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Testing the Limits: China's Expanding Role in the South Sudanese Civil War

By: Hang Zhou
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China's Special Representative on African Affairs, Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, meet with South Sudan President Salva Kiir. (Credit: Chinese Foreign Ministry)

South Sudan relapsed into war on December 15, 2013, primarily due to the power struggle between South Sudan President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar. China once again found one of its sizable foreign investments—particularly in the oil sector—embroiled in local political turbulence. This serves as a painful reminder to Beijing that independence not only endowed South Sudan with 70 percent of unified Sudan's total oil output, but also daunting political and security risks.

Beijing's conflict resolution efforts in South Sudan were widely applauded by the international community until the delivery of the first consignment of a \$38 million order of arms from China North Industries Group (NORINCO) to Juba, South Sudan's capital, in June, which called into question China's neutrality in the peace process (*Sudan Tribune*, July 17). The reported statement by the Chinese embassy in Juba on September 20 that NORINCO would halt the remainder of its arms contract, in addition to the Chinese Foreign Ministry's announcement of the deployment of a full infantry battalion to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), signals a renewed—and hopefully more consistent—commitment to the uneasy peace process. An independent South Sudan, just as the unified Sudan before, is likely to remain

a testing ground for China on how to balance its policy of non-interference and the urgent need to protect fast-growing overseas interests (See also *China Brief*, December 17, 2010; *China Brief*, August 12, 2011).

China's Stake in South Sudan

Since South Sudan gained independence in 2011, bilateral economic engagement has grown rapidly. The bilateral trade volume, although largely insignificant to China, almost quadrupled in 2013 to \$2.54 billion, representing roughly 18 percent of South Sudan's GDP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March). Oil continues to feature as the most important component of this bilateral economic relationship. At full capacity, South Sudan would account for approximately 5 percent of China's imported oil (*Wenweipo*, October 8). However, oil production has so far been heavily encumbered by political turmoil both within and beyond South Sudan. Juba shut down oil production for 15 months until this April, due to a row with Khartoum, Sudan's capital, over transit fees. Amid the ongoing conflict, South Sudan's oil production stands at 160,000 barrels per day, a one-third drop since the fighting broke out (Reuters, June 6). Unity state's oil production was again completely shut down by the Greater Pioneer Operating Company (GPOC), in which China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) controls a 40-percent stake. All the oil is now pumped from Blocks 3 and 7 in Upper Nile state, operated by the Dar Petroleum Operating Company (DPOC) in which CNPC has a 41-percent stake.

About 140 Chinese companies are currently registered in South Sudan and the traces of their involvement in non-oil sectors are increasingly perceptible, particularly in infrastructure construction and telecommunication (Xinhua, October 8, 2013). However, the unresolved conflict overshadows this burgeoning expansion of economic cooperation and the potential developmental benefits that should result from it are unlikely to be realized any time (African Arguments, September 12).

China's presence in South Sudan is also a human one. The Chinese embassy in Juba estimated that around 2,300 Chinese citizens resided in South Sudan prior to the conflict (People's Daily Online, December 23, 2013). Thanks to a growing awareness of political risks and preparedness for emergency response that accrues with experience, Chinese enterprises and the local embassy have undertaken swift and timely evacuations in South Sudan (People's Daily Online, December 16, 2013; *Legal Evening Daily*, December 22, 2013; Xinhua, December 24, 2013). The first reported case in which the security of Chinese nationals was compromised occurred on December 17, 2013, when South Sudanese forces evacuated 12 Chinese workers trapped in a quarry near southern Juba (Xinhua, December 19, 2013). The Consular Department of the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a security notice on December 19 and advised that unnecessary staff should be evacuated (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 19, 2013). One day later, CNPC decided to evacuate personnel in non-key and non-productive positions (CNPC, April 25).

