Luke Patey


A meticulously researched and dense book – the endnotes alone fill 62 single-spaced pages, including materials not only in English but in the Chinese language as well. The data derive from primary (unstructured interviews) and secondary (written documents) sources. The book mainly chronicles the activities of oil companies from China and India in the Sudan. However, there is a sense in which one could say the book is also a modern political history of Sudan in a nutshell. In appearance the book has an unconventional structure, it exhibits the features of a travelogue and scholarly treatise; of a novel and report of survey research; of a news report and philosophical analysis. And yet the book is still worth reading, and is indeed a pleasure to read, since the author is both a good story-teller and a superb analyst. Luke Patey writes with grace, clarity and power.

With a general introduction, Patey draws the reader’s attention to the fact that many of the oil fields are located in South Sudan whereas the pipelines taking the oil to world market are in the (North) Sudan. This is perhaps an indirect way of suggesting, (and, rightly so in my view), that such interdependence should have served as a foundation for further economic (and potentially political) integration of the Sudan. But, of course, it has not turned out that way.

The author singles out (pp. 6-7) five years as of central significance in the political history of the Sudan: 1960: when Anyanya was formed; 1972: the Addis Ababa Agreement which ended the Civil War; 1983: the beginning of the Second Sudanese Civil War; 2003: the beginning of the Darfur Civil War; and 2005: the end of the Second Sudanese Civil War (the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement). One year that must be added, I think, is 2011, when South Sudan achieved independence. The book is divided into four parts, with each part broken further into several readable chapters.
Chapter 1 is a coherent, lucid and comprehensive analysis of the flourishing of US-Sudanese relations from early 1970s to late 1980s. Chapter 2 and 3 chronicle (or continue to do so) with almost every relevant details how the US-Sudanese relations began to run out of steam. It also highlights how the US government transformed (the Government of) Sudan from one of its most important supporter in Africa into an adversary.

Chapter 4 is partly about how China’s oil companies first entered Sudan, followed in Chapter 5 with a thorough examination of the security challenges faced by them in South Sudan. Chapters 6 and 7 are about the political economy of India’s quest for energy independence – and the challenges it entailed as well as the major issues which arose just before Indian oil companies with a help from the Government of India successfully entered Sudan’s oil fields. We also learn about the depth of the historical link between India and the Sudan as symbolized, for instance, by Mahatma Gandhi’s visit to the African country in 1937; three years after that historic visit came another one by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who arrived in the Sudan with Indira Gandhi, his daughter and future prime minister of India.

Significant portion of Chapter 8 is about the divestment effort in the Sudan by different groups [including by the US administration under George W. Bush]. Chapter 9 documents the beginning of the end of the honeymoon between China’s oil companies operating in the Sudan and the Government of Sudan towards the end of the last decade. In this period China was beginning to realize that it may be relying too much on the Sudanese government; Sudan was also beginning to realize that it may be relying too much on China.

Chapter 10 is primarily about the end of the honeymoon between Sudan and China’s oil companies, after the independence of South Sudan. From the point of view of the major objective of the book, chapters 10 and 11 examine the oil factor in the relationship between Sudan and South Sudan. The last chapter provides a summary and outline of the major arguments advanced in the preceding chapters.

The relationship between Chinese and Indian oil companies, on the one hand, and, on the other, the old and the new Sudan; Sudan before and after the partition; Sudan and South Sudan – that is presumably the subject-matter of the book. But, in fact, there is more to the book since the analysis takes the reader beyond the relationship and sheds a much-needed light, directly or indirectly, on several issues that have wider relevance for understanding the behaviors of rising China in Africa.

The book illustrates how Sudan embraced China (and India) because it was abandoned by the West (p. 58). The same could be said to some extent