The Coming Secession Crisis in Sudan:

Will There Be War?

Dec 21, 2010

Brief Analysis

On December 17, 2010, Andrew Natsios and Richard Williamson addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute discussing the ramifications of the upcoming Sudanese referendum. Mr. Natsios, a former U.S. special envoy to Sudan, is currently on the faculty of Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. Mr. Williamson, a senior fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, also served previously as a U.S. special envoy to Sudan. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Andrew Natsios

The two-part Sudanese Civil War -- a war lasting twenty-two years and resulting in two million deaths in southern Sudan -- concluded with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. The agreement came as a result of energetic George W. Bush administration diplomacy, much of it brokered personally by President Bush and Sudanese president Omar Hassan al-Bashir. The provisions of this agreement included southern autonomy for six years, to begin in 2005 and conclude on January 9, 2011, with a referendum on the secession of southern Sudan. With the vast majority of voters registered in the south, recent polling indicates that more than 90 percent will vote in favor of secession. Registration has gone smoothly -- much better than expected, and without any attempt by Khartoum to manipulate the process. The referendum will go forward, despite Khartoum's efforts to complicate ballot printing and raise questions about voter eligibility, because from this point, the conduct of the referendum is in the hands of the southern government. Come January 9, the south will vote to secede.

This referendum has given rise to a number of misconceptions. First is the notion that a single new state will be created. It is vitally important that the international community recognize that the vote will create two new states. The economic dynamics of the north will be profoundly affected, since the south -- rich in oil, gold, copper, water sources, and the most fertile soil in Africa -- has been the main provider of natural resources for decades. And apart from economic considerations, southern Sudan, already functionally autonomous for six years, will no longer figure in the north's political calculations, potentially exposing deep rifts within Khartoum's ruling elites.

Another misconception is that southern Sudan will be a failed state on the first day of independence. The reality says otherwise: in the past three years, Juba has been transformed into a well-functioning, bustling city, with more than six dozen hotels, paved streets, and a comprehensive water delivery system. Furthermore, Juba is increasingly able to push resources out to the provinces. There is a growing civil society and functioning private sector, and at the government's behest, the south has seen an influx of entrepreneurial Africans from neighboring countries such as Tanzania and Uganda to help drive the economy. These countries have a vested interest in seeing the south succeed, as they hope to secure a buffer between themselves and what they perceive to be an aggressive, Islamist north. And although there is concern that an autocratic trend exists in the southern Sudan, the parliament still allows for a functional opposition.

The final -- and critical -- misconception is that the north is growing stronger by the day. Khartoum, facing an impending secession crisis, is rife with division; indeed, it is much more likely that the north will dissolve than the south. The National Congress Party (NCP) is fighting for its survival in a number of regions, not just Darfur, which Bashir's government privately admits it will never control. In the Upper Nile, the NCP has lost not only the governorship but also control of additional territories on the periphery, including the Nuba Mountains.

Within northern Sudan, rebel forces have realigned with Juba and the military faces threats of a coup by Islamists hand-selected by Sudanese Islamist leader, Hassan al-Turabi. The northern army has been severely weakened by frequent purges intended to prevent a coup, limiting the north to only 4,000 troops in Khartoum. Moreover, with its recruiting areas no longer under solid control, Khartoum's ability to enlist new soldiers is limited, and its air force is manned by foreigners. The north, with fewer soldiers under arms than the south, is in no position to launch an invasion of the south. Furthermore, the return of at least 1.5 million of the 2.5 million southerners who had been internally displaced to the north deprives the north of the potential leverage from using such people as hostages.

To avoid serious miscalculations by Khartoum, Washington must act quickly and strategically to ensure the region's stability. First, the United States must immediately provide a security guarantee for the south. Not only would this serve as a deterrent to the north, but the perception of increased security in southern Sudan could help Juba provide the necessary concessions for a revenue-sharing deal with the north. Second, the United States should enter into a free trade agreement with southern Sudan, facilitating American investment in the south. Third, the Washington should establish an embassy in Juba, sending the message that the United States -- with security, economic, and diplomatic interests in the south -- is prepared to stay for a long time. And finally, the United States should expand efforts to increase southern Sudan's military power, both to reduce the risk of future war and to help stabilize the region.

Richard Williamson

The historic context of Sudan's difficulty with marginalization is important in understanding the dynamics of the present situation. A small group of Arab Muslims from the northern Nile were favored during the Ottoman Egyptian empire and again during the British Egyptian empire, contributing to the widespread dislike of the current government in Khartoum. The end of hostilities underscores the great achievement of the CPA, but like other such agreements it kicked many of the core issues down the road. As the endgame approaches, it is important to consider the lessons learned from the dealings of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the NCP in the past six years:

- The north has not made unity an attractive goal.
- The north has continued to engage in thuggish, brutal methods, using proxies such as Islamist militias.
- The south that was held together by John Darang, with his charisma and leadership, has succeeded largely through the leadership of President Salva Kiir Mayardit -- but this success may not be permanent.
- The north has been cavalier about breaking commitments, a pattern that is not likely to change.

The referendum, though ending one stage of the process, begins another. In order to muddy the situation diplomatically, the north will challenge the referendum on any number of grounds, such as its attempt to negotiate the definition of secession. Much of what the north does post referendum will include a strong element of theater designed to gain leverage. Although agreements must be struck on issues such as the border and oil revenue sharing, the tendency of the north, historically, has been not to say no, but to avoid saying yes. These tactics of debate, deliberate, delay, and, finally, deny will characterize the run-up to negotiations this spring and could ultimately prove dangerous. For the moment, however, troop movements along the disputed areas are unlikely to lead to full-scale war.

While recent press attention has centered on the stability of southern Sudan, the real threat, in fact, is potential disarray in the north. Not only can the north ill afford to lose 70 percent of its oil revenue to the south, the government's very existence is threatened by the region's growing radicalism. Should the government in the north dissolve, radical Islamists, who already have a significant presence in northern Sudan, could take over, creating a terrorist band extending from Somalia through Sudan and into Libya. Iran's close ties with Khartoum are also deeply problematic.

Because of the dangers associated with secession, the United States and the international community must do their utmost to ensure a minimally credible referendum process so that the results are seen to reflect the majority view. Pockets of violence will likely surround the vote, which the north will try to exploit as a claim to lack of legitimacy. Should such ploys gain a foothold, the north might be emboldened to probe the border to create "facts on the ground." Such border miscalculations could risk broader violence and even a return to war.

Sudan's neighbors and the international community are watching the upcoming referendum with apprehension. The states of East Africa and the Horn of Africa have their own interests, principally to see a stable south with a defensible border that creates a buffer from what could become an even more radical Islamist north. The Arab states fear such an extremist north as well as the possibility that the north will become a failed state with the resultant flow of refugees. Instability in Sudan could morph into regional instability that spills over into several neighboring countries. Egypt might be particularly hard hit: developments in the south could negatively impact the flow of the Nile, for instance, if more water is used for agriculture.

Although it will do its best to facilitate a relatively peaceful referendum and negotiations, the United States must demonstrate a credible threat of consequences. After considerable interaction with the northern Sudanese government, Washington knows that incentives are not enough to encourage cooperation. A U.S. security agreement with the south must be backed by credible measures in order to make it effective. A stronger south could mean less mischief with the north. But whether an equitable, workable equilibrium can be engineered between two countries with such a long relationship of deep mistrust is subject to question.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Lauren Emerson. ❖

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