

COMMENTARY

The Obama Administration's Sudan Strategy

J. Stephen Morrison and Jennifer G. Cooke

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After months of internal debate, mounting impatience among U.S. activist groups, and rapidly approaching deadlines in the Sudanese Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the Obama administration yesterday unveiled its strategy toward Sudan, calling for frank dialogue with the government in Khartoum and promising “calibrated steps to bolster support for positive change and to discourage backsliding.”

The realities of Sudan itself appear to have forced an end, at least for the moment, to protracted internal bickering and deadlock between hard-liners—most notably, U.S. ambassador to the UN Susan Rice—and realists—U.S. special envoy to Sudan General Scott Gration. Sudan’s national elections are slated for April 2010. Less than a year later is a national referendum in which the citizens of southern Sudan will be asked to choose whether to secede. The new policy officially turns away from isolation and condemnation, reduces ambiguity and potential for misinterpretation of U.S. strategy going forward, and raises confidence that the various factions within the administration (for now at least) are working from the same single playbook.

The review endorses a policy based on realism and pragmatic engagement, with strong emphasis on implementation of the North-South Comprehensive Peace Agreement. It is based on an acknowledgement that to avert the unraveling of the CPA and a potentially destabilizing regional crisis, the United States must maintain a sustained, adult dialogue with the Khartoum government and find common ground with a broader set of multilateral partners. It openly acknowledges the strong possibility that southern Sudan will secede and the urgency of building a modicum of governing capacity within the southern government.

The strategy places the United States in greater alignment with critical international partners concerned with Sudan—the United Kingdom, the European Union, Canada, France, and key African partners—and opens the way for greater collaboration and consensus building with China and other key global powers. Lack of consensus within the administration has confused potential partners who have for some time seen the United States policy as hostage to zealous domestic pressures. Greater alignment with international partners also has the benefit of strengthening the credibility and effectiveness of any pressures the United States might bring to bear. There are few realistic options left for stronger U.S. “sticks,” particularly if undertaken unilaterally. A concerted effort by international partners, that builds agreement around redlines and opportunities for targeted pressure may significantly enhance U.S. leverage with key Sudanese actors.

The approach is also far more consistent with President Obama’s preferred policy of engagement with the world’s rogue governments—in Myanmar, North Korea, Syria, Iran—and the desire to create a new dialogue with the world’s Muslim population. For each of these malgoverned, intractable countries, U.S. domestic campaigners have likened engagement to appeasement or legitimization of the respective regimes, but in each case the urgency of finding a solution has moved the Obama administration to push for frank and more systematic discourse. As the stakes in Sudan have risen and gained urgency, there is growing acknowledgement that isolation and condemnation of the Khartoum regime are no longer viable options, and a greater willingness to push back on domestic groups’ distaste for dialogue. Implicitly, the shift in policy is also an acknowledgement that the high levels of violence against civilians in 2004–2005 have passed.

The policy document does attempt to assuage some of the concerns of the U.S. activist community, which has been highly critical of U.S. special envoy Scott Gration. Priority targets of these groups have been Gration’s description of the security situation in Darfur as “remnants of genocide” and an approach that has inaccurately been characterized as giving preference to unconditional incentives. There is continued uncomfortable wordsmithing around the term genocide, reflective of a still unresolved internal debate. The administration’s review calls for a “definitive end to...genocide in

Darfur” (with the implication that genocide is ongoing); quarterly interagency reviews of progress or regression; and incentives based on “verifiable changes in conditions on the ground”—all implicit reassurances to potential critics.

The benchmarks for progress and slippage, as well as the matrix of potential pressures, remain classified, a source of consternation to domestic groups, who will be impatient to see concrete results from an engagement strategy and who just prior to the release of the policy called for General Gration to be fired. General Gration will not have long to answer his critics on this front and will need consistent backing from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and, at critical junctures, President Obama himself to urge patience and adequate space for negotiation. There are signs that divisions within the administration are still very much alive, and the secretary would do well to keep internal disputes from bubbling over into the public domain and distracting from the key tasks at hand. A series of damaging leaks from within the White House and elsewhere have embarrassed and infuriated senior levels.

There are no quick wins in Sudan, and the administration’s strategy does not guarantee success. The review document provides a clear articulation of a measured strategy that commits the United States to the long, hard slog of sustained diplomatic engagement and mediation. How strong a mandate General Gration will have remains unclear. To date, no new resources have been attached to the effort, which will require sustained attention by a cadre of seasoned State Department personnel. There is much uncertainty in how the strategy will ultimately be implemented and how it will hold up under the stresses and complexities of what is looming in Sudan on the one hand and the scrutiny and impatience of domestic skeptics on the other. And at this point it remains difficult to predict what the United States will deliver if Sudan meets U.S. demands: Removal from the terror list? Lifting of sanctions? Normalization of relations? Nor is it evident what harsh measures will follow if Sudan is obstinate. These formulations—the heart of the matter and the root of U.S. credibility moving forward—remain obscure.

J. Stephen Morrison is senior vice president of CSIS and former director of the Africa Program. Jennifer G. Cooke is the current director of the CSIS Africa Program.

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