

The Darfur and China's African Policy

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Abstract

The ongoing conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan and China's growing economic engagement in that country, particularly in the energy field, has put China's Africa policy in the spotlight. Since China and Sudan have had a long tradition of friendship and close political and economic ties, there has been an unreasonable expectation from the international community that China alone can influence the position of the Sudanese government on this sensitive matter. Based on this, this paper using the innovative theory of Diplomacy argues that, as far as the Chinese government is concerned, the principle of 'non-interference' should not be interpreted as unwillingness on the part of China to take on the responsibility to protect. Given the complexity of the Darfur issue and the volatile north-south relations in Sudan, the 'engagement approach' endorsed and pushed by China is more constructive than the punitive 'sanction initiative' being pushed by the West for bringing about stability and peace in Sudan. Furthermore, this work is departmentalized into:- introduction, theoretical framework, historical background of Darfur, Darfur and its links with China, China-Sudan economic links, China's constructive engagement approach, and Conclusion.

Keywords: Conflict, China, Darfur, Sudan, Diplomacy, Oil

Introduction

The international controversy over Darfur has put China's long-held foreign policy of 'non-interference' on a collision course with the new international principle of the 'responsibility to protect' and the campaign by Western governments and some non-governmental organizations to impose a 'sanctions regime' on government of Sudan.

Since early 2003, the crisis in Darfur has grabbed international attention thanks to the special attention devoted to it by Western human rights organizations, the media and politicians (Amnesty International: 2011). The protracted political crisis has also called into question the growing involvement of China in Sudan and the extent to which China's economic engagement, particularly in the energy field, indirectly emboldens the Sudanese government relentlessly to prosecute the conflict in Darfur. Western governments and human rights groups continue to argue that China's strict adherence to its policy of non-interference amounts to nothing less than direct complicity in fuelling the crisis in Darfur (International Crisis Group: 2012). The questions that must be asked are the following. What are the roots causes of the crisis in Darfur? Does China really have any leverage over Sudan? What steps has China taken in recent years to resolve the Darfur crisis?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted to explain this work is the innovative theory of diplomacy which was propounded during the post-Cold War era by scholars like Hocking Brian, Lee Donna, Sharp Paul, and Kurbalinga Jovan. The innovative theory focuses on enhanced cooperation, dialogue and balance in global affairs in place of the theoretical hostility and parochialism inherent to either the state-centric traditional diplomatic theory or the nascent anti-statist diplomatic theory. The innovative diplomatic theory does not believe that one single diplomatic theory is able to fully explain the modern diplomatic environment.

According to Murry (2006), to understand the modern diplomatic environment state and non-state actors must be considered in tandem.

Diplomatic innovators believe that, a symbiotic relationship exists between state and non-state actors of diplomacy, that is, it is impossible to ignore the collaboration between the state and non-state actors. They maintained that the modern diplomatic environment is best understood from approach that values both statist and non-statist diplomatic theories. Diplomatic innovative theory are critical of the divergent nature of exclusive traditional and orthodox nascent diplomatic theory, they argued that the need to defend these parochial theories on diplomacy can result in conflicting theories on modern diplomacy.

The innovative theorist performs an arbitrary role within the diplomatic studies, they do so by utilizing the merit of inclusive and the moderate nascent theorists view. By adopting different approaches, innovative school avoid or dispel debate that is becoming unproductive in relation to the modern diplomatic environment. They ensure that while they are engaged in the enterprise of diplomatic theory, empirical evidence is employed to enrich theories. Furthermore, innovators suggest a promising research agenda by thinking outside the traditional square or adopting an unconventional approach to standard diplomatic theory.

On the contrary, other theorists like traditional and nascent are critical of the symbiosis that innovative theorists believe exists between state and non state diplomatic actors, and therefore are dismissive of the innovative theory which gives equal weighting to all diplomatic actors.

Be that as it may, the 'engagement approach' adopted by China as regards to the Darfur issue can best be explained by the innovative diplomatic theory which professes the engagement of all sides concerned in resolving a conflictual situation such as that of Darfur.

Historical Background

Located in Western Sudan, Darfur is home to some eighty ethnic groups, the great majority of which are either Arab or African. The former group is nomadic and is distributed over the north of the area, and the latter is made up of agricultural ethnic groups inhabiting the central and southern parts. Apart from occasional conflicts over land and water, the two groups coexisted more or less peacefully until the early 1970s, when a severe drought drove Arab tribes from northern Darfur and from neighbouring countries like Chad to central and southern Darfur, leading to an increase in population from 3 million twenty years ago to its current level of 6 million. This factor, combined with famine and the collapse of the fragile ecosystem, began to accentuate disputes over land and water. According to some Sudanese scholars, the number of intra-group conflicts jumped from three in 1968 to twenty-one by 1998 (Takana: 1998).

