



GROWING SUDAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS AND PROSPECTIVE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS IN THE REGION

By
Ahmad Saffee
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The visit of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to Russia on November 23, 2017 created a spur in the Middle Eastern and African region. The visit, filled with controversial statements against United States, distancing from old allies including Gulf partners, and posturing a strategic shift away from old allies to new partners will create much wider implications for the region.

There are many dimension and opinions to Sudan-Russia rapprochement, some are domestically oriented, while others are of strategic nature. Sudan aims to make its mark on the international and regional stage, and to do so, it needs partners and soon, the time to pick and choose will require tough decisions by Sudan.

Interestingly, in terms of opportunities, Sudan has Russia, China, Pakistan and African Union to help on multilateral forums, as well as in its national development.

In the communiqué issued after the two Presidents met in Sochi, the Sudanese President said that, "Our positions coincide on the majority of issues. We are primarily opposed to US interference in the domestic affairs of Arab countries, in particular US interference in Iraq." He then further castigated US for interfering in Sudan and blamed the split of Sudan into two parts (back in 2011) as a continuation of US policy which has worsened the domestic situation. He also pointed towards the

flashpoints in Red Sea region stemming out of US policy; eventually boiling down his argument to "We need protection from aggressive US actions."¹

President Omar al-Bashir offered Russia cooperation in all fields including establishment of an overseas Russian military base on Red Sea, opportunity for Russian companies for geological exploration of energy resources and even expressed his interest and potential in using nuclear energy with Russian cooperation for civil purposes. He also extended Russia full support and leverage in establishing relations with other African countries, according to Omar, "Sudan may become Russian's key to Africa."²

The response from Russia was neither promising nor demoralizing. It was rather calculated and open-ended. However, Russia now has a blank cheque to fill, only if it is willing to extend protection from US aggressive policies against the trade-off of Russian national interests in Africa.

The narrative given by President Omar al-Bashir has some authenticity given the plethora of challenges faced by Sudan, especially in the wake of upcoming elections in 2020.

Sudan is Africa's largest country in geographical terms with an estimated population of 40 million.³ The British exit and division of Sudan in January 1956 left behind a very complex socio-political fabric, where South Sudan predominantly has Christian/animist tribes (Zande, Madi, Dinka, Nuer). Whereas, north Sudan has Arab Muslim tribes (Baqqara, Kababish, Shayqtiyya, Beja and Nubian), and there is little in common between the two.⁴ In 2003 western region of Sudan, Darfur rebelled against the Northern capital Khartoum leading to a long civil war which finally ended in 2005.

Initially, Sudan was and is an agrarian society with economic dependence on the export of cotton. However, the discovery of oil in 1980s in South Sudan, which is exported through north, transformed the economy, now contributing 94% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁵ This economic transformation led to unequal distribution of resources and growth as income disparity grew between north and south; ultimately creating grievances.

The fears cautioned by President Omar al-Bashir in Russia of US interference in internal affairs and its aggressive policy of further splitting Sudan are of much significance, especially when contextualized within the socio-economic history of Sudan and its complex demographic composition.

¹ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56163>

² Ibid

³ <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/sudan-population/>

⁴ "Sudan", The Economist Video graphics, YouTube.com

⁵ Ibid

United Nations (UN) Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide, Mr. Adama Dieng on November 30, 2016, after his visit to South Sudan described it as "warped environment". Where he further goes on to say that, "The Stage is being set for a repeat of what happened in Rwanda and the international community is under an obligation to prevent it."⁶ This proposed intervention on the basis of prevention, enforced obligation and brutal environment is being blamed on US aggressive policy by Omar al-Bashir, who now fears another scramble of Sudan.

Since South Sudanese civil war broke out in December 2013, almost 50,000 people have been killed, 2.3 million displaced, 6 million face food insecurity and 70% children are out of school.⁷ Despite the "Comprehensive Peace Agreement" brokered in 2005 between the Government of the Republic of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the country later on witnessed a horrific episode of civil war with South Sudan gaining independence on July 9, 2011. Even given the right of self determination could not stop them from political in-fighting, that eventually turned into a civil conflict in South Sudan.

One of the main reason being the complex socio-economic fabric of Sudan which has resulted, with time, in social stratification and societal polarization that can be triggered through manipulation, external interferences and even fake news.. The intensity of this segmentation of society can be accessed from the fact that South Sudan alone has 60 tribes.⁸ After decades of civil war, even SPLM now stands fractured, splitting into unvarying tribal faction that are fighting among themselves.⁹ These tribes are susceptible to falling into the hands of global networks of terrorism and joining transnational terror groups like Daesh. Libya is currently facing the brunt of this susceptibility.

Therefore, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's argument holds some logical ground. An aggressive US policy will lead Sudan nowhere and the creation and "warped environment" in South Sudan is an answer to those demanding secession. In domestic context, there is a need for conflict resolution through National Dialogue.¹⁰ The one organized by Omar al-Bashir in 2014 failed to reach conclusive results. However, dialogue and engagement is the only way forward if Omar al-Bashir has to consolidate national unity and counter US aggressive policy. Without doing so, holding elections in 2020 will be a difficult task, with little legitimacy.

The international community also needs to look into a realistic, pragmatic and grass-root level situational analysis. Despite International Criminal Court's warrants against Sudanese President

⁶ <http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article60988>

⁷ Sam Ellis, "Civil war in South Sudan", VOX, YouTube

⁸ Barak Obama, "In Sudan, an Election and a Beginning", Washington Times, January 8th, 2011.

⁹ Journeyman.tv, "Produced by Foreign Correspondent of ABC Australia", YouTube

¹⁰ <http://hewarwatani.gov.sd/eng/index.php>

Omar al-Bashir, Russia welcomed him. Meddling into the internal affairs and by using good offices, removing Omar al-Bashir is only going to worsen the situation. Sudan needs political stability and policy continuity leading to national unity. Election 2020 and democracy would be the only means of bringing political change in Sudan.