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China's Response to Sudan's Political Transition

By *Laura Barber*



Sudanese demonstrators march during anti-government protests in Khartoum on April 22, 2019. (Photo by Bryan Denton/New York Times)

Contents

Introduction	3
China's Response to Change in Sudan	4
Prospects for Economic Engagement	11
China and External Actors	13
Implications for US Policy	17

Summary

- China's bilateral relationship with Sudan was once among its strongest in Africa, based largely on Beijing's pre-2011 economic interest in Sudanese oil.
- Beijing's public support for Sudan's transition to civilian governance in the aftermath of the coup that deposed longtime President Omar al-Bashir has been cautious, though mostly successful in ensuring continuity in its bilateral ties with Sudan.
- Attempts to balance its ties between Khartoum's rival external backers, however, have limited Beijing's ability to step in and encourage its various allies to act in the interests of stability or to play any meaningful role in bringing the conflicting parties together.
- In the long term, because China's commercial interests in Sudan align with its Belt and Road Initiative objective of boosting infrastructure links in the region, the need to protect its economic interests will increase accordingly—and has implications for its engagement with Red Sea regional powers and Russia vis-à-vis Sudan.
- The United States and China have a mutual interest in political and economic stability in Sudan. Both also have financial and political leverage that could be used to help prevent Sudan's transition from derailing.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines China's evolving political and commercial relationship with Sudan in the aftermath of the April 2019 coup that ousted longtime ally President Omar al-Bashir. Based on interviews with policy officials, diplomats, industry and security experts, and others, it incorporates an extensive review of scholarly and news sources. The research was supported by the China Program at the United States Institute of Peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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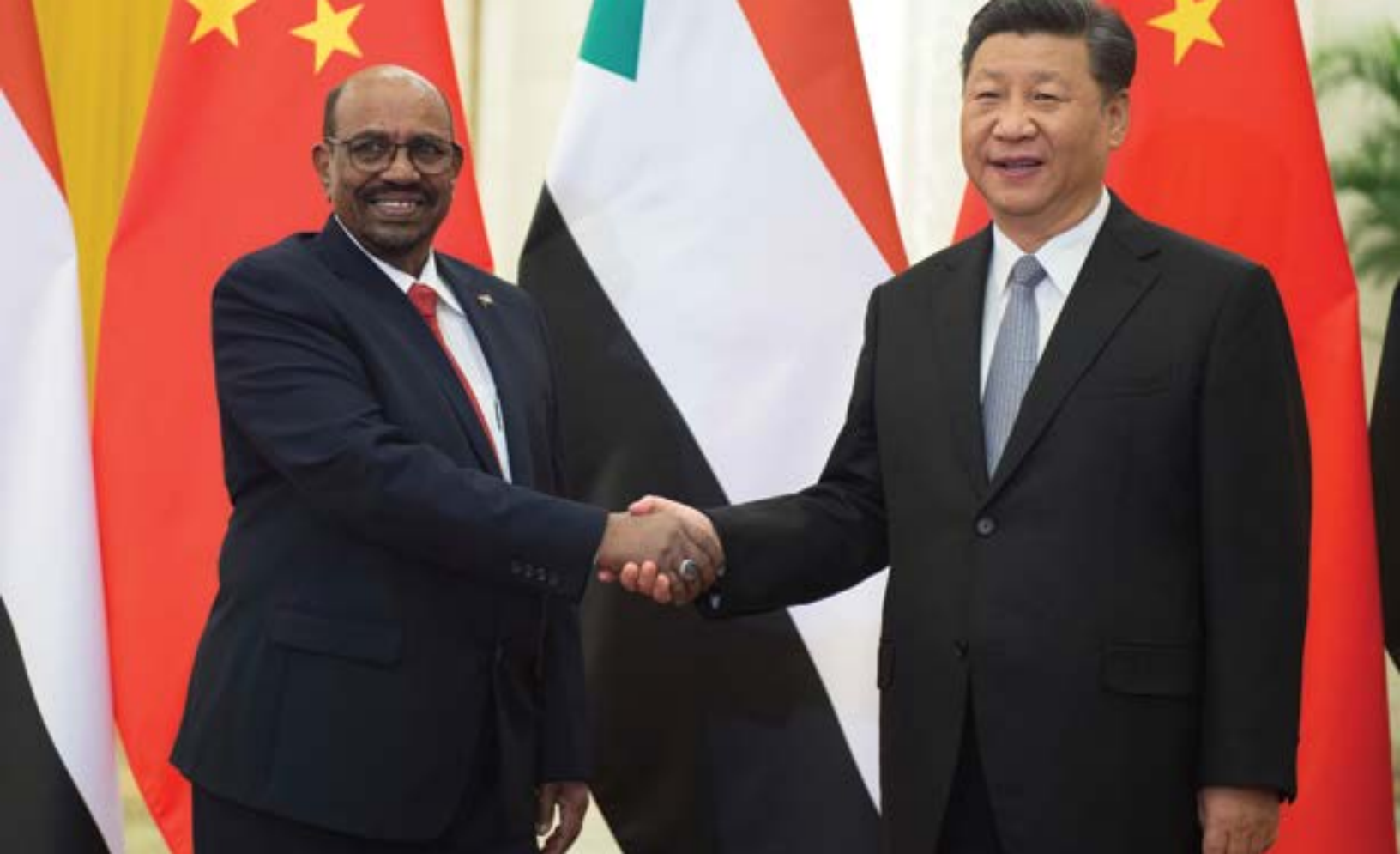
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Sudan's then President Omar al-Bashir and China's President Xi Jinping pose for photographers before their bilateral meeting at the 7th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation on September 2, 2018. (Photo by Nicolas Asfour/AP)

Introduction

In early September 2018, China hosted then Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in Beijing for the 7th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). At the event, President Xi Jinping offered China's unwavering political support in response to the International Criminal Court's arrest order against Bashir. "Foreign forces," Xi asserted, should not interfere in a country's internal affairs. This support, though, never unfolded. The popular protests that spread across Sudan just three months later eventually gave way to a military coup that removed Bashir, who had ruled Sudan for four decades, in April 2019. As the revolution unfolded, Beijing pointedly refrained from interfering with Bashir's removal or becoming directly involved in negotiations that ultimately led to an agreement between the generals and pro-democracy protesters. Previously, given its deep economic interests, China had engaged as various crises arose.