The conflicts over life-sustaining resources such as water and land were further exacerbated by deliberate political exclusion of the southern Sudanese by the northern-dominated central government in Khartoum. The imposition of strict Islamic sharia law across the whole of Sudan by the regime in Khartoum was the straw that broke the camel's back. It fuelled political resentment and gave birth to armed resistance movements which demanded political autonomy from the north. One of the most prominent of these militant movements is the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which, after decades of brutal civil war, finally came to an accommodation with Khartoum with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, which laid out a road map for sharing power, including self-determination for the south.

Just as the deadly conflict in south Sudan was coming to an end, the conflict in Darfur broke out, engulfing neighbouring countries such as Chad, Central African Republic, Libya and Uganda. Arab militias, known as the Janjaweed, began to mete out cruel punishment to Darfurians. In the face of the mass atrocities being committed against defenceless civilians, and the failure of the Sudanese government to protect Darfurians citizens, a concerted humanitarian response was mounted. On their part, Darfurians began to arm themselves to repel the incursion by the government-supported Janjaweed militias (Ronalsen: 2011). The two prominent military fronts were the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). In February 2003, the two armed forces launched a large-scale anti-government campaign demanding autonomous rule. The involvement of neighbouring countries such as Libya, Chad and the Central African Republic was to complicate the situation further as political discord existed between them and Sudan. The expansion of the conflict has caused large numbers of casualties in Darfur, although estimates are difficult to obtain. The estimated number of people who died in the conflict varies from a low of 10,000 (given by the Sudanese government) to a high of 70,000, according to an estimate by the World Health Organization (World Health Magazine: 2010). More than a million people have been displaced. The conflict in Darfur has resulted in the worst humanitarian crisis in decades.

Darfur and its links with China

Many Western governments and non-governmental organisations have consistently advanced the view that, in its relations with the government of Sudan, China is simply pursuing its own economic interests and ignoring the human rights situation in Darfur. Therefore, they argue, China bears some responsibility for the worsening humanitarian crisis in Darfur, and should start to behave as a responsible stakeholder on the international stage (CNN: 2004). As the date for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games approached, the 'save Darfur Coalition' and many politicians intensified their campaign to put pressure on China by calling for a boycott of the Beijing games (Farrow: 2007). Furthermore, in May 2007 over one hundred US Representatives wrote to the Chinese then president, pointing out that if China did not take measures with regard to Darfur, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games might be jeopardized (Cooper: 2007).

Thus the spotlight was put on China, but the criticism was one-sided and hypocritical as there were many other countries heavily involved in the Sudanese oil sector, such as India and Malaysia, whose governments were spared the same kind of criticism. Lost in the political game is China's role in transforming the Sudanese economy through its comprehensive economic cooperation strategy with Sudan. With increased revenue from oil, the government of Sudan was able to gain considerable room to manoeuvre politically, which enabled it to reach political accommodation with its arch enemy, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Without the improved economic situation, considerably aided by Chinese investment in the oil sector, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 would not have been possible. The CPA stipulated a fifty-fifty revenue-sharing formula between Khartoum and Juba (the capital of south Sudan).

China-Sudan Economic Relations

First of all, the strong economic recovery in Sudan is closely linked with China's involvement. China and Sudan enjoy a traditional friendship. Since diplomatic ties were established between them in February 1959, the relationship has developed smoothly. The first trade treaty between the two governments was signed in 1962. In terms of the oil industry, China's energy cooperation with Sudan has dramatically improved Sudanese oil capacity. Chinese companies started to prospect for energy resources in Sudan in the mid-1990s. By the end of 2003, their investment totalled US\$2.7 billion, with which they laid 1,506 kilometres of oil pipelines, and built a crude-oil processing plant with a capacity of 2.5 million tons a year and several gas stations (Blair:2005). With Chinese investment, Sudan transformed itself from an oil-importing country into an oil-exporting country.

More importantly, with China's help Sudan established its own oil industry, consisting of prospecting, exploitation, refining and transportation facilities and sales networks. As a result, oil production has risen from 2,000 barrels per day in 1993 to 500,000 barrels per day today. Crude oil exports amounted to roughly 84 per cent of total exports in 2006 (Gadir: 2007). And Sudan's economic growth rate has been maintained at around 8-12 per cent annually, which ranks as one of the best growth rates among north-east African countries. The inflation rate has also dropped from 135 per cent in the 1990s to 5 per cent in 2006. Meanwhile, annual income per capita has increased from US\$280 TO US\$1,080. Foreign exchange reserves reached US\$1.44 billion at the end of April 2005. Sudan then had the capability to repay the loan provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Sudan's voting rights in the IMF were restored in 2000 (EIU : 2005).

