

Sudan's Perfect War

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Summary: After years as a pariah, Khartoum has now deftly managed to end its political isolation. The success of its new alliances and the completion of an oil pipeline, however, mean that northern Sudan could indefinitely continue its bloody civil war against the south. Only the United States has the power and prestige to help end the violence and push for a peace that would be in everyone's interests.

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BORN INTO BLOODSHED

War has raged in Sudan for all but 11 of the 45 years since its independence. The most recent round of fighting began in 1983, after then President Ja`far Muhammad Numayri revoked the autonomy that had been granted to the country's south 11 years before and imposed Islamic law (the shari`a) throughout the land. These steps were the final insult to the predominantly non-Muslim, non-Arab population of southern Sudan, which had long been cut off from the distribution of national resources and otherwise marginalized.

At first, it was John Garang's Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) that took up the south's fight against government forces. But in the 19 years of bloodshed since, Sudan's civil war has been carried on by four different northern regimes and countless southern alliances. With two million fatalities so far, this war has produced more casualties than those in Angola, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, Liberia, the Persian Gulf, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Rwanda put together. An astounding four million Sudanese — out of a population of around 29 million — have been made homeless. Yet militarily, the fighting has accomplished little. Today the government controls only key garrison towns in the south; the rest of the region is ruled by the SPLM or one of the many other factions that have evolved over the years.

Meanwhile, rather than moving the conflict closer to resolution, political and economic developments in Sudan over the last few years have made achieving a negotiated and just peace even more unlikely. Through deft maneuvering, Khartoum has consolidated its power and ended the international isolation from which it suffered for years. And it has cleverly engineered the war so that today, few of the combatants actually hail from the north. Furthermore, with the construction of a pipeline, oil extracted from the south is now earning Sudan's government well over a million dollars a day — enough to pay for the military campaign and buy new friends abroad. From the north's perspective, therefore, the battle against the south has become self-sustaining, both politically and economically. It has become, in essence, a perfect war.

Only one power has much hope of breaking through this deadlock: the United States. Throughout the 1990s, Washington supported the southern insurgents while isolating the northern government in the hope that Khartoum would eventually fall. This policy was justified by reference to the Sudanese government's habit of violating the human rights of its citizens, its destabilization of the region, and its support for international terrorism. But Washington's approach did little to end the fighting.

In the last few years, however, the Sudanese government has made substantial improvements on the latter two complaints, and, to an extent, also on the first. As a result, progressive engagement by Washington should now supplant the old policy of isolation. The world's sole superpower is uniquely situated to engage Sudan as a firm but fair broker, pushing for a resolution to the decades-long conflict. Furthermore, there are signs that Khartoum is eager to normalize its relations with Washington — if for no other reason than to lift trade sanctions and gain U.S. favor in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although Sudan is unlikely to backslide into its behavior from the bad old days if the United States remains reticent, it is also clear that, without American intervention, the war in the south may continue indefinitely.

ENTER THE MULLAHS

Since 1989, Sudan has been ruled by Umar al-Bashir, a general who seized power after toppling the democratically elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi. At first, al-Bashir's government seemed destined for disaster, as it implemented a number of draconian measures restricting life in Sudan both socially and economically. Possession of foreign currency was made illegal, curfews were imposed, and warehouses of goods belonging to private businesses were seized in a war against hoarding.

Having thus alienated both democrats and Sudan's merchant class, al-Bashir relied for support on the Islamists, forging an alliance with Hassan al-Turabi's fundamentalist National Islamic Front (NIF). In Sudan's last election, in 1986, the NIF had won a pathetic 6 percent of the vote. Nonetheless, after al-Bashir's coup the party suddenly found itself in power, and the NIF wasted little time putting its repressive stamp on the country. Implementation of the shari`a — which had been scheduled to be rescinded on the day that al-Bashir seized control — was redoubled. Public floggings and amputations (including "cross-amputation," the cutting off of the right hand and left foot) returned to the stadium in Khartoum. Osama bin Laden was welcomed into the country, and Sudan strengthened its ties with Iran, Iraq (which it supported in the Persian Gulf War), and Libya — all countries that provided material and moral support for Sudan's war against the south.