China's initial economic interests in Sudan date back to the 1950s, but took off in the 1990s when the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), Beijing's state-owned energy giant, participated in developing Sudan's nascent oil sector. This led, naturally enough, to a more consequential Chinese role in Sudan's political and security affairs. In 2007, before the 2008 Beijing Olympics and amid related reputational concerns and security threats to Chinese citizens and oil assets, Beijing used its influence in Khartoum to facilitate the deployment of a joint United Nations–African Union peacekeeping mission to Sudan's war-torn Darfur region.¹ In late 2013, Chinese diplomats again undertook conflict resolution efforts after the outbreak of civil war in

neighboring South Sudan.² Beijing's recent overtures of continuity in its ties with Sudan belie a significant shift in its engagement since 2011, when Sudan's southern states became the independent nation of South Sudan, taking 75 percent of the former country's oil reserves with it. As a result, China's economic interests in Sudan shifted from its energy resources to its potential as a participant in President Xi's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

At the FOCAC summit, China and Sudan signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to construct the Sudanese portion of a planned 3,200-kilometer (1,990-mile) railway link between Port Sudan and N'Djamena, the capital of Chad.³ The line is part of Beijing's ambitious long-term plans for an intercontinental trade route connecting the east and west coasts of Africa by a series of road and railway links. Sudan admittedly does not have the strategic significance of other regional BRI participants such as Djibouti, where China has established a military base and multipurpose port in keeping with its broader security interests in the Red Sea. Nonetheless, the Sudan–Chad line would be a vital link between its installations in Djibouti and Kenya on the east coast and trade routes from N'Djamena through West Africa to Dakar on the Atlantic coast.

China has carefully tried to avoid appearing to interfere with or take sides between the military and civilian opposition in ways that could undermine its relationship with Sudan's new leaders—or cause problems for future BRI deals. Although Chinese diplomats regularly assert Beijing's desire to foster stability in Sudan, China can also be seen as having been a free rider while other parties stepped in to help resolve Sudan's political crisis. In the long term, Beijing's need for stability in Sudan—and the consequent need to exert ever greater influence on regional geopolitics to consolidate its economic interests—will only increase. This could have implications for its engagement vis-à-vis Sudan with other regional powers and Russia, to the extent that these powers' overt backing of Sudan's military leaders runs counter to Beijing's desire for stability. Meanwhile, how Beijing chooses to exert its economic and political influence in Sudan in the future—particularly regarding the country's transition to full civilian rule—will largely determine the nature of US and Chinese interaction over Sudan in the years to come.

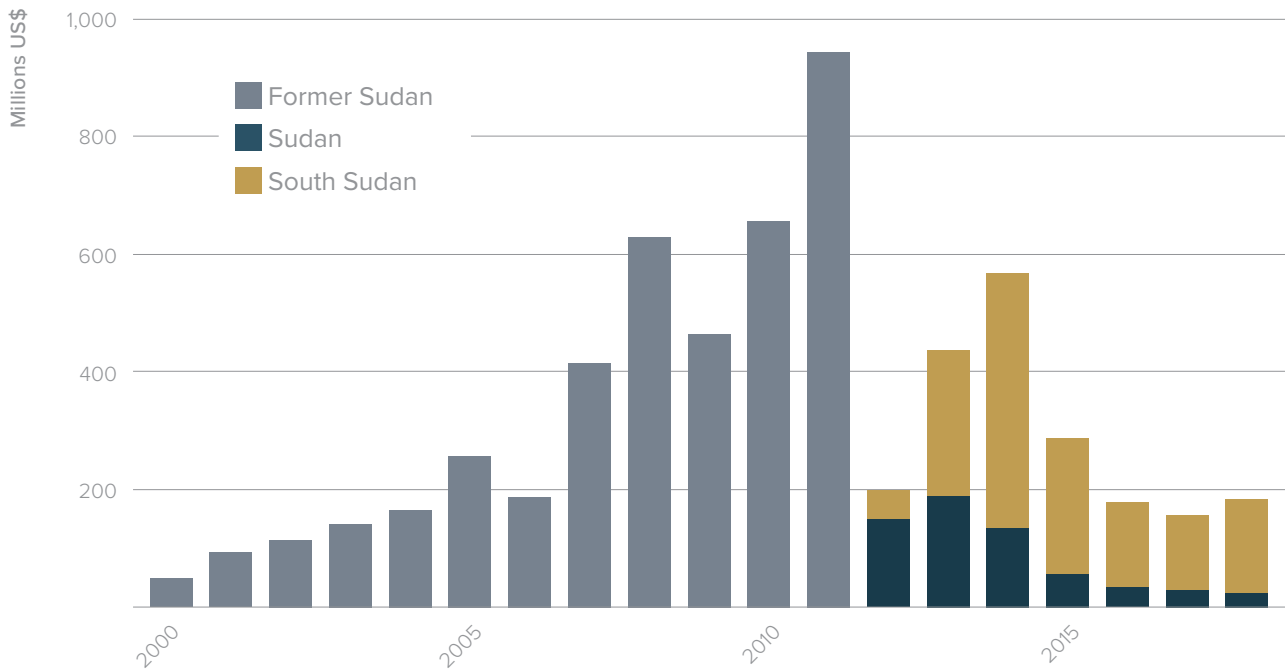
China's Response to Change in Sudan

Although Chinese economic interests did not appear to be directly affected by the wave of anti-government protests that spread across Sudan in December 2018 or the coup the following April, a cross-sector strike organized by the opposition alliance in late May resulted in a temporary disruption to operations at Khartoum International Airport and exports from Port Sudan, prompting concern among Chinese commercial actors. CNPC, however, said that the company's operations and China's oil imports had not been affected, reflecting the reduction in Chinese oil interests following the secession of southern Sudan.⁴

Sudan was China's seventh leading supplier of oil in 2011, but by 2018 it had fallen out of the top forty. Sudan and South Sudan together exported about 114,000 barrels per day of crude in 2018. Although higher than the 65,000 in 2012 during Juba's unilateral production shutdown, the figure is lower than the 182,000 in 2014. CNPC retains the largest stake (40 percent) in the leading consortia operating in both countries—the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company and the

Chinese Imports of Oil from Sudan and South Sudan

Following South Sudan’s secession from Sudan in July 2011, the value of Chinese oil imports fell by more than 80 percent from 2011 to 2012 and has decreased further in recent years.



