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CONTENTS

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Learning from Sudan's 2011 Referendum

Summary

- Numerous predictions asserted that the referendum on the secession of southern Sudan would lead to renewed civil war.
- Despite ongoing violence in many parts of Sudan and South Sudan, the referendum process was largely peaceful.
- This unanticipated result may prove a relatively rare instance of documented success in conflict prevention.
- Warnings of impending violence came from many sources. They were timely but tended to be vague. Whether they were overly dire because of faulty assumptions about the conflict dynamics deserves scrutiny.
- Two prominent narratives explain why the referendum process was peaceful: one that emphasizes domestic factors and another that focuses on international intervention by Africans and westerners. It is highly likely that both contain important explanations for the peaceful referendum.
- People in Sudan and South Sudan tend to emphasize the domestic narrative; members of the international community tend to focus on international engagement.
- Several lessons for global conflict prevention can be drawn from the Sudan referendum experience:
  ° Preventing conflict in what seems like dire circumstances is possible.
  ° Coordinated outside actions should support local conflict-mitigating dynamics.
  ° Technical actions, such as election or referendum logistics, can have a significant positive impact on political processes.
  ° International actors need to be receptive to taking preventive action.
  ° Focusing on successes, as well as failures, is critical.

Introduction

On the surface, the 2011 referendum on the secession of southern Sudan was an unusually clear case of successful conflict prevention and thus is worth examining for general lessons. Attention to preventing violent conflict, rather than just managing and ending it, has grown substantially around the globe in recent decades. Despite this focus, relatively few instances of prevention have been thoroughly documented. This is understandable, given that proving conflict prevention success requires demonstrating that a series of actions prevented something that never happened from taking place.

Sudan has suffered from violent conflict for most of its five-plus decades as an independent state. The second civil war between its north and south lasted more than twenty years and claimed approximately two million lives, ending in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), a complicated series of protocols that detailed an implementation process extending through 2011. The critical event in the late stages was a referendum in southern Sudan on self-determination—whether to remain part of a unified Sudan, or to become independent.[1] As implementation limped along, with increasing certainty that the south would choose independence but scant progress in resolving difficult postreferendum issues including border demarcation, oil wealth sharing, and the status of the disputed Abyei territory, fears grew that the referendum would spark a return to full-scale civil war.

At the same time, the United States and other governments had been declaring their commitment to preventing violent conflicts and mass atrocities such as those witnessed in the Sudanese region of Darfur. In his speech at the UN General Assembly in 2009, for example, President Barack Obama pledged to "[energize] our efforts to prevent conflicts before they take hold," citing especially efforts to "secure the peace that the Sudanese people deserve." The push to elevate conflict prevention to a foreign policy priority raises questions about how to translate this lofty goal into effective action. It also creates demand for analysis of conflict prevention successes in addition to the more exhaustively studied failures. The referendum and the risk it represented could be seen as a test of the international community's general commitment to prevention as well as an opportunity for learning.

To everyone's relief, the worst fears of massive violence did not come to pass. The referendum took place on time and was largely peaceful and orderly. But relations between Sudan and the new state of South Sudan remain deeply troubled, and large-scale violence on both sides of the border is all too common.

The need for better understanding of conflict prevention, combined with the Sudan referendum experience, led to the examination of two main questions:

What explains the relatively peaceful referendum process in Sudan?[2] Potential hypotheses include that risks of conflict were shifted in time and space but not fundamentally mitigated, that this is a case of effective conflict prevention by domestic actors, and that the actions of external actors were central to preventing a violent outcome. That warnings of conflict were inflated and overhyped is also a possibility. The starting assumption is that no single factor can fully explain events, but that understanding the relative influence and interaction among multiple relevant factors is important.

What lessons can be drawn for continued conflict prevention and mitigation efforts in Sudan and elsewhere? These include what strategies and tools are most useful in preventing violent conflict, and how to use them most effectively. Some lessons may be unique to Sudan, but the working assumption is that others can be applied elsewhere.

One caveat is critical: after this research began, violence escalated in both Sudan and South Sudan, especially around the shared border, and no one can know whether they will ultimately return to war. History will judge the effectiveness of conflict prevention efforts in the lead-up to the referendum very differently depending on what the coming months

hold.[3] This analysis, therefore, must be understood as limited by the fact that relations between the two states are constantly evolving. At the same time, however, engaging in analysis without the benefit of more time to observe evolving conflict dynamics has certain advantages, including less hindsight bias[4] and fresher recollections of key parties' thinking during the planning and implementation of critical actions in 2010 and 2011.

Conflict Issues

Southern Sudan's self-determination referendum was the cornerstone and conclusion of the CPA, and probably the single nonnegotiable component of the agreement for southerners. The CPA ended the second of Sudan's two devastating civil wars and was the product of intense diplomacy on the part of the troika (as it was referred to) of international actors long engaged in conflict resolution in Sudan—the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway—and the east African regional organization known as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Those civil wars were driven by a complex array of factors, but at their core was the sense of exclusion, marginalization, and second-class citizenship felt by southerners, who deeply resented the political and economic dominance of the northern Sudanese elite, and the violence they perpetrated.

In 2005, the CPA established the semi-autonomous Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), with its capital in Juba and led initially by John Garang, who served simultaneously as the president of the GoSS and the first vice president of all Sudan, under President Omar al-Bashir. Garang died in a helicopter crash only weeks after the signing of the CPA and was replaced by his deputy, Salva Kiir. Crucially, the CPA allowed the south to maintain the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which led the southern rebellion during the second civil war and, during the CPA's interim period from 2005 to 2011, comprised roughly 150,000 soldiers. This was only one of the trappings of autonomy the south enjoyed during the interim period, during which it established its own ministries and representation abroad, issued travel documents, and inaugurated development projects. In important ways, the south was on its way to independence well before the January 2011 referendum.

