

China and South Sudan's Civil War, 2013-2015

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Abstract: This article examines China's engagement with South Sudan between December 2013, when conflict broke out again in the world's newest independent state, and August 2015, when a deal supposed to end the fighting was formally signed. It argues that China's engagement came to be dominated by a closely related combination of political and security concerns founded in, but going beyond, its economic interests and associated investment protection imperatives. In this way, South Sudan has been the site of an evolving, experimental and more proactive Chinese political and security engagement. For China, this represents a notable departure in its peace and security engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, China's role, like other external actors in South Sudan, has been partly constitutive of but very much subordinated to the politics of armed conflict. China sought to practically negotiate a challenging dilemma concerning the relationship between peace, economic development and conflict.

Introduction

The fighting that erupted in Juba, the capital, in mid-December 2013 devastated the high expectations accompanying South Sudan's independence in July 2011. A rapid escalation of conflict followed. Precipitated by a leadership crisis, this conflict had its roots in deeper tensions within the ruling Southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the oil-based political economy of the new state, which had been officially established as a regional government by Sudan's 2005 North-South peace agreement and then formally constituted as independently sovereign in July 2011.¹ Failure to resolve political differences between the SPLM's top leaders—in particular but not only South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir Mayardit, and former vice-president, Riek Machar Teny Dhurgon—rapidly translated into a violent conflict with ethnicized characteristics. International efforts to respond to the growing civil war, led by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), eventually produced a deal to end the fighting. It was formally, if reluctantly, signed in August 2015. By October 2015, the conflict had displaced more than 2.2 million people, including over 630,000 refugees in neighboring countries, and severely challenged the ability of the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) and a wide range of other international agencies to respond effectively.²

South Sudan has featured prominently in recent attention to China's changing role in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the process it has become a notable case study in the evolution of global Chinese foreign policy. Such views were advanced even before the conflict from December 2013. One leading Chinese analyst, for example, cited South Sudan as a "testing ground for China's proactive diplomacy."³ It has even been argued that the Chinese role there in some senses opens a revealing window onto China's future in Africa, seen in the

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v16/v16i3-4a4.pdf>

suggestion that “China’s more assertive approach to protecting its interests in South Sudan will spread across the continent.”⁴

This article examines thematic aspects of China’s engagement with South Sudan between the outbreak of renewed conflict in mid-December 2013 and the formal, precarious August 2015 deal. It argues that China’s engagement underwent a transition characterized by attempts to engage a closely related combination of political and security concerns founded in its economic interests, but in certain respects going beyond these to reflect wider considerations. Just as Sudan was a testing ground for overseas Chinese corporate oil development after 1995, South Sudan thus became a testing ground for China’s political and security engagement. While for China this may represent a departure of sorts in its peace and security engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa, such engagement conforms with core aspects of international responses to the conflict and established mechanisms by which South Sudan has managed external partners. China’s role, like that of other external actors in South Sudan, has been partly constitutive of but very much subordinated to the politics of conflict, requiring greater attention to the actual nature of China’s engagement within South Sudan and, in particular, the politics of this engagement.

This article is structured into four sections. First, China’s engagement is contextualized within the political economy of newly independent South Sudan. Dominated by oil, and turbulent relations with Sudan, this did most to condition China’s role. Second, starting with the impact of conflict on its oil interests, the various strands of China’s evolving security engagement, and some of the innovations in this, are examined. Third, China’s political attempts to engage primarily state but also rebel groups in an effort to support a negotiated political settlement to the fighting were notable. Putting any serious further economic engagement on hold, Beijing directly experienced the limits of externally driven attempts to resolve South Sudan’s conflicts. The upshot, as the final section considers, was that Beijing was attempting to negotiate a challenging practical dilemma concerning the relationship between peace, economic development and conflict in South Sudan. While recognizing the need for economic development to advance the prospects for a peace meaning more than the absence of conflict, Beijing insisted that peace was needed for the provision of any substantial Chinese economic assistance.

Contextualizing Relations Before December 2013

Much analysis of China’s relations with South Sudan is preoccupied by geopolitical dynamics emanating from, but largely external to, the Chinese engagement within the country itself.⁵ As a result, political and economic circumstances within South Sudan are frequently not explored or emphasized sufficiently, when these are fundamental to any attempt to understand how China fits in and how its multifaceted engagement plays out according to different South Sudanese perspectives. The background context of China’s relations with South Sudan is thus important but, more generally, and prior to any consideration of how an external partner has been involved, it is necessary to appreciate the nature of politics in South Sudan.

From the Chinese government’s perspective, Beijing’s relations with South Sudan were formatively influenced by its engagement in Sudan, especially from the mid-1990s onwards when the Sino-Sudanese petro-partnership was initiated. Chinese oil operations led by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) started and expanded operations amidst the multiple, inter-locking civil wars raging in Sudan at the time; that is, not just the North-

South conflict but also conflict within southern Sudan.⁶ Chinese companies were instrumental in turning Sudan into an oil exporter in 1999.⁷ China's support for the government of Sudan meant that China was regarded by the SPLM/A as supporting its enemies, both the Khartoum government and those Southern forces, led by Riek Machar, who split from the mainstream SPLA/M led by John Garang in 1991 and aligned themselves with Khartoum, resulting in an intra-Southern conflict characterized by ethnicized Nuer-Dinka violence.⁸ For CNPC and the Chinese government, however, a Sudan isolated and under sanctions due to the radicalism of its Islamist government represented a beachhead for its oil operations in Africa, and became a notable stepping-stone in its "going global" strategy.⁹ Sudan was thus initially a corporate testing ground for China's state oil companies, and China's engagement driven and dominated by economic considerations, assisted by diplomatic support.¹⁰ However, the politics of its engagement within and without Sudan became more challenging when the escalation of violent conflict in Darfur from 2003 that featured a brutal government counter-insurgency campaign. Beijing's close relations with Khartoum became far more prominent and controversial, especially before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.¹¹ The crisis galvanized political engagement by the Chinese government in an effort to respond to the conflict, featuring Chinese pressure on Khartoum to accept a UN peacekeeping force.¹²