At first, al-Bashir enjoyed some popular support from pockets of the Islamic right and others in the country who were frustrated with the fits and starts of the al-Mahdi government. What little popularity the new regime amassed soon eroded, however, as the government's policies sank Sudan deeper into financial destitution, political turmoil, and international isolation.

IN FROM THE COLD

Al-Bashir has proven to be far more resilient than anyone expected. Slowly, his government has worked itself out of its pariah status and back from the brink of economic collapse. Visiting Khartoum today, one finds a remarkably improved environment. Telephones work, the roads have

been patched up, and the long fuel lines of a decade ago have disappeared — an impressive feat, considering that many more people now own cars. It is no longer illegal to hold foreign currencies, and the dinar has stabilized, with its official value now nearly on par with its rate on the greatly diminished black market. Import and export rules have been simplified. The streets are once again alive with activity late into the evening, and the harassment of refugees and minorities has declined.

Al-Bashir has also begun wooing back from exile the north's political elite. Among them are Numayri, who was himself deposed by coup in 1985, and al-Mahdi, who has returned to resume the leadership of his popular Umma Party. Similarly, Ahmad al-Mirghani, a senior leader of the equally popular Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), has recently returned from 12 years in exile, leading to speculation that his brother, Usman al-Mirghani — chairman of both the DUP and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a consortium of resistance parties — may soon follow. At the same time that the regime has been welcoming back moderate political leaders, it has started moving against the radicals. Last March, for example, al-Turabi — the reactionary head of the NIF, Sudan's most prominent fundamentalist, and once a pillar of al-Bashir's power — was arrested for treason after signing a memorandum of understanding with his erstwhile archenemy, the SPLM.

Khartoum has matched this domestic turnaround with an international charm offensive — thus managing to end its isolation and further reduce the impetus to make peace in the south. Former detractors and enemies have become partners and collaborators. Once estranged even from its immediate neighbors, Sudan is now building positive diplomatic and trade links across its borders. Ethiopia — eager to rebuild after its bitter war with Eritrea — has concluded a number of agreements with Sudan, including deals for the sale of electricity and plans to build rail links and an oil pipeline. Eritrea, even more desperately in need of trading partners in the region, has also forged closer ties. Although Eritrea still hosts Sudan's antigovernment NDA — and Sudan has reciprocated by supporting Eritrean rebels — both countries seem of late to have decided to improve their relationship.

In late 1999, Sudan and Uganda signed an agreement to stop supporting each other's rebels: Uganda would curtail its backing of the SPLM and Sudan would step away from Uganda's notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Although relations between the two countries are still bumpy, al-Bashir attended Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's inauguration to a new term in the spring of 2001 — a clear sign of the improved cooperation. This reconciliation has been brokered, in part, by another neighbor eager to improve his international standing: Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi.

Even Sudan's relations with its former colonial master, Egypt, seem to be on the mend. Having collaborated on a 1995 attempt to assassinate Egypt's Prime Minister Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa, it will not be easy for Khartoum to repair relations. But the two countries have already signed a number of commercial agreements, and tensions have eased in the Hala'ib triangle, a region claimed by both nations. And Egypt offered no protest last October when the U.N. Security Council lifted the sanctions it had placed on Sudan in 1996 for its role in the assassination attempt.

Finally, last October, Khartoum also hosted peace talks for its southeastern neighbor, the Central African Republic — further evidence of Sudan's interest in playing a stabilizing role in the region.

Outside of Africa, a number of other nations — ranging across Europe and Asia — are also expressing new interest in Sudan. The United Kingdom's high commission in Khartoum is once

again fully operational, having shut down for two years in sympathy with the U.S. policy. Virtually all other nations of consequence — with the notable exception of the United States — now enjoy full diplomatic relations with Khartoum. Sudan's substantial oil deposits have enticed a number of countries to forge new economic ties. Dutch, French, German, Malaysian, and Japanese business delegations have all come calling in recent months.

Sudan even seems intent on ending its reputation as a sponsor of terrorism. In 1996, Washington closed its Khartoum embassy and implemented sanctions (as did the U.N. Security Council) to protest Sudan's involvement in the attempt on Mubarak's life. Two years later, after the bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Washington fired cruise missiles at a pharmaceutical plant on the outskirts of Khartoum, alleging that the facility was engaged in the production of chemical weapons (evidence for this claim remains dubious, however).