Relations between Khartoum and Juba during this period were rocky at best, and, despite assertions to the contrary, the CPA was not implemented in its entirety. Instead, those in power in Khartoum and Juba decided which aspects were most important and focused on implementing them. For the south, the referendum was the top priority; in essence, the message from Juba was that almost everything was negotiable but that the referendum must be held on time and be free of northern meddling.[5] The south made clear that if there were no referendum and secession, they were willing to return to war.[6] For the north, the prescribed nationwide elections in 2010 took on renewed importance after Bashir was indicted by the International Criminal Court for his alleged role in the violence in Darfur, because the dominant National Congress Party (NCP) was eager to present him to the international community as being popularly elected. The north also had a history of instigating violence to protect its interests. But lost in this selective implementation was the CPA's larger democratic transformation agenda, which aspired to reform the exclusionary and divisive governance practices that have prevailed in Sudan for decades. In that regard, the CPA failed.

The 2010 elections were deeply flawed and fell short of international standards.[7] They essentially reaffirmed the status quo, which left the NCP dominating in the north and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) victorious almost across the board in the south. Little changed as a result, and the stage was set for the January 2011 referendum. As it approached, and the parties made scant progress negotiating postreferendum issues thought to be central to their calculations, warnings of a return to war intensified.

A Ticking Time Bomb?

Early warning is universally accepted as one of the pillars of effective conflict prevention. In short, it entails analysis of escalating risks of violent conflict and timely communication about these risks to those who can take preventive actions. Cases of failure to prevent violent conflict can be sorted roughly into *warning failures,* in which policymakers were blindsided, and *response failures,* in which warning was adequate but preventive action either inadequate or ineffective. Apparent conflict prevention success could just as easily be the result of inflated warnings as the product of effective action in response to accurate warnings.

It is tempting to note simply that warnings were issued in the lead-up to the referendum— "a steady drumbeat of Armageddon predictions"—and move on to the next analytic task.[8] But assessing the effectiveness of early warning requires looking at multiple factors:

- How accurate were assessments of the severity and nature of conflict risks?
- Did warnings raise alarm to general dangers or specific plausible scenarios?
- Were warnings far enough in advance to allow for effective preventive action, yet not so distant as to be beyond policymakers' time horizons?
- Were warnings communicated in a way that they would be absorbed and recognized as important by relevant decision makers? Did such individuals take the warnings into consideration?

A review of publicly available risk assessments and warnings yields several conclusions:

- A plethora of warnings were given about the risk of a return to war around the referendum, particularly from nongovernmental sources.
- Although their accuracy is difficult to judge, the similarity of assessments by a wide range of individuals and groups lends credence to the validity of the perceived risks. Yet grounds exist for suspecting that warnings may have been overly dire because of faulty assumptions about the conflict dynamics. Many analysts based their concerns largely on the lack of progress in negotiations concerning oil wealth sharing, border demarcation, and the status of Abyei, or on the assumption that the NCP would simply never let the south go. Others posited that averting renewed war required a fundamental shift in U.S. strategy toward more punitive measures. Yet these factors did not change appreciably. If they were less significant than was thought, the situation may not have been as precarious as the severity of warnings indicated.
- Many warnings were not precise about the scenarios of violent conflict that might erupt, focusing generally on the potential for renewed civil war. Several analysts pointed to Abyei as a likely flashpoint; others highlighted the risks of south-south violence, violence along the north-south border, and attacks on civilian populations—especially southerners living in the north.
- Statements by senior U.S. decision makers indicate that they received warnings when they could still have taken significant preventive measures. Some of the most influential warnings were reportedly communicated by the parties themselves.

U.S. Government Warnings

Warning within the U.S. government is mainly the province of the intelligence community, and warnings are thus rarely issued openly. In the case of Sudan, however, multiple senior U.S. government officials made public statements expressing concern about the risk of major violence around the referendum. The most basic functions of warning—eliminating strategic surprise and ensuring that decision makers are aware of risks—were satisfied in the U.S. government, and likely in many other governments.

President Obama spoke publicly about the seriousness of the risk of violence in the referendum period. At a meeting on Sudan at the UN in September 2010, Obama described an "urgent situation in Sudan that demands the attention of the world."[9] He went on to explain, "At this moment, the fate of millions of people hangs in the balance. What happens in Sudan in the days ahead may decide whether a people who have endured too much war move forward towards peace or slip backwards into bloodshed." Also in September 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton responded to a question about Sudan by saying, "The situation north-south is a ticking time bomb of enormous consequence."[10] Almost a year earlier, a document summarizing the results of the administration's strategy review on Sudan had cited the referendum: "Delays in implementing key portions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement . . . represent a dangerous flashpoint for renewed conflict."[11]

Although most intelligence analysis is never made public, the head of the U.S. intelligence community testifies before Congress annually to present the community's assessment of worldwide threats to U.S. national security. Sudan has been mentioned in each of the last several years. In February 2010, then director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair's statement ratcheted up the warning significantly:

> The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement brought a tenuous peace between northern and southern Sudan, but many observers warn that the risk of renewed conflict is rising as we approach 2011, when the south is set to vote in a referendum on southern independence. Khartoum and Juba are running out of time to resolve disputes over the north-south border—along which most of Sudan's oil reserves lie—or to formulate a post-2011 wealth-sharing deal, which we judge are key to preserving the peace. While a renewed conflict could be limited to proxy fighting or skirmishes focused around individual oilfields, both sides' arms purchases indicate their anticipation of more widespread conflict.[12]

A number of advocates seized on this analysis to buttress their arguments for more vigorous U.S. action.

Nongovernmental Warnings

Voices from outside government often play influential roles in shaping the foreign policy agenda and, in particular, in spotlighting crises perceived to be receiving too little government attention. Independent, nongovernment warnings of major violence surrounding the referendum were plentiful and often pessimistic.[13]

In August 2010, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote of "a growing risk that Sudan will be the site of the world's bloodiest war in 2011, and perhaps a new round of genocide as well."[14] He cited a letter to President Obama signed by sixty-eight nongovernmental groups warning of "the looming potential of a return to war between north and south" Sudan. In November 2010, President Bush's former special envoy to Sudan, Richard Williamson, struck a similar note in an opinion piece published under the headline "How Obama Betrayed Sudan." He wrote, "Time is short. The dangers are rising. The cost in human suffering will be unbearable."[15]

The most consistent criticism was that the United States had not used credible pressures on Sudan to accompany the incentives on offer. As Williamson argued, "There have been no sticks. Obama must make it crystal clear that if war reignites, there will be serious consequences. The United States must make a credible threat that it will employ retaliatory actions against those who ignite renewed war, perhaps even using missiles to take out strategic targets." Williamson, like Blair's congressional testimony, also pointed to the "decisive issue" of oil revenue sharing, on which Williamson found "no evidence of any progress." "Without some acceptable resolution of this thorny issue," he concluded, "war cannot be ruled out."