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of January 2005, signed between the government of Sudan and the SPLM/A, paved the way for South Sudan's independence in July 2011 and was also instrumental in reorienting China's engagement within Sudan in significant ways. The CPA created a semi-autonomous Government of Southern Sudan based in Juba. Its wealth sharing protocol divided revenue from oil located in the south of Sudan on a 50/50 basis between the government of Sudan and the Government of Southern Sudan, which became almost entirely dependent on oil money transfers from Khartoum.¹³ In July 2007, President Kiir visited Beijing and conveyed to President Hu Jintao the SPLM's intention to opt for secession from Sudan via the terms of the CPA. With around 75 percent of Sudan's oil production located in southern Sudan, and China's relations dominated by links with Khartoum, this initiative catalyzed a reorientation of Beijing's Sudan engagement.¹⁴ The SPLM's gambit to engage Beijing worked. A Chinese Consulate opened in Juba in September 2008. Relations thickened as the January 2011 referendum on Southern secession approached. After this resulted in an overwhelming vote to leave Sudan, China established formal diplomatic relations with South Sudan on 9 July 2011, when it became a new, independent sovereign state.

Concurrent with popular hope that independence would, as the SPLM had promised, mean development in a country beset by protracted, chronic underdevelopment and armed conflict, there was resigned pessimism about the state of, and prospects for, the new state. The challenges of an armed guerilla movement transforming itself into a functioning state were immense. China was engaging a kleptocratic petro-state underpinned by military rule and a national security system, governed by the imperatives of political necessity, not competence.¹⁵ Power lay in the hands of men with guns. The patronage system underpinning the new state was financed by oil (and the prospect of oil revenues). This culture shaped a widespread militarization predicated on expectations that violence would be rewarded with government positions yielding rent. Oil revenue, amounting to at least 98 percent of government revenue, allowed government salaries to be paid, with a disproportionately large proportion going to security and the SPLA.¹⁶ Oil money also underwrote the costs of President Salva Kiir's efforts to reconcile and incorporate former

foes, potential rivals and armed militias into a government “big tent.” As Kiir himself acknowledged, his government “largely squandered the opportunity of oil.”¹⁷ As South Sudan’s Development Plan noted, the new country was extremely poor despite having a rich resource base and oil revenue did “not flow to the average resident.”¹⁸ Instead, it was captured by elites.¹⁹

China’s relations with newly independent South Sudan developed in this context and were formatively shaped by the Chinese role in the all-important oil sector. This meant that on top of the challenges of seeking to enhance political relations and develop its economic engagement within South Sudan, China was caught in the middle of turbulent relations between South Sudan and Sudan. Because the oil sector was central in this, due to the lack of agreement about sharing oil revenue after July 2011, Beijing was exposed and vulnerable due to its oil interests. In response, it attempted to bridge the differences between Juba and Khartoum, even as Juba sought to find ways to get Chinese and other support for building a new southern pipeline to free South Sudan of dependence on oil exports through northern Sudan. In a dramatic gambit, senior SPLM leaders responded to Sudan’s seizure of South Sudanese oil, which Khartoum claimed to be taking “in kind” after the failure to agree on transit fees in the post-secession negotiations, by ordering the shut down of South Sudan’s oil sector in January 2012. Having previously faced attacks in Sudan, including in 2008 after which it had developed security response protocols, CNPC was forced to shut down its operations. It took a Cooperation Agreement signed between Juba and Khartoum in September 2012, and progress on its implementation, for oil production to be restarted in April 2013.

In this broad context, between July 2011 and December 2013 China’s practical engagement had to continually adjust to the fluid and challenging political realities it faced. Despite China formally styling its relations with South Sudan on the basis of sovereignty, non-interference and mutual respect, there was a vast difference between its intentions, capabilities, and the reality of the actual South Sudan politics that such relations in which they were grounded.²⁰ Before independence, China’s consulate in Juba was privately optimistic about the prospects for contributing to economic development in South Sudan, starting with infrastructure construction.²¹ In theory, it was thought that South Sudan’s rich resource endowments meant that, suitably managed and overseen by a developmentally minded state, the country could realistically strive to achieve economic development. In the process, various opportunities for a variety of Chinese companies could be advanced, meaning that relations could proceed on the basis of mutually beneficial (“win-win”) ties. Learning the hard way through experience, however, the actual process of converting such plans in the context of South Sudanese politics proved far less straightforward.

At the time, China was widely looked to as almost uniquely capable of delivering a development dividend for independent South Sudan, but such faith was tested by its actual relations with the government. Despite official claims suggesting otherwise, these came to be marked by delays, frustration and mutual discontent. A notable point of friction concerned efforts to negotiate a substantial Chinese financial support package. First mooted before July 2011, and regarded as vital to strengthening relations and enabling a major expansion of China’s economic engagement, this was continually delayed. China’s concern was to ensure that there was sufficient collateral behind any major loan package. In April 2012, while visiting Beijing, President Kiir again tried to secure financial support from President Hu Jintao for a new southern oil pipeline.²² China, however, was unwilling to

support a multi-billion dollar pipeline whose economic viability was in doubt and which would undermine Sudan's position as the transit route for southern crude exports. When South Sudan's Minister of Information unilaterally announced an \$8 billion Chinese loan in April 2012, nothing had actually been agreed.²³ The premature announcement nevertheless caused a popular backlash against China, further damaging China's reputation due to the perception this generated that it was unwilling to add real substance to its rhetoric of friendship with South Sudan. Beijing hardly helped by taking nearly a year before publicly clarifying the lack of a loan in mid-March 2013.²⁴ Indicative of the difficult nature of everyday relations, this saga of the non-existent loan pointed to the underlying structural problem of South Sudan's lack of willing capacity to undertake such negotiations.

