



Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie:
Diritto, Istituzioni, Società

A Foot in Two Camps? South Sudan's Relations with China in a Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Relations between South Sudan and China are not a new phenomenon. However, since 2011 they have been steadily growing in terms of trade and investments, cultural exchanges, development and humanitarian aid. The breakout of the civil war in December 2013 has contributed to this trend. Amidst the disenchantment of traditional Western partners of South Sudan, massive shifts of aid flows from development to humanitarian response, and the flight of foreign capitals scared by the war, not only did China keep its presence in the country, it also took a more active stance by sending its first combat troops ever in the framework of the UN Mission, and engaging in the peace negotiations. What consequences has China's growing presence had on South Sudan's capacity of determining its own political agenda? This article argues that it has provided an opportunity of expanding the space for agency of the South Sudanese governing elite to make choices in opposition to the requests of traditional donors. At the same time, since relations with China are bound to pragmatic considerations from both sides, there is evidence that China's will to partner with the country is only as strong as the potential benefits accruing from this partnership.

Keywords: South Sudan – China – Agency – Oil – Aid.

CONTENTS: 1. Introduction. 2. China-Sudan-South Sudan Relations in a Historical Perspective. 3. China approaches Southern Sudan. 4. South Sudan's Independence and the Disenchantment of Traditional Donors. 5. Conclusion.

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1. Introduction

Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has been progressively ascending towards the top of Freedom House's yearly classification of the lack of freedom in countries around the world, reaching the first position in 2022¹. Persistent internal instability and political tensions, which exploded into a civil war in 2013, have led Salva Kiir's government to strengthen its grip on power with any possible means, including frequent cabinet reshuffles and shifting political alliances², censorship, intimidation³, repression of – real or perceived – political opponents⁴.

While not an unusual evolution for regimes stemming from liberation struggles, South Sudan's authoritarian slide stands out against years of international cooperation with the specific purpose of improving governance processes as well as the governing skills of its ruling elite. The capacity of African states and ruling elites of exercising agency through the use of "extraversion", what Bayart defined as the ability of capitalizing on one's position of dependence within the international system⁵, has been well documented by a growing literature highlighting the active role of African states in determining their positioning in the international system⁶. I myself have investigated the capacity of the South Sudanese ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, of capturing international financial flows destined to good governance and development in the Southern region of Sudan to implement a locally defined political agenda that had little to do with donors' objectives and conditionalities⁷. In this article, I would like to suggest

¹ See Freedom House website: freedomhouse.org/country/south-sudan/freedom-world/2022. Although the US-based think tank ranking represents, as all indicators, a simplification of a complex reality, the indicators on which the ranking is based provide nonetheless a useful picture of how the situation of a country evolved over time with regards to specific aspects (freedom of speech, the rule of law, the exercise of civic liberties).

² D. A. Thiong, *The Pawn Who Became King: How Has Salva Kiir Stayed at The Top So Long?*, in *African Arguments* (blog), 16/02/2022, africanarguments.org/2022/02/the-pawn-who-became-king-how-has-salva-kiir-stayed-at-the-top-so-long/.

³ CIVICUS, *South Sudan: "Our Current Regime Is Democratic Only on Paper, Not in Practice"*, CIVICUS, 29/08/2018, civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3423-south-sudan-our-current-regime-is-democratic-only-on-paper-not-in-practice.

⁴ S. Formisano, K. Bartemes Miranda, *"The Broken Dreams": Life and Work of Kerbino Agok Wol, South Sudanese Entrepreneur and Philanthropist*, Note di Ricerca del Centro Studi sull'Africa Contemporanea, Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale, July 2022, pp. 5-6.

⁵ J. Bayart, *L'Afrique dans le monde : une histoire d'extraversion*, in *Critique internationale*, No. 5, 1999, p. 98.

⁶ W. Brown, S. Harman, *African Agency in International Politics*, Routledge, 2014; J. Fisher, *Structure, Agency and Africa in the International System: Donor Diplomacy and Regional Security Policy in East Africa Since the 1990s*, in *Conflict, Security & Development*, No. 13, 2013, pp. 537-567; J. Fisher, *Managing Donor Perceptions: Contextualizing Uganda's 2007 Intervention in Somalia*, in *African Affairs* No. 111, 2012, pp. 404-423.

⁷ S. de Simone, *Playing the 'Fragile State' Card: The SPLM and State Extraversion in South Sudan*, in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, No. 56, 2018, pp. 385-420; S. de Simone, *State-Building South Sudan: International Intervention and the Formation of a Fragmented State*, Brill, 2022, pp. 50-107.

that this capacity of exercising extraverted agency has been increasingly enhanced, in recent years, by the emergence of new partners and allies to the South Sudanese elite with different approaches to the provision of development assistance, with a particular focus on China.

While the literature on the role of the “new-donors” is divided between those who emphasize the opening of new spaces of agency for African recipient countries⁸ and those who warn against overstating this agency⁹, it is important to analyze these relations in a historical perspective focusing on specific country case studies and how they themselves change over time¹⁰. Moreover, Otele has pointed at specific aspects (reciprocal trade dependence, the recipient country’s level of indebtedness, its dependence on foreign direct investments and the internal legitimacy of its government) that might influence the relations between China and specific African countries and the amount of room for maneuver that the African country has to carve out advantageous agreements from its negotiation with China. This kind of situated analysis also speak to the debate around the growing influence of China in “preventing democracy” and supporting the strengthening of autocratic regimes around the world¹¹, even though some authors have argued that local socio-political and clientelist dynamics might be more important than Chinese influence in determining the outcome of Chinese investments¹².

