The Dynamics of Conflict in the Tri-Border Region of Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic

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- The security situation in the eastern part of Chad and parts of the Central African Republic has deteriorated dramatically in the last three years. However, this is not primarily due to a spill-over of the conflict from the neighbouring Sudan/Darfur, but rather an escalation of pre-existing national conflicts.
- While the crisis in the Central African Republic is of a predominantly domestic nature, the growing interrelation between the conflicts in Darfur and Chad has given rise to a new conflict system that can only be resolved by simultaneously addressing the causes of conflicts in both countries.
- The mostly isolated analysis of single elements of the larger conflict system is one of the reasons for the failure of international peace efforts. What is needed is the development of a comprehensive regional strategy and better coordination of the numerous actors involved – including China, Libya, the African Union and the League of Arab States – as well as a return to the primacy of political solutions over the resort to international military missions in ongoing conflicts.

Home-grown Conflicts

The Darfur crisis raging in Western Sudan, with its millions of refugees, hundreds of thousands of people killed and unabated violence against the civilian population, has been at the centre stage of the global public arena since the conflict escalated in autumn 2003. Massive movement of refugees and cross-border attacks have since also drawn attention to the neighbouring regions in eastern Chad and the northern Central African Republic. The security situation there has deteriorated dramatically since the end of 2005, a development interpreted by the media as well as the political debate as a direct spill-over of the Darfur conflict. This point of view, however, fails to fully explain the origins of the crises in the neighbouring countries. Although the crisis in Darfur has undoubtedly contributed to the further escalation of existing conflicts, the problems in Chad and the Central African Republic each have particular causes of their own. These often have a long history that must not be overlooked when trying to understand the complexity of the region's present-day web of increasingly interrelated conflicts.

Chad: All Against All

Chad today is marked by the country's division along ethnic and religious lines, the beginnings of which date back to the colonial era. The lack of trust and confidence among the various groups of the population has led to the development of a repressive and authoritarian political culture in which ethnically homogenous elites exploit the country's resources to their exclusive benefit. Ethnically based rebel groups compete for this exclusive control of the state apparatus, displaying little inclination towards democratic reform of the authoritarian presidential system. Since independence changes in power have thus always been the result of military force and have merely led to a replacement of the ruling elite while otherwise maintaining the existing political system. Thus, a vicious cycle of violence and repression has developed which yet remains to be broken.

The security situation in Eastern Chad has deteriorated due to three main factors. To begin with there is the continuous presence since the 1960s of various rebel groups, which use the sparsely populated eastern part of the country as

a rear base. In recent years, support for these groups by the Sudanese government has not only exacerbated the regional security situation but also contributed to a weakening of the Chadian regime itself. Furthermore, Sudanese militia groups have been crossing the border and attacking the civilian population since 2005. Although these raids have somewhat subsided in the meantime, they have led to a dramatic escalation of the third factor, namely violent conflicts between ethnic groups in the region. The Sudanese strategy of destabilising Chad, however, is for its part a reaction to Chad's support for the rebel groups in Darfur. This support for armed opposition in the respective neighbouring country has led to such a close interrelation of the crises in both countries that a lasting peace in the region can only be brought about if both conflicts are addressed simultaneously.

Sudan: Centre-Periphery Conflict

On the Sudanese side of the border the process of fractionalisation of rebel movements has accelerated following the collapse of the Darfur Peace Agreement in the spring of 2006. In view of the endless number of tiny splinter groups, the chance of a common rebel position for possible peace negotiations has further plummeted. To grasp the full complexity of Sudan's crisis, the focus of analysis has to be extended beyond Darfur to include the nationwide conflict between the small elite in the centre of the Sudan and numerous marginalised groups throughout the country. The experience with the peace Agreement concluded with the southern Sudanese rebel group SPLM (Sudan People's Liberation Movement) and the simultaneous outbreak of the rebellion in Darfur clearly demonstrates that an isolated solution of individual sub-conflicts cannot resolve the issues at the core of Sudan's overall problems.

The SPLM, which at least occasionally advocated a holistic solution, however faces the dilemma that in such a framework it would have to give up parts of its hard-won privileges set out in the north-south Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Then again, given that the implementation of the CPA has come to a virtual standstill, these privileges are themselves in jeopardy. The crucial factor deciding the future of the Sudan will therefore be whether the SPLM maintains its coalition with the NCP (National Congress Party) or whether the Government of National Unity unravels – which in all probability would lead to a renewed outbreak of the civil war.

Central Africa: Disappointed Mercenaries

The Central African Republic has also seen an escalation of violence over the last few years.

However, this is primarily due to internal conflicts in the wake of the military coup in 2003. In addition to supporters of the former president, the very soldiers who originally helped the new President Bozizé seize the reigns of power are now fighting him. These mercenaries feel insufficiently rewarded for their services and are trying to settle the score by way of rebellion. It is scarcely surprising then, that rebel groups have cropped up not only in the region bordering on Darfur, but in the north-western part of the country as well.