Official optimism about Sudan South's prospects in general, and China-South-Sudan relations more particularly, before and after independence became tempered by the everyday experience of implementing cooperation. Beyond concerns about the political will of South Sudan's government to be genuinely developmental, a particular concern was the lack of South Sudanese human capacity to negotiate deals with China. The pronounced asymmetry in capacity characterizing relations posed challenges to their practical advancement. Addressing this structural impediment to deeper bilateral cooperation in order to strengthen relations with South Sudan became a central preoccupation for China's embassy in Juba. Both sides sought to address this and created a "China Desk" involving South Sudan's Ministry of Finance and Chinese representatives to fulfill this role. This mechanism was intended to play a key role in negotiating the financial foundations of wider and deeper China-South Sudan economic relations.

Political circumstances in South Sudan, however, were not conducive to strengthening relations in this manner. In early December 2013, China Exim bank and South Sudan's Ministry of Finance co-sponsored a South Sudan-China Development Cooperation Forum in Juba, attended by around 200 industrial and commercial representatives. Everything changed when fighting irrupted in Juba not long after. Before December 2013, South Sudan had been experiencing a number of conflicts, including in Jonglei.²⁵ The SPLM/A's "process of transforming the institutions of the liberation struggle" essentially failed.²⁶ The political crisis of the SPLM's high leadership was one of the important factors that led to conflict, which was triggered by fighting in Juba in mid-December 2013. Salva Kiir alleged that a coup attempt led by Riek Machar was made against him. This narrative was contested. The AU Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan, established by the AU Peace and Security Council in 2014, later found that a gunfight within the Presidential Guard had triggered the violence.²⁷ The Juba fighting rapidly spread to Unity and Upper Nile, key oil producing regions, and other parts of South Sudan. China's relations with South Sudan were confronted by a rapid and violent return to armed conflict. Unsurprisingly, this derailed plans to enhance China's role in economic development schemes and meant that these were put on hold. China's principle economic role was restricted to the oil sector and, with its interests threatened by the escalating conflict, a more involved security and political engagement was required.

China's Security Engagement

China's security engagement was multifaceted, featuring responses mounted by Chinese agencies in conjunction with the government to threats posed by the fighting to Chinese interests, together with an effort to contribute to UN peacekeeping as part of China's multi-

level role extending to the UN Security Council. Such responses extended beyond central Chinese government relations with the government of South Sudan, to feature other actors, most notably corporations, and important indirect connections.

The first, notable area concerned corporate security. China's state oil corporations shared the Chinese government's concern at protecting the immediate welfare of Chinese workers operating in the conflict-affected areas, and in protecting their oil investments. While China has a significant, leading stake in South Sudan's oil sector, it was by no means the only player in the industry and so was not alone in this regard. While reliable, accurate oil production statistics are elusive, before December 2013, South Sudan's production level was often reported as running at around 245,000 barrels per day (bpd), although in October 2013 the Ministry of Petroleum and Mining put this at 190,000 bpd.²⁸ The industry had been set for expansion after independence.²⁹ A Petroleum Act was passed in 2012 providing a new legal framework for the sector. In late December 2013, however, and at various points thereafter reflecting the pattern of the conflict, the strategic oil fields were at the center of fierce fighting. This caused a complete shutdown of the Greater Pioneer Operating Company (GPOC) consortium operations, in which CNPC had a 40 percent stake (Petronas, ONGC and Nilepet, South Sudan's national oil company, being the other shareholders). In Upper Nile, despite intensified conflict over the oil fields, production was reduced but not stopped in fields where the Dar Petroleum Operation Company consortium operated, CNPC having a 41 percent share and Sinopec 6 percent (also involving Petronas, Nilepet and Tri-Ocean). In March 2014, South Sudan's oil production was reportedly running at 166,458 bpd, and approximately 140,000 bpd in 2015.³⁰

CNPC mounted a rapid emergency response to the December 2013 fighting. The swift evacuation of Chinese oil workers after 15 December 2013 ensured the Chinese government—and CNPC—were seen to act to successfully protect its nationals.³¹ Chinese nationals working for other Chinese companies in South Sudan, such as Sinohydro, were also evacuated via Chinese or other channels such as the UN. This set the pattern for CNPC's responses to the subsequent ebb and flow of fighting in oil-producing parts of South Sudan. In May 2015, for example, China also evacuated some four hundred workers from Paloich, Upper Nile because of fighting. Production later resumed after government forces regained control. CNPC had previously operated amidst conflict in Sudan before, but exposure to South Sudan's conflict after December 2013 enabled it to utilize procedures developed to respond to such situations and deepened its experience of operating amidst conflict. Notwithstanding damage to and disruption of its operations, and reduced profits, its response demonstrated the advances it had made in managing corporate risk through practical investment protection, apparently including local security partnerships.³²

Military cooperation was a second area of evolving security cooperation between China and South Sudan.³³ After July 2011, Beijing and Juba did not initially have a proper bilateral military relationship. Some military links between China and South Sudan grew, however, as a result of the new circumstances of need arising from South Sudan's civil war. Citing China's military support for the government of Sudan against the SPLA's armed struggle, SPLA commanders were previously dismissive of China as a military partner. A more pragmatic approach evolved as the conflict forced the SPLA's to maximize options for military procurement.