Source: UN Comtrade Database, www.comtrade.un.org.

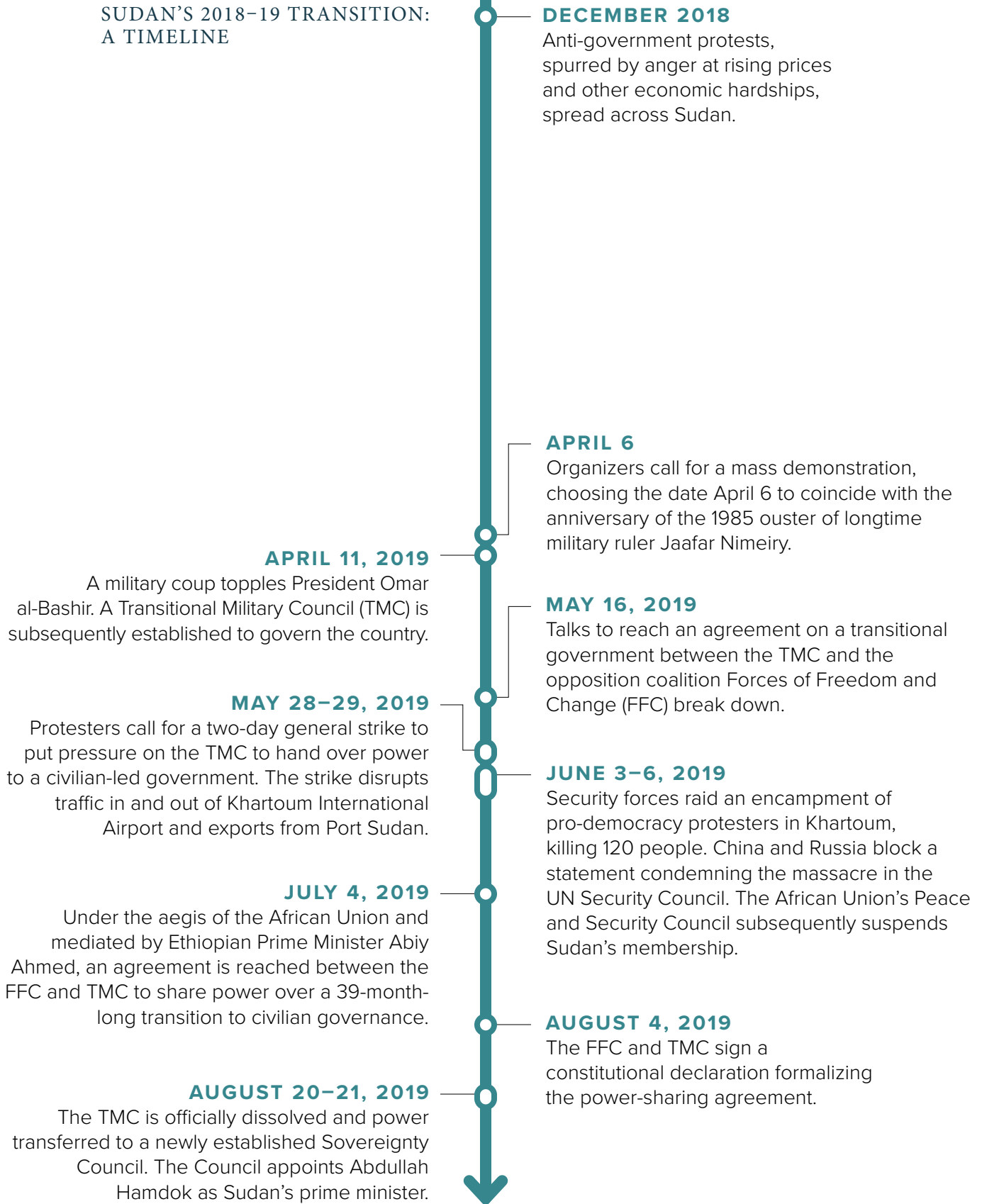
PetroDar Operating Company. However, because most of the oilfields are in the south, recent Chinese efforts to boost production have focused on deepening cooperation with South Sudan.⁵

China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs declined to comment publicly on the December 2018 protests. Local sources, however, confirm that during the rebellion China’s embassy in Khartoum actively assessed the situation on the ground and the potential impact of the instability on Chinese citizens and commercial interests in the construction, mining, and livestock sectors.

Chinese diplomats assert that Beijing has begun transforming its economic role in Sudan. With imports of Sudanese oil dropping off so precipitously after 2011, China fell behind the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the leading market for Sudan’s exports. In 2017, the UAE’s imports of Sudanese goods, at \$1.7 billion, nearly tripled the \$611 million of goods shipped to China. Yet in recent years China has increased and diversified its investments in cotton, livestock, and the country’s burgeoning gold mining sector (in which, by 2017, twenty Chinese mining companies had reported profits totaling at least \$100 million).⁶ Still, China’s investments in these sectors are tiny compared to the funding it provided to Sudan’s oil industry from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, when just a single company, CNPC, was responsible for \$10 billion of investment.

Despite its concerns about Sudanese stability, as pressure on al-Bashir continued to mount between January and April 2019, Chinese officials adopted a wait-and-see approach.

SUDAN'S 2018-19 TRANSITION: A TIMELINE



Although Sudan and Algeria had been unaffected by the 2011 Arab Spring, the wave of public uprisings across North Africa had reinforced the lesson within Beijing's foreign policy establishment that China cannot rely on the permanence of longtime autocratic rulers.

THE MILITARY COUP

According to interviews with Sudanese sources and Chinese commercial actors, China's economic interests were not directly affected by the wave of anti-government protests across Sudan or by the military coup four months later. The regime's response to the uprising exposed fissures within the security establishment, however. Despite Bashir's attempts to maintain his grip on power by forming a security committee of loyalists, key generals in that group would soon turn on him. In particular, General Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemeti), leader of the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group that originated in Darfur, emerged as a key power broker, backed by the influential Gulf States Saudi Arabia and the UAE and their regional ally Egypt. It was after Riyadh and Abu Dhabi gave their blessing that the generals moved on April 11 to oust the president.⁷

Chinese officials are not believed to have offered Bashir any support. Chinese scholars at the time compared Sudan's situation with the popular protests in Algeria that had just brought down President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was seen as having failed to address that country's economic challenges.⁸ Although Sudan and Algeria had been unaffected by the wave of public uprisings across North Africa in 2011, the so-called Arab Spring reinforced the lesson within Beijing's foreign policy establishment that China cannot rely on the permanence of longtime autocratic rulers. It also consolidated thinking that the priority of protecting China's long-term investments outweighs the potential costs of continued support for autocratic rulers if their remaining in power fuels protracted instability or triggers regime change that could threaten the longevity of those investments.

