

MODERNIZING INDIA'S APPROACH TO PEACEKEEPING: THE CASE OF SOUTH SUDAN

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Over the last several decades, India's security interests have moved beyond the subcontinent, in response to its growing economic and geopolitical interests. This is especially evident by its increasing engagement with Africa. At the Third India-Africa Forum Summit in October 2015, India and many African nations acknowledged the potential benefits of expanded trade and economic ties, as well as greater security cooperation.¹ With this recognition, and the long-standing presence of Indian peacekeeping troops on the continent, India has a notable opportunity to raise its profile both in Africa and globally. However, to do so, the country must employ a strategic, holistic approach to peacekeeping that is more in line with its current foreign policy. To bolster regional security cooperation, protect its long-term interests, and compete with other rising powers like China, India can and should add conflict prevention and mediation to its peacekeeping toolbox. The need for such an approach is most apparent in South Sudan, where renewed unrest and an unfolding humanitarian crisis threaten India's economic, political, and peacekeeping goals.

INDIA'S STAKES IN SOUTH SUDAN

At stake in South Sudan are India's economic investments and political partnerships and its credibility as an international peacekeeping actor. India was among the first countries to invest in Sudan's oil and gas sector in the early 2000s. This was an important strategic decision because Western commercial interests and competition in this region were and remain low. Indian investment in united Sudan's petroleum sector totaled \$2.3 billion and was one of the first major Indian investments in energy security abroad since the 2001 investment in Russia's Sakhalin-I field.² After its creation, South Sudan assumed around 75 percent of united Sudan's oil production, while the pipelines and the Red Sea export terminal remained in the north, creating several disputes that have worsened since the start of the civil war

in 2013.³ Since then, this investment has turned into more of a liability, as Indian nationals and workers have had to be routinely evacuated with every new cycle of violence. The most recent Operation Sankat Mochan shows India's effectiveness in protecting overseas citizens, but the Indian government has made no effort to ensure the sustainability of such investments in the face of political upheaval and local conflicts. The recent violence has plunged into uncertainty the tenuous peace deal of August 2015, which was the result of a long and complicated mediation process involving numerous external actors. It is clear that a political strategy needs to accompany India's economic investments, especially since national companies like ONGC Videsh have flagged several new locations in Africa for foreign investment in natural resources.⁴

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In addition to economic investments, India has devoted significant human and financial peacekeeping resources to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and, as of July 2016, is the largest troop-contributing country with 2,288 troops.⁵ To understand the scope of this commitment, it is important to note that UNMISS is one of the UN's largest peacekeeping missions, after deployments in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Darfur region of Sudan. Since the start of the civil war in South Sudan, a significant number of Indian soldiers have been injured or lost their lives. Seven soldiers were killed in the first year alone.⁶

The Indian deployment largely constitutes medical corps, engineering units, and supply corps, which have been crucial to running a mission in a new country with almost no existing infrastructure. However, given the nature of the conflict, Indian soldiers have not shied away from robust peacekeeping and have also played an important role in protecting the mass of civilians fleeing from violence. The most recent example is when the UN's Protection of Civilian camps came under heavy attack in Malakal and Pibor; the Indian battalion played a vital role in protecting the thousands of civilians seeking shelter there.⁷ However, the UNMISS is deeply flawed and does not have the mandate or the tools to provide a lasting solution to an increasingly brutal and ethnicized civil war, with political parties unwilling to relinquish control over armed groups.⁸ Given these restrictions, regional and external actors have taken over the mediation process through forums like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and IGAD plus, where India has not participated.

In comparison, China, also invested heavily in South Sudan both in terms of human capital and economic resources, has adopted a hands-on approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. If India's aim is to keep pace with China's rise in influence, it must reassess its application of nonintervention and sovereignty principles, particularly related to peace operations. These principles were products of a specific set of circumstances, produced particularly during the Cold War.⁹ While India acknowledges that the nature of peacekeeping has changed to include intrastate wars involving terrorism and criminal networks, its policy has not kept

pace, particularly with regard to post-Cold War debate on humanitarian imperatives and protection of civilians.¹⁰

REDEFINING INDIAN PEACEKEEPING OBJECTIVES

With Western leadership in the resolution of the conflict steadily declining—best exemplified by Britain, Germany, and Sweden's repatriation of police officers in July without consulting the UN—there is space for India to play a larger role in the conflict's resolution.¹¹ And given that India's international identity has been shaped to a large extent by its role in UN peacekeeping—and it has used peacekeeping as leverage for its claim to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council—peacebuilding and conflict mediation seem like natural entry points for increased engagement.