In 1996, at American urging, Sudan expelled bin Laden from the country. Reportedly, the al-Bashir government even attempted to hand him over to the United States — but was turned down by the Clinton administration for lack of indictable evidence. Sudan has now signed the 1997 International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings and the 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism. Furthermore, Khartoum was also quick to condemn the September 11 terrorist attacks and, by most accounts, has cooperated with Washington since then, providing information about terrorist groups and finances and expelling or detaining terrorist notables.

Despite these improvements, the U.S. government has yet to remove Sudan from the State Department's list of terrorism sponsors, and thus American trade sanctions remain in place. Washington has been vague on what, exactly, it would take to convince it to finally lift the restrictions. Meanwhile, when the Security Council voted to lift its sanctions on Sudan last October, only one country — the United States — abstained.

PROXY WAR

Even as Sudan's international relations have improved dramatically, the bloody civil war has continued unabated. And the fighting seems unlikely to let up anytime soon, for Khartoum has administered the war in such a way as to limit domestic resistance (at least in the north).

Sudan's low-intensity conflict little resembles a war in the traditional sense, with national armies fighting over a contested border. The vast majority of Sudan's casualties are not combatants killed in battle but southern civilians who fall victim to famine and disease — the products of a devastated rural economy, abandoned social infrastructure, and limited access for humanitarian groups. As for the fighters themselves, most of them — on both sides — are southerners: troops of either the SPLM or one of many government-supported militias drawn from rival southern tribes. Even Sudan's army is made up of large numbers of southerners, who have been rounded up on the streets of Khartoum and shipped off to battle against their southern brethren. This unmotivated army is rarely given frontline duty, however.

To deal with shortcomings in morale and appease disgruntled parents in the north who are weary of having their sons come home wounded or dead, Khartoum has raised a parallel army: the Popular Defense Force (PDF). This militia is composed of young Muslim volunteers persuaded that they are

fighting a jihad against southern infidels. The mujahideen in the PDF see war as a spiritual duty and death as a means of martyrdom and instant admission to heaven.

Khartoum also keeps northern conscripts off the front line by using murahaleen militias to do its fighting. The murahaleen are Arab tribesmen who harbor a historic enmity against the neighboring southern Dinka tribe — a feud based on ancient competition over grazing land, cattle raiding, and the abduction of slaves. Khartoum has exploited this rivalry by employing the murahaleen to harass the Dinka in Bahr al-Ghazal and to run interference for the army's resupply trains to its garrison in the provincial capital, Wau. These trains run through contested territory a few times each year, moving at little more than walking speed and stopping frequently for repairs to the tracks. The murahaleen fan out on horseback and camelback, ranging up to 20 kilometers from the tracks. They burn villages, rustle cattle, kill the elderly, and abduct women and children — and then load their booty onto the trains for transport back to points north. The abducted are taken in as "wives" and slaves, traded for cattle, or sold off to growing numbers of well-intentioned European buyers. (One mystifying feature of Sudan's war is the small cadre of Western organizations and church groups it has inspired, which seem to believe that by buying up and then liberating these unfortunates they can end the slave trade.) Sudan's Ministry of Justice has acknowledged that abductions take place, and it even allowed the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) to start programs aimed at its elimination. But these grim practices are unlikely to end as long as Khartoum keeps using its murahaleen proxies in the war against the south.

BLOOD AND OIL

Although Khartoum has managed quite successfully to isolate the northern impact of the war, nothing has contributed as much to the conflict's sustainability as the opening of Sudan's oil pipeline.

Until only a few years ago, Sudan's oil reserves represented no more than untapped potential. Short on cash, Khartoum had to go begging to places such as Baghdad, Damascus, Tehran, and Tripoli for the resources to continue fighting, and this dependence on outcast nations contributed to Sudan's diplomatic isolation and economic decay. With the opening in 1999 of a 1,600-mile pipeline connecting its oil fields to Port Sudan on the Red Sea, however, Sudan finally got the chance to translate its petroleum reserves into economic and political capital. The payoff has been impressive: last year, Sudan's oil income was estimated to be in the neighborhood of \$500 million, and many experts believe that production could double or more in the next few years.