The GRSS received Chinese arms supplies, detailed in a UN sanctions panel report documenting a shipment of arms, ammunition and related materiel that the SPLA received

from Norinco (China North Industries Group Corporation) in July 2014.³⁴ This weapons consignment, worth some \$46.8 million according to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, appeared to have been ordered before the outbreak of the war.³⁵ However, given that this underlined China's support for President Kiir and the SPLA, seen as Dinka dominated, the SPLM-IO predictably sought to draw attention to this and China's partisan support for the government.³⁶ Contextualized in terms of its other external military partnerships, South Sudan by no means relied on Chinese arms purchases, having a number of more significant military suppliers. Despite China's comparatively less important direct military relations with the GRSS, its role nonetheless mattered. The mere appearance of the Chinese government seeking to promote peace and participate in UN peacekeeping in a conflict characterized by immense civilian suffering while a Chinese company was simultaneously supplying weapons of war to Juba dramatically illustrated the mixed, contradictory role of a Chinese engagement made up of multiple actors.

This was rendered even more entangled by the indirect connections involved in China's military relations with Sudan, and Sudan's military relations with rebel groups in South Sudan. Taking into account China's arms transfers to Sudan, and the indirect impact of Khartoum's secondary retransfer of arms to allied armed groups in South Sudan, Beijing's military role was thus more significant than mere attention to its direct relations with Juba might suggest.³⁷ After the revelations about the Norinco arms deal, and facing not just a damaging political backlash but also possible military blowback against its interests, China declared a moratorium on arms sales to South Sudan.³⁸ The extent to which this has been enforced remains to be seen.

China's Role in UN Peacekeeping

China's role in UN peacekeeping in South Sudan was a third, more prominent area of China's evolving security engagement. This combined multilateral engagement with other, more bilateral dynamics, such that China's role in UNMISS served to fulfill and promote a number of concurrent bilateral interests. The prominence of China's role in and support for UN peacekeeping in South Sudan is notable, and followed on from its first deployment of UN peacekeeping troops after 2005. Dispatched from the Jinan Military Command, these Chinese peacekeepers were based in Wau and undertook primarily logistical, engineering or health support roles.

After December 2013, the nature of China's UN peacekeeping in South Sudan significantly evolved when the country became the first instance of the Chinese government deploying an infantry battalion under a Chapter VII UN mandate.³⁹ In April 2015, the final detachment of Chinese troops deployed to UNMISS on this basis, thus departing from the previous Chinese peacekeeping role that had involved logistical or medical support functions. Most notably, this upgraded Chinese peacekeeping troop contribution included a civilian protection role as a core aspect of the UNMISS mandate. Debate around how this peacekeeping deployment was or was not related to China's efforts to pursue the protection of corporate oil investment interests through multilateral, UN means was in certain respects a distraction. While indirectly connected, these forces were deployed in Juba, far from the oil fields, but the real issue from the perspective of China's engagement was the changed nature of Chinese peacekeeping. This illustrated how South Sudan became the site of a notable innovation in China's UN peacekeeping, expanding the People's Liberation Army's operational experience in a potentially transferable manner while at the same time exposing

the Chinese troops to the risks inherent in being tasked with implementing an ambitious peacekeeping mandate amidst conflict.

A final related area involving China's security engagement was Beijing's role in the UN Security Council, which provides further insights into China's shifting engagement. Beyond contributing troops to UNMISS, the Chinese government supported the mission and participated in policy debates about international responses to South Sudan at the UN Security Council level. It is partly because of apparent Chinese pressure that UNMISS's Chapter VII mandate came to feature the aim to "deter violence against civilians, including foreign nationals...in areas at high risk of conflict including, as appropriate, schools, places of worship, hospitals and the oil installations."⁴⁰

China had previously opposed sanctions, and these remained a point of contention, but its attitude appeared to become more flexible. On March 3, 2015, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to impose sanctions on the conflict protagonists. Endorsing the Cessation of Hostilities agreements signed by both the Government of South Sudan and the SPLM-In Opposition (SPLM-IO) in January and May 2014, resolution 2206 imposed a package of sanctions against those deemed to be blocking peace and established a panel of experts to oversee these. The resolution text underscored the Security Council's "willingness to impose targeted sanctions in order to support the search for peace." In discussions over the resolution, China was keen to highlight the UN Security Council's role in supporting the IGAD mediation process, and expressed the hope that the resolution would signal its desire for a breakthrough in the negotiations. The resolution also explicitly urged "both parties to immediately implement" the "China-mediated 'Five-Point Plan'" agreed by the government and SPLM-IO during a meeting China convened in Khartoum in January 2012 to support the IGAD process (see below). The Chinese government's support for this went against previous opposition and was clearly one part of its evolving, more multifaceted engagement. While China's UN Security Council role concerned international security responses to conflict, its engagement clearly involved other, concurrent and connected forms of political engagement with and within South Sudan and the region.

China's Political Engagement

Having already evolved considerably before July 2011 and in the aftermath of independence, China's political engagement with South Sudan continued to evolve after December 2013. It came to involve interlinked direct and indirect connections, featuring bilateral inter-state relations, political party ties, and China's support for international mediation, which took its role toward a more multilateral footing. With economic interests remaining an important driver in China's engagement, the challenges of investment protection and conflict response required the adaptation of its political engagement.

