

Southern Sudan: the new kid on the block? Assessing the neighbourhood on the threshold of Southern Sudan's self-determination referendum

As Sudan has entered the final and most critical year of its post-war transition period, the other countries comprising the Horn and central Africa are on the alert. Southern Sudan's self-determination referendum, scheduled for January 2011, could result in partition of the country and may possibly prompt the resurgence of violent North-South conflict. In any case, the emergence of an independent South would have profound regional implications. With the stability of the entire Horn and central Africa on the line, this policy brief offers a preliminary assessment of how Southern Sudan's bordering states are likely to position themselves with regard to this potential 'new kid on the block', and explores various political-economic interests that could come into play. Failure to recognize the connections between the region's many problems is a recipe for ill-considered interventions. Therefore, in any future international involvement in Southern Sudan, careful notice should be taken of its neighbours, their actions and concerns.

Jort Hemmer

Background¹

On 9 January 2005, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) marked the official end of more than two decades of bitter warfare between the Khartoum-based government of Sudan, led by the National Congress Party (NCP) since 1989, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), the South's principal rebel group. The CPA provides for a transitional period during which Sudan is ruled by a unity government representing both parties, ultimately paving the way for a self-determination referendum for Southern Sudan, scheduled for January 2011. In less than one year from now, southerners will vote on whether to remain part of a united Sudan or opt for secession and found their own state.

Although no one knows what the future holds, the emergence of an independent Southern Sudan is a very real prospect. Available evidence indicates overwhelming support among the southern population for the option of breaking away from the North – an objective which for many southerners has always formed the rationale behind their armed struggle against the domination by successive governments in Khartoum. Meanwhile, Sudan's northern elites appear neither willing nor able to make a last effort in the remaining months of the interim period to present unity as an attractive option, and senior SPLM officials are increasingly voicing their preference for secession. In the context of stalled CPA implementation and shaky relations between the NCP and SPLM, the policy debate on the future of Sudan is gradually shifting from the question *if* Southern Sudan will secede, to *how* that secession is going to take place and what repercussions this will have.

Without a doubt, Southern Sudan's neighbours are carefully assessing events as they unfold. After all, the partition of Sudan and the founding of a sovereign southern state would not only have fundamental domestic implications, but would also

¹ This Policy Brief is part of a larger CRU research project aiming to look at present and approaching developments in Southern Sudan from a regional perspective, and intends to serve as a discussion paper for forthcoming workshops. The analysis presented here partly draws on interviews with international and local experts in Addis Ababa, Juba, Kampala and Nairobi, which were held between September and November 2009. The author gratefully acknowledges the valuable comments made by Hans Hoebeke and Rosan Smits on earlier drafts.

affect the region's power configuration and reshape its security and economic environment.

The politics of the Horn and central Africa

Southern Sudan shares borders with Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, as well as with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR). It thus constitutes a nexus between the Horn and central Africa, two regions that are among the most volatile in the world. Though distinctive in many respects, states in both regions share common characteristics that drive and sustain conflict and instability. These include: excessive centralization of power and wealth, resulting in serious centre-periphery disparities, which create a breeding ground for rebellion; weak state authority, particularly in frontier areas; competition for scarce resources such as oil and minerals as well as arable land, water and livestock; disputed and porous borders; and the widespread proliferation of arms.

The politics of the regions also show basic similarities. Within states, the absence of effective formal institutions that would allow ruling and oppositional elites to solve their differences has encouraged an environment in which patronage reigns and money and arms are the key to political success. The consequent internal regime insecurity that individual states experience also shapes their mutual relations. Ruling elites persistently interfere in each other's domestic affairs to protect or advance their own power base. This has given rise to an intractable habit of supporting cross-border insurgency groups, reflecting the calculation that an enemy's enemy is a friend. Partly as a consequence of this reciprocal meddling, the region's conflicts are highly interconnected.

Southern Sudan – regional relations

Southern Sudan has always been deeply enmeshed in the geopolitics of the Horn and central Africa. Nevertheless, the partition of Sudan and the establishment of an independent South would drastically alter the region's political playing field. Obviously, the impact would be even greater if this divide were contested and accompanied by North-South violence – a scenario that is by no means far-fetched. In the months to come, Southern Sudan's neighbours will have to prepare themselves for the potentially painful birth of a new country. In the process, each state has its own political and economic interests to weigh up.