Sudan, therefore, now has an internal source of financing for its million-dollar-a-day war. Khartoum has used the windfall not only to buy and import more sophisticated weapons but also to start building them itself. The U.S. Committee for Refugees estimates that Sudan's military expenditures have doubled since 1998, and government sources in Khartoum proudly claim that Sudan can now produce its own light arms and munitions — and will soon manufacture artillery and even tanks. These new industrial interests have increased the constituency for war in the north. The ability to produce its own weapons has also left Sudan far less beholden to fundamentalist regimes and international rogues.

Sudan has also built new business partnerships with several of the world's major oil companies: Malaysia's Petronas, China's National Petroleum Company, Sweden's Lundin Oil, Austria's OMV,

France's TotalFinaElf, and, perhaps most controversially, Canada's Talisman Energy. These relationships have boosted Sudan's diplomatic respectability. Prior to the oil boom, for example, Western diplomats in Khartoum seemed largely concerned with Sudan's chronic droughts, floods, refugee crises, and human-rights violations. Since oil entered the picture, however, foreign emissaries have become more circumspect in their criticism of the regime.

There is yet another, even more direct and disturbing way that petroleum has affected Sudan's war. Because the oil fields lie almost exclusively in the south, the government has redoubled its efforts to wipe out resistance in the area and consolidate its control. Numerous reports from a variety of U.N. agencies, foreign governments, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicate that Khartoum is now working hard to displace populations from the oil concession areas.

Such activities have not escaped notice, however, and foreign oil companies have suffered criticisms for their complicity. Of all the foreign operators, Talisman Energy seems to have received the most attention — in part because it is the largest of the overseas oil corporations involved and in part because the world seems to hold a publicly owned Canadian business to a higher moral and ethical standard than it does for Chinese or Malaysian firms. Grass-roots efforts in Canada and the United States have put pressure on Talisman and its shareholders to divest or suspend operations until Sudan halts its war and human rights abuses. Talisman has argued in response that its investment in Sudan is encouraging peace. Talisman employees tout their social contributions and the importance of oil revenue to Sudan's development, and they claim that there have been no civilian evictions from the areas where Talisman is working.

Indeed, a number of published reports indicate that oil exploration and exploitation have had only limited negative effects on the prospects for peace. These reports are typically financed by oil interests, however, and based on tours through government-held areas. Not surprisingly, such claims have been flatly contradicted by organizations including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, various U.N. special rapporteurs on Sudan, the Canadian Assessment Mission to Sudan (the "Harker mission") and, most recently, the NGO-sponsored "Report of an Investigation into Oil Development, Conflict and Displacement in Western Upper Nile, Sudan," published last October. These latter documents are particularly troubling, as they reveal a pattern of offensive military operations conducted from oil industry airstrips in an effort to clear civilians from rebel-held portions of the concession areas.

GO SOUTH, YOUNG MAN

It is hard to discuss Sudan's civil war without accounting for the role that Islam has played in the conflict. Although not an insubstantial factor, however, religion alone does not explain the war — and it should not be enough to prevent peace from coming to Sudan.

Until now, of course, Khartoum's insistence that Sudan be governed by Islamic law has been a major source of tension. For most southerners, the war is as much about cultural freedom as it is about sharing national resources. Yet Arab northern Sudan is not an Islamic fundamentalist culture. Traveling through the region, a Westerner does not sense the kind of deep antipathy and xenophobia found in states such as Iran, the Taliban's Afghanistan, or Pakistan. As noted earlier, Sudan's main Islamist party, the NIF, has never commanded a significant popular following, and it has gained and retained power only through intrigue and coup.

This lack of popular support for Islamist injunctions has led to a slow erosion in the implementation of the shari`a throughout the country. In southern garrison towns, few traces of Islamic law can be found. And in the north, the more extreme regulations and punishments have faded from practice.

Political Islam, therefore, may well be diminishing in importance as a factor in Sudan's civil war. Although powerful Islamists remain among the ruling elite — including, most notably, the country's vice president — al-Bashir's regime has managed to build new, non-Islamist pillars of political power. The NIF itself has been fractured into its theologically indistinguishable successor, the National Congress — now in power — and al-Turabi's Popular National Congress.

