

# The Evacuation Operation in Sudan and PLA's Capability of Long Distances Military Power Projection

**Ming-Shih Shen**  
**Research Fellow and Director**

Division of National Security Research  
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## 1. News Highlights

On April 15, 2023, Sudan in Africa erupted in domestic military conflict. The two factions involved in the coup, the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces, engaged in a civil war as they fought for power. Due to the incident, many countries evacuated their citizens in response to the situation. The US stated that the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces would begin a 72-hour ceasefire on April 25 for humanitarian evacuation. According to the WeChat public account postings of the Chinese Embassy in Ethiopia on April 25, Chinese citizens had been evacuating

on their own even before the situation in Sudan rapidly deteriorated. They mainly left Sudan by land and entered Ethiopia's northern border along the highway to Gondar and the Metema Port in northwestern Ethiopia in preparation to evacuate and return to China.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Security Implications

### 2-1. PLA transport plane did not participate in the evacuation from Sudan

Because the capital of Sudan, Khartoum, is in the center of the country, another group of Chinese citizens were

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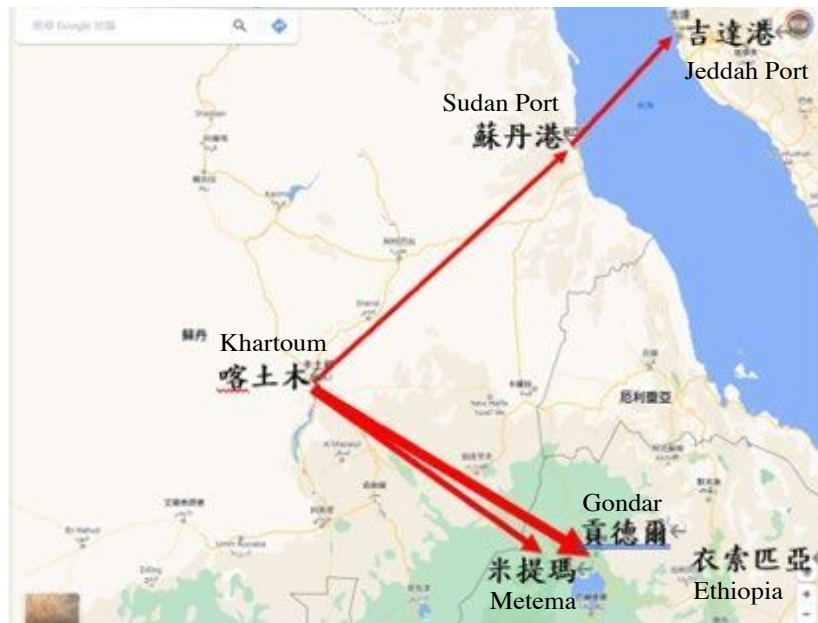
1. "Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Embassies Will Always be the Last to Evacuate when There's A Danger," *The Bastille Post*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.bastillepost.com/hongkong/article/12694235-外交部：有危險需要撤離時使館永遠撤在最後>.

evacuated by land to the Sudan Port and then transferred to Jeddah port in Saudi Arabia by PLA navy ships.

In summary, the Chinese government completed the mission of evacuating its citizens on April 29th. Whereas over a thousand Chinese people were evacuated from Sudan mainly by land and sea transportation, heavy air force transporters were not dispatched. Compared to the

evacuation actions of other countries, the Chinese military took the most winding evacuation route (as shown in the diagram below), highlighting the gap in force projection capabilities between China and US as well as other Western countries; in that concern, China is even behind less powerful countries such as Jordan and Thailand.

**Figure: Route Map of China's Evacuation from Sudan**



Source: Prepared by Ming-Shih Shen.