The need to issue credible threats along with conditional incentives was a nearly ubiquitous theme in NGO analyses. Gerard Prunier and Maggie Fick, in a June 2009 report, eighteen months before the 2011 referendum, concluded that

Along similar lines, in September 2009, John Prendergast from Enough wrote, "Left unchecked, the NCP's behavior will trigger a return to war in the south and make it all the more difficult to resolve the still simmering crisis in Darfur."[17] This report was one of the most definitive forecasts of renewed violent conflict. "All the warning signs for a much broader conflict are now present," the report declared, concluding that "the actual substance of the U.S. diplomatic strategy is fatally flawed and is failing to halt the accelerating slide back to north-south war." The main problem of the U.S. strategy, according to Prendergast, was that its actions "inadvertently led the NCP to believe it can renegotiate specific elements of the CPA and avoid honoring agreements or sharing power." The recommendations that followed urged President Obama to state unequivocally that the CPA must be implemented and to specify the consequences if it is not.

The International Crisis Group, the NGO whose analysis is perhaps most widely read and respected by governments, also warned of conflict risks surrounding the referendum. A December 2009 briefing asserted that "Sudan is sliding toward violent breakup. . . . Unless the international community, notably the U.S., the UN, the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council, and the Horn of Africa Intergovernment Authority on Development, cooperate to support both CPA implementation and vital additional negotiations, return to north-south war and escalation of conflict in Darfur are likely."[18] Although Crisis Group's analysis discussed the need to threaten noncompliant parties with stiffer consequences, it tended to place at least equal emphasis on energetic and robust international engagement and coordination.

Most voices outside government warned that Sudan was on a clear path toward war in the lead-up to the referendum.

In sum, most voices outside government warned that Sudan was on a clear path toward war in the lead-up to the referendum, but that the U.S. government could alter this course if it worked with partners to ratchet up the coercive measures threatened for noncompliance with the CPA. But there was no significant change in the use of sticks or progress on the issues thought to be decisive, yet at the same time no major north-south conflict. One must conclude, therefore, that the consensus NGO and independent analysis was incomplete at best or seriously flawed at worst.

UN Warnings

The United Nations (UN) was deeply engaged in CPA implementation from the beginning. The secretary-general issued a series of reports at the request of the Security Council—five in 2010 alone—on the situation in Sudan. By the time of the last report before the referendum, issued on December 31, 2010, the secretary-general noted significant progress on technical preparations for the referendum as well as progress in negotiations on post-referendum arrangements, and referred to "the unlikely event that the referendum leads to large-scale violence."[19] He also wrote, "The continuing stalemate over Abyei and the Abyei referendum is a cause for alarm . . . an agreement is not yet in sight and tensions are building up on the ground."[20]

In earlier reports, the secretary-general had expressed greater concern about dangers of the referendum period. The first of his reports in 2010 observed that

a return to conflict remains a very real possibility, with potentially catastrophic humanitarian, political, military, and economic consequences throughout the region. Preventing such an outcome will require all the support that the international and regional communities can offer.[21]

As one might expect, the language used in the UN reports—for example, "remains a very real possibility"—is open to wide interpretation, and UN personnel in New York, Khartoum, and Juba disagreed about the risk of renewed violence. Likewise, the secretary-general's main prescriptions were vague. In addition to calling for "all the support that the international and regional communities can offer," the report concluded, "With less than a year before the referendums, successfully completing implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement will require an enormous exercise of political will by both parties."[22]

The tone and severity of the conflict warnings in the secretary-general's reports is considerably less alarmist than those in independent reports and newspaper columns, and even from U.S. officials. However, it is difficult to know—given how different the purpose and context of the respective reports are—the extent to which this reflects real differences in risk assessments. Neither an NGO nor the UN nor any government is free from the prejudice or bias that can unintentionally tilt analyses. Moreover, one must be alert to the possibility that warnings are deliberately inflated or minimized to shape policy actions or to draw attention to a cause.

Two Narratives

Fortunately, the worst-case referendum scenarios envisioned did not come to pass. Politically and logistically, the referendum process was largely a success. Two narratives predominate in explaining this success: one that focuses on internal, domestic factors, and another that revolves around international engagement and intervention. In general, Sudanese and others in Sudan (and now South Sudan) tend to give primacy to domestic factors, and observers outside the country to the external factors. These two narratives are not mutually exclusive, of course; few knowledgeable observers or referendum participants completely dismiss either domestic or international factors, and most recognize that some combination are to credit for the peaceful process. But which factors were most influential is in dispute. The next section explores the logic of each narrative.

Politically and logistically, the referendum process was largely a success.

Domestic Factors

NCP and SPLM interests. The most straightforward, and perhaps convincing, explanation for the peaceful referendum was that neither the NCP nor SPLM wanted a return to war. For the NCP, this calculation was largely a product of military and economic factors. For the SPLM, the impetus was the overwhelming desire of southerners to peacefully secede and start anew in their own country, coupled with the SPLM's need to maintain the moral high ground and strong relations with the West, which would have been jeopardized had it seemed eager to fight.

