South Sudan in Turmoil: The Risk of a Congo-like Regional Crisis

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If not dealt with in due time and meticulous manner, the current armed conflict in South Sudan has a potential to explode into a Congo-like regional crisis. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly known as Zaire), in many respects similar to today's South Sudan (its resource, territory, promising future at independence, natural landscape, forest, etc.), had suffered in historic proportions due to a conflict largely fueled by the security and economic interests of its neighbors and countries in the region (Williams, 2013:81-100). Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, Chad, and Sudan have all been involved in what is known as the second Congo war (1998-2003) – also known as the "first African World war". In particular, Rwanda has been the maker and breaker of Congolese politics since the mid 1990s. It has invaded Congo on two occasions, 1996 and 1998, and provided an active support to rebels fighting against the government – a practice which has not ceased to date (United Nations, 2012:3).

All these countries got sucked into the second Congo war for a multitude of complex reasons (Shah, 2010; Williams, 2013:81). Yet, from the literature on the roots of the conflict, two reasons – particularly, security and economic – stand out clear as core motivating factors (Louisa, 2012:5; UN Panel of Experts, 2001:6). The Congo has never been a stable state ever since its independence from the Belgian colonial rule in 1960 (MacGreal, 2008). In the 1990s, Rwandese, Ugandan, and Burunduse rebel forces were operating and mounting attacks from their bases in the Congo (Williams, 2013:90-94). These cross border raids from the Congo, at times with the support of successive regimes in Kinshasa, have put neighboring states, particularly Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi under a serious security threat (Williams, 2013:90-94). The treble reacted with an intervention, crossing the Congolese border in pursuit of the dissident forces, and fighting against the government which supported them (Ibid). In turn, the Congolese government, led by Laurent Desire Kablia – an old ally of Rwanda and Uganda now turned into a foe – appealed for help to Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia (Williams, 2013:93-95). He was given what he needed; and with the intervention of these three countries, "Africa's first world war" was already underway (Williams, 2013:90).

The war, however, was not only about security threats and risks. Congo's bonanza and the desire to exploit its resources has also been an important dimension of the war (Shah, 2010). Congo is one of the few naturally wealthy countries in the world. It is rich in diamonds, gold, copper, cobalt, and zinc (BBC Africa, November 2013). In addition, Congo has also supplies of coltan, a mineral used for mobile phone processors and other gadgets, found only in few other countries in the world (Shah, 2010). As a result, besides security and other considerations, involvement in the Congo war was, thus, viewed as an economically rewarding venture. In a craving appetite to extortion and looting, the military generals in particular pushed for it (United Nations, 2001:6; *The Economist*, 2002). No surprise, then, once in the ground, the armies of these countries were engaged in a serious business of plundering – digging diamonds, harvesting timber and ivory (*The Economist*, 2002).

The core argument of this article is that South Sudan, which currently is undergoing its own internal crisis, could be caught in the same quagmire Congo was in during its second war. To be sure, the conflict in South Sudan has already started assuming a regional character with the stepping-in of Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) and various dissident groups of neighboring countries (International Crisis Group, 2014:i). As the conflict drags on, other actors are also likely to openly engage in support of one or the other side in the conflict.

Generally speaking, countries in the region seem to have very important security and economic interests in South Sudan. The specifics of each country's interest, however, differ. By analyzing the economic and security interests of core states in the region, the following section explains why the conflict in South Sudan, if not settled in a timely or sustainable way, could potentially develop into a major regional disaster.

Uganda

Concerns about a potential regional crisis in South Sudan began to be raised with the intervention of Ugandan troops in support of the government. Uganda is concerned about the contiguity of instability in South Sudan to its territory. In particular, Uganda is concerned that unstable South Sudan would become a safe haven to the Lord Resistance Army (LRA), which most recently has operated in Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo (International Crisis Group, 2014:22). Economic interests, however, seem to be even more overwhelming. Uganda is the "the largest trading partner" of South Sudan, exporting coffee, shoes, vehicles, steels, and other agricultural products, amounting to millions of dollars annually (Awolich, 2014:12-13; IRIN, 2014). In addition, South Sudan employs thousands of Ugandan citizens, especially in the service sector, generating a significant amount of revenue for Uganda (IRIN, 2014). Not least, President Museveni and President Salvia Kiir have forged a very close relationship each other (Awolich, 2014:13). The intervention of Uganda is, thus, an issue that should be seen in light of these economic and security interests of the country.

