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Courting Khartoum: The Obama Administration's Sudan Policy

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Ending genocide and massive human rights abuses in Sudan and preventing it from becoming a hotbed of terrorism are key U.S. policy objectives in Africa.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama criticized the Bush Administration's policy for inaction and promised to confront Khartoum. Since entering office, however, his Administration has primarily engaged in a lengthy policy reassessment and occasional feuding among policymakers. It now appears that President Obama has settled on a strategy that attempts to spruce up Bush Administration policies toward Sudan with soft talk and modest incentives. It is doubtful that these conciliatory gestures will ultimately alter the behavior of Sudan's thuggish leaders in Khartoum or the *Janjaweed* militias perpetrating terrible crimes in Darfur.

The Obama Sudan Policy. On October 19, 2009, the State Department finally unveiled its comprehensive policy for relations with Sudan.¹ Like other changes in foreign policy strategy emanating from the Obama White House, the revised Sudan policy promises "frank dialogue" with those with "whom we disagree." It proposes unspecified "incentives and disincentives" aimed at ending genocide in Sudan's Darfur region and renewed attention to the North-South peace accord. The policy states that it will prevent Sudan from again becoming a haven for international terrorists. Predictably, the Administration aims to pursue these policies multilaterally with the help of other nations and often through the United Nations.

Considering all of the attention given to Sudan before and after the November elections, the Obama Administration's policy announcement is anticlimactic. It is largely a continuation of Bush Administration policy—which Obama criticized as inadequate—leavened with increased willingness to negotiate with Khartoum and a welcome realization of the need to focus on the crisis in the relationship between Northern and Southern Sudan. Whether the strategy can improve the situation in Darfur remains a huge question.

Why Sudan Is Important? A nation of 40 million, Sudan dominates the headwaters of the Nile and geographically is the largest country in Africa. Its territory is approximately equal to the size of the U.S. east of Mississippi River. Yet decades of internal conflicts and misgovernment have resulted in the loss of as many as 2.5 million lives with millions of others displaced. Today millions of Sudanese depend on the continued generous support of the international community for survival. Ungoverned spaces, factional and tribal rivalries, the collapse of government institutions, and hostile actors create promising preconditions for Islamist terror. The U.S. has long believed that critical humanitarian, political, and strategic interests are at stake in

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Sudan. Consequently, the U.S. spends more than \$2 billion annually for multilateral peacekeeping and other assistance efforts aimed at peace in Sudan.

Upholding the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA). One of the most important achievements of the Bush Administration in Sudan was its support for a negotiated end to the 20 year-old Sudanese civil war. In January 2005, both sides signed the breakthrough comprehensive peace accord (CPA). The accord created a power-sharing mechanism and called for national elections in 2010 and a referendum on the South's independence in 2011. The Obama Administration's not-so-new policy promises to place a renewed focus on achieving compliance with the CPA, resolving conflicts, and holding successful elections. While the CPA opens the door to autonomy and possible division of Sudan into two independent states, many experts doubt the South's ability to govern itself capably or even hold credible elections—let alone Khartoum's readiness to fully abide by peace accords, allow free and fair elections, or accede to the independence of South Sudan.

Ending Genocide in Darfur. The Darfur crisis began in 2003, when various rebel groups challenged the oppressive authority of the Khartoum government in the Texas-size western region. The *Janjaweed* militia, supported by the Sudanese military, committed widespread acts of violence against rebel groups and unarmed civilian populations that resulted in an estimated 300,000 deaths and the displacement of more than 2 million people.

Few conflicts have troubled the conscience of the 21st century international community like the slaughter in Darfur. The conflict is emblematic of man's capacity for inhumanity and led the African Union to create the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) in 2004. When it proved unable to

curtail the violence, AMIS was replaced a hybrid United Nations–African Union peacekeeping mission (UNAMID) in January 2007, which has proved marginally more effective than AMIS, although it has not quelled the ongoing conflict. In March 2009, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Sudan President Omar al-Bashir and is preparing its indictment.