As the referendum approached, it became clear that the NCP and SPLM each had a single primary goal: for the NCP, it was remaining in power, the immediacy of which was heightened by the International Criminal Court's indictment of President Bashir; for the SPLM, it was secession, preferably an orderly one. Neither party wavered, and a return to war would have put both goals in jeopardy. Renewed conflict would have further isolated the NCP internationally and shaken its economic and military standing, weakening its hold on power. It would also have scuttled the peaceful, orderly secession the SPLM craved and made the state-building challenge even more difficult. In seeking to avoid a return to war, the NCP and SPLM interests were temporarily aligned.[23]

By many accounts, it was in November 2010, around the time of an NCP *Shura* (leadership) council meeting, that Bashir decided to allow the referendum to proceed relatively undisturbed and to accept the inevitable southern secession. This decision was a highly

contentious one within the NCP, the repercussions of which continue.[24] Once the decision was made, some of the political and logistical barriers to the referendum melted away. Instead of attempting to scuttle the referendum, Bashir was outwardly welcoming of it, giving a well-received speech in Juba on January 4, 2011, and being the first head of state to officially recognize the referendum result.

Military balance of power. One of the most frequently cited explanations for the NCP's acceptance of the referendum and secession involves the military balance of power between the northern army, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), and the southern army, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). A central component of the CPA was that it maintained these two armies, likely with the intent of creating this balance of power, and ordered that the SAF withdraw from southern Sudan (which it did) and the SPLA withdraw from northern Sudan (which it did not). Despite the CPA's prescriptions for reducing the size of both armies, evidence is ample that both sides strengthened their military hardware and posture during the interim period. Whereas the SPLA was a guerilla army (albeit a formidable one) during Sudan's second civil war, throughout the interim period it made progress transforming into a more professional force. Another key change was that during the war the SPLA controlled only parts of southern Sudan, and the SAF maintained strategic garrison towns. During the interim period, the SPLA clearly controlled all of southern Sudan after the SAF withdrew. Furthermore, a large percentage of SPLA troops were deployed close to the north-south border, many maintaining a presence in northern Sudan. For these reasons, many southern leaders warned that if war returned, it would partially be fought in the north, even in the vicinity of Khartoum, unlike previous civil wars. This deployment was likely a deterrent to northern aggression.

Furthermore, throughout the interim period, the SAF fought a low-intensity war in Darfur. A return to north-south conflict would have forced the SAF to fight on two fronts, which may have stretched it and other northern armed elements to a breaking point. This possibility likely factored into the calculations of the Darfur rebel movements: if a north-south civil war resumed, they would intensify their military campaign. Whether the Darfur rebel movements had the capacity to escalate militarily remains an open question, but the prospect of intense fighting on two fronts was likely another deterrent to northern aggression.

An element of war fatigue among the militaries and general populations in north and south also surely came into play after decades of conflict that took more than two million lives. Anecdotally, many Sudanese and South Sudanese complain of being tired of war, eager to do whatever they can to avoid it. This factor is difficult to quantify, however, and how war fatigue affects leaders' decision making is uncertain, especially in places where democracy is in its infancy and leaders are not consistently held accountable to popular sentiment.

Economic factors. Despite economic rationales for the NCP to try to preserve unity given the preponderance of oil in the south (roughly 75 to 80 percent of Sudan's presecession oil reserves were located in the south), the economic cost of returning to war would have been high. By late 2010, the northern economy had begun to weaken in the wake of inflation, corruption, the expectation of southern secession, and other factors; in response, the government implemented significant austerity measures. Adding the cost of war presaged disastrous economic consequences; one organization estimated $50 billion in lost GDP.[25] The economic costs to the north would have been twofold: the military expenses and the negative economic impact. This outcome may have been a burden that the north simply could not have endured; such losses and additional expenditures may have made maintaining the patronage system on which the NCP depends exceedingly difficult, possibly jeopardizing its hold on power—a reality the NCP leadership likely understood.

The north also had economic incentives to abide by the CPA and, notably, to bring peace to Darfur. The roadmap the U.S. government put forward in September 2010 laid this

groundwork. If Sudan were to abide by the CPA, it would be removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. If it were to peacefully resolve the Darfur conflict, it would enjoy normalized relations with the United States and some debt relief as well. Debt relief was an important incentive; at the time of the referendum Sudan's external debt stood at roughly $38 billion. For years, the chances of having significant portions of that debt written off appeared remote, but the U.S. roadmap seemed to offer what had previously been unavailable (though doubts circulated about Washington's ability to deliver).

Furthermore, the north and south's significant dependence on oil revenue likely served as a deterrent to renewed violence.[26] It was probable that if war resumed, the oil infrastructure (pipelines and refineries) would be damaged or destroyed, diminishing the oil revenues accrued by both sides. Furthermore, if the oil stopped flowing for any notable period, the pipelines would be damaged because of the high wax content in Sudanese oil (if the oil stops flowing it essentially hardens), which also would have crippled the industry. Neither north nor south could afford to lose precious oil revenue. Oil is often characterized as a negative factor in Sudan—something to fight over—but the mutual dependence on it may actually have had an overall positive effect.

Effective southern strategy. The leaders of Southern Sudan had weaknesses, but they played their cards quite well in the run-up to the referendum. Senior government and SPLM figures made abundantly clear that holding the referendum on time was their top priority— a redline—and that they were in lock-step on this policy. The SPLM message concerning the primacy of a timely and fair referendum was simple and straightforward—easily understandable by Sudanese and the international community. The unspoken implication was that if the referendum were not held on time, or if the south were prevented from seceding, a return to war would be almost certain. Essentially, the SPLM made clear that almost everything was negotiable except the referendum. Publicly, SPLM leaders equivocated on which referendum outcome they supported, but that they favored secession was never in doubt, and as the referendum approached President Kiir began to more overtly encourage a vote for secession.

Also in the months leading up to the referendum, the SPLM and southern leaders made a concerted effort to rein in and accommodate political and military opposition in the south. Politically, the SPLM convened the All Southern Sudan Political Parties Conference in October 2010, which was impressively inclusive. The conference final communiqué presented a unified position on the need for a timely referendum and laid out a roadmap for postreferendum governance (several opposition parties now accuse the SPLM of not adhering to that roadmap). Almost simultaneously, President Kiir offered amnesty to three renegade SPLA leaders who had rebelled and were destabilizing portions of the south.[27] The offer was not uniformly accepted, but did seem to temporarily mollify the rebellions; violence in southern Sudan was significantly lower in 2010 than in 2009 and 2011. The result of this political and military reconciliation was that the south temporarily went quiet, with a loose, transient unity among southerners prevailing as they counted the days to the referendum. This unity demonstrated to the world that whatever their internal differences, southerners were almost unanimous in their support for a timely referendum and, by extension, southern secession.

