



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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WEEKLY REVIEW

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What is South Sudan's Wisdom Courting Russia?

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The month of May 2014 had been an interesting period politically in South Sudan. During this period, the American Secretary of State, John Kerry and the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, visited South Sudan to push the warring parties to seek a peaceful end to the violence that had stoked fear of genocide internationally. Their visits added a much-needed impetus into the peace process resulting in the meeting between President Kiir and Riek Machar in the Ethiopian Capital, Addis Ababa. The meeting of the two principals led to the signing of the Framework Agreement on how to end the conflict and recommitting the parties to the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed on January 23, 2014. However, just days before the aforesaid agreement, the United States levied targeted sanctions on two military generals, targeting both sides to the conflict.

The sanctions followed weeks of speculations about who were on the US list of sanctions and who would be the first victims of such sanctions. While the parties were working on the negotiation agenda, the US and France had also been pushing the UN Security Council to follow through with its own targeted sanctions, creating fear of isolation in Juba. However, an unlikely ally in the UN Security Council, Russia, with a veto power, threatened to block the decision on grounds that such moves “can undermine the spirit of co-operation”¹. Russia, a country under immense pressure from America and western European countries to stop meddling in Ukraine affairs and facing sanctions of its own, is seemingly in the hunt for allies and possibly for markets for its military industrial products. Russia is also posturing against the West to prevent their expansion into territories considered to be in the sphere of its influence, which is what probably explains its support for the battered Syrian regime and its actions in Ukraine.

This review analyzes the emerging relationship between Moscow and Juba and the kinds of political implications this has on the latter.

¹ <http://mobile.nation.co.ke/news/UN-Security-Council-South-Sudan-Violence/-/1950946/2302498/-/format/xhtml/-/15i363j/-/index.html>

The Sudanese People's Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A) in its early years of inception having been hosted by Mengistu Haile Mariam's Ethiopian regime, was aligned to the Soviet Union. This alignment may not have been out of genuine ideological marriage, but a result of needed political survival as American government by then was a staunch ally of the Khartoum government under Jaafer Nimeiry. When the Soviet bloc fell apart in 1991, the SPLM/A aligned strategically with America after Islamists took power in Khartoum, with issues related to racial and religious prosecution, terrorism, and democracy creating sorely desired bonds. This move might have angered Russia, creating understandably a bad diplomatic relations between the two entities in the periods that followed. This probably explains part of the reason that Russia still has not established any diplomatic relations with South Sudan at a high-level since independence.

Russia perhaps sees an opening in this crisis, with America not in really good terms with the South Sudanese government and China not standing up for its junior trading partner. This is conceivably a good entry point for the US and Russia to grab each other's ally amidst crisis.

The South Sudanese government on its part is clearly desperate, and so it has seemingly put a moratorium on any ideological discrimination and suppressed any moral campus to allow for the survival of the regime. Hence, Russia's offer to cover South Sudan's back at the Security Council is a welcomed relief. Since its allies in the United States and China are seemingly unhelpful at its moment of need, Russia may be that friend it needs. Like a common South Sudanese saying, "God let me be sick in order to know my true and loyal friends." Russia is obviously trying to be that friend indeed.

The most pertinent questions that deserve being answered are whether this courtship is wise and genuine and what are the tradeoffs. It is legitimately a concern for a country to get married to these giant countries such as China, US and Russia, who are with bloated egos and interests and not risks being a battlefield for proxy wars. Although South Sudan is seemingly abandoned by its friends and allies in the West, it must be very careful not to rush to any new relationship out of political expediency lest it risks losing its longstanding friends who may be a little apprehensive right now because of the crisis, but more reliable and useful going forward. This is not to suggest that the government should not establish any diplomatic relationship with Russia; it must do so after carefully balancing geopolitical interests of the country going forward. More specifically, what would America and China do when South Sudan cements stronger ties with Moscow?

In light of these concerns, reports² of President Kiir extending invitation to President Putin to visit South Sudan show an advanced stage in the diplomatic courtship between the two countries. However, President Putin's visit should be crafted carefully to make sure that the country is not sending mixed signals inadvertently. Putin, of course, should be treated with the state welcome like all other international dignitaries, but the country should be careful not to take any major decisions as this relationship evolves. Russia

² The Citizen, daily newspaper published a report on May 30, 2014 Vol. 8 Issue 765 pages 16.

carries a political baggage that would definitely have spillover effects for South Sudan. Such spillover effects can be in the form of isolation, both politically and economically. Forming political relationships haphazardly is asking for troubles, thus South Sudan must listen carefully to its longstanding friends and allies to ensure that they are not ticked off unintentionally.

But having a good relationship with Russia equally has advantages, among which the ability to acquire military hardware is of essence, since both China and the US do not easily market their weapons to unstable governments. Part of the concern with this newly established relation with Russia is the fact that it is seemingly motivated by the need to thwart sanctions at the UN Security Council and not driven by strategic geopolitical analysis and realignment. Hence, the fear is that countries like the United States and China may see the move as a strategic geopolitical shift, which carries a number of possible ramifications beyond the scope of this review.

In conclusion, it is important to reiterate that Russia's gesture to oppose sanctions against South Sudan in the UN Security is welcomed and appreciated, but any move to take this diplomatic overture to another level should be approached cautiously. Strategic geopolitical and ideological factors must be considered and the interests of the existing allies should be well-thought-out so as to ensure that the nascent state does not become a flashing point for proxy wars as witnessed in Syria, Ukraine, and many other countries.

About Sudd Institute

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

About the Author

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