

Partition of Sudan prepares way for further conflicts

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South Sudan formally declared its independence on July 9. President Barack Obama was among the first to recognise the new country. He welcomed the “birth of a new nation”.

“I am proud to declare that the United States formally recognises the Republic of South Sudan as a sovereign and independent state upon this day, July 9, 2011. Today”, Obama said, “is a reminder that after the darkness of war, the light of a new dawn is possible”. This is simply rubbish.

The war to which he was referring was the civil war between the Khartoum-based Northern government and the separatists of the South. A US-brokered peace deal ended that conflict in 2005 after more than 20 years. In January, a referendum was held under the terms of the peace agreement. Some 99 percent of Southern voters opted for secession from the North. What was formerly Africa’s largest country is now divided into two.

Despite the celebrations and Obama’s soothing words, there are major questions still unresolved. The line of the border between the two Sudans has still not been agreed; the Abyei region remains a matter of dispute; and the division of oil revenues, which are vital to survival of both countries, is still undecided.

Most of Sudan’s oil reserves are in what is now South Sudan. Since 2005, there has been a revenue-sharing agreement, but that agreement is in doubt with the secession of the South. Southern leaders have threatened to keep the oil revenue. In response, President Omar al-Bashir has threatened to cut off the pipeline that passes through North Sudan on its way to Port Sudan on the Red Sea.

Even if South Sudan keeps all the oil revenue, the sector does not provide a stable long-term future for the new country. Reserves are expected to peak in 2011/2012. With little infrastructure except what has been built by foreign companies in the oil fields for their own use, the prospects of diversifying the economy are not great.

Military conflict is even more pressing. In South Kordofan, a region on the border between North and South Sudan, a little-publicised civil war is already under way. Thousands of civilians have fled from bombing, as the Khartoum government attempts to take control of one of the few areas that it could claim that has oil reserves.

There are reports of house-to-house executions. Khartoum’s

internal security forces are said to be identifying potential leaders among the Muslim and Christian communities and slitting their throats. Aid agencies have been driven out the area. The airfield they use to bring in humanitarian flights has been bombed, and road access has been blocked.

Conflict is not confined to the border. South Sudan faces internal conflicts from opposition elements opposed to the Juba government. A South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA) has emerged, under the leadership of Peter Gadet, and another force led by George Athor, a former general in the Southern army.

These legacies of the civil war that claimed nearly 2 million lives are not the only threats facing Sudan. Other issues may yet become the sparks that ignite what could be a wider conflict. Far from stepping into a new dawn, North and South Sudan face the danger of wars on a number of fronts.

As the drought in East Africa and the Horn of Africa worsens, there is growing conflict over the use of the waters of the Nile. The Nile runs through nine countries. Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya have signed a deal on water sharing. Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have not yet decided whether to sign up to the new agreement. But Egypt and Sudan, which currently get the lion’s share of the river’s water and can veto the construction of dams upstream, have refused any new scheme to share this vital resource. Meanwhile, Ethiopia is pushing ahead with its Grand Millennium dam, a \$4.5 billion project that will make Ethiopia an exporter of hydroelectric power.

Access to Nile water is vital for Egypt. It uses the river to generate hydroelectric power, and its agriculture is entirely sustained by irrigation. Agriculture accounts for a third of the Egyptian economy. It cannot afford to lose any of the 84 billion cubic metres of water it currently draws from the Nile.

The division of Sudan injects a further element of uncertainty into the rivalry over water. Satellite pictures clearly show the stark distinction between the lush green of South Sudan and the barren desert landscape of the North, with only a strip of green provided by the Nile.

The basis for this acrimonious dispute over water was laid in colonial times, when the region was under British rule. The agreement that gives Sudan and Egypt the largest share of the Nile was drawn up by the British in 1929. Both North and

South Sudan, despite having been independent since 1956, continue to be dominated by imperialism. The latest independence ceremonies do nothing to diminish that domination. South Sudan's independence is purely formal.

The economy and social structure of these two countries were formed by decades of colonial dominance. Rivalries between tribes, language groups, and religious communities were exacerbated by British rule that favoured one group over another. Initially, Britain used Arabic-speaking Northerners in its colonial administration. But after the Egyptian uprising of 1919 and the 1924 uprising in Khartoum, the British authorities turned increasingly towards what they claimed were traditional tribal forms of rule. What had been a purely ecological distinction between north and south became a major political division, as Britain expunged all trace of Arab culture from the South. Sudanese had to have passports to move between the north and south of their own country.

This cultural cleansing was done on the grounds of protecting the African identity of the local communities who had long cooperated with Arabic-speaking herders. The South proved resistant to British rule. From 1927, Britain used air strikes in an attempt to subdue the Nuer of South Sudan and uprooted whole populations in a bid to bring them under the control of the colonial administration. Anthropologists were employed to discover more pliable leaders and to designate what were and what were not valid tribal and ethnic identities. South Sudan was in many respects "Made in Britain".

The emerging regional conflicts owe just as much to British colonialism. The current borders were the creation of British imperialism. British rule prevented the emergence of larger economic and political entities. From the battle of Omdurman in 1898, when Britain took control of Sudan, it worked to prevent the union of Egypt and Sudan. For Britain to rule this vast region and keep it out of the hands of its imperial competitors, it was vital to foster local loyalties among the elite that would become national rivalries after independence.

Britain's original invasion of Sudan was justified on the spurious humanitarian grounds of suppressing the slave trade. Claims of humanitarianism underpin the present wave of colonial expansionism no less than that which took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Obama administration has presented itself as a champion of human rights in Africa. But the peace agreement and the partition of Sudan it has sponsored will produce new conflicts in Sudan itself and threaten to draw in the rest of the region.

Potentially, the conflicts that are now developing in Sudan may even have global implications. Most of the oil fields in South Sudan have been developed by Chinese companies. Beijing has invested \$20 billion in the Sudanese oil industry. Half a million barrels of oil a day are pumped mainly by the Chinese National Petroleum Company, with Malaysia's Petronas and Indian companies responsible for a smaller share. China buys between 55 and 60 percent of Sudan's oil, which

accounts for 30 percent of China's imports. By world and even African standards Sudan is not a major producer, with only 5 billion barrels of proved reserves of oil. It comes fifth in Africa, behind Angola, which is the world's eighth biggest oil producer, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria and the Republic of Congo. But it is China's most successful investment in the continent.

Beijing has offered to provide loans to South Sudan while it builds a new pipeline that will take the oil to the Kenyan coast and give it an alternative to the now vulnerable northern pipeline. The fuel that powers Chinese industry is at stake. A dispute between North and South Sudan over the use of the present pipeline raises the possibility of major disruption to the Chinese and the world economy.

Washington sees in Sudan an ideal opportunity to strike at an ever more threatening rival. The US has long been arming its southern ally. Kenya has served as a conduit for weapons. According to cables published by WikiLeaks, the tanks captured by Somali pirates off the coast of Kenya were destined for the Juba regime, and the US was aware of the shipment. In the run-up to the referendum, the US has trained and re-equipped the Southern army.

It is notable that Obama did not offer to lift US trade sanctions against Khartoum, or to remove it from the list of terrorist states--despite frequent suggestions that this would be the reward for co-operating with the partition of Sudan. A flood of news reports are highlighting the atrocities committed by Northern forces, but have little to say about the military build-up in the South. The ground is thus being prepared for yet another US military-backed conflict and possibly even a direct intervention under the banner of defending a civilian population.



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