On April 12, a public announcement stated that the inspector general of the Sudanese Armed Forces, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, was to lead the junta, now formally called the Transitional Military Council (TMC). Beijing moved quickly to publicly extend rhetorical overtures of continuity, repeating its principle of noninterference and respect for state sovereignty that had underpinned China-Sudan relations for six decades.⁹ Behind the scenes, however, Beijing's diplomats were quick to establish ties with the TMC. It was apparently not lost on Beijing that the military maneuvering that had led to Bashir's ouster was part of a broader attempt by the generals, the Gulf States, and Egypt to eradicate Islamist elements that had long dominated the ruling National Congress Party (NCP). In its purge of Islamists left over from the old regime, the junta arrested prominent members of the NCP, including Awad al-Jaz, a key Bashir aide and oil minister who had been China's key interlocutor. Informed sources state that Beijing subsequently severed its ties with the NCP and that Ambassador Li Lianhe met privately with al-Burhan and his deputy Hemeti to extend China's "congratulations" to the TMC leadership.

When the National Islamic Front, the NCP's predecessor, took power in Sudan in June 1989, Beijing began cultivating military ties that served both its business objectives and the strategic aims of a regime facing a protracted period of international isolation. In the 1990s, Chinese actors began exporting arms and helped develop Sudan's arms manufacturing industry. Despite the depth of Beijing's ties with the Islamist-dominated regime and military-industrial complex, however, the security establishment does not consider the relationship with Beijing to be tied

to the NCP. Local sources suggest that the Sudanese Armed Forces see China as a pragmatic and commercially focused actor that has no ideological affinity with the Islamists, implying that China will continue to be a reliable partner. This supposition is bolstered by the fact that al-Burhan, while not especially well-known among the Sudanese public, once served as Khartoum's defense attaché to Beijing and so is known to China.

Sino-Sudanese military cooperation in arms exports and training is also expected to continue, and Chinese companies will most certainly want to retain their major contracts in the mining and energy sectors. Several sources asserted in interviews that, given the growing influence and dominance of the Rapid Support Forces within the military establishment, Hemeti can be expected to emerge as a key interlocutor for Beijing. Indeed, despite serving as al-Burhan's deputy, he is widely considered the true power holder in Sudan today.¹⁰

China's immediate interest in seamless continuity in bilateral ties partly explains its decision on June 5, 2019, to block the UN Security Council from passing a statement condemning the brutal killing of 120 civilian protesters by security forces in Khartoum two days earlier. Chinese diplomats asserted that China hopes Sudan "can maintain stability and smoothly carry out the political transition," but believes that the international community "should . . . adhere to the principle of non-interference in others' domestic affairs."¹¹

China's opposition to the statement came as a surprise in Western diplomatic circles, where Beijing and Moscow were perceived to be providing cover for Hemeti's brutal paramilitary forces. Some, though, asserted in interviews that, given China's wider strategic interests, the stance was not unexpected. Indeed, Beijing would have been motivated to oppose the West's position in the Security Council amid persistently vocal criticism by Washington of China's human rights record.

MILITARY-CIVILIAN NEGOTIATIONS

Meanwhile, the June crackdown galvanized regional and international attention on pushing the TMC to reach a binding agreement on a transitional government with the opposition coalition Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) after talks had broken down on May 16. As public pressure on General al-Burhan to hand power over to civilians had continued to mount in late April, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson announced that Beijing welcomed the talks in the interests of stability and development. This message was reiterated when Beijing then dispatched Special Envoy for African Affairs Xu Jinghu to Khartoum in early May to meet with both al-Burhan and Hemeti.¹² However, it was Hemeti's key external backers in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi who—reportedly pressured by US Special Envoy for Sudan Donald Booth—brought the generals back to the negotiating table. According to multiple interviewees, when the talks resumed in July under the aegis of the African Union (AU) and spearheaded by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, China's envoy did not play a role.

This abstention stands in sharp contrast with the engaged role China's envoys played in the context of the Darfur conflict in 2007 and the civil war in South Sudan. From 2014 until the signing of a peace deal in 2015, China played a direct mediation role between the warring parties in South Sudan's civil war, working jointly with the AU and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development.¹³ Its special envoy also engaged formally with the United Kingdom, the United States, and Norway by attending meetings on the sidelines of the talks.¹⁴

MAP OF SUDAN

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski and Mmoloko Vector/Shutterstock.

Local sources in Khartoum believe that China's absence from the July talks in Addis Ababa reflects the overall decline in Sudan's importance to Beijing after South Sudan's secession in 2011 and the massive "shift" in oil assets to the south. A former Chinese envoy for African affairs confirmed that China does indeed have a "unique set of interests" in South Sudan that have motivated a more engaged role

there. He cited the growing threat of rebel attacks against oil infrastructure that was set to trigger the evacuation of Chinese oil workers and the total shutdown of oil production, which remained the country's only economic lifeline. As South Sudan's single largest investor in the sector, Beijing perceived it had "no choice" but to actively help secure the 2015 peace deal.

The absence of a direct impact on China's commercial interests on the ground in Sudan certainly explains Beijing's lack of a substantive role, particularly given that other players with deeply vested political interests—the UAE and Saudi Arabia in particular—were already putting pressure on the TMC to reach a deal with the opposition. Yet it can also be said that China's preference is to support mediation efforts between states or between established governments and warring parties, and Chinese actors assert that they do not have the domestic experience to advise on the formation of civilian governments. Beijing was apparently reluctant to gain such experience in Sudan, underlining concerns that potential local perceptions of Chinese interference at this stage could undermine its future relations with the new government, and particularly its ability to push forward on planned BRI projects. At the same time, this demonstrates a level of confidence in Beijing that it has the economic clout to win over whichever side would come out on top in the negotiations.