Southern leaders also showed impressive restraint in not responding militarily to several northern provocations. In the weeks leading up to the referendum, multiple SAF bombs landed along the north-south border, by most accounts on the southern side. Then, in May 2011, two months before southern secession, northern troops occupied Abyei, the disputed and volatile region along the shared border that has long threatened to drag both sides back to war (northern military action was, by some accounts, in response to southern provocations). All these acts can be interpreted as northern efforts to provoke aggressive southern responses; if that was the strategy, the south refused to take the bait, though the possibility of conflict over Abyei remains pronounced. This restraint may have left the south looking

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weak, but southerners seemed to understand that they needed to stay the course to reach their goal. This included making the strategic decision to leave the final status of Abyei temporarily unresolved and to not address the future status of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, two states in the north populated by some groups sympathetic to the south that have since descended into violence.

Northern support for secession. The conventional wisdom before the referendum was that the NCP, and many northern citizens, opposed southern secession. This assumption may be accurate, but a notable portion of the northern population may actually have favored secession on the grounds that it would, once and for all, resolve the "southern problem" (essentially that the south is a burden not worth fighting for any longer) and produce a more homogenous rump state (which for many means more Arab and Islamic).[28] This argument was favored by some NCP hardliners and closely associated with the newspaper al-Intibaha.[29] The acrimonious interim period made unity unattractive, according to this line of thinking, and it would be better to let southerners go their own way[30] and for the north to continue the Islamist project started in the 1980s. Southerners, the thinking goes, are fundamentally different from northerners.

This argument likely reflects some revisionist thinking. It is easy to support southern secession when it is so clearly the overwhelming preference of southerners and the likely referendum outcome. Accordingly, this argument grew more prominent in the north as the referendum approached and secession appeared increasingly certain. It may have been a strategy for northerners to cope with and justify that outcome. But it is difficult to gauge what portion of the northern population truly bought into this thinking.

Technical preparations. The explanatory factors offered earlier, concerning north-south dynamics and relations that would affect the referendum, are largely political. Such dynamics are the stuff of headlines but often obscure the grassroots grunt work required to pull off a complex process such as an election or referendum. The effective logistical preparations behind the scenes of the referendum is in many ways the untold success story. In the latter months of 2010 there was considerable concern that, from a technical perspective, the referendum might be subpar, and that the north would meddle in logistical preparations to try to lower the credibility of the referendum, which certainly would have been in their capacity. Politically, the referendum needed to meet a high technical standard for the world to accept dividing Africa's largest country into two.[31]

Thanks in large part to the work and leadership of the Khartoum-based Southern Sudan Referendum Commission (SSRC) and the Juba-based Southern Sudan Referendum Bureau (SSRB), the preparations came together in time. According to U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan Princeton Lyman,

> A major effort that combined frequent political pressuring by international actors, extensive technical support from the UN, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, and other sources of expertise, and courageous leadership by the SSRC chairman in the face of politically inspired criticism and threats, enabled the SSRC to confound all the predictions and be able to emerge on the dawn of the prescribed date ready and able to carry out the self-determination vote.[32]

The efforts of the SSRC chairman, Mohamed Ibrahim Khalil, as well as those of the head of the SSRB, Chan Reec Madut, are commendable and an important part of the story. Khalil, a widely respected northern lawyer, proved not as malleable as the NCP might have expected. The international support was also crucial, especially the funds, equipment, and expertise provided and the observation conducted by the Carter Center and others.

International Engagement

Despite this plethora of domestic explanations for referendum success, the international factors often attracted greater attention, especially from the media, contributing to a

The referendum needed to meet a high technical standard for the world to accept dividing Africa's largest country into two.

narrative that the international community saved the day.[33] There is little doubt that the international role was critical, and possibly decisive. Several factors were influential.

African leadership and broad international engagement. In the months leading up to the referendum almost every country with an interest in Sudan found its voice on the matter. The troika of the United States, the UK, and Norway was centrally involved, but deference to African leadership and the African solutions to African problems principle was clear. African leadership came from multiple sources: the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan (AUHIP), chaired by former South African president Thabo Mbeki, supported by former Burundian president Pierre Buyoya and former Nigerian president Abdulsalami Abubakar; IGAD, the regional grouping of east African countries; and individual heads of state, notably Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, who was widely acknowledged to be one of the few leaders able to maintain a balanced relationship with both the NCP and SPLM (in part because Ethiopia borders both Sudan and South Sudan). Haile Menkerios, an Eritrean-born South African who served as special representative of the UN secretary-general in Sudan, was also closely involved in the process.

These leaders, especially Mbeki and the AUHIP, played a particularly important role in selling the notion of southern self-determination to the rest of Africa. With few exceptions, Africa's colonially drawn borders, despite their artificiality, have been treated as sacrosanct by its leaders. Many African heads of state were ambivalent about, if not opposed to, the division of Africa's largest country, for fear of possible follow-on secession efforts elsewhere and that secession would result in two weak states rather than one. At various stages before the referendum, concerns were that the African Union might not accept southern secession, especially if the referendum process had any significant technical flaws. This situation would have been disastrous, putting the UN and influential non-African countries, including the United States, in the difficult position of siding with either southern Sudan or the African Union. But, in the end, this concern was a nonissue, in part because of arguments by the AUHIP members and other African leaders that the continent had no choice but to accept the decision made by southern Sudanese.

African leaders such as Mbeki and Zenawi also had important behind-the-scenes dialogue with the most senior NCP and SPLM leaders in the run-up to the referendum. Given their stature as current and former African heads of state, they were able to deliver messages and offer advice in a way unmatched by other interlocutors. This interaction was critical in the case of Bashir because the United States and other Western countries had forbidden their diplomats from directly engaging with him on the basis of the International Criminal Court indictment. But Bashir needed to be regularly consulted as the referendum approached, a role that was filled by Mbeki, Zenawi, and others.