The Obama Administration says the scale of violence in Darfur has diminished.² It promises to base its policy in Darfur on “verifiable changes in conditions on the ground.” Yet, ominously, the announcement of the new Sudan policy occurred as UNAMID officials warned of the potential for increased conflict. The new policy says nothing substantive about bringing combatants and the moral authors of massive crimes against humanity to justice.

Contentious Players, Perennial Problems. Prior to his election, President Obama demanded tough sanctions against Sudan and an immediate end to genocide in Sudan.³ As a scholar at the Brookings Institution, Susan Rice urged the Bush Administration to take tough action to save Darfur, including imposition of a “no-fly” zone and possible use of U.S. military force.⁴ Since January, the President and Ambassador Rice have retreated from these positions, claiming improvements on the ground in Darfur.

Formulating a new policy has been marked by sparring between Rice and the U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan, retired Air Force Major General Scott Gration. In June, Rice and Gration differed over assessments of events in Darfur. Ambassador Rice spoke of ongoing genocide, while Gration declared the situation there constituted the “remnants of genocide.”⁵ Gration attracted attention when he commented: “We've got to think about giving out cookies. Kids, countries—they react to gold stars,

1. U.S. State Department, Office of the Spokesman, “Sudan: A Critical Moment, A Comprehensive Approach,” October 19, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/oct/130672.htm> (October 20, 2009).
2. Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks on the Sudan Strategy,” U.S. Department of State, October 19, 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/10/130686.htm> (October 20, 2009).
3. Organizing for America, “Barack Obama and Joe Biden's Plan to Secure America and Restore our Standing,” 2008, at http://www.barackobama.com/issues/foreign_policy/index_campaign.php#onafrika (October 20, 2009).
4. Susan E. Rice, “The Genocide in Darfur,” The Brookings Institution, 2008, at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Projects/Opportunity08/PB_Darfur_Rice.pdf (October 20, 2009).

smiley faces, handshakes, agreements, talk, engagement.”⁶ Yet what Gration and the Administration propose to offer remains unclear, assigned to a classified portion of the new study.

Policy Recommendations:

- *Realistic Darfur verification.* Because the new policy promises verifiable changes and measures to end genocide in Darfur, the Administration must work with the U.S. Congress and non-governmental organizations to establish acceptable measures of positive change.
- *Robust support for the CPA.* Fulfilling the promise to hold national elections and a sovereignty referendum that are free and fair will require substantial involvement and assistance from the U.S. and other countries. Given the absence of democratic traditions and modern institutions, especially in South Sudan, elections will be difficult at best. Delays may occur for legitimate technical reasons or as the result of sabotage by Khartoum.
- *Adequate contingency planning.* While the new policy promises solutions for “the whole of Sudan,” it also risks falling short of its goals. The

Administration needs to begin a planning process for responses to an escalation in violence in Darfur or a breakdown in the CPA process.

The Perils of a Soft Approach. The Obama Administration promises to end genocide in Darfur, preserve the North–South peace accord, and deny Sudan to terrorists. No one questions these objectives.

Yet the Administration believes, contrary to historical experience, that diplomacy, kind words, and a rich diet of incentives will cause parties that are not democrats and not America’s friends to work with the U.S. A soft U.S. approach that curries favor with the present regime in Khartoum will permit those wedded to absolute power and unafraid of committing genocide to continue perpetuating tyranny and terror over the people of Sudan indefinitely.

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5. Colum Lynch, “Sudan’s Coordinate Genocide in Darfur Is Over, U.S. Envoy Says,” *The Washington Post*, June 18, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/17/AR2009061703491.html> (October 20, 2009).
6. Stephanie McCrummen, “U.S. Envoy’s Outreach to Sudan Is Criticized as Naïve,” *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/28/AR2009092802336.html> (October 20, 2009).