Chinese oil companies not only provide employment to local people, they have been engaged in other kinds of projects that directly benefit local communities. For example, by the end of 2006 China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China's largest oil producer, had spent over US\$32 million on building schools and hospitals and drilling water wells in the country, benefiting over 1.5 million local people (USA Today: 2007). CNPC has invested in the construction of twenty-two primary schools and helped 65,000 people receive education. Meanwhile, the company has also provided millions of dollars for Sudanese students to study at undergraduate and postgraduate level in China, or receive short-term training

Lost in the debate over Darfur is the significant contribution of China in the revival of the Sudanese economy and the effect this had on accelerating the peace in south Sudan. As stated earlier, the development of Sudan's oil industry with China's help had a direct impact on the ability and willingness of the central government to reach an accommodation with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, leading to the signing of the CPA in 2005. While diplomacy and international mediation were a critical part of the peace process, the resolution of the north-south conflict would not have gone that far without the improved economic situation of Sudan as a result of windfall oil receipts.

Sudan's president Omar al-Bashir extolled the success of Sino-Sudanese energy cooperation when he said 'No CNPC, no oil industry in Sudan, not to mention the peace in the south and north of Sudan'. (China Daily: 2006)

According to the statistics given by the Sudanese Energy and Mining Ministry, the total oil revenue from 1999 to July 2005 reached US\$15 billion. Oil income accounted for 53.7 per cent of national fiscal revenue in 2003. Only as a result of the oil revenue could the NPC-dominated central government in the capital, Khartoum, and the SPLM-led autonomous Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) finally reach the deal over resource sharing, consisting of a fifty-fifty split, after an allocation of 2 per cent of the revenue allocated directly to the oil-producing regions themselves. At present, the Ministry of Finance and National Economy publishes a monthly report on oil revenue, which is prepared with assistance from the Energy and Mining Ministry and southern officials. According to the data given by the Ministry of Finance and National Economy, the GoSS had received US\$473 million in oil revenue in the first five months of 2006.

During this period, the south's reported monthly share of oil receipts increased from US\$72 million in January to US\$112 million in May (EIU: 2006). And according to Andrew S. N, US Special Envoy to Sudan in 2006/07, as of early 2008, some US\$3 billion in oil revenues had been transferred to the south's treasury. The south's economy is beginning to boom. Therefore, there is no doubt that the increased oil income received either by the central government in Khartoum or the GoSS in the south had greatly eased the budgetary constraints in both the north and the south and improved people's living standards as a whole. And that is very helpful for the consolidation of the CPA.

The 'Engagement Approach': China's Constructive Role

On the Darfur issue, there are two major allegations levelled at China by the Western media and international organizations: first, China has objected to using sanctions against Sudan when the UN Security Council has discussed the Darfur issue; and second, China has not done enough to pressure the Sudanese government to change its stance. On the contrary, China has been active in search of pragmatic solutions to the crisis in Darfur, despite relentless criticism from the West. China believes that regional and international conflicts should be settled through innovative diplomatic means such as dialogue and negotiation. It argues that sanctions are counterproductive and that those hit hardest by sanctions are the common people, not the authorities. Sanctions and strong-arm tactics against Sudan will succeed only in complicating matters (Thompson: 2004). According to Chinese Special Envoy to Darfur Liu Guijin: 'Too much pressure or expanding sanctions will not be helpful for the peaceful settlement of the issue, but will further complicate the situation, and many previous cases had already proved that issues like Darfur would never be properly addressed without the country's internal political process'(China Daily: 2007).

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that China's adherence to the principle of 'non interference' does not mean that Beijing is unwilling to take on the 'responsibility to protect'. The key difference here is that China supports legitimate intervention only if it meets the following criteria: first, the intervention should not violate the concerned state's sovereignty; second, the intervention must gain the authorization of the United Nations; third, the UN force must secure an invitation from the concerned state; and finally, the UN mission should use force only when all other options have proved ineffective (Carison: 2004). In defence of this position, the Chinese authorities point to the disastrous failure of the US invasion of Iraq in the name of 'protecting' the 'human rights' and 'freedom' of the Iraqi people, which took place without the support of the United Nations (Bellamy: 2005). China believes that, in the case of the Iraqi invasion, the United States did not fully exploit all diplomatic avenues and instead chose a bilateral approach over multilateral means. In the end, its actions generated a great deal of resentment from Iraqi citizens, paving the way for internal insurrection by the Iraqis against what they came to regard as an occupying power rather than a liberating force.