Chinese Peacekeepers: More Helpful in Protecting Its Nationals

China's significant stake in South Sudan motivates its participation in the peacekeeping mission there to an unprecedented level. Despite initial resistance from some United Nations diplomats during the negotiation of UN Security Council Resolution 2155, which reprioritized the mandate of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) toward the protection of civilians, China succeeded in garnering support to charge the beefed-up peacekeeping mission with

responsibility to protect the civilian populations at oil installations (Foreign Policy, June 16). In early September, Beijing decided to contribute a full infantry battalion of 700 soldiers to UNMISS, the first ever Chinese battalion to a peacekeeping operation. This is in addition to the 350 Chinese peacekeepers—mainly engineering units, medical staff and liaison officers—already deployed in South Sudan, which have been helpful in providing medical assistance to both local refugees and other peacekeepers, as well as lending logistic support to international humanitarian organizations (China Military Online, May 26; *PLA Daily*, January 16; China News Service, September 10; China Military Online, October 8). The total Chinese commitment to UNMISS—over 1,000 peacekeepers—will make UNMISS China’s largest peacekeeping mission, surpassing the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

China’s efforts to secure the arrangement in Resolution 2155 confirms the link between its overseas interests and its participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Furthermore, China’s dispatching of combat troops as peacekeepers indicates Beijing’s willingness to fully explore all available means under the UN umbrella to protect its overseas interests. In fact, this also dovetails with China’s domestic mainstream view that its participation in peacekeeping missions constitutes an effective way to protect its overseas interests, especially when Beijing still lacks long-range projection capabilities and does not intend to move dramatically away from its longstanding policy of non-interference (Ministry of Public Security, May 5, 2010; China National Radio, July 4, 2013).

Some South Sudanese officials suggest that Chinese troops will be deployed to protect “vital installations” in the oil-rich Unity and Upper Nile states, which reinforces the mercantilist interpretation of China’s proactive engagement with UNMISS (Bloomberg, September 10). However, the UN mission denied this speculation and emphasized that it will only be called upon to protect civilian oil workers in case of emergency, according to the purview of Resolution 2155 (*South China Morning Post*, September 11). Meanwhile, Beijing claims that the timing and areas for the deployment of its combat forces is still under discussion (Xinhua, September 25).

So far, there is scant empirical evidence to suggest that Chinese peacekeepers are being dispatched to protect any nation’s oil infrastructure. A closer look at the map of current UNMISS deployments reveals that they are now concentrated not in oil-rich states, but in Wau of Western Bahr el Gazal state (UNMISS, September). Their presence in South Sudan, however, does bring about tangible benefits for the protection of Chinese nationals. To begin with, the peacekeepers play an important role in enhancing prevention measures and crisis-response planning. In cooperation with Chinese enterprises and the local embassy, Chinese peacekeepers located 31 Chinese living around their mission areas near Rumbek, Wau and Aweil, and they established a working group to make daily contact with these compatriots to ensure a quick emergency response in case of crisis (Xinhua, January 3; *China Police Daily*, December 25, 2013). The peacekeepers also continue to try to raise security awareness among Chinese nationals who refuse to leave the country amid conflict, by arranging security exercises and emergency training, and providing them with food in case of supply shortages (People’s Daily Online, February 14).

Additionally, Chinese peacekeepers can assist with evacuating Chinese nationals. They have more updated and first-hand information on the security situation through their attachment to the UN mission, from whom Chinese companies and the local embassy benefit significantly when it

comes to making informed decision on whether and when to carry out an evacuation. For instance, CNPC had close contact with Chinese peacekeepers when it decided to only maintain a minimum presence of staff in Blocks 3 and 7. On December 18 2013, Chinese peacekeeping police evacuated three trapped Chinese construction workers to a nearby UN camp and arranged them to take a UN flight from Bor to Juba one day later (Luzhou News, February 26; Xinhua, December 22, 2013). Within the first two months of the conflict, Chinese peacekeepers helped evacuate a total 15 Chinese nationals out of South Sudan (People's Daily Online, February 14).