This article thus attempts at a reconstruction of South Sudan’s relations with China in a historical perspective, pointing at how, consistently with China’s pragmatic approach to international affairs, these relations intensified notwithstanding China’s traditional proximity with el Bashir’s regime in Khartoum. Even though growing evidence of the role of other “new donors” from the Gulf exists, with particular regards to the concession of loans to the new-born country¹³, China’s

⁸ L. Corkin, *Uncovering African Agency: Angola’s Management of China’s Credit Lines*, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 123-160; A. Gadzala, *Africa and China: How Africans and Their Governments Are Shaping Relations with China*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015; A. Gadzala, *Ethiopia: Toward a Foreign-Funded ‘Revolutionary Democracy’*, in A. Gadzala (ed.) *Africa and China: How Africans and Their Governments Are Shaping Relations with China*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, pp. 85-108; G. Mohan and B. Lampert, *Negotiating China: Reinserting African Agency into China-Africa Relations*, in *African Affairs*, No. 112, 2013, pp. 95-100.

⁹ P. Carmody and P. Kragelund, *Who Is in Charge? State Power and Agency in Sino-African Relations*, in *Cornell International Law Journal*, No. 49, 2016, p. 15; H.J. Swedlund, *Is China Eroding the Bargaining Power of Traditional Donors in Africa?*, in *International Affairs*, No. 93, 2017, pp. 393-396.

¹⁰ J. Malm, *China-powered’ African Agency and its Limits: The Case of the DRC 2007–2019*, Policy Insights (South African Institute of International Affairs, 2020), pp. 12-13; O. M. Otele, *Rethinking African Agency Within China-Africa Relations through the Lens of Policy Transfer: A Framework for Analysis*, in *The African Review*, No. 43, 1, 2016, p. 96.

¹¹ See for example M. Beckley and H. Brands, *China’s Threat to Global Democracy*, in *Journal of Democracy*, 2022, journalofdemocracy.org/chinas-threat-to-global-democracy/.

¹² Y. Wang and U. Wissenbach, *Clientelism at Work? A Case Study of Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway Project*, in *Economic History of Developing Regions*, No. 34, 1, 2019, pp. 1-20.

¹³ D. K. Deng, *From the Region to the Grassroots: Political Dynamics in South Sudan*, Conflict Research Programme Briefing, London School of Economics, 2019, available at: lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/CRP-South-Sudan-

presence in the region dates back to the 1960s, and its economic power, its efforts on promoting alternative approaches to development and international relations, and its increasingly authoritative international posture make it a particularly relevant actor on the South Sudanese scene. At the same time, however, China's foreign relations are widely dominated by the country's self-interest, which makes it both difficult and, perhaps, also undesirable for the Southern Sudanese ruling elite to let relations with traditional donors deteriorate. For this reason, South Sudan finds itself looking for a delicate balance between international allies that have different priorities and values, something that forces it to keep a foot in two camps and may ultimately endanger the relations with both sides.

The article relies on the analysis of secondary literature and newspapers, as well as on extensive field research conducted in South Sudan between 2010 and 2016.

2. China-Sudan-South Sudan Relations in a Historical Perspective

China's relations with the region pre-date South Sudan secession in 2011, as the country had a long history of cooperation and friendly relations with Sudan. These relations have intensified in the 1990s, in line with China's increasing penetration in Africa taking advantage of US's reduced interest towards the continent¹⁴, but go much more back in time. In 1959, Sudan was among the first countries to recognize the government of the People's Republic of China that took power in Beijing. The latter, which was struggling for international recognition and legitimacy, paid back with trade, aid, political and military cooperation¹⁵. Relations between the two countries remained amicable throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, characterized by favorable trade arrangements and development aid - including military assistance and medical cooperation. In the 1970s, Jafaar Nimeiri travelled to China to strengthen relations with the Asian country. Even though Beijing was not involved in the oil explorations, which were started by Chevron in the mid-1970s, China absorbed 26% of Sudan's cotton production and significant portions of its exports of gum Arabic, oil seeds and other food items. It imported manufactured goods, building materials and industry machinery, while also obtaining favorable loans to implement infrastructural projects such as the Hassa Heissa Friendship Textile Mill and several bridges¹⁶.

When the war between Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) broke out in 1983, the rebel movement started targeting Chevron oil facilities, jeopardizing the explorations and forcing the company to scale down its

Panel-Memo-December-19-Final.pdf. See also the IMF website: elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2021/070/article-A003-en.xml.

¹⁴ S. Graziani, "Buona narrazione" e potere discorsivo nel contesto dei rapporti sino-africani. Una riflessione preliminare, in *Sinosfere*, 17/01/2021, sinosfere.com/2021/01/17/sofia-graziani-buona-narrazione-e-potere-discorsivo-nel-contesto-dei-rapporti-sino-africani-una-riflessione-preliminare/.