Bilateral ties between China and the Republic of South Sudan continued on a regular basis at the highest level. Beijing prioritized relations with South Sudan's central government, ruling party and military.⁴¹ As seen already, the sudden violence from December 15, 2013 derailed a process of loan negotiations and as fighting spread. After December 2013, the China Desk in Juba sought to function but the Chinese government became even more cautious about extending a loan package in the context of armed conflict that, while not covering the whole country, was spreading. As the prospects for significant Chinese economic investment receded in the face of expanding conflict, China's engagement evolved. One part of this was the elevation of humanitarian aid as part of a revised

assistance program to South Sudan. China's program of development assistance predated December 2013; independent South Sudan became a FOAC partner in 2012 and was thus eligible for assistance. The conflict severely interrupted China's development assistance, for example its plan to build hospitals in South Sudan's ten state capitals, including those of Unity and Upper Nile. China's assistance shifted in order to respond to the new circumstances, with health and medical aid remaining a key part.⁴² Outside humanitarian aid, China's development assistance encompassed other areas, notably agriculture, but invariably this was also set back by the conflict.⁴³

Efforts to strengthen political party relations between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the SPLM was another trend that pre-dated December 2013 but continued and evolved amidst the conflict thereafter. While notionally distinct from inter-state relations, in reality such ties featured overlapping and reinforcing connections between two very different incumbent ruling political parties, both originally constituted as armed guerilla movements. The CPC was active in courting South Sudan and the SPLM before independence in July 2011.⁴⁴ The SPLM and CPC signed an MOU in 2011 about "building a pragmatic relationship" between both parties focused on training and exchanges.⁴⁵ SPLM officials undertook CPC training, including at the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong in Shanghai, as part of a developing connection featuring SPLM participation in the CPC's political party training program.⁴⁶ In November 2014, for example, SPLM announced that it was sending twenty cadres to China "for training to boost party leadership administrative capacity."⁴⁷ By then, some 150 members had received training in China.

While China prioritized dealings with the government of South Sudan and the SPLM/A, a further form of political engagement concerned its more diversified contact with the SPLM-IO. This was driven by the need to try to protect its oil investments, and contribute to China's efforts to advance the peace negotiations. It is important to underline how and why China diversified political contacts beyond its previous preference for maintaining political relations only with the governing party-state. While continuing, albeit in a disrupted manner indicative of its fragmentation, its relations with the SPLM, China maintained non-official, ad hoc connections with the SPLM-IO. This meant that its political relations came to feature multi-stranded connections, not confined to relations with South Sudan's central state under President Kiir or the SPLM. That the Chinese government needed to indirectly connect with the SPLM-IO is unsurprising. In addition, SPLM-IO members also sought to engage China as an attempted means to promote their cause and exert more pressure on the government in Juba. In September 2014, an SPLM-IO delegation led by the Chairman of its External Relations Committee visited Beijing and met China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming. Chinese media reports were at pains to point out that "China stressed its fair and objective stance."⁴⁸ The Foreign Minister affirmed: "China always adheres to a just and objective position."⁴⁹ Such efforts to stress China's objectivity may have been genuine but were formally and publicly overlaid above deeper political connections and efforts to protect economic interests.

Beijing's Diplomatic Engagement

A final area of Beijing's political engagement with the conflict involved diplomatic efforts to support and promote a negotiated end to the fighting. This took various forms, and involved connections and coordination with other international initiatives. One notable indirect political connection, for example, came via the regular and institutionalized contacts

between China and Sudan, which inevitably featured the conflict in South Sudan. Beyond Sudan, China also engaged with Uganda and other states neighboring South Sudan, giving a regional diplomatic aspect to China's diplomacy over the conflict.

One interpretation of China's engagement after the outbreak of fighting in 2013 was that it "potentially accelerated China's evolution from a reactive and passive actor in conflict resolution to one that is more active and positive in both conflict management and conflict prevention."⁵⁰ In reality, while discernably becoming more actively engaged, China's approach continued to be ad hoc, following on from the period before December 2013 when, led by its Special Envoy for Africa, China had carried out a quasi-mediation role in the disputes between Khartoum and Juba. While focused primarily on its own interests, these dovetailed with more widely held interests, since oil and oil money was central to the Sudan-South Sudan dispute and fundamental to paying for the state. Beijing's subsequent engagement featured aspects of continuity and change.

At regular points in time, corresponding to the evolution of the fighting in South Sudan, Beijing called for a ceasefire and underscored the fundamental importance of political negotiation. A consistent refrain from Beijing was that the conflict could not be resolved through military means. At times, these calls were fairly clearly connected to core Chinese economic concerns. In May 2015, for example, and in an interesting choice of wording, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson asserted: "Both sides have the responsibility to protect oil infrastructure in South Sudan, as oil is a critical resource in its reconstruction and economic development during the country's peaceful transition period."⁵¹ This pattern of publicly supporting each short-lived peace agreement was accompanied by more engaged diplomacy aimed at achieving a lasting negotiated settlement.⁵²

China's efforts to undertake a mediation role after December 2013 attracted widespread attention. While the nature and extent of China's private efforts to try to persuade the government and the SPLM-IO to end the conflict are not properly known, the notion of China as a mediator in South Sudan's conflict was mostly not commensurate with its actual role and impact.⁵³ China was readily styled as a mediator, following Wang Yi's January 2014 suggestion that China was playing the role of a conflict mediator.⁵⁴ In reality, China's engagement may have had mediation-like aspects, but, more than conform to a rigorous definition of mediation, in essence it represented a diplomatic-political intervention to try to assist negotiated settlement and assist the formal mediation process. Importantly, China sought to liaise with other initiatives, including with the US-Norway-UK Troika and, in particular, ensure its role supported the IGAD-led process. In this light, while China maintained formal fidelity to its non-interference principle, in practice it appeared to have recognized that circumstances necessitated a more proactive engagement and its diplomacy proceeded accordingly.