International coordination. In the months leading to the referendum, the international community sent a strongly coordinated message to Sudan, the crux of which was that the referendum had to happen on time and that the outcome must be respected. A secondary emphasis was often the need to negotiate and resolve the various postreferendum issues, such as how to share oil revenue, divide debts, demarcate the shared border and agree on potentially explosive citizenship issues. This rare degree of international coordination has two explanations. First, the message to Sudanese (the NCP in particular) was simple—hold the referendum and respect the result—making it easy and straightforward to articulate. Second, the fixed date of the referendum, which loomed on the calendar and was widely understood to be followed by either southern secession or renewed fighting, mobilized the international community because leaders could count the days to the make-or-break moment and knew the urgency of the situation would not last indefinitely. The result was temporary unity among the international community. Even countries naturally predisposed to oppose secession, such as China, belatedly recognized the only plausible referendum outcome and signaled readiness to accept the division of Sudan.

The referendum rose to a level of international importance that is rare for African issues. The culmination of international engagement was probably the high-level meeting in September 2010, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, convened by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, which emphasized the primacy of the referendum. Speaker after speaker—many of them heads of state, including President Obama—affirmed their expectations for a timely and credible referendum. In this and other venues, the NCP and SPLM were repeatedly compelled to publicly commit to the referendum and its result. With each public commitment, it became increasingly difficult to back away from the pledge.

U.S. engagement. Although deferential to African leadership at many turns, the United States was always a central player. This involvement was due to American global influence generally but more specifically to its long-standing engagement in Sudanese peacemaking, the many predictions of renewed violence,[34] the vocal advocacy community in the United States that was deeply engaged on Darfur issues and pivoted toward the referendum as it approached, and, critically, to the unrivaled incentives and pressures the United States could bring to bear. Despite being more directly affected by Sudan issues, the African countries and organizations involved could not bring the tools for moving the NCP and SPLM's positions in the same way that the United States and a few other powerful countries could. With both incentives (removing Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terror, removal of sanctions, and debt relief) and to a lesser extent pressures (increasing international political and economic isolation of the north,[35] withholding incentives) at its disposal, the United States—it was presumed in some quarters—could affect outcomes in Sudan. As discussed, these incentives, on the surface, were no doubt attractive to the NCP, especially given the difficult economic situation it faced following secession. But there was at the time, and continues to be, deep skepticism among NCP leaders that the United States is capable of delivering on such incentives given the multiple branches of the U.S. government involved in sanctions removal and debt relief (including the Congress, elements of which have historically been hostile to the NCP) and the influential role of the advocacy community that is skeptical of rewarding the NCP. Because it was never clear that the U.S. administration was capable of delivering these incentives, U.S. leverage was diminished, but still significant.

The immediacy and fixed date of the referendum mobilized and temporarily united the international community. The effect was similar within the U.S. government. Divisions within the administration on Sudan policy before the referendum were an open secret, but in the lead-up to the referendum the different camps seemed to close ranks. This was likely due to what by many accounts was the personal engagement of President Obama, who weighed in on the internal disputes and was said to receive daily briefings on Sudan issues. A small group of interagency senior officials was established to work closely on Sudan issues, which raised the profile and importance of those issues. This heightened U.S. engagement and the ultimately peaceful referendum has led some to characterize the process as a key U.S. foreign policy success.[36]

Two moments of U.S. engagement are worth noting. The first was in June 2010, when Vice President Joe Biden met with Kiir in Nairobi to discuss U.S. expectations for the referendum process. The second was just before the meeting on Sudan at the UN in September 2010, when the United States produced the roadmap for normalized relations with the north, which clearly articulated a timeline, steps, and reciprocal actions in the normalization process. Both signaled high-level U.S. engagement as the referendum approached.

In sum, the array of explanatory factors for the relatively successful referendum is wide, but there is a gap between Sudanese and international participants and observers in terms of which factors they believe were more or less influential.

Policy Lessons

After combining the analysis of prereferendum warnings and the various explanations for why the referendum process was relatively peaceful, what lessons emerge? Several are evident, most of which are applicable beyond the Sudan context.

Even in the most combustible circumstances, violent conflict is not inevitable. At the most basic level, the experience of relative peace around the referendum reinforces this fundamental tenet of conflict prevention. Despite differences in degree of concern, analysts were unanimous that the ingredients were present in the lead-up to the referendum to result in massive violence. Whatever set of explanatory factors one subscribes to, the immediate outcome was different.

African problems have African solutions . . . when buttressed by international support. To their credit, African leaders recognized the great importance of the referendum, as well as the threat it presented if not managed effectively, and mobilized in response. The AUHIP was an innovative mechanism that attracted the participation of prominent former heads of state. The AUHIP's success rate has been mixed; it took the lead in facilitating negotiations on postreferendum issues, which have yet to be resolved, more than a year after the referendum. But the African engagement in, and effectively blessing of, the referendum process that the AUHIP represented may have been as important as its more tangible achievements. The referendum was the major political event in sub-Saharan Africa in 2011 and, perhaps for the first time with an event of such magnitude, Africans were out front in international engagement. The effectiveness of African leadership, however, still depended on broader international support, especially from the major powers with the ability to bring pressures and incentives to bear. Had Africa leaned one way and much of the international community another way, the result could have been disastrous. Fortunately this did not occur; consequently, African influence was magnified.

Outsiders should recognize the limits of their influence and will maximize their positive impact if they understand and support local conflict-mitigating dynamics and are coherent, consistent, and coordinated across influential parties. In most circumstances, local parties and neighbors will have the greatest influence on local conflict dynamics. Outsiders—perhaps especially when they are powerful Western governments—frequently overestimate the extent of their influence on internal conflict dynamics in other countries. This confidence can lead not only to exaggerated claims of impact, but to misguided strategies in the first place. Outsiders who seek to help prevent conflicts should start by analyzing inside-out the interests and capabilities of various parties, resisting the temptation to assume that the solution lies in Washington, New York, Brussels, or even Beijing. This orientation, consistent with the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development principles of good engagement in fragile states, should help minimize the risk of counterproductive actions and of third parties being manipulated by one party or another.