¹⁵ D. Johanson, *China's Soft Power in Sudan: Increasing Activity but How Effective?*, in H. Wasserman, W. Mano (eds.), *China's Media and Soft Power in Africa. Promotions and Perceptions*, by Xiaoling Zhang, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p.182.

¹⁶ L. N. Moro, *China, Sudan and South Sudan Relations*, in *Global Review*, Winter 2012, pp. 23-24.

operations. In 1989, Omar el Bashir took power with a coup supported by Hassan al Turabi's National Islamic Front, compromising the relations between Sudan and the US and turning the country into a pariah of the international community. By 1997, after having stopped all oil explorations since 1992, Chevron was forced to leave after the US government imposed an embargo against the country, accusing it of hosting international terrorists. By the end of the decade, not only was Sudan hit by a double embargo (one from the US and one from the United Nations); also, support from International Financial Institutions was completely halted¹⁷.

While the US turned their support towards the SPLM/A, el Bashir travelled to China in 1995 to ask for support in the development of the oil industry, and obtained it¹⁸. If Sudan was desperately in need of international allies, China had launched an economic modernization campaign and was in search of access to resources that were not controlled by established powers in Africa. Sudan, particularly, gave it the opportunity of accessing a stable oil supply to fulfil the country's growing energy needs, as well as of acquiring important risk management skills that would make Chinese companies more competitive at an international level¹⁹. To encourage Chinese companies to invest in the country, the Chinese government offered special incentives between the late 1990s and early 2000s²⁰. And indeed, it was thanks to Chinese investments in the oil sector (together with those of Malaysian, Indian and Middle Eastern companies, even though to a smaller extent), that Sudan became an oil exporting country in 1999.

Economic relations between Sudan and China were not limited to the oil sector: Chinese companies also invested in the construction of the infrastructures needed for oil export (pipelines, airfields, roads, refineries), but also not related to the oil industry (one such example is the Meroe Dam, started in the early 2000s). Between 2001 and 2004, Sudan was the third most important African economic partner to China, where it exported 80% of its crude (5% of China's total oil imports)²¹.

Sudan's oil boom must be contextualized in the situation of protracted civil war in the Southern region that raged on throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The entanglement of the oil business with the armed conflict has been well documented by NGOs and human rights activists²². Oil revenues became an outstanding source of hard currency for the Government of Sudan, increasing of 875.7% in just three years (1999-2001) and enabling the government to boost its purchase of weapons. As a consequence, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the worsening of the North-

¹⁷ D. Large, *China and the Changing Context of Development in Sudan*, in *Development*, No. 50, 2007, p. 59.

¹⁸ L. N. Moro, *China, Sudan and South Sudan Relations*, in *Global Review*, Winter 2012, p. 24.

¹⁹ L. Patey, *Learning in Africa: China's Overseas Oil Investments in Sudan and South Sudan*, in *Journal of Contemporary China*, No. 26, 107, 2017, pp. 1-13.

²⁰ These incentives were then dropped in 2007.

²¹ D. Large, *China's Sudan Engagement: Changing Northern and Southern Political Trajectories in Peace and War*, in *The China Quarterly*, No. 199, 2009, pp. 615-616.

²² Human Rights Watch, *Sudan, oil, and human rights*, 2003.

South civil war, together with the breakout of new conflicts in Darfur²³. With Chinese assistance, Sudan developed an arm manufacturing industry and intensified arms import from the Asian country notwithstanding the arms embargo imposed by the UN to counter the war in Darfur²⁴.

China's presence in Sudan was thus marked by its complicity with the Khartoum government: not only because, by turning Sudan into an oil-exporting country, it sustained the government's war effort, enabling it to perpetrate atrocities against civilians; also, its oil industry provoked massive social and environmental damage in the oil producing areas, by severely polluting the land and water sources and by supporting the creation of local armed militias tasked with clearing the oil areas from the population²⁵. For these reasons, China was largely looked at with suspicion, when not with open opposition, by South Sudanese people. "We don't want those Chinese here", told me a former child soldier from Bentiu town, deep into the oil producing area, during a personal conversation in 2010: "they don't put conditions on human rights, governance and so on, but we do need these requirements here to make things work!"²⁶. While this arguably remained a common sentiment among the Southern population after the end of the civil war, Southern Sudan's political elite adopted a rather pragmatic approach and actively sought to develop relations with the Asian country notwithstanding its legacy of close relations with Khartoum.

3. China approaches Southern Sudan

In January 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between the SPLM/A and the Government of Sudan, ending over twenty years of civil war. The agreement included five protocols disciplining specific aspects. Most notably, the Power-sharing agreement created a regional government in the Southern region (GoSS – Government of Southern Sudan) headed by the SPLM leader, who was also appointed as First Vice President of a Government of National Unity (GoNU) in Khartoum headed by el Bashir and made of members of the ruling National Congress Party and of the SPLM. The Wealth-sharing agreement answered to Southern people's grievances of being left out from any benefit arising from the exploitation of the country's natural resources, which were located predominantly in the Southern region: it provided for the equal redistribution of oil revenues between the GoNU and the GoSS, and also recognized the entitlement of 2% of the

²³ D. Large, *Sudan and South Sudan: A Testing Ground for Beijing's Peace and Security Engagement*, in C. Alden, A. Alao, Z. Chun, L. Barber (eds), *China and Africa. Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent*, Palgrave McMillan, 2018.