China's immediate response to the December 2013 fighting featured public expressions of deep concern and calls for restraint and a rapid negotiated settlement. It also called for measures to "protect personal and property safety" of Chinese enterprises and employees.⁵⁵ In January 2014 Wang Yi held talks in Addis Ababa with representatives of the conflict protagonists. Subsequent Chinese diplomacy on the IGAD process was multi-sited, connected by key individuals and involving communication and coordination between Embassy, Ministerial and leadership levels in Beijing. Four aspects about this are worth noting.

First, there was regular monitoring of the Addis Ababa negotiations by Chinese diplomats based there, which involved continuous communication with members of the IGAD team, and links with the negotiating parties. Second, China's outreach and dialogue on South Sudan went beyond its Foreign Minister to include State Counselor Yang Jiechi (who visited Juba as Foreign Minister in August 2011). Notably, China's Special Envoy Zhong Jianhua regularly travelled between Juba, Addis Ababa, Khartoum, and Beijing. He was also active in regional diplomacy, trying to engage Kampala and other states neighboring South Sudan, as well as maintain connections with his US and European counterparts. China's role in the mediation process assumed a new level of importance by its participation. This contributed to a more complex international mediation structure also involving diplomats from Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, US, UK and Norway.⁵⁶ Third, Beijing did propose its own recommendations about resolving the conflict, though this was not sustained and was later upstaged by China's support for IGAD. In August 2014, the Chinese government advocated a four-point solution to South Sudan's civil war. Formally arising out of talks between Wang Yi and his South Sudanese counterpart in Beijing, this appeared to resurrect and revise an earlier proposal advanced by former President Hu Jintao in relation to the Darfur conflict. The proposal reiterated China's position in stressing that a cease-fire, political dialogue, and support for IGAD were the best means for "Africa solving the issue on its own" and alleviating the humanitarian situation.⁵⁷ Fourth, and importantly, China supported IGAD and the AU's response, tending to take its lead from this and seeking to style its engagement as supporting "African solutions." Finally, China's Foreign Minister, as well as figures from the CPC's top leadership, also had a role in terms of meeting key political leaders from South Sudan and messaging Beijing's support for peace.

China's diplomatic engagement was mostly confined to a supporting role positioned carefully behind IGAD and the AU. Beijing departed from this general tendency in January 2015, when it convened a meeting in Khartoum with the conflict parties, but even this was styled as a "Special Consultation in Support of the IGAD-led South Sudan Peace Process."⁵⁸ This brought together Tedros Adhanom, the rotating chair of the IGAD Council of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, Seyoum Mesfin, Chairperson of the IGAD mediation team on South Sudan, Barnaba Marial Benjamin, South Sudan's Foreign Minister, and Taban Deng Gai, the SPLM-IO's Chief Negotiator. It also featured President Bashir. The result was a Five-Point plan expressing support for implementation of signed agreements, negotiations to form a transitional government, measures to enhance humanitarian response, and support for the IGAD peace process, this also featured the provision: "ensure the safety of all personnel and assets of all countries and international entities operation in South Sudan," again offering a demonstration of China's effort to protect its economic interests as one part of its broader and multi-stranded political and security engagement.⁵⁹

This represented China's most ambitious attempt to initiate and convene such a meeting under its own flag. The public message from Wang Yi to South Sudan, the region, and the world was clear: "China is an active promoter of peace in South Sudan."⁶⁰ In a further attempt to address accusations of economic self-interest, its diplomacy was cited as motivated by and giving expression to "its international responsibility and not to achieve any other purposes."⁶¹ However, the nature and extent of the challenges that undertaking such an event gave rise to, rooted in the sheer difficulty of finding scope for agreement between the parties, appear to have reduced Beijing's appetite to sponsor and undertake further such ventures.

No Peace, No Development

In August 2015, South Sudan seemed to have achieved a formal peace but the nature of the agreement signed then and other developments in the country meant that there were wide doubts about the prospects for the deal being converted into an actual and lasting resolution of conflict. Riek Machar signed the IGAD-mediated Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan on behalf of the SPLM-IO on August 17. Facing heavy US-led international pressure, President Kiir eventually signed on August 26. Amongst other things, the agreement committed both parties to a permanent ceasefire and power sharing. Even as President Kiir signed, however, his government circulated detailed objections; it was clear that there was wide opposition, including by powerful leaders on both sides.

The Chinese government welcomed the August 2015 accord. In the face of the political uncertainty surrounding it, Beijing continued to respond with humanitarian assistance, while trying to manage and maintain relations with the government in the context of the first phases of the August agreement.⁶² Any hope the deal engendered was tempered by political and military developments. The political “pre-transition” period that the accord provided for was not proceeding smoothly. Despite the limited withdrawal of SPLA forces from Juba in November 2015 to comply with the demilitarization provisions of the agreement, there were regular violations of the August accord.⁶³ The US Special Envoy for South Sudan affirmed in early December 2015 that “the signed agreement, for all the challenges of implementation, currently offers the best chance for peace in South Sudan.”⁶⁴ There were real doubts, however, about the durability of the deal. As well as political and military opposition, and on top of massive humanitarian need, South Sudan faced a severe economic crisis. Plummeting oil prices and revenue compounded the problem of already much reduced oil sector operating capacity. The issue of how to pay for the South Sudanese state loomed large, as Juba sought to find ways to secure money from neighboring countries, international donors, the Arab League and China.

Expectations that Beijing would provide a big financial package, and that this would make a significant difference, were unrealistically high. For China, the issue of extending major financial support to South Sudan after August 2015 reprised a core pre-December 2013 issue but in a political, economic and military context rendered even more challenging by political tensions, security concerns and dramatic decrease in oil prices. From Beijing’s perspective, in view of the prevailing economic climate, conflict and insecurity in parts of South Sudan, and political uncertainty about the prospects for the creation and effective functioning of the Transitional Government of National Unity under the terms of the August 2015 deal, there was little prospect of a guaranteed return on any substantial new investment. Importantly, there were also myriad doubts that the peace agreement would actually last and provide the political basis for durable stability. While the strategically and economically vital oil sector would continue, the realistic likelihood of an environment conducive to a financial package between Beijing and Juba being agreed to, and forming the enabling basis for China’s plans for economic development projects to be implemented, were remote.