These insider-outsider dynamics are reflected in the two distinct narratives that emerged from the research to explain the relatively peaceful referendum process. The narratives, however, describe complementary forces, suggesting that internal and external actions reinforced each other with conflict mitigating effects. For example, the south's determination to hold the referendum on time was bolstered by international actors' strong and consistent message to the north about the need to stick to the referendum timeline. Each action alone probably had positive effects on the peaceful nature of the referendum process; together they proved quite powerful.

A similar point holds concerning the coherence of messages and actions by the many international parties engaged with Sudan. The consistency in communication across influential governments and international organizations was unusually high in the months leading up to

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the referendum, and it seems that this made a difference. Not only did it mean a single, clear message from outsiders—the referendum needed to happen on time and be credible—but also few opportunities for Sudanese parties to "forum shop" or play one outside party off another.

That said, outsiders should be cautious about crediting their interventions for peaceful outcomes, especially without acknowledging the critical domestic factors at work. Whatever contribution outsiders made, the peaceful referendum process was ultimately a Sudanese achievement.

Seemingly apolitical, technical actions can be critical ingredients of a conflict prevention strategy. The important role of technical preparations for the referendum underscores the general point that preventing a conflict does not always require solving the stickiest, most sensitive political issues. Technical assistance and capacity building on issues such as elections, policing, and managing natural resources can positively influence conflict dynamics in many situations, and are typically less controversial than core political and security issues such as power-sharing arrangements or control over weapons. This kind of preventive action commonly occurs under the radar but can be used to greater effect if these activities are integrated fully into policy discussions, supported with adequate resources, and coordinated across international actors.

The more receptive international actors are to taking preventive action, the more robust those actions will be. Several factors contributed to the level of international engagement in advance of a potential major crisis, which can be described collectively as receptivity to proposals for preventive action. It is important to understand these factors if one believes that the kind of preventive action in the lead-up to the referendum reflects a culture of prevention that should be more routine than exceptional. The same collection of factors is unlikely to be present in other situations, however.

First, the referendum represented a clear, discrete event that many feared would trigger north-south conflict, and it was set for a specific date—January 9, 2011. This deadline made it easier to mobilize preventive action than in the more common scenario in which either potential triggers are unknown or their timing is uncertain. Second, in the United States, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, an extremely active political constituency was focused on Sudan and lobbying for vigorous U.S. government action to reduce risks of violence surrounding the referendum. This constituency was in place, having previously mobilized around the violence in Darfur and ending Sudan's civil war. Unlike some potential conflict situations, U.S. leaders had a domestic political incentive to support action on Sudan. Third, and perhaps most important, prereferendum action on Sudan represents a prominent case of postconflict prevention as opposed to primary prevention. That is, the war that diplomats and others were trying to prevent was primarily the resumption of a war between the north and south that was ended by the CPA in 2005. This quality made it different in important respects from efforts to prevent new conflicts—those involving parties between which an agreed framework for peaceful coexistence is lacking.

That the CPA provided an overall structure and precedent for discussions between the NCP and SPLM and a series of commitments the two parties had already agreed to, with significant support from external actors such as the United States, made the preventive efforts in 2010 and 2011 much easier. Cross-national quantitative analyses indicate that a recent history of conflict is associated with increased risk of violent conflict.[37] But the experience in Sudan suggests that some of the characteristics associated with being postconflict—identifiable disputants, vivid memory of negative aspects of war, a political framework that ended the previous conflict—can also provide openings for conflict prevention. By contrast, in situations that have not experienced recent violent conflict, third parties frequently struggle simply to persuade governments to engage in dialogue about potential conflict issues because those governments may fear that acknowledging internal conflicts diminishes their stature or compromises their sovereignty.

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It is difficult—using a single case over a defined period—to distinguish overwarning from prevention success, to discern risk shifting from risk reduction, and to glean general lessons about the relative effectiveness of prevention strategies. Several of the key questions posed at the outset are difficult to answer unambiguously. To a great extent, this reflects the general constraints of single case study research—one sacrifices the ability to generalize for a thick description of the individual case. Studying conflict prevention using a single case study, however, carries additional challenges.

First, good measures for the underlying risk of conflict are lacking, so judgments by various experts and organizations that the referendum process was extremely ripe for violence must be relied on. But this remains only an assumption. The referendum period was relatively peaceful, leaving little way to judge confidently how accurate or inflated (deliberately or not) these assessments were.

Second, this report's focus was on preventive actions and impacts within a limited time frame—leading up to and immediately following the referendum. Thus, the possibility exists that what seemed like successful prevention was in fact temporary suppression of tensions or deferral of deliberate violent strategies. This notion is especially worrisome because violence in both Sudan and South Sudan has been significant in recent months. Indeed, war between the old foes may yet be in the cards. The threat of violence may have been shifted, not avoided.

These limits on the confidence of the conclusions are significant. Conducting additional studies of conflict prevention efforts in other situations to enable comparison of results across cases is thus recommended. Although individual case studies of conflict prevention are plentiful, coordinated cross-case comparisons are surprisingly rare.[38] It is sometimes surprising in the conflict prevention and peacebuilding field how often we study war but infrequently we study peace.

Notes

1. In this report, the referendum refers to the vote on the secession of southern Sudan. In fact, two referenda were scheduled to occur simultaneously, the second on the status of the disputed Abyei area. But the Abyei referendum has yet to occur for a host of reasons, and is not the focus of analysis here.

2. *Referendum process* refers to the period leading up to the referendum (roughly one year), and the months following the referendum before South Sudan's official secession in July 2011.

3. The referendum on the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1993 proceeded smoothly and immediately afterward the countries were at peace with one another, but they went to war several years later, in part on the basis of unresolved secession-related issues.

