

China Playing Bigger Diplomatic Role in Trying to End Sudan Conflict

Scott Stearns | June 1, 2012

How Much Is About Oil?

Chinese diplomats are stepping up their pursuit of a deal between Sudan and South Sudan to end cross-border hostilities and resume oil exports from the south.

Following South Sudan President Salva Kiir's state visit to Beijing, China's Special Representative for African Affairs, Zhong Jianhua, shuttled between Khartoum and Juba championing an African Union plan to settle the border, citizenship, and oil-revenue-sharing issues left unresolved by a 2005 peace agreement.



So how much of this is about improving China's image in Africa — where Beijing has been criticized by labor and human rights activists — and how much of this is about restoring Sudanese oil production, which accounts for 5 percent of Chinese imports?

Beijing is the largest single investor in Sudanese and South Sudanese oil fields and pipelines, with the China National Petroleum Corporation holding a 40 percent stake in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company.

“We believe oil is the economic lifeline for both Sudan and South Sudan,” says Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin. “Maintaining the stability and sustainability of oil cooperation is fundamental to the interests of both countries and is consistent with the interests of Chinese enterprises.”

Obama Administration ‘Delighted’

Unlike other places in Africa where the United States has questioned China’s commercial motives (Guinea, Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo), the Obama administration says it is “delighted” by Beijing’s increased involvement in Sudan.

“They have increasingly recognized that if the political issues in Sudan and between Sudan and South Sudan are not resolved, neither the oil nor their other interests can be served,” says Princeton Lyman, U.S. special envoy to the conflict. “It’s hard to see the full implementation of an oil agreement if the two sides are fighting at the border.”

During Sudan’s long civil war, Beijing sided with President Omar al-Bashir and the Sudanese military, helping to increase oil exports through Port Sudan. Cato Institute Senior Fellow Doug Bandow says that changed with South Sudan’s independence last June.

“China’s foreign policy so far has been very rational,” Bandow says. “They supported the Sudanese government. It gave them what they thought they wanted. But after secession, after you suddenly see a potential war between the new country and the former, they recognize that their interests are at stake.”



South Sudan President Salva Kiir: After a state visit to China, now gets a measure of Beijing's attention.

John Bradshaw is executive director of the Enough Project to end genocide and crimes against humanity. He says no one benefits from the destruction of oil infrastructure.

“The Chinese have recognized that the kind of dynamic they had working with the regime in Khartoum is just no longer sustainable, and they have to have a more balanced approach between Juba and Khartoum to try to bring the two sides together,” Bradshaw says.

Even so, neither Chinese diplomacy nor renewed efforts by former South African President Thabo Mbeki have managed to implement a previously agreed joint border monitoring mission between Sudan and South Sudan. Both sides, however, say greater Chinese involvement is helping.

“We value China’s role in the current situation,” says Issam Mitwalli, director of the China Department at Sudan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “China has a good relationship with the two countries. As the friend of both sides, China is able to play a very important and valuable role.”

“There must be some sort of relationship where China can play a positive role, even in this war,” says Barnaba Marial Benjamin, South Sudan’s Information Minister. He likens Beijing’s relationship with both Khartoum and Juba to “a case of a husband with two wives.”

China is Single Largest Investor

Sophie Richardson, China Director for Human Rights Watch, says Beijing has a special obligation to help resolve this conflict.

“China, as the single largest investor in the two Sudans, has a responsibility to make sure its support promotes human rights and not continued violence and violations,” she says.

Doug Bandow says China’s expanded diplomatic role in Sudan shows it is moving away from some of the ways it conducted foreign policy in the past.

“They are going to have to be more nuanced, more reasonable,” Bandow says. “And I think that’s good for the United States and good for other countries because then there is more role for engagement and cooperation. If they see a practical reason to try to solve the Sudan problem, well the U.S. and the Europeans also want to solve that. We can work together as opposed to being at odds.”