In contrast to the Chinese government’s abstract refrain about the necessity of peace for economic development, Beijing had to confront very real, practical dilemmas concerning peace, conflict and development. In Juba, it recognized that peace was “the foundation for development,” and that without meaningful peace Chinese – indeed most external

investors— would not be keen to meaningfully make new investments in South Sudan beyond its existing ones.⁶⁵ Such a perspective, however, raised a familiar, circular conundrum: China appeared unwilling to agree any substantial loan for the government of South Sudan until there was a credible peace deal, and a credible sense that such a financial deal would be used as intended. Until there was such a loan, however, any significant Chinese economic engagement that might hypothetically support such a deal, including through much needed infrastructural development, was highly unlikely. The logic of this dilemma was not unique to but was magnified in the Chinese case. In this respect, China's predicament was consistent with and one part of a more structural dilemma, and suggested that China would need to further coordinate with South Sudan's other international partners, such as the IMF, in order for any support it might advance to fall within and support broader economic objectives.

Conclusion

This article has examined the broad contours of China's engagement with South Sudan between mid-December 2013, when fighting broke out again, and the official agreement supposed to end the civil war that this caused in August 2015. In doing so, it explored some of the reasons why South Sudan can be regarded as a "testing ground" for attempts made by China to undertake more proactive diplomacy. South Sudan has been, and continues to be, a laboratory of Chinese foreign policy experimentation. This had been the case when Chinese oil operations started in Sudan from 1995, and in relation to Chinese diplomacy over the Darfur conflict. In South Sudan, however, this broadened to involve a more advanced security engagement and has extended into more political terrain. For Juba, the basis of China's relations with South Sudan formed an attractive contrast to that of the US by its formal commitment to sovereignty, non-interference, equality and mutual respect. For Beijing, however, much in its South Sudan engagement on the ground has raised questions about the changing actual meanings of its formal foreign policy doctrine when confronted with such challenges involving imperiled economic interests, political exposure and wider ramifications for Chinese conduct.

While South Sudan's place in China's foreign policy in Africa and the world more generally needs to be considered, more attention needs to be paid to the actual nature and constraining politics of this in different parts of the country. Unlike external views about China's supposed ability to effect internal change in South Sudan, this provides a much more sober understanding of the limits of and important constraints on China's engagement. China's South Sudan diplomatic engagement has been interpreted as evidence of a shift toward a more activist role within the country and that, for example, China was "acting not only like a 'responsible world power' but like a practical great power."⁶⁶ Notwithstanding Beijing's desire to gain external credit for its diplomacy, this is less clear-cut when China's actual engagement is considered. If anything, this confirms China's proclivity toward experimental attempted solutions, that have been revised or discarded in the face of direct experience, as well as support for African-led initiatives and, despite strong calls for peace to be agreed through negotiations, apparent recognition that this can ultimately only be achieved from within South Sudan. As its engagement has gone well beyond its previous emphasis on oil, China has come to have a more involved political and security engagement founded in the investment protection imperative but going beyond such interests. Besides representing a departure for China's engagement within South

Sudan, China has also been converging with the policy engagements of other external actors in so far as its practical ways of engaging South Sudan are concerned. Part of this was characterized by a shift to a more involved multilateral engagement, even as it sought to maintain its bilateral relations.

In late 2015, with efforts sought to implement the August 2015 deal ongoing amidst further political tensions, South Sudan remained a militarized rentier state beset by ongoing conflict and facing humanitarian need on an unprecedented scale. In seeking to examine China's role in South Sudan after December 2013, and thereby analytically elevate the role of an external actor (albeit one made up of various entities), this article clearly has pronounced limits in its ability to do more than chart the changing general trajectory of one of South Sudan's more important external relations. As such, this article has merely attempted a preliminary, thematic account of China's role during this time frame. Such an approach is, however, clearly limited when it comes to properly embedding China's role in the politics of the conflict and offering a properly developed account of multiple forms of South Sudanese agency in shaping relations not just with China but myriad other international actors of various kinds as well. Everything, going forward, depended on whether the August 2015 deal worked, and in that South Sudanese politics remained in command.

Notes

1 Nyaba 2013, p. 167.

2 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Humanitarian Bulletin: South Sudan: Bi-Weekly Update", 9 October 2015.

3 Shen 2012.

4 Fielding 2015.

5 South Sudan is frequently cited, for example, as an African proxy caught up in a US-China geo-political conflict. See Paterno 2012 and 2015.

6 See Johnson 2003.

7 See Patey 2014a.

8 See Jok and Hutchinson 1999; Johnson 2003.

9 See Patey 2014a.

10 See Large and Patey 2011.

11 See Budabin 2011.

12 See Large 2009.

13 Strictly speaking, this division was made after 2 percent was allocated to oil-producing states.

14 In 2010, 75 percent of total peak production of 490,000 bpd was produced in South Sudan, a situation carried over when South Sudan became independent.

15 de Waal 2014.

16 Ibid.

17 "When we got to power we forgot what we fought for and began to enrich ourselves at the expense of our people." Letter from President Salva Kiir Mayardit to 75 former and current South Sudanese officials, 3 May 2013. Also, see Patey 2009, p. 628.