China's Noticeable But Limited Role in Mediation

In addition to the unprecedented deployment of an infantry battalion as UN peacekeepers, China's diplomatic involvement in South Sudan is characterized by an active and constant presence in the on-going Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)-led mediation process, markedly different from its previous diplomacy in other countries' domestic disputes. [1] Beijing's more hands-on approach emerged shortly after the outbreak of conflict, as Foreign Minister Wang Yi set a proactive tone for China's role. He made his first public comment on the conflict in South Sudan during his visit to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in late December 2013, and stressed that China would "make active efforts in its own way to promote peace talks" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 26, 2013). On January 6, during his first trip to sub-Saharan Africa, Wang met with representatives of the South Sudanese warring parties in Ethiopia and said that he was "ready to directly engage" both parties to end the fighting (Bloomberg, January 7). This attempt to diversify diplomatic outreach and engage with all the key players—including those fighting against the incumbent government—is significant and increasingly commonplace in China's crisis diplomacy, as previously seen in China's mediation roles in Darfur and Syria (*SIPRI Policy Paper No.41*, June). Most recently on September 22, Wang Yi met with a high-level delegation from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) in Beijing, which, according to the South Sudanese rebels, was intended to "prepare the ground for" their leader's visit to China (Xinhua, September 24). It is also noteworthy that this invitation was extended directly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, different from the invitations extended to the Syrian opposition by the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA), which is a semi-official organization affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs aimed at enhancing exchanges between foreigners and their Chinese counterparts.

The main implementer of Beijing's mediation efforts, however, appears to be its Special Representative on African Affairs, Ambassador Zhong Jianhua. Prior to Wang's visit to Africa, Ambassador Zhong was sent to Kenya to attend a special IGAD session on South Sudan on December 27, 2013 and also visited South Sudan and Ethiopia afterwards. One of the key goals for his trip was to establish direct contact with the rebels to express China's willingness to promote peace talks and to request the protection of Chinese nationals and investments in rebel-controlled areas (CCTV, January 3). Since then, Zhong has paid two more visits to the region and met with both domestic and regional stakeholders to promote the stalled peace process.

Chinese embassies in Juba and Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, also tried to facilitate the peace talks. Based on the announcements on the website of China's embassy in South Sudan, China's Ambassador to South Sudan, Ma Qiang, has visited the South Sudanese President, Foreign Minister and Minister in the office of the President at least 13 times since December 2013. China's Ambassador to Ethiopia and the African Union, Xie Xiaoyan, reportedly joined

his Western counterparts to call on the South Sudanese factions to “get your act together” after the signing of the first cease-fire on January 23 (Reuters, June 5). Most recently, given the frequent breaches of cease-fires and the stalled negotiation over the transitional government, Xie made palpable his dissatisfaction by criticizing the negotiations for moving at a “snail’s pace” and saying the international community was “worn out” (AFP, August 4). Furthermore, media reports suggest that diplomats from both Chinese embassies have joined efforts to monitor the cease-fire agreements (Reuters, February 11).

Despite Beijing’s diplomatic activism, caution is needed against an overly optimistic estimate over the depth and width of its involvement in the resolution of the South Sudanese conflict. China is only playing a secondary role to IGAD and Troika countries behind the mediation process. [2] Beijing’s decision to primarily rely on regional organizations, such as IGAD, to lead peace talks between the warring parties, despite important Chinese interests at stake, highlights the continuity in China’s approach to solving disputes far beyond its border. This is partly because China is still in the formative stages of participation in similar mediation processes, and partly due to Beijing’s belief in the regional countries’ better contextual understanding of the situation.

Conclusion

China’s diplomatic efforts to address the ongoing conflict should be first understood against a larger backdrop of growing awareness within the Chinese government of its potential role in African peace and security—which was most recently evident in the announcement of the China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security in 2012, during the fifth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (FOCAC, July 23). Meanwhile, the need for the Chinese government to protect its significant investments and nationals—whose security is intricately linked with local political dynamics—pulls and encourages Beijing to adopt a more engaged foreign policy. China’s responsibility to its own interests abroad is likely a much more decisive factor in the country’s stepped-up role in South Sudan when compared with calls by IGAD members and Ethiopia to be more actively involved as a crucial stakeholder. South Sudan, as with the previously unified Sudan, will continue to be a critical test case for stretching the boundaries of Beijing’s diplomacy in order to protect its nationals and economic interests in crisis zones overseas.

Notes

1. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is a regional grouping of Uganda, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan. It currently leads the peace talks between the South Sudanese warring parties in Addis Ababa.
2. The Troika comprises of the United States, United Kingdom and Norway. They were particularly involved in supporting and advancing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) process that brought an end to Sudan’s civil war in 2005. They now play a significant role in supporting the IGAD-led peace talks.