North Sudan

For the past five years, North and Southern Sudan have maintained an uncomfortable 'one country, two systems' pact, which now appears on the verge of breaking down. If there is to be a peaceful split, post-2011 arrangements will need to be in place on a wide range of sensitive political, financial, legal and security issues. Given the stakes involved, a deal on the division of the country's substantial oil revenues will probably be the most difficult one to strike.² On the other hand, oil also provides an important incentive to maintain at least a minimum degree of cooperation. With nearly all of the oil infrastructure to be found on the northern side, and most of the active oil fields located on the southern side of the contested North-South border, the parties are condemned to work together if they want to maximize their profits from Sudan's resource wealth.

Of course, it is not just oil that connects North and Southern Sudan. Millions of northerners and southerners live, work and do business together. Those who inhabit the borderlands have been sharing pasture and water resources for centuries. Moreover, since the signing of the CPA, northern and southern political elites have become increasingly entangled in each other's systems of patronage. Thus, whether or not the referendum ends up dividing the country, North-South linkages will remain strong for many years to come. Whether their respective political leaders will succeed in translating into practice their shared interest in achieving a state of peaceful coexistence is, for now, an open question.

Ethiopia

Sudan and Ethiopia have a history of fuelling each other's internal conflicts by financing, training and arming opposition groups, or by simply allowing these groups to operate from their territory. From the early 1960s onwards, governments in Khartoum have supported dissident forces on Ethiopian soil, including those who demanded autonomy for Eritrea. In response, Ethiopia backed Southern Sudan during its first (1955–1972) and particularly during crucial stages of its second (1983–2005) insurrection against the North. Under the Marxist rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam, which lasted until 1991, Ethiopia essentially functioned as the SPLA's lifeline. Shortly after gaining independence in 1993, Eritrea abandoned its former sponsors in North

² It is estimated that oil revenues account for up to 98% of Southern Sudan's, and 60-70% of North Sudan's income.

Sudan and joined the regional coalition of SPLA allies, in retaliation for the NCP's policy of providing assistance to Islamist groups within its borders.

This regional dynamic changed profoundly following the outbreak of the Ethiopia-Eritrea border war in 1998, which prompted both states to seek rapprochement with their old enemy Khartoum. Since then, Ethiopia has managed to establish fairly good political and trade relations with Sudan, and today imports a vast share of its total oil demand from its western neighbour. However, it remains extremely wary of the Islamist agenda that ruling elites in Sudan might have, and thinks of the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) as a more 'natural' and reliable partner. Eritrea has developed a considerable business interest in Southern Sudan in the post-CPA era; however, realpolitik logic suggests it ought to maintain cordial ties with Khartoum, given that in the event of a crisis, Ethiopia would be expected to side with the GoSS and thus become the common adversary of both North Sudan and Eritrea. Recent reports that Ethiopia is supplying arms to the SPLA substantiate this line of reasoning.

Kenya

During Sudan's last civil war, Kenya managed to avoid becoming a party to the conflict and, notwithstanding its more sympathetic stance towards the South, it maintained reasonably good relations with both sides, allowing it to play a leading mediating role in the CPA negotiations. The impact of the war was mostly felt through the influx of hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees, most of whom settled in Kakuma and Lokichokio in Kenya's remote north-western Turkana district. Many of these refugees have yet to return to their country of origin, much to the distress of the local population.

Kenya readily seized the opportunities that arose following the signing of the peace agreement. Since 2005, Kenyan businesses have significantly expanded their activities in Southern Sudan, particularly in its capital city Juba. Meanwhile, the Kenyan government is seeking to capitalize on its strategic importance for Southern Sudan, given that it is the only country providing its landlocked neighbour with direct access to sea. There are longer-term plans to construct an oil pipeline and railway from Juba to Lamu, a coastal city which Kenya sees as becoming East Africa's new major business hub and which, by extension, will relieve the current bottlenecks at the port of Mombasa. The GoSS,

overseeing an economy that is almost entirely reliant on the export of oil, will be keen to follow through on these plans to lessen its dependency of North Sudan, through which its oil is currently channelled.