²⁴ *Sudan Tribune*, *Chinese arms in Darfur: the twisted trail of weapons*, 19/06/2006. sudantribune.com/article16778/.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Sudan, oil, and human rights*, 2003.

²⁶ Personal communication of the author with male ex-child soldier in the SPLA, Bentiu, 15 November 2010.

oil revenues to oil producing states²⁷. Overall, the CPA recognized the right to self-determination to the Southern people: it provided for a six-year interim period that was to end with a referendum to decide whether Southern Sudan would become an independent state or it would stay united with Sudan. During the interim period, both parties to the agreement, together with their international partners, had to work to “make unity attractive” – to promote reforms to the political system and to support the delivery of “peace dividends” to the Southern population to convince it that unity was the most desirable outcome of the peace process²⁸.

China held important stakes in the unity of Sudan: China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) controlled the two major oil consortiums active in the country (Greater Nile Petroleum Operation Company – GNPOC, formed in November 1996, and the Petrodar Operating Company, formed in 2001), as well as the vast majority of the oil blocks²⁹. However, since 75% of the oil wells happened to be in the Southern territory, China had to come to grips with the possibility that Southern Sudan would choose secession – a possibility that became ever more realistic after John Garang, the late leader of the SPLM and the major supporter of unity with Sudan, died in a helicopter crash months after the signing of the CPA.

Consistently with its policy of non-interference with other states’ internal affairs, China only started contacts with the SPLM after the signing of the CPA. In 2005, a small delegation of the SPLM visited the Asian country, but the first official, high-profile visit of a Southern Sudanese delegation to Beijing took place in 2007. The president Salva Kiir Mayardit, together with representatives of several ministries and top SPLM members, visited China to convey two key messages to the Chinese government: that Southern Sudan was likely to vote for secession; and that the majority of Sudan’s oil actual and prospective production was located in southern territory³⁰. This visit was rapidly followed up by the Chinese Ambassador to Sudan who travelled to Juba, and by a Chinese government technical team conducting an official needs assessment mission to Juba, Yei and Nimule³¹. Less than a year after, in 2008, China opened a consulate in Juba, expressing its will of including the regional government in its relations with Khartoum³².

²⁷ The government structure of Southern Sudan was organized in four layers, of which states constituted the highest. The same structure has been adopted by the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011.

²⁸ Government of Sudan e SPLM, *The Comprehensive Peace Agreement* (2005).

²⁹ D. Large, *China and the Changing Context of Development in Sudan*, in *Development*, No. 50, 2007, p. 59.

³⁰ S. Kiir Mayardit’s speech, opening of the second session of the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly, Juba, 10 September 2007 (quoted in D. Large, *Between the CPA and the Southern Independence: China’s Post-Conflict Engagement in Sudan*, Occasional Paper, Global Powers and Africa Programme, South African Institute of International Affairs, 2012).

³¹ D. Large, *Between the CPA and the Southern Independence: China’s Post-Conflict Engagement in Sudan*, Occasional Paper no. 115, South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), 2012, fn 81, p. 24.

³² See the website of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China: 中国首任驻朱巴总领事张清洋向苏丹外长阿鲁尔递交领事任命书 (china-embassy.gov.cn).

Notwithstanding the people's grudges against China and its proximity to the Khartoum regime, Salva Kiir clearly stated, during an opening speech at the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly, that "South Sudan is open for business and investors are welcome"³³. And indeed, as a region coming out from almost half a century of civil strife, Southern Sudan was direly in need of investments: not only to sustain its most vital economic sector – that of the oil industry, which made up 98% of the regional budget -, but also to develop other economic sectors, telecommunications, and to build any kind of infrastructures (from public buildings to housing, bridges, hospitals, roads – at the time of independence, there were only 200 m of paved road for every 1000 km of roads in the country)³⁴.

On the other hand, South Sudan was widely perceived to be a new, unexplored economic frontier as well as an undeveloped market, characterized by a situation of persistent relative instability that discouraged risk-averse Western entrepreneurs and that therefore provided a relatively little competitive business environment. In 2007, CNPC still held control of the major extractive companies active in the country³⁵, but Chinese companies also started investing in the infrastructure sector, building vital facilities such as the Juba airport, hospitals, roads and entire neighborhoods in the capital city³⁶. Chinese service providers also developed (particularly hotel, restaurants, supermarkets and private medical clinics)³⁷.

To minimize the legacy of its relations with Khartoum, China supported the idea that a peaceful coexistence and cooperation between the two Sudan was in the interest of both peoples³⁸. To strengthen this idea, Beijing engaged in multilateral forums, contributing peacekeepers to the UN peacekeeping Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) deployed in 2005, participating to the Donor Coordination Forum³⁹, supporting the UN Work Plan coordinated by the UN Office for the Coordination

³³ Government Policy Statement delivered by the president of the Government of Southern Sudan, opening of the second session of the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly, 10 April 2006 (quoted in D. Large, *Between the CPA and the Southern Independence: China's Post-Conflict Engagement in Sudan*, fn 80).