4. Hindsight bias refers to the well-established phenomenon in which people believe in retrospect that events were more predictable and obvious than they in fact were without the benefit of hindsight.

5. This was especially true after the death of SPLA leader John Garang only weeks after the signing of the CPA. Garang ostensibly favored Sudan's unity, but his successor, Kiir, made little secret of his preference for secession.

6. An intermediate step may have been a unilateral declaration of independence by the south.

7. Carter Center, "The Carter Center Election Observation Mission in Sudan Preliminary Report," April 17, 2010, http://cartercenter.org/news/pr/sudan-041710.html.

8. Jeffrey Gettleman, "Peaceful Vote on Sudan Appears More Likely," *New York Times,* January 2, 2011.

9. "Remarks by the President in a Ministerial Meeting on Sudan," September 24, 2010, www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2010/09/24/president-obama-attends-ministerial-meeting-sudan#transcript

10. "A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton," September 8, 2010, www.cfr.org/diplomacy/conversation-us-secretary-state-hillary-rodham-clinton/p22896

11. U.S. Department of State, "Sudan: A Critical Moment, A Comprehensive Approach," October 19, 2009, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/oct/130672.htm

12. February 2, 2010, annual threat assessment to Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

13. As is commonly the case for NGOs and advocates, warnings in 2009 and 2010 were part of a policy critique and an advocacy effort to spur more robust or different action by governments. It is hard to know to what extent advocates' assessments of risk may have been influenced by their judgment about the best way to gain attention and traction on their recommendations.

14. Nicolas D. Kristof, "Obama's Failure in Sudan," *New York Times,* August 28, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/opinion/29kristof.htm

15. Richard Williamson, "How Obama Betrayed Sudan," November 11, 2010, www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/11/how_obama_betrayed_sudan

16. Enough Project, "Sudan: The Countdown," June 2009, www.enoughproject.org/publications/sudan-countdown.

17. John Prendergast, "Avoiding Total War in Sudan," Enough Project, September 2009, www.enoughproject.org/files/avoiding_war.pdf

18. "Sudan: Preventing Implosion," Africa Briefing no. 68, December 17, 2009.

19. UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Sudan," UNMIS S/2010/681 (December 31, 2010), para. 78.

20. Ibid., para. 92.

21. UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Sudan," UNMIS S/2010/31 (January 19, 2010), para. 89.

22. Ibid., para. 90.

23. Some speculate that this created the opportunity for secret deal making. One theory is that Presidents Bashir and Kiir agreed that if the SPLM pulled their presidential candidate (Yasir Arman) from the 2010 elections, the NCP would allow the referendum and southern secession to proceed.

24. By some accounts, Vice President Ali Osman Taha, who was deeply involved in CPA negotiations and signed the document, encouraged President Bashir to allow the referendum to proceed, while Nafie Ali Nafie, an adviser to the president, argued for preventing southern secession.

25. Frontier Economics, "The Cost of Future Conflict in Sudan," 2010, www.frontier-economics.com/_library/pdfs/frontier%20report%20-%20the%20cost%20of%20future%20conflict%20in%20sudan.pdf.

26. South Sudan receives an estimated 98 percent of its revenue (excluding international aid) from oil. In the north the figure is much less certain, but oil is clearly the largest single source of revenue.

27. The GoSS accused Khartoum of supporting these rebellions.

28. This is a dubious assertion, as northern Sudan, even without the south, remains diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion.

29. It is frequently observed that al-Intibaha is owned by Bashir's uncle.

30. However, presumably only after the north laid claim to a sizable portion of southern oil.

31. In this sense the referendum was not comparable to elections that are of poor quality but ultimately accepted; there was only one shot at the referendum and the execution needed to meet a high standard.

32. Princeton Lyman, "Negotiating Peace in Sudan," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs,* www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=21.

33. For example, Nicholas Kristof wrote that southern secession "arrived first of all only because of President Bush's diplomatic surge, leading to the 2005 peace agreement between north and south. That was an extraordinary achievement and ended the brutal twenty-year north-south war. But even a year ago, it looked as if there might be another war. Then, beginning last fall the Obama administration launched a diplomatic surge to give peace a chance. That worked, more or less: there are still risks of renewed war, fighting is underway now in South Kordofan and may spread to Blue Nile, and rival groups are also fighting within South Sudan. The situation is fragile and troubled—but still better than many expected a year ago, and it's a reminder that diplomacy can be an incredibly powerful tool to avert humanitarian catastrophes" (*New York Times* On the Ground Blog, http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/09/welcome-to-south-sudan/.

34. Speaking about these predictions and the prereferendum analysis, U.S. assistant secretary of state for African Affairs Johnnie Carson said that "it helped spur our government, our African partners, and the international community into action and brought an essential spotlight on the players and issues at stake." (Chatham House, "The Conclusion of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement: US Perspectives and Policy Goals in Sudan," March 7, 2011, www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/109613).

35. Despite debate over the degree to which sanctions could be ratcheted up, some argue that sanctions on Sudan are essentially "maxed out."

36. For example, "Grading Obama's Foreign Policy," January 23, 2012, www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/23/grading_obama_s_foreign_policy?page=0,1. Some U.S. officials have also claimed a degree of credit for the peaceful referendum; for example, in an address at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Vice President Joe Biden said, "But after months of focus and to the credit of the President of the United States, in my view, months of focus and absolute sustained engagement with the Sudanese, neighboring governments, the Kenyans, the Egyptians and others, by our administration, by the international community, by organizations like this Museum which sponsored bearing witness trips to South Sudan last fall, last month hundreds of thousands of southern Sudanese pressed and moved, voted with their thumbprints on ballots and endorsed independence. And the Khartoum government recognized the results." (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Vice President Biden's Address in Honor of Tom Lantos, February 24, 2011, www.ushmm.org/genocide/analysis/details.php?content=2011-02-24).

37. See, for example, Paul Collier, Lani Elliot, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (Washington, DC: Oxford University Press and World Bank, 2003).

38. Jentleson's 2000 edited volume, *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized,* and Zartman's 2005 *Cowardly Lions* are good models.