Sudan

Sudan has overtly declared its support to the government (IRIN, March 2014). This does not come as a surprise, given Sudan's interest for an uninterrupted flow of oil from South Sudanese fields. Although it has lost 75% of the oil reserve together with the secession of South Sudan, South Sudan's oil is still an important source of revenue to Sudan (IRIN, March 2014). Sudan still benefits from pipeline and transportation fees. Sudan would, thus, not be willing to risk its revenues, particularly, in a moment which the two countries are enjoying relatively a warm relationship.

Yet, there is no guarantee that Sudan's position would remain unchanged. As the conflict unfolds and the balance of the power of the parties alters, Sudan may revise its position and switch sides. First of all, Uganda's intervention into the conflict is something that irritates Sudan. The two have been at odds for decades supporting the rebels of each other (Williams, 2013:95). In addition, after the Juba incident on December 15, most of the conflict has been concentrated around oil producing territories – Unity, Upper Nile, and Jongelei states. A persisting control of these oil producing territories by the rebels would certainly prompt Sudan to change sides. Added to this, South Sudanese rebels claim that Sudanese rebel groups are fighting against them alongside government forces (BBC World News, *HARDtalk*, May 2014). If this is the case, it comes as evidence to a close relationship between Sudanese rebels and the government in Juba – something which Sudan has long been voicing its complaint. Sudan might respond in kind, supporting the rebels of South Sudan.

In fact, although vehemently denied by Sudanese authorities, there are increasing rumors that Sudan is supporting the rebels undercover (IRIN, March 2014; *Sudan Tribune*, May 2014). Firm evidence to this, however, remains to be produced. Whatever the case might be, the intervention of Uganda, alliance of Sudanese rebels with South Sudanese government, and concentration of the war along the oil fields are all factors that might push Sudan to openly get involved in the conflict.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia also has significant security and economic interests in South Sudan. The Nuer problem in South Sudan is likely to spread into Ethiopia, particularly to Gambela Region (Region – 8), which constitutes a large number of Nuer population. The Nuers of Gambela may extend a hand to their counterparts in South Sudan (IRIN, March 2014). In addition, instability in South Sudan opens up a security vacuum to be exploited by others political actors against Ethiopian interests. Eritrea and Egypt, in particular, could take advantage of such a vacuum.

Ethiopia also has a considerable economic interest in South Sudan. Like Kenya and Uganda, Ethiopia has a large contingent of citizens working in South Sudan. In addition, Ethiopian Airlines operates daily flights to Juba. The Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, the largest government-owned bank in the country, also has branches in South Sudan.

Ethiopia, however, has not sided with any of the parties so far. Rather, it has been the mediator of the conflict. Once again, this does not, however, mean that Ethiopia's position would remain fixed. Reportedly, Ethiopian government officials are unhappy with the intervention of Ugandan troops into South Sudan (IRIN, March 2014). They feel that Uganda is challenging their hegemony in the region (IRIN, March 2014). In addition, Ethiopia is at unease with the military cooperation South Sudan has signed with Egypt (*Turkish Press*, 2014). On top of this, Ethiopia and its Gambela region may not simply sit and see the perpetration of mass-level violence against ethnic Nuers.

Kenya

Kenya was instrumental to the negotiations which led to the end of one of the longest-running civil wars in Africa, particularly in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. Since then, Kenya has benefited tremendously from the resurging post-war economy of South Sudan (IRIN, March 2014). South Sudan has been a destination to Kenyan citizens and banks for employment, investment, and business (Ibid). A crisis in South Sudan would risk all these economic benefits that Kenya enjoys from South Sudan. In addition, violence in South Sudan would also disrupt Kenya's plan to provide an alternative trade route to South Sudan to transport its oil, via the port of Lamu. Added to all this, Kenya is also presently suffering from the instability in Somalia and does not want to see another failed state in its northern frontier.