Since the emergence of the Darfur issue, China has been in constant communication with the relevant people, playing mediator, promoting dialogue between top leaders, dispatching envoys and discussing the problem in the UN General Assembly (Russell and Wallis: 2007). President Hu Jintao held discussions with Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir on the Darfur issue during the Beijing summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in November 2006 and his visit to Sudan in February 2007. Furthermore, China participated in a conference held in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa in November 2006 involving representatives of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the African Union and Sudan.

Former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan outlined a three-phase plan (the Annan Plan) to offer assistance to African Union troops stationed in Darfur. In the first phase, the UN would send in military equipment valued at US\$21 million, and dispatch nearly two hundred personnel as intelligence officials and counsellors. In the second phase, the personnel and equipment sent to the African Union troops should reach a certain level; in the third phase, a UN-AU united force should be established in Darfur with 17,000 soldiers and 3,000 police, under the command of the UN (United Nations: 2006). China supports the Annan Plan, and believes it is practical and acceptable to Sudan

Owing to China's constructive efforts and its endorsement of the Annan Plan, the Sudanese government announced that it would agree to the deployment of a hybrid UN-AU peacekeeping force in Darfur. This was subsequently reflected in Resolution 1769, passed by the UN Security Council on 31st July 2007. This would have been unimaginable without China's constructive innovative diplomatic engagement (Large: 2007). Moreover, China is committed to going beyond words and taking action. In order to promote the implementation of UN Resolution 1769, China has dispatched 315 Chinese military engineers to Darfur as part of the first group of UN peacekeepers to be sent there. China has offered assistance valued at a total of 80 million Yuan (US\$10.93 million) to the Darfur region, and donated US\$1.8 million to the peacekeeping organizations of the African Union.

In addition to its support of the Annan Plan and its behind-the-scenes diplomatic manoeuvring in the passing of Resolution 1769, on 10th May 2007 the Chinese government appointed Ambassador Liu Guijin as the special representative on African affairs (Associated Press: 2007). Prior to Ambassador Liu's appointment, China had previously dispatched five Special Envoys to Darfur to study the situation on the ground in order to help the authorities in Beijing develop appropriate strategies towards Sudan. This clearly shows the importance the Chinese government attaches to Africa, and particularly to the Darfur issue. After assuming office, Ambassador Liu immediately made a five-day trip to Sudan, and discussed the plight of Darfur with high-ranking Sudanese leaders, so as to accelerate the political settlement of the issue and afford local people a better life and security (The Economist: 2007). The Economist applauded China for publicly applying more pressure on the Khartoum regime.

As Andrew S. Natsios has stressed, 'innovative engagement is now the only policy that has any chance of success' (Natsios: 2008). The unpleasant history of relations between Khartoum and the West, however, has naturally made the leaders in Khartoum believe that the West is out to depose them and facilitate Sudan's break-up. And unfortunately, the arrest warrant issued by the Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC) to Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir in early March 2009 seems the latest evidence of what feeds this anxiety. Owing to the deep-rooted mistrust between Khartoum and the West, China has the advantage of being able to serve as a bridge-builder and message-transmitter bringing its innovative engagement approach to the Darfur issue. And China has indeed played this role and made a great contribution in this direction.

Conclusion

The success of China's 'quiet diplomacy' in Darfur does not mean that Beijing should not make a reassessment of its policy in Sudan and Africa in general. In the light of the ICC's decision to indict President al-Bashir for genocide, the situations in Darfur remain precarious. While China has worked hard for the regime in Khartoum to accept UN peacekeeping operations on its soil, it remains unconvinced by the international community's narrow focus on peacekeeping to the exclusion of permanent peace by addressing through peaceful means the root causes of the Sudanese conflict, which are both political and historical. As former US Special Envoy to Sudan Andrew.S. Natsios has rightly pointed out, 'Washington spends a disproportionate amount of its staffing and budgetary resources on resolving the crisis in Darfur rather than on supporting the Comprehensive Peace Agreement'. As General Martin Luther Agwai, the one time 'Without a new peace deal, even with the force numbers we are bringing into Darfur, it will still be a big task because you cannot keep peace if there is no peacedeal' (Times:2007). This imbalance must be redressed urgently, because peace cannot be achieved in Darfur if it is not secured between the north and the south. It is exactly this same message which China has been trying to get across to the international community, with little success. Failure to address this contradictory position will no doubt send wrong signals to the protagonists and will harm efforts to bring peace to the country as a whole.

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