



Sudan and South Sudan: Peace in the Making

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The current peace process between Sudan and South Sudan, which underwent territorial separation in July 2011 after a relatively peaceful referendum in January 2011, constitutes a very critical phase of their complex interface. The contentious bilateral issues in the post-secession disputes comprise oil transfer mechanism, border demarcation, competitive claims over Abyei region, citizenship determination and population exchange, and mutual suspicion for support to rebel groups on respective territories. The two Sudans consequently find themselves in a constant mode of confrontation with an interregnum of peace.

Sudan and South Sudan have held several rounds of negotiations and three of these appear to be crucial. First, they signed a non-aggression pact in February 2012; second, they agreed on trade, oil and security deals in September 2012. In this round, they had planned to set up a demilitarised buffer zone and lay the grounds for oil sales to resume. They, however, failed to resolve border issues including the disputed Abyei territory. Third, in January 2013, they have agreed to abide by timelines to be drawn up to implement the security, oil and border deals signed in the earlier rounds of negotiations. Their leaders also agreed to set up a demilitarised zone along their disputed border as soon as possible, a condition for the resumption of oil exports.

There is, however, a source of concern that tensions over oil and security have frequently brought the two sides to a series of armed confrontations. This belligerent posturing threatens to derail the peace process that otherwise happens to be a steady one.

Significantly, the international community is constantly engaging, in its own ways, with Sudan and South Sudan to reach an agreement on the issues of bilateral conflict. The United Nations, apart from supporting the African Union (AU) led the peacekeeping operation in the Abyei region, continues to urge the two sides to negotiate. The United States has appointed Ambassador Princeton N. Lyman as its special envoy for Sudan in March 2011; China has sent its special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan Liu Guijin in December 2011; and India also followed suit and sent an official in March 2012. Thus, international actors, given the oil and related economic stakes in the two countries, have used their good offices to defuse the bilateral standoff.

The AU and the East African neighbourhoods, which are more concerned about regional peace than anything else, have endlessly pressed Sudan and South Sudan to resolve their disputes. The mediation efforts by former South African President Thabo Mbeki (representing the AU) and Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn have indeed gone a long way to bring the two countries to the negotiating table. Desalegn hosted talks in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa in September 2012 and January 2013, and noted that he was 'very much satisfied' with the progress of the latest round of negotiation. He added, "I am very happy that the bottlenecks are now released and the implementation can resume."

Furthermore, peace dividends had become more glaring for the two hostile countries themselves, since smooth functioning of the oil sector, which bears the brunt of the present conflagration, remains critical to the petro economies. Nearly 85 per cent of oil wells are in South Sudan, but the port and transshipment facilities are in Sudan. While revenue from oil provides 98 per cent of Juba's exchequer, Khartoum faces a 36 per cent gap in its budget because of South Sudan's secession. The economic necessity, therefore, propels the two sides, locked in skirmishes over oil and territory, to go for de-escalation of their bilateral conflict.

Nevertheless, there is scope for the economic factors of the peace process getting overweighed by the hawkish constituencies in the respective domestic fronts of the two parties. Sudan wants South Sudan's army, which is called the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), to actively disengage from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) fighting in South Kordofan and Blue Nile falling under Sudan's territorial jurisdiction. It expects South Sudan to pull back its weaponry and other logistics from the SPLM-N, and to expel any of its members from Juba. For many SPLA generals, SPLM-N fighters are, however, former comrades, and ideologically many of them continue to support the aim of a regime change in Khartoum.

While military generals tend to prevail over civilian leadership in Juba, certain sections of Khartoum's leadership also rule out talking to the SPLM-N until there is clear evidence that their ties to Juba have been cut. The recent arrest of several prominent insiders for allegedly plotting a coup and protests at universities about the mysterious deaths of three Darfuri students have provided fodder to the hawkish segment in Khartoum to harden their positions. Moreover, the oil-rich region of Abyei, astride the boundary of North and South Sudan and having lucrative oil fields, evokes the fiercest contention.

The post-secession conflict between Sudan and South Sudan, raging over competitive territorial claims and strategic resource ownerships, has currently entered into a de-escalation mode, due to a series of peace talks. The latest round of negotiation has led to a commitment by the two countries to implement security, oil and border deals signed in the earlier rounds of negotiation, and a time bound demilitarisation process. The ongoing peace efforts, driven by a combination of bilateral, regional and international stakes, carry the risks of being hampered by domestic exigencies. The regional community and international actors, including New Delhi, consequently need to sustain and deepen their meditational engagement with both Khartoum and Juba, and help the two parties to develop a sense of protracted mutuality.

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