Egypt

In the last three years, the tension between Egypt and Ethiopia has been on the rise. As part of its strategy of putting pressure on Ethiopia, Egypt has embarked on a task of consolidating its diplomatic and military ties with other countries in the region. Most recently, Egypt has signed a military cooperation deal with South Sudan (*Sudan Tribune*, March 2014). This comes as an alarm bell to Ethiopia, which has intensified the construction of its $ 4.5 billion mega hydroelectric dam project on the Nile (BBC Africa, March 2014). In addition, Egypt, although it is not a member of the regional grouping Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which is currently mediating between the parties, is one of the few countries that immediately pledged to contribute troops as part of the Protection and Deterrence Force which IGAD has sought to deploy in South Sudan (International Crisis Group, 2014:22). Egypt certainly is trying to gain more influence in the region, and this is something Ethiopia abhors.

Eritrea

More than a decade after the end of the Border war (1998-2000), Eritrea and Ethiopia still see each other as archetype enemies. The two countries have been engaged in a proxy war, supporting various rebel groups in the region (Lyons, 2006:6, 16). Somalia, in particular, had been a ground to such wars (Ibid). A prolonged crisis in South Sudan could, similarly, open up another forum for fierce wrestling of these two countries. Eritrea may intervene in the conflict to further destabilize Ethiopia, as well as disrupt any diplomatic gains by Ethiopia. Ethiopia, in its part, as illustrated by its intervention in Somalia (2006) and cross border raids into Eritrean territory (2012), may not tolerate such hostile acts by Eritrea. Indeed, although firm evidence still remains to be produced, there are rumors that Eritrea is covertly aiding South Sudanese rebels (Awolich, 2014:14).

Concluding Remarks

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has suffered in historic proportions due to a conflict largely fuelled by the security and economic interests of its neighbors and countries in the region. Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, Sudan, and Chad have all been involved in the second Congo war, 1998-2003 – also known as Africa's First World War. These countries were drawn into the war mainly due to security and economic reasons. State fragility and sanctuary provided by the Congo to the rebel groups of neighboring states – Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi – has caused an immense security dilemma, to which the countries responded by sending their troops in

pursuit of the dissident groups and fighting against the (Congolese) government.

However, the story of the Congo war was not only about security challenges. Congo's bonanza and the desire to get enriched from the natural resources of the Congo has also been an important factor (McGreal, 2008). For example, a concealed interest to exploit Congo's precious resources, particularly among the top army generals, was certainly a contributing factor in the Ugandan rationale for war (Williams, 2013:92). In addition, among other things, Zimbabwe joined the Congo war to preserve the status quo and protect the economic interests of Zimbabwean elites (Williams, 2013:95). Similarly, Namibia has had economic interests to fight for and protect (McGreal, 2008).

The central contention of this article has been that, given the fragility of South Sudan and its abundant resources, the current crisis in South Sudan could degenerate into a regional crisis. The regional grouping, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), constituting Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Uganda, has been trying to bring an end to the conflict, mediating between the two parties. Member states of IGAD, however, do not seem to be united behind IGAD's effort of mediation. Uganda has unilaterally intervened in support of the incumbent government, and the rebels are reportedly supported by Sudan and Eritrea. Sources within the rebels also claim that a range of Sudanese rebel groups have also become part of the conflict, fighting alongside the government troops. These include Darfurian rebels, particularly the Justice and Equality movement (UNMISS, 2014:16). As a conflict becomes increasingly protracted, other countries in the region could also be enticed to get involved. Sometimes, support and intervention could simply be motivated on calculation of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

For some writers, such as Abraham Awolich (2014:15), the talk of a regional crisis in South Sudan is hype. Awolich sees the intervention of Uganda as a very useful exercise that avoided a terrible bloodshed and genocide in South Sudan (Ibid: 12). In addition, according to him, the claim that Sudan and Eritrea are supporting the rebels is just an unconfirmed rumor (Ibid: 14).

All these propositions by Awolich, however, do not fully evade the potential risk of a regional crisis. To begin with, the rumors may have some value of truth. Awolich himself is not sure if they are entirely so. In addition, as the conflict gets extended overtime, the current position of the countries is likely to develop.

In short, the stakes in the South Sudanese conflict are simply high, and hence the peace process which has currently stalled needs to be revitalized and rigorously pursued to bring a lasting settlement to the conflict.

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