In September 2008, Somali pirates hijacked a Ukrainian-owned ship heading for Kenya. It contained military cargo including main battle tanks, multiple launch rocket systems, anti-aircraft guns and grenade launchers. The end-user for this consignment was the SPLA. The incident seemed to confirm already existing suspicions that Kenya serves as a transit port for weapons deliveries to Southern Sudan, and damaged the country's reputation as an 'impartial' actor in Sudan's political marketplace.

Uganda

In the wake of the 1986 coup that brought Uganda's serving President Yoweri Museveni to power, several armed groups emerged to challenge his leadership. Aware of Museveni's close personal ties with SPLA commander-in-chief John Garang, Khartoum began supporting the attempts of these groups to topple him. In a striking display of tit-for-tat politics, the newly established government in Kampala responded by providing military assistance to the SPLA, before becoming its most important sponsor when the level of Ethiopian support dropped after the fall of the Mengistu regime. Although the relations between Kampala and Juba today are not as friendly as they were before the ill-fated death of John Garang in mid-2005, Uganda's deep-rooted mistrust of the regime in Khartoum, and its Islamist tendencies in particular, serves as a strong incentive to stand by the GoSS in times of difficulty.

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is the most significant remnant of the Sudan-Uganda proxy war that prevailed during the 1990s. Northern Uganda initially suffered the greatest burden of LRA activity, but Joseph Kony's small yet resilient guerrilla army gradually turned into a regional menace. Today, Southern Sudan, the DRC and the CAR are its key operational bases. The NCP is known to have trained and equipped the LRA in the past, and still stands accused of being the rebel group's most important foreign sponsor, though hard evidence for this claim is lacking. In the event of renewed warfare between North and Southern Sudan, however, there is a serious possibility that Khartoum will again employ the services of this proxy on standby.

Ugandan businessmen have greatly benefited from the relative calm in Southern Sudan since the establishment of the CPA and the withdrawal of the LRA from the Southern Sudan-Uganda border area. In recent years, there has been a massive increase in exports from and through Uganda to Southern Sudan. The Ugandan government is keen on maintaining a certain level of stability in the Uganda-DRC-Southern Sudan border area, in order to gain the maximum benefit from the significant oil discoveries that have been made since 2006 in Lake Albert, the northernmost of the chain of lakes separating the DRC and Uganda.

The Democratic Republic of Congo

The government in Khartoum has generally taken a supportive stance in relation to its counterparts in the DRC, primarily with the objective of keeping in check the regional influence of other countries, including Uganda. It maintained friendly ties with the Mobutu regime, backed his successor Laurent-Désiré Kabila when a military alliance led by Rwanda and Uganda tried to oust him, and has been accused of delivering arms and ammunition to Joseph Kabila's government during the hostilities in North Kivu in 2007, despite a United Nations arms embargo.

By contrast, the SPLA loosely sided with the opposition forces during the Congo wars (1996–1997 and 1998–2003), and took advantage of the disorder in the DRC's north-eastern region to occasionally indulge in looting. This has resulted in rather icy Southern Sudan-DRC relations, although their recent military cooperation in the context of a Uganda-led operation against the LRA could be seen as an indication of, or a preface to, normalized ties. Since Southern Sudan merely borders the desolate north-eastern part of the DRC, their relations are likely to remain fairly low-key, though the oil discoveries in Lake Albert and the possible presence of other minerals will enhance the strategic importance of this area over time.

The Central African Republic

Although the CAR never actively took sides in, or engaged in, Sudan's North-South fighting, it was not left unaffected by its eastern neighbour's troubles. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the CAR's eastern region was used as a rear base and transit route by troops from both North and Southern Sudan. In the near future, the CAR's territory could easily be used again for a similar purpose,

given that the country's nominal government lacks the capacity to enforce even rudimentary control of its borders. CAR's political leaders themselves are caught up in a myriad of domestic crises and are therefore not expected to be willing or able to actively pursue any particular policy vis-à-vis its Southern Sudanese neighbour.

Other regional (f)actors

The global war against terrorism

The attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 brought Africa back into the geopolitical picture, after the continent's strategic relevance had waned since the end of the Cold War. In the ensuing United States (US)-led global war against terrorism, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa more generally, became a central zone of concern. The US is suspicious of extremist sections within the NCP, which pursued an aggressive and expansionist Islamist policy throughout the 1990s before adopting a more moderate policy in response to growing international isolation. There are concerns that, if the South secedes, the NCP will return to its Islamist roots in order to overcome internal fragmentation and mobilize support in the Arab world.

