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Countering Chinese Influence in Sudan

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Countering Chinese Influence in Sudan

Abstract

It is difficult to imagine a more poisonous symbiosis than that between China and Sudan. The former requires a continuous flow of low-cost oil imports to satisfy its soaring oil demand, and the latter requires sufficient economic support to immunize itself against international interventions and preempt potential internal uprisings. Sudan supplies 64 percent of its oil to China (meeting seven percent of the economic power's demand in 2006), and China, for its part, has invested heavily in Paloich, one of the country's central oil-producing areas.

Keywords

Human rights, China, Sudan, Darfur, Oil

Countering Chinese Influence in Sudan

by Ali Wyne

It is difficult to imagine a more poisonous symbiosis than that between China and Sudan. The former requires a continuous flow of low-cost oil imports to satisfy its soaring oil demand, and the latter requires sufficient economic support to immunize itself against international interventions and preempt potential internal uprisings. Sudan [supplies 64 percent of its oil to China \(meeting seven percent of the economic power's demand in 2006\)](#), and China, for its part, has invested heavily in Paloich, one of the country's central oil-producing areas.

China's appeal to Sudan, a fellow authoritarian country, is manifest. Unfortunately, however, no democracies have challenged its influence in the country, a fact that becomes further disheartening when one recognizes that liberal states can actually offer the embattled state a far more appealing investment program. The absence of human rights conditionality, one of the prominent characteristics of China's offer, is admittedly difficult to counter. However, China has invested almost exclusively in oil-related infrastructure. In order to compete, the West could propose a far more diversified package—to include investment in Sudan's oil regions, to be sure, but also to include investment in irrigation technologies and high-yield crops ([the country's economy is largely agrarian](#))—conditioned on the regime's making good-faith efforts to halt hostilities in the country. Short-term instability may prove advantageous to the Sudanese government insofar as it affords it a vacuum in which to consolidate its power, but as armed conflict envelops the countries that border Sudan, instability becomes increasingly costly.

Encouragingly, a “hybrid” force of the United Nations and African Union (A.U.) is primed to supplant the A.U. Mission in the Sudan. That unit, however, will likely meet the fate of its predecessor—which proved unable to establish a durable peace—unless it receives robust financial support. The imperative of provisioning such support takes on added urgency when one notes that the conflict in Sudan increasingly threatens Chad and the Central African Republic.

This new force, however, is not the only entity that requires attention. Humanitarian organizations must receive better protection; [they have been the object of growing levels of violence](#) and, not surprisingly, have begun to leave *en masse*. How can a civil society be expected to challenge the government if it is subject to daily terror and, more importantly, if it is unable to procure the basic necessities for survival: water; food; and shelter?

Although this war is, in part, racially motivated, it is also, perhaps more importantly, a resource war. Indeed, [resource scarcity has been a root cause and sustainer of much of the violence that has plagued Sudan](#) since it achieved independence in 1956. [Britain's Department for International Development offered the following assessment of the conflict](#): “It is largely a battle for resources, land, water and grazing rights together with a related struggle for power within the indigenous tribal administration structure.” In consideration of this fact, the discovery by Boston University researchers of [“a huge underground lake in Sudan's Darfur region”](#) is especially encouraging. At a minimum, it introduces a new, and potentially powerful, element into the Darfur calculus. A comprehensive deal, the bare outline of which I proved earlier, should use this potentially important new resource as a point of departure.

There is a certain perversity to framing such unspeakable, unfolding horrors in practical terms. Unfortunately, however, as Samantha Power documented in her masterful account, [A Problem from Hell](#), even the awareness that genocide is occurring rarely compels the necessary interventions on the part of those who can do the most to stop it. In Sudan, the world confronts yet another ghastly specter and yet another test of its will to preserve human dignity. While I would hardly be so naïve as to suggest that a resolution to the ongoing crisis therein can readily be achieved, it seems, once again, that the central impediment to one is political will. Chinese influence is formidable, but it can be challenged. What will the world do this time?

Ali Wyne is a senior at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he is pursuing dual degrees in Management and Political Science, as well as a minor in Economics. He serves as Vice-President of the Undergraduate Association, and as Editor-in-Chief of the [MIT International Review](#), MIT's first journal of international affairs. He will be contributing a chapter, "How World Opinion Challenges American Foreign Policy," to a forthcoming volume, *The Public Diplomacy Handbook* (Routledge 2008). He maintains a blog on global problems and solutions, ["The Struggle of Memory Against Forgetting."](#)