya in South Sudan are economic, trade and investment. However, there is political competition for regional influence between Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda when it comes to relationships with South Sudan. These competing interests for regional influence often hinder the spirit of cooperative engagement in relationship with South Sudan.

In a country which has a history of violent conflict, gained independence through violent military use of force as a form of liberation and two years after independence used violent military means to bring reforms and changes in the country; what is the best way to do business with such a country at regional and international levels?

Kenya is aware that relationship with South Sudan being a member of the East African Community (EAC) need to reflect the spirit of the regional integration project in galvanizing efforts towards the formation of a renewed and solid regional block in a changing regional and international system. One of the principles of EAC integration philosophies is a need for the EAC member countries to share a reasonable degree the liberal democratic values that citizens of their respective countries generally regard as important. The establishment of a moderate East African Community in which its citizens can have profitable political, economic, trade, educational, cultural, defense, security, strategic and intelligence benefits including human rights will go a long way in improving the lives of the people of the region and Kenya has an important role to play in making sure the above objectives are realized.

Kenya should take seriously the above factors when it comes to doing business with South Sudan especially economic, trade and investment. The Northern Corridor Development Project, in which countries of East African Community will be connected through a common railway network will go a long way in improving economic and trade ties. It should be noted that South Sudan and Uganda are land –locked countries and their only gateway to international markets is through the Kenyan Port of Mombasa. Kenya is aware of this fact and may exploit it to maximize its economic and trade relationship with South Sudan through unfair trading agreements. South Sudan has vast natural resources including cattle, goats and sheep and when it begins its industrial and manufacturing sector it will need to export its products to the international markets including dairy products and the only gateway is through Kenya.

The relationship between Kenya and South Sudan so far is cordial. It is in Kenya's national interest not to exploit the status of South Sudan as a land-locked country through unfair trading arrangements. The current spirit of cooperative engagement between the two countries should continue for the benefit of the people of the two sisterly countries.

In conclusion, the geopolitics and strategic options for Sudan and South Sudan relations should pay attention to all the factors pointed out above that affect the relationship potentially the interests of neighboring countries. In the case of South Sudan the question that begs for answers is: In a country which has a history of violent conflict, gained independence through violent military use of force as a form of liberation and two years after independence used violent military means to bring reforms and changes in the country; what is the best way to do business with such a country at regional and international levels?