TRANSITION AND CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT

In a similar vein, China refrained from direct public engagement with the civilian opposition until after the constitutional declaration between the FFC and the TMC was signed and ratified in August 2019. The deal laid out a road map for a transition to elections at the end of a thirty-nine-month period of reforms to be carried out by a civilian-dominated cabinet and legislature. An eleven-member Sovereignty Council was formed to oversee the transition, which al-Burhan is heading (with his deputy Hemeti) for the first twenty-one months. Beijing's diplomats quickly adapted to the political changes in Khartoum ushered in with the swearing in of Abdalla Hamdok, a civilian, as Sudan's





Abdalla Hamdok, prime minister of Sudan, addresses the United Nations General Assembly in New York City on September 27, 2019.
(Photo by Brittainy Newman/New York Times)

prime minister on August 21. A former World Bank economist, Hamdok was likely considered in Beijing to be a safe pair of hands to oversee plans to bring about much-needed economic stability in Sudan. On September 24, Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Hamdok on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. Wang reiterated China's position that stability was the "overriding priority" in Sudan and that Beijing welcomed the deal as a positive step in that direction.¹⁵ Sudanese sources affirmed in interviews that, in the wake of Hamdok's appointment, both embassy diplomats and Chinese company representatives in Khartoum began to engage with the individual parties that make up the FFC to discuss the civilian government's economic development priorities.

Despite its parallel ties with Sudan's transitional military leadership, China is likely confident that its economic clout will help secure future development cooperation with the civilian administration. Further, China will look to develop its influence and soft power by continuing its public diplomacy efforts across the country. It will be needed. Across civil society, vocal criticism about China's role remains, particularly allegations of corruption and the environmental practices of Chinese companies. Nonetheless, a consensus appears to be forming among FFC policymakers that Beijing will remain a partner, particularly given Washington's 1993 designation of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism and consequent restrictions on US government funding.

Prospects for Economic Engagement

Sudan's new leadership faces serious economic challenges after decades of mismanagement and Western sanctions: debt close to \$60 billion and arrears to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Paris Club creditors to the tune of \$2.6 billion. Khartoum, interviewees indicate, believes that only when the United States removes Sudan from the state sponsors of terrorism list—a designation that has left Sudan isolated from most of the international financial system since it was placed on the list in 1993—can the country begin to recover. Finance Minister Ibrahim Elbadawi stated in November 2019 that Sudan needed \$5 billion in budget support to avert economic collapse—a situation that will likely become even more perilous as Sudan deals with the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

Khartoum has already begun receiving emergency budget support from Gulf States and hopes that some of its Paris Club creditors will follow suit. Beijing, however, has not yet extended any short-term assistance to the new government. It has invested more than \$20 billion in Sudan, mostly in the oil sector, over the past two decades, and as of late 2018 its total debt to China was estimated at \$10 billion. At the 2018 FOCAC summit, China agreed to write off a large portion of the debt Sudan had incurred through 2015. Reports suggest, however, that Sudan still owes China more than \$2 billion and has failed to honor an agreement that delayed repayments for five years.¹⁶ The Bashir government had hoped to obtain sizable loans and aid from China on the sidelines of the summit, but it came away with only a pledge for a \$58 million grant and a \$30 million interest-free loan.

As long as Sudan's Gulf allies are willing to plug Sudan's budgetary gaps, Beijing appears reluctant to step in with emergency support. China's ambassador in Khartoum, however, has publicly stated that Beijing "endorses" Sudan's removal from Washington's state sponsors of terrorism list, even though such a move might lead to Chinese firms facing more competition by signaling to foreign investors that Sudan is open for business.¹⁷ Beijing appears willing support the fiscal reforms that would accompany this change on the grounds that greater macroeconomic stability in Sudan would better enable the government to service its debt and subsequently expand cooperation related to BRI development.

China's contribution to medium- to long-term economic recovery efforts in Sudan are likely to focus on projects that Beijing perceives to be genuinely win-win for China, too, in particular the Port Sudan–N'Djamena railway project. Several FFC sources have said in interviews that they expect China to play an expanded role in infrastructure development in the country in line with the new government's intention to boost industrialization and exports of finished goods. In his recent meeting with China's foreign minister, Prime Minister Hamdok expressed the government's intention of becoming a BRI participant, and informed sources assert that the MOU for the railway project, entered into by the Bashir regime, is expected to be upheld.

That said, key issues that could prevent or at least slow the project remain. Indeed, since initial work by Chinese companies to improve sections of the Port Sudan–Khartoum portion of Sudan's rail network in the late 2000s, progress has been modest, in part because available funding declined significantly after 2011 but also because the plan was overly ambitious. Although at the 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing momentum seemed to have gathered on the Chinese side to fund the project, a deal to provide financing still needs to be hammered out with Khartoum. Senior FFC



A derelict train sits at Sudan Railway's maintenance complex in Khartoum in 2013. Infrastructure development—including new railways—is an area in which Sudan's government hopes China will play an expanded role. (Photo by Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah/Reuters)

sources have said the government's intent is to ensure that contract terms for new infrastructure loans are manageable and sustainable. However, concerns remain that Sudan's experience could replicate Kenya's Nairobi–Mombasa railway project, once a flagship for China's BRI plans, which has been plagued by issues relating to debt sustainability, mismanagement, and corruption.

Meanwhile, efforts to expand the rail network could be hampered by broader regional political tensions and insecurity. In 2014, the Bashir government reached a political agreement with Chad for the railway to link Khartoum and N'Djamena with Port Sudan, but tensions between the FFC and Chad's President Idriss Déby could put that deal in jeopardy. Separately, in March 2012, Chad reached an agreement with the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation to build the Chad portion of the rail line from N'Djamena to the Sudanese border, but rebel activities in eastern Chad have prevented the project from progressing.

Hemeti, the deputy head of the TMC, is likely to emerge as a key interlocutor for Beijing as it pushes forward on the project. The former camel trader is widely known as the primary gatekeeper in Sudan's strategic economic sectors, such as gold mining and infrastructure. In his home region of Darfur, he maintains various business interests, including the company al-Junaïd for Roads and Bridges, which holds contracts to build at least three highways in Darfur.¹⁸

Hemeti's Arab tribe straddles the border between Sudan and Chad, and he has used his ancestry to cultivate strong links to circles of power in N'Djamena and influence in eastern Chad.