³⁴ African Development Bank Group, *South Sudan: An Infrastructure Action Plan*, 2013, afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/projects-and-operations/south_sudan_infrastructure_action_plan_-_a_program_for_sustained_strong_economic_growth_-_full_report.pdf.

³⁵ In 2007, Sudan extracted 520.000 barrels per day of crude. CNPC has a 40% stake in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operation Company (GNPOC) formed in November 1996 to develop three blocks in Western Upper Nile. The Petrodar Operating Company was formed in 2001 (CNPC holds 41% and Sinopec 6%). CNPC holds 95% of Block 6, which straddles Darfur and South Kordofan. D. Large, *China and the Changing Context of Development in Sudan*, p. 59.

³⁶ D. Johanson, *China's Soft Power in Sudan: Increasing Activity but How Effective?*, p. 186; Ł. Jureńczyk, *Economic Cooperation of the People's Republic of China with the Independent South Sudan*, in *Humanities and Social Sciences quarterly*, No. 28, 2021, pp. 38-39.

³⁷ D. Large, *Between the CPA and the Southern Independence: China's Post-Conflict Engagement in Sudan*, p. 16.

³⁸ See former Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi's declarations, available at: ss.china-embassy.gov.cn/sbwl/201108/t20110809_7182850.htm (courtesy translation by Giulia Sciorati).

³⁹ Established by OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), this involved neighboring states, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the US, Norway and the AU.

of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). Support to Southern Sudan development constituted an important part of China's efforts to clean its image from the war legacies and to demonstrate to a hostile Southern population that development would also benefit them and not only the northern region⁴⁰. Besides engaging in budget support to alleviate the financial fatigue of the Government of Southern Sudan after the collapse in international oil prices in 2009, it supported a variety of cooperation projects in the agriculture, education, water&sanitation, and medical sectors⁴¹, emphasizing the shared agenda with the SPLM of bringing "peace through development"⁴².

Both the Chinese consulate – turned Embassy right after South Sudan's independence in 2011 – and the Southern political elite have worked hard to reinforce the narrative around the proximity of the Chinese and South Sudanese people. As elsewhere in the Global South, China emphasizes a sense of shared historical experience at the hands of imperial powers and brings its own example of economic transformation and rapid rural development as something that can be repeated elsewhere⁴³. Memories of the engagement of Chinese medical teams dispatched to the Southern region in the 1970s were also greatly celebrated (for example, through setting up an online photo exhibitions on historical diplomatic relations between the two countries⁴⁴, or on Chinese medical teams working side by side with Southern Sudanese nurses in various southern health centers, hosted on the website of the Chinese Embassy in Juba⁴⁵), together with the existence of common names between the two peoples, like Deng or Guandong⁴⁶.

These strengthening relations between China and Southern Sudan changed the former's position on unity: while still preferring it as an option, the Chinese government became more open to the idea of Southern secession. A new delegation

⁴⁰ T. Wheeler, *Development through Peace: Could China's Economic Cooperation with South Sudan be More Conflict-sensitive?*, in *Global Review*, Winter 2012.

⁴¹ D. Large, *Between the CPA and the Southern Independence: China's Post-Conflict Engagement in Sudan*, p. 17.

⁴² While also representing the core philosophy of Chinese cooperation in conflict-affected countries (see T. Wheeler, *Development through Peace: Could China's Economic Cooperation with South Sudan be More Conflict-sensitive?*), "Peace through development" was also the title of a booklet published in 2000 by the SPLM in which the then rebel movement argued the need to promote economic and social inclusive development to address the root causes of the civil war. See: SPLM, *Peace through development in the Sudan*, 2000.

⁴³ International Crisis Group, *China's New Courtship in South Sudan*, Report 186, Africa, 2012, p. 4; S. Graziani, "Buona narrazione" e potere discorsivo nel contesto dei rapporti sino-africani. Una riflessione preliminare, in *Sinosfere*, 17/01/2021, sinosfere.com/2021/01/17/sofia-graziani-buona-narrazione-e-potere-discorsivo-nel-contesto-dei-rapporti-sino-africani-una-riflessione-preliminare/.

⁴³ See the website of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China to South Sudan, ss.china-embassy.gov.cn/sbwl/201108/t20110812_7182874.htm.

⁴⁴ See the website of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China to South Sudan, ss.china-embassy.gov.cn/sbwl/201108/t20110812_7182874.htm.

⁴⁵ See the website of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China to South Sudan, ss.china-embassy.gov.cn/sdnfjj/tpk/201108/t20110826_7648972.htm.

⁴⁶ L. Biong Deng, *China: A Strategic Partner of the New Nation of South Sudan*, in *Sudan Tribune*, 16/04/2012.

from the Government of Southern Sudan visited Beijing in 2010 on a “post-referendum preparation” trip, followed up by a Chinese delegation visiting Juba. China was now willing to support stability through the peaceful transition towards independence of Southern Sudan under the CPA terms by donating US\$500.000 to the Southern Sudan Referendum Commission and sending teams of observers during the polls⁴⁷.

