



## China and the Sudan Coup

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On April 11, 2019, Sudan’s long reigning president Omar Bashir was overthrown in a military coup after 30 years at the helm. China, one of his staunchest supporters, must now assess how to maintain its relationship with the African nation, which lies on a critical spot on the prospective Belt and Road route.**

Diplomatic relations between China and Sudan began in January 1959. In the early decades of the relationship, the two states focused primarily on their inclusion in the Non-Aligned Movement and not so much on cooperation in other fields, like energy and trade.

But as China became more and more developed and Sudan became increasingly isolated, Beijing’s presence in the African country expanded enormously. Between 2000 and 2011, about 65 Chinese infrastructure projects were started in Sudan, including construction of the presidential palace, the laying of railway lines between Khartoum and Port Said, construction of power stations, and the upgrading of the local electricity grid.

China is the leading source of imports to Sudan, with a market share of 24% – more than double that of the number two on the list, the UAE. China was, moreover, one of very few countries to supply weapons to the Bashir regime. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2018 China was the only country to transfer arms to the Sudanese army.

The reasons for Beijing’s interest in Sudan are not difficult to fathom. Sudan lies on a vital trade route between Asia, Europe, and Africa. Its physical location thus makes it central to the success of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Beijing is highly focused on the maintenance of stability, and prefers to cooperate with states without using either military force or direct political

intervention. Instability in Sudan threatens China insofar as it disrupts Beijing's ability to expand its presence in that country. Chinese officials fear that local instability might harm Chinese companies working inside Sudan, where they are either operating facilities and infrastructure or building them. Trade can also be affected by instability and uncertainty. The Chinese are very concerned about losing control over this African country as it is a linchpin for their long-range plans.

At the beginning of the demonstrations against the Bashir regime, Beijing refrained from reacting, though it is reasonable to assume it followed developments carefully. After the president's ouster, Chinese FM spokesman Luo Kang said, "No matter how the situation changes, China will remain committed to maintaining and developing friendly relations and cooperation with Sudan." The fact that the Chinese, who had collaborated directly with Bashir for many years, did not stand by him, should not be surprising, as that is their standard *modus operandi* in such situations. Beijing's main loyalty is to its own interests. The Chinese press, which is often regarded as the regime's mouthpiece, advised all parties to maintain stability and avoid acts that might derail it, and called on the international arena not to interfere.

Based on the precedent of China's response to similar uprisings in the Arab world in 2011, it can be anticipated that Beijing will decide who it supports in Sudan on the basis of who is likely to be the first to restore stability and safeguard Chinese interests. Last year's events in Zimbabwe reinforce this assumption. The Chinese did not intervene, and the long-term partnership between Zimbabwe and China has been maintained. It is unlikely that the Chinese will take any significant steps in Sudan, such as sending assistance to either side (at least not openly). Nor are they likely to give personal support to any particular candidate for the leadership.

In the final analysis, the Sudanese have no substitute for China, and both parties understand this. Any Sudanese leader will have to maintain cooperation with Beijing and perhaps even try to expand it in order to strengthen his regime, provided that the West does not intervene and support a pro-Western, anti-Chinese leader. The struggle between the US and China on commercial issues could push both sides to try to prove their supremacy by attempting to solve the Sudanese crisis in order to strengthen and expand their international influence.

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