Potentially deepening links between Chinese actors and Hemeti's interests in the region raise the specter of Beijing being drawn back into the conflict in Darfur, where Sudan's government backed a forced displacement strategy in peripheral oil concessions areas in the 1990s that has, since 2014, been replicated in Darfurian mining regions. On the one hand, China's diplomats and businesses likely broadly support reform efforts to the extent that they improve the investment climate in Sudan, which Chinese firms have increasingly found challenging. On the other hand, a wide-ranging anticorruption drive targeting Bashir's former inner circle would prompt concern in China should it implicate Chinese firms. Given that Hemeti's control over Sudan's economy appears to have strengthened since the transition agreement, and that Chinese ties with Sudan's central power broker will grow as a result, concerns will likely remain that Beijing may support any future efforts by Hemeti to block the government's anticorruption and political reform programs in a bid to protect China's interests.

China and External Actors

Both Sudan's coup and transition to civilian government and the evolution of China's interests need to be seen in the context of other major players in Sudan and the region—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Russia, and the AU—and their interests.

GULF STATES

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have emerged as significant external actors in Sudan, motivated primarily by their core interest in blocking the influence of Qatar and Turkey. Saudi Arabia has also been driven by its interest in continued Sudanese contributions (including fighters from both the Sudanese Armed Forces and Hemeti's Rapid Support Forces) to its campaign against the Houthi rebellion in neighboring Yemen. Meanwhile, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan of the UAE had long loathed Bashir's ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which he sees as the principle threat to the region. His policy in Sudan is also informed by a wider interest in consolidating the UAE's expanding influence in the Horn of Africa—an effort that includes the operation of naval and air bases outside Eritrea's port of Assab on the Red Sea. Local sources have stated that the UAE was the most influential voice in driving Gulf support for the generals who overthrew Bashir.

Since the coup, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sought to sustain their relationships with the TMC, offering to provide \$3 billion in assistance within just days of the coup. Both states remain concerned about keeping the TMC within their orbits and including the FFC, especially following Hamdok's recent visit to Doha. Indeed, FFC members say that the UAE came on board with the AU's proposed power-sharing deal after the FFC warned Abu Dhabi's envoy that the opposition planned to seek Qatari support in the negotiations. Members of the civilian government confirmed in interviews that they intend, as part of a broader foreign policy position of neutrality, to accept financial support from all potential partners. Concerns remain, however, that a significant move by Qatar or Turkey to regain a foothold in Khartoum would increase the likelihood that the TMC would break its agreement with the FFC at the behest of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

In line with China's narrative that its involvement in the region does not advance its geopolitical goals, "Beijing is careful to avoid replicating what it sees as Western intervention and puts forward a narrative of neutral engagement with all BRI countries—including those that are at odds with each other."

Beijing's interests in the region do not necessarily align with those of either Riyadh or Abu Dhabi. The Saudi campaign of airstrikes in Yemen has increased instability in a state China is keen on bringing into the BRI. At the same time, Houthi attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure directly threaten the stability of China's oil supplies from the Kingdom. Moreover, Saudi and UAE support for the TMC before the August 2019 power-sharing deal contributed to rising instability in Sudan, which also ran counter to China's state

interests. Furthermore, China and the UAE have conflicting interests throughout the Horn that are not easily reconcilable: Beijing's growing economic and security interests in Somalia and Djibouti mean that it has a strong interest in not seeing the region destabilize, yet Abu Dhabi's hostility to the Somali central authorities and its militarization in the region present a potential source of tension.

Despite all these competing interests, China has refrained from becoming involved in Sudan's political transition. It also did not pressure Saudi Arabia or the UAE to back the AU's power-sharing proposal in June. It refrained largely in deference to broader geopolitical objectives in the Red Sea—not wanting to offend Saudi Arabia, its largest source of oil and primary strategic partner in the region, by appearing to overtly question Riyadh's strategic goals (including the deployment of Sudanese troops in Yemen) on the one hand, and not wanting to risk jeopardizing its growing economic relationships with Qatar and Turkey by appearing to overtly support Saudi objectives on the other. This approach broadly fits within Beijing's Middle East policy and its close alignment with the objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative, which straddles both sides of the long-term rift between the Saudi-led bloc of Gulf Cooperation Council states and Qatar over Doha's alignment with Iran. In line with China's narrative that its involvement in the region does not advance its geopolitical goals, "Beijing is careful to avoid replicating what it sees as Western intervention and puts forward a narrative of neutral engagement with all BRI countries—including those that are at odds with each other."¹⁹

China is likely to find that such neutrality will be difficult to sustain, particularly as the BRI draws it deeper into the economic and political dynamics of participant states. At the end of the day, however, most Gulf Cooperation Council states, to the degree they are intent on securing Chinese investment, will likely be receptive to Chinese concerns about stability in the Horn. China's potentially expanding economic presence in Sudan could in fact see Beijing use its influence to encourage the Gulf States to act in the interest of stability should Sudan's power-sharing deal collapse.

RUSSIA

Africa returned to prominence in Moscow's foreign policy in the wake of Western sanctions for Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. Posturing as a global power and looking for new markets and spheres of influence, the Kremlin has sought to leverage military connections to garner influence across the continent. Recently leaked documents show the extent of the mission—led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close business ally of President Vladimir Putin—to force the United States and former colonial powers from the region and to prevent "pro-Western" uprisings.²⁰

Sudan was identified as a key country in which to pursue these objectives. To this end, the Kremlin brokered deals with the Bashir regime for military training and arms sales in exchange for

mining concessions. The leaked documents reveal how, to prop up Bashir before his fall, Prigozhin offered the ruler an elaborate disinformation campaign strategy to smear the protesters as “anti-Islam,” “pro-Israel,” and “pro-LGBT.” Although they were not fully implemented, the recommendations “inspired the Sudanese police to arrest students in the Darfur region for inciting a civil war.”²¹

After the coup, Moscow attempted to throw its weight behind the TMC. As the protests continued to intensify, senior Russian policymakers attempted to delegitimize the opposition. Numerous geopolitical imperatives drove the Kremlin to support the TMC. Especially significant, though, were Russia’s defense contracts with the Sudanese government and mooted plans to construct a Red Sea naval base, which had reportedly not been discussed since January—three months before the coup—because of Sudan’s persistent instability.

