Sudan: on the brink of a new conflict?

In late October, the pro-South Sudan Ngok Dinka tribe in the disputed province of Abyei began to vote unilaterally to join the territory. Reports of this caused great anger in Khartoum and among the leaders of the nomadic Misseriya tribe, which is under its control and passes through the territory of the province several times a year with its herds. The latter have already stated that their 30,000-man army is "ready with weapons in hand" to defend the territorial integrity of Sudan, if the Ngok Dinka proclaim Abyei to be a part of South Sudan.

Considering the fact that the mandate of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) is ending in late November, the resumption of hostilities between Khartoum and Juba is becoming more real.

It would seem, from the European point of view, that nothing, right now, could be like the military conflict between North and South Sudan.

And, indeed, both countries are mutually dependent on "oil" dollars, which are the basis of life in both the North and the South (95% and 98% of their respective revenues).

Moreover, Khartoum's current monopoly on transportation of South Sudan's oil is, in essence, a key factor in avoiding a new civil war.

Besides this, there is another reason why the two countries seem to have to tolerate one other: the socio-economic situation in both Sudans. After the global financial crisis, and especially over the past two years, substantial problems have arisen in the Sudanese economy. They are connected, first of all, with a severe "drain" of capital abroad.

Because of this, the war between North and South Sudan, despite the perhaps most pressing issue of ownership of the oil-rich area Abyei, seemed unlikely due to the basic lack of funds to carry out such a war.

However, experience has shown that Western logic applied to Sudanese territory seriously falters.

The predicted failure of negotiations between North and South Sudan on the issue of border demarcation and the rights to extraction and transportation of oil has put a maximum of strain on relations between Khartoum and Juba.

As a result, in March of last year, the largest armed confrontation since the Civil War of 1983-2005 began between the two countries. In April, South Sudan troops seized the Heglig oil field in the province of Abyei and then repelled a massive counterattack by Khartoum troops. In response, the Sudanese parliament adopted a formal declaration in which South Sudan was named an enemy state.

Generally speaking, the situation escalated to the limit. It was only the intervention of the UN Security Council, with its adoption of the resolution on the withdrawal of Sudanese and South Sudanese military from all disputed territories, which somewhat reduced the degree of tension.
Then again, time has shown that the "Abyei question" is an enduring one.

It is well-known that the Abyei region provides about 55% of the total oil production of Northern Sudan. In fact, this is the main reason that Khartoum did everything it could to prevent the vote on South Sudan's independence from being carried out there in January 2011. This was done by insisting that the nomads from the aforementioned Misseriya tribe, who are loyal to the north, participate in the referendum.

For the same reason - the oil - Sudan has also introduced its troops to the area, which caused quite a stir in Juba. Then, as a result, the signing of the agreement in June 2011 in Addis Ababa succeeded in bringing down the surge, requiring both parties to immediately withdraw their troops from Abyei, to form a joint administration, headed by a representative appointed by Juba, and to elect a legislature, headed by a representative of Khartoum.

However, negotiations on implementing these requirements initially stalled, and then reached a complete stalemate. Juba demanded that Khartoum first withdraw its remaining troops from Abyei, and then proceed to create the administrative management body. In response, Sudan, speaking through its foreign minister, Ali Karti, countered that it agreed to withdraw its military forces from the disputed area only after the joint creation of the administration with South Sudan.

Last fall, the African Union proposed to hold a referendum on the status of the district Abyei without the participation of representatives of the Misseriya tribe, who live in the area a few months out of the year. But the Sudanese government predictably rejected this proposal, saying that it "violates previous agreements," since only the Referendum Commission has the right to determine its participants.

Realizing the futility of the situation, and understanding that, due to the complete economic collapse and subsequent famine, the country could simply splinter into small feuding factions, the former guerrillas, and the current powers that be in Juba have gone the already proven path of propaganda, just like in the civil war of 1983-2005, in the style of "Arise, great country."

In particular, there has been a significant increase in the recruitment of local farmers to the Sudan People's Liberation Army. The program of "total military training" is being introduced, and pervasive indoctrination of the population about the "criminal regime" in Khartoum continues, alongside all kinds of separatist sentiment being fueled in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

So what is Juba planning, to have so abruptly turned toward the total militarization of its population? By all appearances, it is counting on a "small victorious war" at first, and then when the country's economy gets really bad, on Paris and its ambitions to come forward as the main "driver" if not in the entire African continent, then at least in its northern part.

It should be noted that in the context of France's "practical" African policy, South Sudan has recently begun to occupy one of the leading roles in the African vector of French foreign policy, considering its hydrocarbon reserves.

In particular, the French company "Total" has become a key "driver" in South Sudan oil and announced its intention in the near future to triple the current level of oil production, as well as to build "as quickly as possible" an alternative North Sudan oil pipeline through Kenya to the Indian Ocean (China plans to build an oil refinery in Kenya, costing about $1.5 billion).

But Juba should take into account the fact that the current occupant of the Elysee Palace, Hollande, unlike his ubiquitous predecessor Sarkozy, seems to be preoccupied, for the moment, with the internal problems of France and the European Union.

Then there's another question: will Hollande go along with the further cooling of relations with Washington, which has a different view from Paris on resolving Sudanese problems? On top of everything else, a worsening of relations between Paris and Washington has recently been observed in connection with the almost diametrically opposing views on the question of achieving peace in Sudan's province of Darfur.

Hollande certainly understands that the differences in the American and French interests in Sudan, and the potential draw for the major governments interested in the problems of Sudan (China, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Iran) could become an important risk factor for the development of the "optimistic" scenario in this situation.

All this, of course, wouldn't necessarily heighten the mood of the current rulers in Juba. But there, as well as in Khartoum, it seems they still haven't had enough fighting yet, after decades of civil war.
So once again, this non-sober, militaristic, gung-ho mood is starting to dominate, capable of maximally igniting the already volatile situation in the region.

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