South Sudan represents a good case for India to test a broader approach to peacekeeping that includes diplomacy and conflict mediation support. India enjoys a certain amount of goodwill in the country, because of both its support of the nascent state and the presence of Indian peacekeeping forces. China has not had some of these advantages, particularly when it was seen as siding with Khartoum. However, it has broken the long-standing Chinese policy of noninterference to act as a mediator in the internal conflict in South Sudan, quell violence, and protect its petroleum interests. In 2008, the then special envoy for African affairs, Liu Guijin, began to talk informally with players outside the ruling elite in Khartoum, invited President Salva Kiir Mayardit to Beijing, and opened a consulate in Juba.¹² Liu's successor, Zhong Jianhua, has spent considerable energy on working with the United States, Ethiopia, and the African Union to find a political solution to the conflict in South Sudan. China was actively involved in the 2014 peace talks in Addis Ababa, closely consulting with both warring parties, as well as Western diplomats and African mediators.¹³ While it is important not to overstate the impact of Chinese potential involvement in a solution to the conflict in South Sudan, the Chinese leadership believes its enhanced mediation role will likely boost its credentials as a "responsible power."

India has previously engaged in mediation between Sudan and South Sudan, when it was not technically seen as interfering in internal matters. In March 2012, the Ministry of External Affairs appointed a special envoy to Sudan and South Sudan. This position was later given to P. S. Raghavan, also the special secretary for the Development Partnership Administration, the body managing India's international development partnerships.¹⁴ As a result, India could both articulate its position for a speedy resolution to the conflict and offer South Sudan several capacity-building and infrastructure projects. However, these projects were either suspended or never initiated due to the civil war, and the position of special envoy became vacant in late 2013. While India has since sent diplomats to assess the situation and follow peace negotiations in Addis Ababa, it remains largely on the sidelines of international mediation efforts.¹⁵

Arguably, India's first-on-the-scene advantages and peacekeeping efforts will not have a sustainable impact in South Sudan unless combined with conflict prevention and mediation support. India has extensive experience in using dialogue to manage and resolve conflicts both internally and regionally. Drawing on this experience, it has the potential to become an influential player in Africa. This means pushing for an augmented peacekeeping mission, including allowing Indian troops to play a larger role in the protection of civilians—a priority for a conflict with a high number of civilian fatalities. In addition, India must make a serious diplomatic push in Juba, in coordination with regional African powers.

Of course, there is no easy solution to seemingly intractable conflicts like South Sudan. India will have to evaluate how it can be a more effective mediator—qualitatively different from other regional actors already engaged in mediation processes. This will be particularly difficult if Indian diplomats have not maintained a wide network of relations within the country besides with the two main leaders Kiir and Riek Machar, who seem unwilling to abide by any solutions. The main lesson from Indian engagement in South Sudan is that to be a credible security actor, the country cannot sit on the sidelines, especially as its soldiers die and a humanitarian catastrophe unfolds.

IMPLICATIONS OF A STRATEGIC APPROACH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for India to be a leading power reflects larger ambitions, both globally and regionally, to have more than a balancing role in the world.¹⁶ This is reflected in India's renewed interest and foreign policy push toward Southeast and East Asia and its ambitions of becoming a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region (evident by its decision to reinvest in building naval capabilities). Recent analyses argue that India plans to embrace new and more ambitious roles for the country's military, as observed in the rescue missions and evacuations of overseas citizens from fragile contexts such as Yemen.¹⁷ To create a marked profile for itself in the African region, India could benefit from developing a distinct peacemaking profile—focused on collaborating closely with partners rather than using its political or economic might, which China is often accused of doing. The region is crucial for India in terms of geography, security, and energy, but India has yet to figure out a strategy to make real political and military contributions to stability and security in the region.

Instituting a more strategic approach to peacekeeping involves recognizing that peacekeeping missions alone cannot solve political stalemates and conflicts. To be effective, India will need to step up cooperation with major powers and regional partners like the African Union, as well as go beyond troop contribution to provide training, logistical and operational support, and conflict mediation support both through bilateral and multilateral processes. It will also need to expand domestic defense capabilities and strengthen military diplomacy. Further, a national debate on the objectives behind India's participation in peacekeeping will be essential, especially in light of its changing foreign policy ambitions.

The new approach is likely to face challenges within New Delhi, especially since peacekeeping has become a routine activity for India and the focus of the Ministry of External Affairs remains on process-related issues at the UN. Some sections of India's strategic community even argue for cutting back on peacekeeping commitments, but to do so would be a waste of a long and exemplary history—which has seen India

devote nearly 185,000 troops to close to fifty UN operations. The recent agreement between the United States and India on jointly training peacekeepers from six African nations is indicative of a changing Indian approach to peacekeeping.¹⁸ It marks the start of cooperation between the two major peacekeeping powers. It is also an opportunity for India to share its expansive experience in peace operations with partners. Much more can be gained by recasting the peacekeeping strategy and by putting it at the center of New Delhi's military diplomacy, especially as India aims to become a net security provider.

NOTES

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