According to Sudanese sources, China-Russia coordination over Sudan has primarily taken place at the UN Security Council. The geopolitical rapprochement of Russia and China that has boosted their cooperation in the Security Council has taken place amid heightened perceptions that Western powers are aggressively seeking to contain their rise. Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov defended Moscow’s decision (along with Beijing’s) to block the Western-proposed statement condemning the June 3 crackdown in Khartoum on the grounds that Moscow opposed “foreign intervention” in Sudan. Beijing, however, took a comparatively cautious approach in not overtly backing the TMC even as Russian diplomats and state-media outlets defended it over the crackdown and backed its plans to hold elections later this year. Russia is more closely aligned with the UAE and Saudi Arabia in this respect.

Indeed, broader geopolitical alignment between Moscow and Beijing creates the impression that they have a coherent joint strategy in Africa. Yet beyond reports of Sino-Russian naval exercises with Egypt and South Africa over the past two years, evidence of direct cooperation is limited.²² Meanwhile, in discounting domestic political changes and rushing to back incumbents, Russia is making costly mistakes in Africa that China has learned to avoid since the Arab Spring.²³ As a result, Moscow finds itself in the position of needing to repair its relations with the civilian government in Khartoum.

The TMC has agreed to uphold Russia’s substantial contracts in Sudan’s defense, mining, and energy sectors, but General al-Burhan has publicly affirmed that Sudan will not accept any permanent foreign military presence, meaning that Russia’s prospects for a Red Sea base now seem unlikely.²⁴ Nonetheless, defense ties are expected to remain strong. Possible Kremlin attempts to help the Sudanese military circumvent the political transition by directly interfering in the elections could rub against China’s interests to the extent that it triggers instability.

China’s public support for elections would be premised on a calculation that the success of the transitional government is the best option for continued stability and not a sign of growing affinity with Western democratic norms. However, its support could also run counter Russian perceptions that Moscow and Beijing present a united front against Western efforts to “interfere” in Sudan by spreading liberalism. Despite potential frictions between China and Russia, the countries’ relationship remains fundamentally asymmetrical, with Moscow increasingly reliant on China’s economy. Beijing may thus be one of the few actors with enough influence to dissuade Russia from directly undermining stability in Sudan.



The Transitional Military Council's Muhammad Hamdan Dagaglo (right) shakes hands with Ahmad al-Rabiah of the Forces of Freedom and Change on August 4, 2019, as they exchange signed copies of the constitutional declaration agreeing to share power. (Photo by Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah/Reuters)

AFRICAN UNION

China's traditional perspective on the resolution of African conflicts has been that external intervention cannot fundamentally resolve Africa's security problems. Beijing has therefore preferred "African solutions to African problems" and tended to "support a regional local consensus in response to crisis in an African state."²⁵

The AU's response to the Khartoum massacre exposed the emergence in recent years of two competing blocs within the regional body. One—Egypt, Eritrea, and Chad—unsuccessfully lobbied on Sudan's behalf to block the Peace and Security Council's June 6 decision to suspend its membership. It was reportedly the steadfast support of a second bloc—Ethiopia, South Africa, and Nigeria—that allowed the measure to suspend Sudan to pass.

The relaunch of talks in July to form a transition government was marred by confusion over who was taking the lead and the nature of the deal. The AU Commission's Chadian chair, Moussa Faki, offered his envoy, the Mauritanian diplomat Mohamed el-Hassan Lebatt, to lead the talks. According to FFC members, however, a role for Lebatt was ultimately rejected. Lebatt was reportedly proposing an Egyptian-sponsored deal that FFC members saw as enabling the generals

to remain in power indefinitely. In the end, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his envoy Mahmoud Dirir took the lead, and a declaration was eventually signed and ratified in August.

China's lack of public support for the AU's mediation process likely reflected a desire to maintain good relations with both Ethiopia and Egypt. Each is strategically important to China, for two reasons. First is influence on the continent: Addis Ababa, where the AU is headquartered, has become an intercontinental diplomatic hub, and Egypt is a major regional security provider and major ally of the Saudi-UAE axis. Second, Egypt is a key BRI participant in North Africa, while Ethiopia became a major recipient in East Africa with the opening of the Addis–Djibouti railway, which connected the landlocked country to the maritime trade routes of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

Scope remains for China, despite its absence from the mediation process, to engage again in regional efforts to help stabilize Sudan and the region. Chinese diplomats have already offered to help mediate between Eritrea and Djibouti, where Beijing has substantial interests, and will likely support efforts to mitigate conflicts in Darfur and South Sudan. Indeed, while Sudan's AU negotiations were taking place, Beijing publicly urged the warring parties in Darfur to end hostilities through political dialogue.²⁶ One senior AU official said in an interview that the focus of Chinese diplomats at the time was on the status of South Sudan's fledgling peace deal.

Beijing remains committed to stability in South Sudan because CNPC's oil assets and planned infrastructure projects are otherwise at risk. Indeed, following Juba's 2018 peace deal with the country's rebel opposition, Beijing began focusing on South Sudan as a potential BRI participant, and in April 2019 the countries struck a deal to increase oil exports to China to fund the construction of major highway projects.²⁷ Because South Sudan is a landlocked nation, much of its oil still has to be pumped via pipelines across Sudan to reach export markets; thus, Beijing understands that stable bilateral ties between Sudan and South Sudan will be a critical factor in protecting China's interests.²⁸ Sudan's continued role in supporting Juba's fledgling peace deal will therefore be crucial. FFC members say Beijing has already reached out to again offer to assist Khartoum with potential future mediation efforts.

Implications for US Policy

Sudan's uprising and political transition has unfolded as trade tensions have increased between China and the United States. Perceptions of strategic competition have come to dominate official US policy in Africa—a point drawn out by then National Security Advisor John Bolton, who, in a December 2018 speech at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC, observed that “great power competitors, namely, China and Russia, are rapidly expanding their financial and political influence across Africa.”²⁹

As some suggest, in putting Beijing and Moscow together “on the same side of the barricades,” Washington risks pushing them together in Africa.³⁰ Yet, as detailed above, Chinese and Russian responses to political change in Sudan have in fact differed, with Moscow's destabilizing disinformation campaigns potentially undermining Beijing's overriding interest in stability. It has been argued that the Kremlin benefits when its presence in Africa is framed as a restoration of

The United States and China have a mutual interest in Sudan's economic recovery and long-term macroeconomic stability. They also have enough leverage to deploy to encourage Khartoum's economic reform efforts to stay on track.

its status as a global superpower, and that the West should instead focus on the potential threats, such as election interference, a reassertive Russia might pose in Africa.³¹

In Khartoum, sources within the FFC have said that they see future Chinese and US engagement in Sudan as primarily competitive, particularly given that Hamdok's government intends to establish closer ties with the United States with an eye to both debt relief and having its designation

as a state sponsor of terrorism lifted (although a US official said in August that Washington would test the commitment of Sudan's new transitional government to human rights, freedom of speech, and humanitarian access before it agrees to rescind the designation).

