

China's Potential Mediation Role in the South Sudan Conflict

LSE's Laura Barber asks if China is beating a slow retreat from its deep-seated foreign policy principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

Talks are still ongoing to reach a ceasefire in South Sudan, where **nearly 10,000 are estimated to have been killed** since the eruption of fighting between President Salva Kiir's government troops and a rebel faction loyal to former Vice-President Riek Machar on 15 December 2013.

China has found itself directly affected by the conflict. Its leading national oil company, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), is the most heavily invested foreign company in the young nation's oil sector. China currently imports approximately 70% of Sudan and South Sudan's oil (although production has fallen by at least 20% since the fighting began).



Photo credit: Reuters/Petar Kujundzic

Facing an increasingly critical domestic audience regarding the safety of Chinese citizens abroad, the Chinese government's primary concern has been with the safe evacuation of over 300 Chinese workers from South Sudan's oilfields. But there is also growing concern within Beijing's foreign policy-making establishment regarding the conflict's impact on broader regional stability, with over 31,000 South Sudanese having fled the country into neighboring states since the deadly clashes began.

It is increasingly apparent that Beijing's leadership is aware that it has a direct role to play in the resolution of the conflict. Specifically, China's Special Envoy for African Affairs, Zhong Jianhua, has offered to mediate between both sides and stated his intention to establish direct contact with the rebels "to express our will and help achieve a ceasefire".^[1]

This is deeply significant, given China's deep-seated foreign policy principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, which in recent years has become increasingly difficult to implement in practice when its own interests abroad have come under threat. But from Beijing's perspective, a direct mediation role would not constitute 'interference' in South Sudan's internal affairs, as China is adamant that it would only intervene if both sides requested it.

Chinese mediation efforts between conflicting parties, including engagement with rebel movements, are not unprecedented in Sudan and South Sudan. In 2008, at a time when the negotiations seeking to end violent conflict in Sudan's Darfur region were stalling, China began to

understand that to become effectively involved in any conflict resolution efforts, it must listen to and engage with all the key players.

The then-Special Envoy for African Affairs Liu Guijin began, albeit informally and on an ad hoc basis, to pursue a more inclusive mediation approach: which included, for the first time, talking to players apart from the ruling elite in Khartoum. Although China's role in the process was limited, the fact it was engaging at this level at all was significant.

Liu met informally with the leaders of the two main factions of the Darfur rebel group, the Sudan Liberation Movement. According to a senior Chinese diplomatic source, Liu encouraged one of the factions to keep the safety and security of local people as its top priority by directly negotiating with Khartoum and abandoning its insistence on preconditions to political dialogue.

Currently, a key stumbling block to the signing of a ceasefire agreement between the rebels and the government in South Sudan is the rebels' continued insistence on the prior release of 11 political detainees in Juba. This is despite the fact that the detainees themselves have told the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) mediators that their status should not be an impediment to reaching a ceasefire agreement.^[2]

Continuing Liu's mediation approach in Darfur, his successor Zhong Jianhua has a key role to play in the current crisis in South Sudan. Through direct mediation efforts, Zhong could further the efforts of his U.S. counterpart, Donald Booth, to encourage the rebels to agree to an immediate ceasefire without preconditions. Such an initiative could be bolstered through Beijing's efforts in Juba and through the UN Security Council's calls on President Salva Kiir to release the detainees to the custody of the IGAD and enable their participation in an inclusive negotiation process.

It is crucial not to overstate the extent and depth of China's potential involvement in the resolution of a crisis far beyond its borders. Nevertheless, in its efforts to ensure the protection of Chinese citizens and – critically – the continued flow of oil in the Sudans, China will certainly remain engaged in supporting the IGAD-led peace process.

Moreover, China's leadership is aware that an enhanced mediation role in resolving conflicts will also boost China's credentials as a 'responsible power' and demonstrate its stated commitment to African peace and security. China is likely to deepen its cooperation with the U.S. and other Western states in resolving conflicts where it shares interests: in this case, stability in South Sudan and the region which is achieved through politics instead of violence.

This was highlighted on 10 January by clear consensus within the UN Security Council on condemning "external interventions" that would only serve to exacerbate the conflict.^[3] This is undoubtedly welcome for Beijing, reaffirming, as it does, that state sovereignty and avoiding military intervention – which remain at the very heart of Chinese foreign policy – are maintained above all.

[1] <http://english.cntv.cn/program/newsupdate/20140103/100797.shtml>

[2] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/09/statement-national-security-advisor-susan-e-rice-south-sudan>

[3] http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2014-01/11/c_133036199.htm