In the context of the US's counter-terrorism efforts, Ethiopia, Uganda and, to a lesser extent, Kenya have emerged as key bastions of support in the region, ensuring them of substantial US political, military and financial backing. After having previously enjoyed US backing during the 1983–2005 civil war, a secular, non-Islamic independent Southern Sudan can be expected to follow a similar path.

Egypt and the Nile waters

The Nile, the world's longest river, has ten riparian states,³ all of which to some extent depend on its waters for safeguarding livelihoods and generating energy. For Egypt, with up to 97% of its water resources originating outside its borders, the Nile constitutes its lifeline and is absolutely vital for its food security. The secession of Southern Sudan could jeopardise the Nile flow and would probably necessitate the renegotiation of the Nile Basin Treaty, which currently authorizes Egypt to utilize a significantly larger share of the river's water than the other riparian states. It is therefore no surprise that Egypt has always actively advocated Sudan's

3 These are Burundi, the DRC, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

unity. Nevertheless, catching up with the realities on the ground and anticipating a possible split, it has recently been softening its intransigent stance and started to build ties with the GoSS.

The African Union and IGAD

As a signatory of the CPA, the African Union (AU) will have little choice other than to recognize the independence of Southern Sudan, provided that this results from a credible referendum. Nevertheless, the AU and its member states are concerned about the precedent that might be set by the partition of Sudan, and they fear the total disintegration of Africa's biggest country, as well as heightened activity of separatist movements elsewhere on the continent. The possible impact of a North-South split on the fragile and war-torn Darfur area is an additional concern, given that AU troops make up the bulk of the international peace-keeping mission currently stationed there.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional organization comprising the East African states,⁴ was strongly involved in settling Sudan's 1983–2005 civil war and establishing the CPA. However, IGAD's potential role as a mediating body or platform for North-South dialogue and cooperation in the post-referendum phase has waned, owing to internal feuds and conflicting interests. Besides, at present IGAD is not likely to be an acceptable forum for North Sudan, given that Khartoum essentially tends to regard the current governments of Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, the organization's dominant powers, as allies of Southern Sudan.

Beyond borders – keeping an eye on the neighbourhood

The vote in 2011 on whether Southern Sudan should secede will have a tremendous impact that will be felt well beyond its own borders, regardless

⁴ IGAD was founded in 1986 by Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. Eritrea joined in 1993 after gaining independence from Ethiopia but suspended its membership in 2007.

of the outcome. An armed confrontation between North and South looms, while the latter faces political fragmentation and escalating tribal violence, so that its neighbours, which have doubts about the governance capacity of the GoSS, have every reason to be on the alert. Mass inflows of refugees, unrestrained cross-border movements of arms and combatants, and a spill-over of instability, are valid neighbourhood concerns.

The need for international actors to adopt a regional approach in their dealings with Southern Sudan is evident. Yet integrating often complex and rapidly evolving regional dynamics into a country strategy is not a simple task, and efforts to work towards common assessments and a close coordination of policies are bound to be frustrated by divergent political agendas. In the case of Southern Sudan, the fact that existing regional mechanisms to facilitate cooperation and manage conflict are plagued by internal rivalries and capacity problems, and consequently do not automatically provide an entry point for constructive engagement, is a further complication.

Nevertheless, failure to recognize the connections between the region's many problems is a recipe for ill-considered interventions. Therefore, in any future international involvement in Southern Sudan, careful notice should be taken of its neighbours, their actions and concerns. As key stakeholders, they will need to be factored into each step of the policy-making process.

Recommended reading

Healy, S. (2008). *Lost Opportunities in the Horn of Africa. How conflicts Connect and Peace Agreements Unravel*. Horn of Africa Group Report, Royal Institute of International Affairs – Chatham House.

Waal de, A. (2003). 'The Politics of Destabilisation in the Horn, 1989-2001'. In: Waal de, A. (ed.) (2003). *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

ABOUT ...

The Clingendael Conflict Research Unit

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a training and research organization on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team, focusing on conflict-related issues in developing countries.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jort Hemmer is a research fellow at the Clingendael Conflict Research Unit, working on peace and security issues in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region.