4. South Sudan’s Independence and the Disenchantment of Traditional Donors

In 2011, 98,8% of Southern population voted in favor of secession from Sudan, and on 9 July 2011 South Sudan became independent. Even though the transition to independence was relatively smooth, relations between Juba and Khartoum remained tense: the CPA had not addressed several important border issues and, most importantly, had left open to negotiation any agreement for the exportation of the crude extracted in Southern Sudan through the only existing transport facility: the Sudan-owned pipeline that linked the oil producing areas in Upper Nile to Port Sudan. An escalation of tensions over the use of the pipeline – and related accusations of Khartoum diverting part of the oil – brought to brief military confrontation in Heglig between the two countries and to a shutdown of oil production in 2012. Following this decision, South Sudan went under severe financial stress, with a skyrocketing deficit, limited access to concessional loans (at that time the country was not yet a full member of the International Monetary Fund) and a nearly bankrupt government. Relations with China, at that point, were ambivalent: on the one hand, the CNPC president of Petrodar (41%-owned by CNPC) was kicked out of the country with the accusation of being complicit with Khartoum; on the other hand, China was nagged to provide more credit to the country as a form of payback for its proximity with the Sudanese government⁴⁸, which the country accepted to do due to its own reliance on South Sudanese crude⁴⁹. Thanks to its persistent bilateral relations also with the Government in Khartoum, China tried to mediate between the two governments to avoid the oil shutdown, but its attempt was unsuccessful. The result was a stalemate that was only resolved one year later, when Juba and Khartoum reached an agreement on the price to use the pipeline, after the Uganda-Kenya Crude Oil Pipeline project, which would have connected Hoima (Uganda) with Lamu (Kenya), providing Juba with an alternative route of international markets for its crude, failed to in secure investors⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ D. Large, *Sudan and South Sudan: A Testing Ground for Beijing’s Peace and Security Engagement*, in C. Alden et al. (eds.), *China and Africa. Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 167.

⁴⁸ L. Biong Deng, *China: A Strategic Partner of the New Nation of South Sudan*.

⁴⁹ H. Xu, *China’s Influence in South Sudan: Prospects and Challenges*, The Zambakari Advisory, 2017.

⁵⁰ China was involved in the Lamu (Kenya) pipeline negotiation but refused to fund its construction until the countries reached an agreement. Zhang Chun, *China’s Relations with Two Sudans: From ‘One Country, Two Systems’ to ‘Two Countries, One System’*, in *Global Review*, Winter 2012; The involvement of China National Offshore Oil Corporation financing the East Africa Crude Oil

The oil shutdown was the first moment, after the successful interim period and declaration of independence, when the international community dominated by Western actors started to show some kind of impatience with the new-born country. The World Bank described the move as “irresponsible”⁵¹, the US deplored the decision, the EU warned against the threat to the viability of the two states without oil. China too was hit by the oil shutdown, yet relations between the two countries intensified as South Sudan’s traditional partners’ impatience increased.

Despite the relatively smooth transition to independence and the effort to normalize relations with Sudan, South Sudan was never really at peace. Localized tensions continued throughout the interim period and after independence, often giving rise to violent clashes between different ethnic communities. On top of local disputes, usually linked to the access to resources such as land, water and basic services, high level political tensions, kept at bay by the common objective of achieving secession, exploded after independence. The oil shutdown, particularly, contributed to heighten these tensions, depriving the ruling elite of the vital resources to feed clientelist networks and to buy loyalty from political opponents⁵². The year 2013 was marked by an increasingly visible cleavage among the political leadership of the SPLM that saw the current president Salva Kiir Mayardit challenged by his vice president Riek Machar Teny. The tension escalated, in mid-December 2013, into a full-scale civil war, largely fought along ethnic lines, with most clashes concentrating, once again, in the oil-producing areas.

China’s approach of non-interference in the internal affairs of its partners, deplored by the SPLM when it was a rebel movement, was much more appealing to the Government of South Sudan in these circumstances, as China did not take a strong position against the conflict – and the government itself – as other major donors did. Even though it had to intervene to shortly evacuate its nationals from the country, China kept regular relations with the Government of South Sudan even bringing cooperation a step further: if at independence no military cooperation was ongoing between the two countries (as the SPLA still received assistance from the US and the Chinese were considered to be too close to the Sudan Armed Forces), after December 2013 things changed. The US stopped supporting the SPLA and the

Pipeline, which has replaced the Lamu pipeline project and will link Uganda’s oil producing areas to the Tanzanian port of Tonga, might still expand South Sudan’s possibility of exporting its crude through alternative routes than the Port Sudan pipeline. Nevertheless, this will only become possible in the long run as the project is still at an early stage of construction and there seem to be no immediate plans to link South Sudan’s oilfields to the new pipeline. Luke Patey, *A Belated Boom: Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan and Prospects and Risks for Oil in East Africa*, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2017; Brendon J. Cannon and Stephen Mogaka, *Rivalry in East Africa: The Case of The Uganda-Kenya Crude Oil Pipeline and the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline*, in *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 11, 2022.

⁵¹ M. Giugale, *Note-to-File. Closed Hold, Not for Distribution or Attribution*, Briefing, The World Bank, 2012.

⁵² A. de Waal, *When Kleptocracy Becomes Insolvent: Brute Causes of the Civil War in South Sudan*, in *African Affairs*, No. 113, 2014, p. 349.