That said, although strategic competition will likely continue to characterize US and Chinese policy with regard to Sudan, a convergence of Chinese and American interests in the country could also open space for cooperation—or at least an informal division of labor—in three key areas.

First, the United States and China have a mutual interest in Sudan's economic recovery and long-term macroeconomic stability. They also have enough leverage to deploy to encourage Khartoum's economic reform efforts to stay on track. Although Sudan's removal from the state sponsor of terrorism list could introduce perceptions of commercial competition, China will continue to encourage delisting because it will likely lead to fiscal reforms and historic debt relief, which will in turn enable Khartoum to manage its arrears and become a BRI participant. A significant driver of the protests that forced Bashir out was the perilous state of the economy. If the transitional government fails to seize the opportunity and build the domestic support to address its economic challenges, the country risks being dragged into protracted social instability.

Washington is in a unique position to encourage Khartoum to successfully implement IMF and World Bank conditions that would also eventually lead to debt relief. Meanwhile, Beijing could insist on demonstrated improvements to macroeconomic stability as a condition for financial assistance or loans for infrastructure development. South Sudan is a precedent. In 2012, using what has been referred to in China as "soft hard power," the country's Export-Import Bank placed conditions on potential economic assistance to encourage improvements to economic stability and security.³²

To coordinate economic support for Sudan's recovery and development, the United States could invite Beijing's diplomats to participate in the Friends of Sudan, which currently includes all major partners (African powers, Western donors, and Gulf States) except China. A conference of major donors could also be an opportunity for China to contribute funds for humanitarian assistance efforts so badly needed for Sudan's peripheral regions. Washington could also concurrently support the transitional government in its capacity to negotiate economic reconstruction deals—including BRI infrastructure projects—to ensure that they are in line with the national strategic goals of Sudan's Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning to develop local industry and boost employment.

Second, given the mutual US and Chinese interest in addressing Sudan's myriad security challenges, a potential area for coordination is helping end Sudan's internal wars. Not only does the country face a rare opportunity to end its internal cycles of conflict, doing so is a

constitutional imperative. The military-civilian power-sharing declaration signed in August 2019 required that transitional authorities prioritize the pursuit of a “just and comprehensive peace” within the first six months of the transition.³³ Furthermore, on October 31, 2019, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution to extend the mandate for the joint UN-AU peacekeeping mission for a year, calling on the government and armed groups to strive for peace to enable an eventual exit of peacekeeping troops from Sudan.

Beijing has already sought to publicly encourage Darfur’s rebels to return to the negotiating table, and it is likely to play an increasing role—potentially by providing technical or financial support—in talks between Khartoum and the rebels, which restarted in Juba in December 2019. Likewise, as UN discussions on the drawdown of peacekeeping troops continue and increasingly focus on the establishment of an international police presence and special political mission in Darfur, the United States should encourage China to contribute to these longer-term, multilateral efforts. Beijing would likely be inclined to contribute both personnel and advisers.

Today, Beijing has 2,500 military and police personnel deployed to overseas missions—the most of any of the five UN Security Council members—which it views as a low-risk, nonconfrontational way to test its crisis-management capabilities and train its troops. Yin He, a professor at China’s Peacekeeping Police Training Center, has asserted that the country’s desire to be perceived as a rising power will never allow it to be “satisfied at being regarded as merely a personnel and budget contributor.” The country, he argues, should look at ways to improve its representation in the UN peacekeeping regime “so that more Chinese experts can participate in advising, designing, and running operations.”³⁴ That said, the welcoming of Chinese contributions should be balanced with prompts by Sudan’s other external partners that any participation should consistently prioritize the broader long-term need for stability in the region over narrower commercial objectives.

It has been said that dealing with Darfur’s splintered factions will require a special effort, not least because of the rise of Hemeti, whose Rapid Support Forces now control most of the region and is loathed by many Darfuris. To this end, Hemeti has simultaneously attempted to distance himself from the political elite in Khartoum while also portraying himself as the key actor who can end Sudan’s communal conflicts. Beijing should be encouraged to use its leverage of potential investment to help ensure that Hemeti’s efforts genuinely benefit regional stability.

Finally, concerns remain in Washington and Beijing about political stability in Sudan, and each retains influence that could be used to apply pressure on both Khartoum and external stakeholders to help ensure that the political transition does not stall. The FFC and Western diplomats in particular are concerned about the generals’ willingness to allow for elections and a full handover of decision-making power to civilian authorities. Meanwhile, given the deeply vested interests of regional states, any seemingly unbalanced neutrality on the part of the civilian government—such as deepened engagement with Turkey or Qatar—would risk another coup by the generals, again at the behest of their Gulf allies.

In the lead-up to the revitalized talks in July 2019, the United States was slow to offer political support to the negotiation process. China entirely declined to do so. In this absence, the states in the Gulf saw an opportunity to step in and exert their influence. However, Washington eventually sought to use its leverage to encourage Riyadh to get the generals back to the negotiating

table. It could use these channels to apply pressure again should the generals scupper the transition. Meanwhile, Beijing could quietly pressure Riyadh to pressure the generals to act in the interest of stability.

The United States has also since gotten behind the FFC and the civilian government. It is in a unique position to use its leverage by removing Sudan from the state sponsors of terrorism list, which would help ensure that the power-sharing deal and broader political reforms in Khartoum are implemented. Beijing's approach of appearing to balance its ties between the military leadership in the Sovereignty Council and the civilian-led government will be difficult to maintain given its increasing investment in Hemeti's dominance. On the other hand, ties with Hemeti could provide Beijing with leverage in the long term should the political transition derail and protracted instability follow.

Despite tensions between the United States and China in Africa, then, Washington shares Beijing's interest in political and economic stability in Sudan. Both countries have financial and political leverage that could be used to help prevent Sudan's transition from derailing. If this leverage can be effectively harnessed, cooperation between Washington and Beijing to help bring about long-term peace and prosperity in Sudan remains possible.

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