Still, ending the north-south feud will not be easy. The war is more like a clash of civilizations than a battle of religions. Many Arab Sudanese view the conflict in ways similar to how nineteenth-century Americans perceived the conquest on the western frontier: as their manifest destiny. Northerners feel contempt for southern culture, a divine duty to subjugate the region's inhabitants, and a sovereign right to exploit its resources. Indeed, if northerners had their way, war in the south would ultimately be resolved in the same way as the one in America's west: through the subjugation of the native peoples and relinquishment of local resources to the northern conquerors.

PARTNERS FOR PEACE?

To be fair, not all obstacles to peace lie in the north. The SPLM has always formally held that it is fighting a war to unify, not divide Sudan — a position that would seem to favor reconciliation. But the SPLM has also steadfastly insisted that the resignation of al-Bashir's government is a precondition to peace — and it is unlikely that the Khartoum regime will ever be willing to negotiate itself out of existence. Meanwhile, Garang's democratic credentials are no better than his northern counterpart's. The SPLM's leader has never withstood the scrutiny of elections, and it is not clear that he would survive if he did. Since it is also unclear what role he could play in a postconflict Sudan, many speculate that Garang has no personal incentive to seriously pursue peace.

Even more troubling is the growing talk of southern independence among some of the SPLM's junior leaders. Insurmountable obstacles stand on the road to independence, which is simply not a viable objective. For one thing, where would the north-south border be? The richest oil fields lie just south of the traditional divide, and now more than ever the north will be unwilling to relinquish them. Meanwhile, what would be the destiny of two million to three million southerners living in the north, or the unknown number of northerners — primarily merchants — in the south? Were Sudan's two halves to split, the country could face the kind of bloodshed, chaos, and population transfers that beset India in 1947.

Complicating matters further, the south itself is far from united. Deep internal divisions have long plagued southern politics — as evidenced by the ease with which Khartoum has found southern proxies to fight its war. It therefore cannot be assumed that independence in the south would end the violence there. Moreover, many southerners fear that, even in the best of circumstances, an independent southern Sudan would be dominated by the Dinka tribe in a way aptly demonstrated by Garang's domination of the SPLM.

In the longer term, southern Sudan's economic interests are likely to lie in the north. The oil boom may last only 30 to 40 years. In the not-too-distant future, southern Sudan's real strategic value will

be its water and agricultural resources. Neighboring Egypt — which has seen its own population double to 70 million in the last 20 years — depends for water on Sudan and has maintained an unwavering opposition to an independent south. Likewise, southern Sudan should realize that its trading position would be stronger if it shared a border with Egypt — instead of being separated by a hostile, independent north, which could block access to Egyptian markets.

INADVERTENT ACCOMPLICES

Ironically, still another factor prolonging Sudan's endless war has been the role of humanitarian aid agencies. Years of combat, concurrent droughts, floods, and other calamities have drawn the international community to the country in force. Scores of aid organizations now operate in Sudan, mostly in rebel-held areas that are accessed from Kenya and Uganda. Hundreds of millions of dollars pour into the country via these groups, coming from foreign governments, the U.N., and private sources.

Both sides in the conflict, however, have proved adept at manipulating the aid organizations. Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) — a U.N. initiative launched in 1989 to bring help to the south — was built on the unprecedented willingness of the government to allow regulated access to rebel-held areas. But Khartoum has controlled OLS by restricting access to some of the most needy areas in order to further its strategic or tactical objectives, and it has repeatedly bombed even those relief operations that it approved. For its part, the SPLM has also routinely diverted aid and restricted access.

In a broader sense, the work of the humanitarian agencies has taken pressure off the combatants to deal with or accept responsibility for the war's enormous human consequences. The two largest southern rebel groups have each created fledgling civil service bureaucracies but have failed to allocate resources for their efforts. In the north, little of the government's new oil wealth is going to help victims of war and poverty. On the one hand, it is doubtful that any of the combatants would divert resources to humanitarian needs if the aid agencies were to withdraw. On the other hand, the willingness of the humanitarian community to fill this vital role allows both north and south to evade the question entirely.

