

The United States Shouldn't Replicate Slip-ups in Sudan

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Brief Analysis

The international community was caught off-guard by the almost miraculous, peaceful, youth-driven revolution in Sudan, which successfully triggered the overthrow of a brutal dictator. A country so-often overlooked by the rest of the world suddenly dominated news outlets, took over social media, and grabbed the attention of governments around the world. Among these countries, the United States, on the judicial, executive and media level, was closely monitoring Sudan's situation. On the legislative side, the House of Representatives and the Senate passed resolutions and convened a three-hour open hearing on the situation in Sudan. Both the Secretaries of State and Treasury also issued statements putting pressure on the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and its members, warning it not to delay or impede negotiations and the formation of a new government. These measures, along with the appointment of U.S. special envoy to Sudan, Donald Booth, helped place international pressure on the TMC to take part in negotiations.

The United States' new interest in engaging with Sudan is commendable, but it must also be sustained. There is now a golden opportunity to build a new relationship with Sudan, but the United States must learn from its past lessons in the region and not lose sight of Sudan as it did other countries in the region, such as Syria and Libya. Proactive diplomacy and a clear political stance must be adopted by the administration, and sooner rather than later. The United States must act swiftly to declare its firm stance of support for the new change in Sudan and recognition of the civilian-led government, while also providing it with the help it needs to develop.

Moreover, the United States should maintain its current role, already having helped in the lead-up to the agreement between the TMC and FFC (Forces of Freedom and Change) on a civilian-led government; an agreement that reflected the desire and will of the Sudanese people to transform their country into a democratic state after three decades of brutal dictatorship. If the United States were to pull out now, the TMC would lack the necessary pressure needed to accomplish the implementation of the entire agreement.

In tandem, The U.S. Government should consider hosting the leaders of the FFC and the Sudanese Professionals Association (SFA) in Washington D.C. Hosting these groups would send a clear and strong message to the TMC that the United States continues to support a civilian-led government and the transition to democracy in Sudan.

Sudan's importance to the United States stems from its geostrategic advantage, along with its dual identity as both an African and Arab nation. Sudan lies at the crossroads of three geostrategic units: the Horn of Africa, North Africa,

and Sub-Saharan Africa. This location has also made it a major crossing route for Sub-Saharan migrants moving towards Libya and the Mediterranean in order to migrate illegally to Europe. Mixed in are human traffickers, drug dealers, arms smugglers, all while Sudan's border with Libya is under threat given Libya's ongoing civil war. ISIS and Al-Qaida forces are taking shelter in Libya, while African mercenaries from neighboring countries including Chad, Niger, and Mali are fueling the war within Libya. With the right support from the right country, the new Sudanese government could help Sudan to serve as a buffer to prevent Libya's armed conflict from spilling over.

Sudan is a natural barrier in deterring Salafi Islam from spreading into Sub-Saharan Africa, acting not only as a geographical buffer but a cultural one too. Its regional influence is large as not only are Sudanese song rhythms and music the lingua-franca for Africans from Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Yemen, Ethiopia and Djibouti, but Sudan also acts as a cultural bridge for North African Muslims, connecting North Africa to Mecca. This, tied in with the Sudanese people's strong embrace of Sufi Islam, makes it a valuable ally to any nation.

Sudan is also a highly progressive country in the African continent. The Sudanese, both inside the country and in the diaspora, not only revolted against Al Bashir's oppressive regime but also continually rejected its expansionist ideology and policies. They became aware and mindful of the urgent necessity to build a new Sudan based on the values of cooperation and mutual interests. The Sudanese people adopted a strong will to distance themselves from the dark era of Al Bashir's dictatorship as well as from political and diplomatic isolation.

The pressure placed by the House, the Senate, and both the Secretary of State and Treasury by blocking the transfer of the three billion U.S. dollars allocated by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates to the TMC was counterproductive. In order to gain Sudan as an ally, the United States should consider helping Sudan in its path towards democracy by offering financial incentives as well as other means of direct assistance, instead of blocking them.

The United States could also consider programs of capacity building and donating to financial funds to help civil society organizations, human rights awareness, and infrastructure grow. Both the education and health sectors, with universities suffering from book shortages and labs in need of development, would greatly benefit from such contributions. Any assistance, however, would be welcomed with open arms by the Sudanese people.

Moreover, U.S. investment could help mitigate the influence of Chinese investments in Sudan. The Al Bashir regime opened the door to China in the 1990s after U.S. sanctions began crippling the economy. They filled a huge gap in the oil and energy sector, helping to lift up Sudan's sluggish economy by purchasing one of its major resources. However, their relationship with Sudan was heavily one-sided and was often characterized by corruption.

China has a 40 percent share in all Sudanese oil projects, making it Sudan's largest economic partner. As a result, they have continually maintained support for Al Bashir's regime, even in the face of human rights violations. During the War in Darfur, China supplied Sudan and Sudanese armed militias with small arms, despite an arms embargo imposed by the UN. The Al Bashir regime has also been known to pursue secret deals with the Chinese in order to get Chinese drilling equipment. Such equipment has been used to explore the potentially oil-rich region of Sudan called Abeyi. However, these concealed deals were soon brought to the attention of the world by the Save Darfur Coalition, which stirred a strong advocacy protest across the world against China's role in supporting the regime in Sudan, damaging the relationship between the two countries.

It would, therefore, benefit the new Sudan not only to revise the previous oil contracts with China but to disavow them. Instead, Sudan should discuss new paths of partnerships with U.S. oil companies already in Sudan such as Chevron (given the fact that it was the first company to discover oil in Sudan and previously had ownership of the concession on the oil fields).

Sudan's wealth of natural resources could allow it to become a giant in cooperation and trade both within Africa and

the rest of the world. Not only are these resources key to European industry, but Sudan's agricultural resources are also highly desired by neighboring countries such as Libya, Egypt, and the Gulf States. With investment, Sudan's natural products could be transformed into processed products, which would substantially add to their value. Agriculture, minerals like gold, and processing of food such as meat, fruit and vegetables are all abundant across the country and act as potentially profitable areas for foreign investors. On top of this, these foreign investments would create a plethora of jobs for the Sudanese youth, which is a majority of the population.

The country could also benefit from international financial support to streamline integrated industrial chains, attract investors, revive the country's stagnant economy and open new markets and avenues of cooperation with other countries and partners. This would lead to the opening of new markets for Sudanese products and would inject cash flow into the economy of the country.

Sudan's accessibility to the Red Sea is also key both for trade and strategic security cooperation. Sudan's coasts border important countries in the Horn of Africa including Eretria, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, a region currently riddled with security issues. The war in Yemen, the influence of Iran, the presence of ISIS and Al-Qaida in the region all present threats to US interests. Moreover, Sudan's access to the strait of Aden and the vital passage of international trade and commerce through the strait of Hormuz, where tensions continue to grow between the United States and Iran, could provide key strategic points for the United States.

For all these reasons, the United States must shift and diversify its policies to proactively engage with Sudan. Sudan has the potential to become the backbone for U.S. influence in this volatile region as well as a valuable economic partner. Sudan's oil extraction and its mineral resources need sophisticated technology, new investors and new markets. The United States mustn't replicate its slip-up in Sudan as it did in Syria and Libya. ❖

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