18 South Sudan Development Plan 2011, p. 13.

19 Moro 2013.

20 Large and Patey 2011.

- 21 Interview with Chinese official, Juba, September 2010.
- 22 For background, see ICG 2012.
- 23 Large and Patey 2014a.
- 24 *Reuters* 2013.
- 25 Thomas 2015.
- 26 Deng 2013.
- 27 It concluded that “widespread and systematic” killings occurred in Juba in December 2013, later spreading to other parts of South Sudan, and that these were coordinated and “could have been planned.” Final Report of the AU Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan, Addis Ababa, 15 October 2014.
- 28 Including, but not only, by Stephen Dhieu Dau in late May 2014. *Sudan Tribune* 2014.
- 29 A new licensing round centered on Block B, and further infrastructure projects were planned besides oil refineries built in Melut and Bentiu. A feasibility study was underway on a smaller pipeline for block 5. Ministry of Petroleum and Mining 2013.
- 30 *African Energy* 2014.
- 31 The exact numbers are unknown but thought to be around 400 oilfield workers were evacuated, as well as other Chinese working outside the oil industry in other parts of South Sudan. This was followed by subsequent evacuations, notably in early 2015, as fighting ebbed and flowed in the oil areas. *Sudan Tribune* 2015b.
- 32 The Small Arms Survey reported that the Unity blocks of the GPOC consortium, including those in Pariang country, were being defended by SPLA troops, and a militia force of some 700 recruited from the Rueng Dinka youth of Pariang. The GPOC consortium was cited as providing funds for the militia, and run by the national security service. See Small Arms Survey, “The Conflict in Unity State,” 29 January 2015. In addition, new partnerships were created to undertake security activities, notably through the Hong Kong registered company Frontier Services Group, whose shareholders include CITIC (formerly China International Trust and Investment Corporation). *Africa Confidential* 2015.
- 33 China had longstanding military relations with the government of Sudan. The continuing relevance of old connections, notably the role of Riek Machar when allied to Khartoum following his 1991 split from the SPLA/M, were not to be discounted.
- 34 Interim report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2206 (2015), 21 August 2015.
- 35 Interim report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2206 (2015), 21 August 2015, p. 17 at 61.
- 36 In March 2015, for example, it claimed a Chinese flagged vessel had brought large quantity of armaments and ammunition to South Sudan via Djibouti. *Sudan Tribune* 2015a.
- 37 China accounted for some 58 percent of all of Khartoum’s self-reported arms imports over the period 2001–12. The Sudan government angered Beijing by retransferring some imported Chinese weapons and ammunition to allied groups in Darfur, a violation of the UN arms embargo on Darfur, and also to rebel groups in South Sudan. The existence of Chinese-manufactured small-caliber ammunition in South Sudan between 2011–2013, for example, was extensively documented, mostly appearing to originally derive from Sudan Armed Forces stocks. Leff and LeBrun 2014, pp. 24, 105.
- 38 *Bloomberg* 2014.

- 39 In 2012, and before contributing troops in Mali, China had quietly deployed an infantry platoon to protect its engineering and other staff in South Sudan.
- 40 Patey 2014b; UNMISS. n.d. "UNMISS Mandate."
- 41 In June 2014, for example, Vice-President James Wani Igga visited Beijing where he met Premier Li Keqiang, Li Yuanchao, Li Ruogu, Chairman and President of Exim Bank of Chin, and Zhou Jiping, Chairman of CNPC.
- 42 Zhou, 26 October 2014. In March 2015, China's embassy in Juba and the RSS Ministry of Health signed an agreement for further Chinese medical assistance, notably to the Juba Teaching Hospital.
- 43 *Upper Niles Times* 2014. In September 2014, China advanced a US\$25 million grant for "agro-infrastructureal development" reportedly "mostly in the areas hugely affected" by the conflict.
- 44 Indeed, one senior leader involved in that process, Li Yuanchao, was subsequently elevated to the Politburo and became a Vice-President.
- 45 This was signed by former SPLM General Secretary Pagan Amum. For background, see Mayom 2014.
- 46 See, for example, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in South Sudan 2012.
- 47 Mayom 2014.
- 48 *Xinhua* 2014b.
- 49 Wang Yi 22 September 2014.
- 50 Zhang and Kemple-Hardy 2015, p.1.
- 51 *Xinhua*, 22 May 2015.
- 52 "China urges parties to ease tensions in South Sudan" *Xinhua* 16 May 2014.
- 53 Tiezzi, 6 June 2014; Zhang and Kemple-Hardy 2015.
- 54 Tiezzi, 6 June 2014.
- 55 Wang Yi 2015b.
- 56 In late March 2015, the African Union Peace and Security Council endorsed the creation of a panel of 5 African country leaders (Algeria, Chad, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa) to support the IGAD team.
- 57 MFA 2014.
- 58 Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on January 12, 2015.
- 59 The full wording was: "(i) earnestly commit to the full implementation of all signed agreements; (ii) speed up the pace of negotiations towards the formation of a transitional government at an early date; (iii) take concrete steps to relieve the humanitarian situation in conflict-affected areas, and facilitate access of international humanitarian assistance; (iv) ensure the safety of all personnel and assets of all countries and international entities operating in South Sudan; and (v) provide strong support for and take active part in the IGAD-led mediation efforts, and, in this regard, *strongly urging* both parties to immediately implement the Five-Point Plan." Taken from UN Security Council Resolution 2206 (3 March 2015).
- 60 Wang Yi 2015a.
- 61 *Xinhua* 2015a.
- 62 In November 2015, for example, Beijing announced a US\$5 million donation to the World Food Program to assist its response to food insecurity in South Sudan.
- 63 IGAD reports and UNMISS reporting. See, for example, IGAD, 9 September 2015.

64 Testimony of Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan Donald Booth before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations "Independent South Sudan: A Failure of Leadership," 10 December 2015.

65 Interview with Chinese official, Juba, July 2015.

66 Tiezzi, 2015.

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