OUT OF DATE

U.S. policy toward Sudan during the Clinton administration was formed around the events of the early 1990s: the coup that ousted a democratically elected government, and the dark days of turmoil that followed and led to Sudan's international isolation. The American cruise missile attack in 1998 reflected this earlier period — indeed, the strike was more a visceral reaction to an outdated image than a calculated response to current information.

Despite the attack, in its final years the Clinton administration began loosening up on Sudan, sending low-profile missions to Khartoum and appointing a special envoy to look into the faltering peace talks and review the general situation. More recently, despite its warnings that foreign assistance and meddling in African wars would not be a high priority, the Bush administration has also shown real interest in Sudan, thanks to (sometimes contradictory) pressures from some of the administration's core supporters. The Christian right (in an unlikely coalition with the Congressional Black Caucus) has urged Bush to isolate Muslim Khartoum and support the southern Christian

insurgents — particularly the SPLM. Meanwhile, the U.S. oil industry, among other commercial interests, has applied counterbalancing pressure on Washington to normalize relations with the north, thus opening up access to Sudan's oil fields and growing markets. What the Bush administration now needs to realize is that these conflicting pressures could best be reconciled by establishing a durable peace in Sudan.

The current legislative struggle over the Sudan Peace Act, however, shows that many in Washington have yet to get that message. The battle over the act has been essentially a struggle between the two conflicting American camps. The legislation, adopted in a nearly unanimous vote by the House of Representatives last June, condemns Khartoum's bombardment of civilian targets and provides \$10 million in assistance to Sudanese opposition forces. If implemented, it would impose stock-market sanctions on companies invested in Sudan, thus evicting Canada's Talisman from the New York Stock Exchange. The Senate's version of the bill, adopted in August, does not include stock market sanctions, however, and the different versions have yet to be reconciled.

Fortunately, even while the Sudan Peace Act languishes, the Bush administration has begun taking other important steps. U.S. humanitarian aid representatives, including the director of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), have begun making more frequent visits to Khartoum. A charge d'affaires has been appointed (although he commutes to work from Nairobi). And last summer, the U.S. government provided 40,000 metric tons of food aid to northern Sudan, in a gesture regarded by many as a new sign of engagement and recognition.

Another good sign was the appointment last September of former Republican Senator John Danforth as special envoy for peace in Sudan. The appointment has been greeted by all parties as a sign that Washington may finally be putting its weight behind a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Because Danforth is an ordained Episcopalian minister with no prior background in Sudan, however, his appointment played better in Washington than it did in Khartoum — where it was viewed by both north and south as a nudge and a wink to the Christian SPLM. And the four confidence-building proposals that Danforth submitted in November did little to allay northern suspicions. All four proposals seem aimed at drawing concessions from Khartoum without demanding counterbalancing compromises from the SPLM. For example, one proposal quite correctly insists on a cessation of aerial bombing and artillery attacks on civilians yet fails to require the SPLM to distance its military assets from civilian areas. Similarly, another Danforth proposal calls for an end to the practice of slavery (allegations of which are leveled only on the north), while making no mention of the abduction of children for use as soldiers and porters by all parties to the war.

Despite these shortcomings, the U.S. peace mission has a lot going for it. Danforth's deputy, veteran diplomat Robert Oakley, brings with him extensive experience in the region, personal familiarity with the actors, and a demonstrated ability and willingness to engage all parties. At least partly as a result, the delegation has become the first U.S. mission in memory to get Khartoum's permission to visit southern Sudan and to be given access to the Nuba Mountains, indicating a new openness from al-Bashir's regime. Danforth's delegation has also managed to broaden humanitarian access, establish "days of tranquility" throughout the south during which aid workers can carry out vaccination campaigns without fear of being caught in military operations, persuade both sides to curtail the bombardment of civilian targets, and take steps toward limiting the slave trade and the

abduction of child soldiers. Finally, the fact that the Sudanese government and SPLM representatives met recently in Switzerland for U.S.-led talks is further evidence of both sides' interest in the Danforth mission and general U.S. involvement.