In spite of sporadic points of tangency with conflicts in the neighbouring countries such as, for instance, Chadian rebels passing through the north-eastern part of the Central African Republic in their attempted coup d'etat in April 2006, the problems besetting the Central African Republic can still be analyzed and solved largely separately from the problems in its neighbouring countries.

International Efforts: Learning from Past Mistakes?

The attempts of the international community to help find a solution in the region have not been very successful, particularly since the outbreak of the rebellion in Darfur. The no doubt serious will of politicians as well as the public pressure to "do something" to end the conflict in view of the humanitarian suffering have all too often led to hasty measures being taken without any prior, realistic analysis of their probable efficacy. The development of future strategies must therefore also be based on a critical assessment of measures taken in the past. An analysis of these measures indicates three main shortcomings that should henceforth be avoided. First of all, the isolated view on individual hot spots, secondly the lack of cooperation between the numerous actors involved and, finally, the primacy of military solutions.

Accordingly, the first step along the route to a more promising strategy would be to acknowledge the interrelations between the various conflicts and to carefully analyse these linkages. On this basis, an overall strategy for the region needs to be developed which simultaneously addresses the various hot spots – the implementation of the CPA, the search for a peaceful solution to the Darfur conflict, the consideration of other marginalised regions and groups in the Sudan and, finally, an analysis of the structural problems afflicting the political system in Chad.

One of the advantages of a comprehensive strategy for the conflicts in the region is that it ensures that the groups involved in the various localised conflicts do not receive contradictory

messages from the international community, but rather clear and unambiguous ones.

The prerequisite for this to happen, however, is that the numerous actors in the international arena agree on a common approach. Instead, however, efforts by governments and international organisations have thus far been influenced by particularistic interests as well as domestic political pressure creating the need to demonstrate rapid action. These factors have not only diverted attention from the objective of achieving peace in the region, they have also created a veritable cacophony of mediation offers that provides the parties to the conflict with an avenue for avoiding the international community's potential pressure .

What follows from all this is a clear need for a realignment of international efforts for a peaceful solution of the conflicts in the tri-border area. In this context it is of great importance to truly engage all the actors in a common structure and not, for instance, to equate the international community with the Western world. China, Libya, the African Union and League of Arab States may be difficult partners for the West at times, but no lasting solution to the problems in the region is conceivable without them. The aim should be to create a single coordinating group bringing together all the main actors under a clear leadership structure, which assigns clearly delineated tasks to individual countries and organisations in accordance with their respective strengths (e.g. maintaining contact with a certain group) and within the framework of a common strategy.

Re-politicising Peace Efforts

Such an approach would also facilitate a political approach to resolving the conflicts in the region. Experience with AMIS (African Union Mission in Sudan) and UNAMID (United Nations / African Union Mission in Darfur) has shown that a peace mission deployed against the will of the conflict parties not only fails to accomplish its objectives, but will instead become part of the conflict itself. In the case of Chad, one can even argue that the very announcement of the EUFOR mission has motivated rebel groups to launch a new coup

attempt before the full deployment of the mission and has thus ultimately contributed to an escalation of the crisis. The mandates of both Darfur missions, as well as MINURCAT (United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad), do not include any political component that, besides mitigating symptoms, could contribute to the solution of the crisis' root causes. As lasting peace in the region is only possible through a political solution, this objective should once again be brought to the fore. For Sudan this could mean, for example, a greater emphasis on the political components of the UN mission stationed in the South and assigned with the task of monitoring and implementing the CPA (UNMIS, United Nations Mission in Sudan).

In view of the most recent coup attempts in Chad, the mandates of MINURCAT and EUFOR (European Union Force) should be thoroughly reviewed. Both mandates are restricted to the military conflict concentrated in the east and completely ignore the country's fundamental political crisis. French support for President Idriss Deby in his fight against rebel groups, both in the east in November 2007 and during the coup attempt staged in February 2008, have convinced the rebels that the French-dominated EUFOR is by no means neutral, but rather meant to stabilise the existing regime. EUFOR has thus become a party to the conflict from the very outset and may have to dedicate more attention to its own security needs than to its actual mission. The EU's reputation as a neutral mediator is at stake, and it should quickly put a halt to its uncritical implementation of French objectives. The EU should furthermore improve coordination between its existing initiatives, which have so far been running parallel to one another. Even though the mandate of the EU Special Representative for Sudan has been expanded to include assistance for EUFOR, no provision has been made for his involvement in the political dialogue between the government and political opposition, which has received significant support by the EU Commission. In the current atmosphere of increased political repression, the protection of this dialogue and its participants is of utmost importance and should thus be an integral part of the MINURCAT mandate.

Note:

The author of the brief is Patrick Berg, a sociologist and political scientist with many years' experience with Africa. After serving in the diplomatic corps for several years, he is currently working as an independent political consultant.
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