UN imposed an arms embargo: Juba thus started military cooperation with Beijing. The Chinese North Industries Group Corporation (Norinco) sent arms cargo to the Government of South Sudan in July 2014. Even though the shipment was said to have been ordered before December 2013, this was in open violation of the UN embargo. Also, while many other investors fled the country, South Sudan continued to court Chinese investments and the South Sudan Embassy in Beijing organized the first South Sudan-China Investment forum in early 2014.

But Chinese investments were also at risk. After a first few days of clashes in Juba, fighting between the South Sudan army and the rebel group Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-In-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) quickly moved to the oil producing areas in Unity and Upper Nile States, leading to a drastic reduction in oil production (from around 500.000 to 165.000 barrels per day). China thus started unofficial relations with the SPLM-IO and, in September 2014, a SPLM-IO delegation visited Beijing allegedly to discuss the security of the oilfields. As during the civil war between Northern and Southern Sudan, Small Arms Survey has traced links between oil companies and armed militias in the oil producing areas, suggesting that the very existence of these militias may be linked to the incentives provided by oil companies in exchange for security⁵³.

In what might be looked at as a contradiction, China also tried to market itself as a contributor to peacebuilding efforts, both contributing to the UN peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and by attempting a higher-level political mediation between the warring parties in Addis Ababa⁵⁴. For the first time, China decided to dispatch 850 combat troops to UNMISS. It did so after having obtained the strengthening of the mission's mandate, which came to include the protection of oil workers and oil facilities⁵⁵. At the same time, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi participated to the IGAD-led peace negotiations while at the same time also holding separate talks with Kiir and Machar. While stressing the need to find an African solution to South Sudanese problems – taking on a popular refrain of the African Union and emphasizing the need to support ongoing peace initiatives in the region – in 2015 he proposed a five-point peace plan based on: the implementation of the signed agreements (which were systematically violated); the creation of a Transitional Government; the strengthening of the humanitarian response; the

⁵³ L. M. James, *Fields of Control: Oil and (In)security in Sudan and South Sudan*, Small Arms Survey, 2015, pp. 48-50.

⁵⁴ D. Large, *Sudan and South Sudan: A Testing Ground for Beijing's Peace and Security Engagement*. This new trend in China's approach to international security was later officialized during the Boao Asia Forum in 2021, where Xi Jinping launched the Global Security Initiative based on the Indivisible Security Principle – the idea that collective security of the international community should be prioritized to national security interests. See Sumukhi Asati and Shivangi Jain, *China's Global Security Initiative and Indivisible Security Principle*, in *Diplomatist*, 28/10/2022. diplomatist.com/2022/10/28/chinas-global-security-initiative-and-indivisible-security-principle/.

⁵⁵ C. Lynch, *U.N. Peacekeepers to Protect China's Oil Interests in South Sudan*, in *Foreign Policy*, 2014, available at: foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/16/u-n-peacekeepers-to-protect-chinas-oil-interests-in-south-sudan/.

support to the IGAD-led peace process; and the need to ensure safety of foreign people and assets located on South Sudan's national territory⁵⁶.

In 2015, the IGAD-led peace process achieved the signing of a peace agreement that soon turned out to be unviable. South Sudan was undergoing a deep economic crisis due to the limited operation capacity of its oil sector as well as to low international oil prices. Expectations of China approving a major financial support package were unrealistically high, but the situation in the country remained too unstable even for China and its entrepreneurs. As expected, the agreement collapsed less than one year after it was signed, and it was not until 2018 that a new peace agreement, the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed. This agreement provided for the creation of a monitoring system (the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission) to oversee its timely implementation, which involved representatives from "International Partners and Friends of South Sudan", including China⁵⁷. Despite continuous clashes in various parts of the country, the progressive disillusionment of traditional donors and repeated threats of withdrawing support forced the leaders to take the implementation of the agreement seriously: renovated prospects for the improvement of stability led to the restart of economic activities and investments, with CNPC obtaining new concessions to conduct hydrocarbon explorations through its two participated companies, Dar Petroleum Operating Company (DPOC) and Greater Petroleum Operating Company (GPOC) (winning over French and Kuwaiti competitors)⁵⁸.

Yet, the implementation of the peace agreement proceeded slowly, with frequent episodes testifying of a lack of trust from both sides: it took almost two years for Salva Kiir and Riek Machar to agree on the formation of the Transitional Government, and several burning issues (such as the organization of elections, power-sharing within the local government system and the merging of the rebel troops with the army) have again stalled. While cooperation with China was strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic – when the Asian country sent medical supplies and personnel as well as committed to infrastructural interventions and economic support to the creation of Small and Medium Enterprises⁵⁹ and agricultural projects in the framework of South Sudan's participation to the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation⁶⁰ –, relations with traditional donors have also become less tense. This *détente* is visible in OECD-DAC data on ODA to South Sudan

⁵⁶ D. Large, *China and South Sudan's Civil War, 2013-2015*, in *African Studies Quarterly* No. 16, 2016, p. 45.

⁵⁷ See JMEC website: jmecsouthsudan.org/index.php/about-rjmec/rjmec-membership.