THE HONEST BROKER

Despite these positive signs, breaking the deadlock in Sudan's perfect war will not be easy. Any approach to peace should start by considering what will not work. There have been numerous calls — mostly emanating from the ngo and human rights communities — for the oil companies to suspend operations until a peace agreement is concluded. This would indeed be a powerful incentive to peace — if it could be implemented. Unfortunately, the oil industry as a whole has shown little interest in voluntarily cutting off its revenue from Sudan. Even if one or two oil companies or foreign governments were to individually halt production, therefore, it would not be hard for Khartoum to find more reliable partners to fill the void.

Diplomatic isolation seems just as unlikely to produce results. Khartoum's government has already been recognized and engaged by virtually every major international player. Its list of friends among respectable world powers is growing. Accordingly, if Washington maintains its hostility, it is the United States that risks isolation as an observer and a conduit for positive pressure on Sudan.

Most importantly, all parties must give up on military solutions. Providing arms to either side of the conflict has merely fanned the flames and undermined serious peace negotiations. American air strikes or further cruise missile attacks would anger the international community and reverse the dwindling influence of Khartoum's fundamentalists. Even if the al-Bashir regime could be brought down, Taliban fashion, by outside military intervention, most of the issues that fuel the war in the south would persist. After all, the conflict has already survived many changes of regime in the north.

Although isolating or attacking Sudan would clearly be futile, the parties to the conflict cannot bring about peace on their own. The powerful economic, political, and social interests in the north and the growing pressure for independence among southern leaders must be counterbalanced by firm pressures and incentives from outside players.

Today, U.N. officials, foreign diplomats, and even Sudanese government representatives all seem to agree that the United States should play a more active part in pushing for peace in Sudan — and that Washington is uniquely positioned to break the deadlock. Indeed, the United States is well situated to play the role of honest broker. Due to ongoing American sanctions, the United States has no current investments in Sudan. Washington can thus be firm with Khartoum without coming under undue pressures from American economic interests.

As an effective first step, the United States should restore its diplomatic relations with Sudan. Having an ambassador in Khartoum — and a Sudanese ambassador in Washington — would not imply acceptance of Khartoum's human rights practices, but it would provide a conduit for communicating U.S. displeasure with Sudan's abuses and for pressuring the regime to negotiate an end to the war. Moreover, it would also send a very important message to the SPLM that Washington will not support secessionist ambitions and that, like it or not, Khartoum must be reckoned with.

Meanwhile, the cancellation of U.S. sanctions can be held out as a coveted reward should Sudan cooperate. Khartoum has shown itself to be very interested in getting these sanctions lifted. Washington should thus identify clear and realistic benchmarks for removing the restrictions. Meanwhile, the Sudan Peace Act — including the economic sanctions contained in the House version — should be pushed through, thus shifting the focus of U.S. sanctions to the regime's human rights practices and the war in the south. The United States can and should put economic pressure on Sudan through the World Bank and the IMF.

The United States should also increase its support for humanitarian operations. The very presence of aid workers helps guard against further atrocities. Not only do aid operations address deplorable human conditions, they also allow monitoring on the ground and a means of support for antiwar institutions that will be the building blocks of postwar Sudan. Washington should also actively support civil society in both the northern and southern regions.

Danforth's appointment as special envoy was a step in the right direction, but it is now imperative that he maintain a balanced approach and show patience for all sides. Danforth has so far wisely avoided opening yet another peace process. Instead, he has proposed confidence-building measures and the expansion of humanitarian access. He should now push more actively for the parties to get back into the peace talks initiated eight years ago under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

The IGAD process has the advantage of containing a "declaration of principles" to which all parties have already formally agreed — principles that include the possibility of southern self-determination and the separation of religion and state. Although this peace process has stumbled along for eight years with little progress, that is in part because there has not been much outside pressure for serious negotiation. When the parties have reached hurdles, they have simply adjourned. Danforth should push all sides back to the table and force them to confront key issues, such as defining the conditions set out in the declaration of principles. And the U.S. envoy should rally international pressure and participation in the process.

Just as positive developments in Sudan over the past few years have ironically served to perfect Sudan's war, so have the tragedies of the past few months provided new opportunities to pursue peace there. If Sudan's war now seems perfect, it is because the domestic constituency for peace has been evaporating. But now the new alignment of international and domestic concerns and expectations has left the United States ideally situated to build and lead a coalition for peace. This presents a unique moment in Sudan's history — and one that should not be wasted.

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