⁵⁸ M. A. Goch, *China, Oil and the South Sudan Resource Curse*, in *The Elephant*, 18/18/2022, theelephant.info/features/2022/02/18/china-oil-and-the-south-sudan-resource-curse/.

⁵⁹ Xinhua, *China, South Sudan hold workshop on SMEs development*. 30/06/2021, xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2021-06/30/c_1310034825.htm.

⁶⁰ Xinhua, *China, South Sudan start implementation of key projects under FOCAC*, 12/08/2022, english.news.cn/20220812/ba3da2e8d0f84ac5b0f5343041daf430/c.html.

between 2018 (when the revitalized agreement was signed) and 2020, as well as by recent commitments from the World Bank to grants and credits in various sectors⁶¹.

5. Conclusion

The history of relations between South Sudan and China clearly shows that they grew hand in hand with the capacity of the South Sudanese political elite to subtract itself from, or even openly resist to, traditional donors' conditionalities and requests, particularly in the field of democratic governance, human rights protection and transparency. This dynamic has become quite clear during the civil war that broke out in December 2013: irrespective of the mediation efforts, of the sanctions and of the arms embargo, the Juba government still managed to delay the implementation of peace agreements and both parties repeatedly disrupted the negotiation process at least partly thanks to their access to alternative sources of finance and supply. Providing an alternative to the traditional donor community, China represents an attractive partner to South Sudan notwithstanding its increasing political – and military – engagement in the region. Its commitment to not interfere in other countries' internal affairs remains strong at a time when South Sudan's Western allies – particularly the US, the EU, UK and Norway – have become increasingly critical of the government (in)actions⁶².

At the same time, however, recent events would invite to caution. Consistently with what has been noticed by other authors⁶³, China's approach to its international relations and cooperation remains extremely pragmatic and it has already demonstrated in the past that it is willing to take on risks only as long as it deems that the benefits will outplay the costs. While benefits do not only include economic ones but also have to do with broader political and strategic considerations about

⁶¹ World Bank, *South Sudan: New World Bank Financing to Boost Access to Income Generating Opportunities for Youth and Women*, 07/06/2022. [worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/06/07/south-sudan-new-world-bank-financing-to-boost-access-to-income-generating-opportunities-for-youth-and-women](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/06/07/south-sudan-new-world-bank-financing-to-boost-access-to-income-generating-opportunities-for-youth-and-women); World Bank, *Provides \$34 million to Support Public Financial Management Reforms in South Sudan*. 04/03/2022, [worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/04/world-bank-provides-34-million-to-support-public-financial-management-reforms-in-south-sudan](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/04/world-bank-provides-34-million-to-support-public-financial-management-reforms-in-south-sudan); World Bank, *South Sudan Receives \$120 million to Continue Strengthening Service Delivery, Community Institutions, and Resilience to Floods*, 15/03/2022, [worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/15/south-sudan-receives-120-million-to-continue-strengthening-service-delivery-community-institutions-and-resilience-to-flo](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/15/south-sudan-receives-120-million-to-continue-strengthening-service-delivery-community-institutions-and-resilience-to-flo).

⁶² See for example: *Statement by the Troika, the EU and its Member States on the Extension of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan*, 9/08/2022, ss.usembassy.gov/statement-by-the-troika-the-eu-and-its-member-states-on-the-extension-of-the-revitalized-agreement-on-the-resolution-of-the-conflict-in-south-sudan/.

⁶³ J. Malm, *China-powered' African Agency and its Limits: The Case of the DRC 2007–2019*, pp. 1-14; Jon Phillips, *Who's in charge of Sino-African resource politics? Situating African state agency in Ghana*, in *African Affairs*, No. 118, 2019, pp. 1-24.

China's positionality in the international order⁶⁴, the economic viability of investments and the political stability of its partners still play an important role. Because of this, and also because of the amount of aid that DAC donors still pour into the country, the Government of South Sudan finds itself between a rock and a hard place, searching for a balance between traditional donors' conditionalities and requests, and China's (at times implicit) requirements for its investments to be rewarding. One example is the implementation of restrictive measures to improve transparency and accountability in the oil sector, and particularly the undertaking of an environmental audit and the implementation of human resource policies in early 2021, which was strongly advocated for by the Troika (the three most important donors to South Sudan, US, UK and Norway) and the World Bank. However, this exercise seems to have triggered China's resentment, which resulted in its favorable vote for the extension of the UN arms embargo, from which it had previously abstained, as a form of retaliation⁶⁵. These latest events may suggest that, even though a pragmatic relation with China has provided benefits in terms of infrastructural development and reduced dependence from Western donors and their conditionalities, South Sudan may need to decide which partnership to prioritize for its own development and the wellbeing of its population.

⁶⁴ S. Graziani, "Buona narrazione" e potere discorsivo nel contesto dei rapporti sino-africani. Una riflessione preliminare, in *Sinosfere*, 17/01/2021, sinofere.com/2021/01/17/sofia-graziani-buona-narrazione-e-potere-discorsivo-nel-contesto-dei-rapporti-sino-africani-una-riflessione-preliminare/.

⁶⁵ M.A. Goch, *China, Oil and the South Sudan Resource Curse*, in *The Elephant*, 18/18/2022, theelephant.info/features/2022/02/18/china-oil-and-the-south-sudan-resource-curse/.