In comparison, other countries such as the US, Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, France, Italy, the

Netherlands, Greece, Tunisia, Jordan, and Thailand dispatched military aircraft to pick up their respective citizens gathered

at safe locations and then send them to nearby countries for returning flights on civilian airliners. The US started planning the evacuation of its nationals on April 15. For security reasons, embassy personnel were evacuated by helicopters and transporters, while the remaining Americans were gathered at designated locations and evacuated in batches by convoy or air. In addition to military aircraft and escort troops, the US has also deployed the Navy fast transport ship “USNS Brunswick” to Sudan Port for assistance in the evacuation work.<sup>2</sup>

There were 4,000 UK citizens in Sudan, and at least 2,000 requested assistances. More than 1,200 UK troops from the 16th Air Assault Brigade, Royal Marines, and the Air Force were dispatched to Sudan. Their transporter planes landed directly at the Khartoum International Airport for the armed soldiers to protect British nationals boarding the planes at the airport. The evacuation of UK expatriates was successful.

Since Sudan is very far from China,

the fastest way to evacuate Chinese citizens was to dispatch PLA's Y-20 transport aircraft and land them quickly at Khartoum International Airport in the capital of Sudan and bring out the embassy personnel along. However, the PLA Air Force did not deploy transport planes. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs arranged evacuation for their nationals with delays, and most people took the most circuitous route. They first rushed from Khartoum, the capital, to the Sudan Port on the Red Sea by land and then to Saudi Arabia's Jeddah Port on the other side of the sea for temporary flights back to China.

## **2-2. China's evacuation was inefficient compared to other countries**

CCP media highly praised the PLA Navy for successfully completing the evacuation and dispatching the warships “Nanning” ( 南寧 ) and “Weishanhu” ( 微山湖 ) from April 26 to 29 to evacuate 940 Chinese citizens from Sudan Port

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2. China has been heavily criticizing the evacuation method used by the US, aiming to highlight the insistence of the Chinese embassy to be the last to evacuate. See “Hua Chunying Defames the US, but Her Lies Revealed: American Media Offers Details about Sudan Evacuation,” *NTDTV*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.ntdtv.com/b5/2023/05/03/a103704315.html>.

to Jeddah of Saudi Arabia. In fact, “Nanning” and “Weishanhu” (as shown in the table below) were two of the three warships that carried out the 43rd anti-piracy mission; some media have pointed out that “Sanya” also participated in the evacuation mission, but it did not.<sup>3</sup> It is speculated that the reason for “Sanya” to continue its anti-piracy mission without participating in the evacuation might be its low personnel carrying capacity as a 4,000-ton missile escort. On the other hand, “Nanning” participated in the “Peace 23 Exercise” with the Pakistani Navy in Karachi in February and only joined the evacuation mission after the exercise ended.

Since China only arranged for warships to undertake maritime transportation of approximately 100 kilometers, Chinese citizens in Sudan must travel from Khartoum to Sudan Port via land routes on their own, during which the Chinese government did not provide any protection or assistance. That means

China only sent two vessels carrying anti-piracy missions to sail from Sudan Port to Jeddah. As the trip from Khartoum to Sudan Port must be done by land transportation, it not only called for many vehicles but also posed high risks on the way.

According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement on April 27, more than 1,300 Chinese citizens have been safely evacuated. Some have left Sudan by PLA Navy ships and other vessels, while over 300 have traveled to neighboring countries of Sudan by land.<sup>4</sup> Approximately three-quarters of Chinese citizens left Sudan on PLA Navy ships, while the remaining one-quarter did not do so. Because Khartoum is in the central part of the country and it is a long journey to reach Sudan Port by land, some choose to travel by road to Ethiopia. The Chinese Ministry of National Defense spokesperson stated that two military ships were deployed in a coordinated manner. This implies that even for short-

3. “Evacuation from Sudan: on the Three Ships of Navy’s 43rd Escort Fleet Tasked with Evacuation,” *Sing Tao Daily*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.singtaousa.com/2023-04-26/> 蘇丹撤僑 | 一文看清擔任撤僑任務海軍第43批護航編 /4479740#page6.

4. “Ministry of Foreign Affairs: more than 1,300 Chinese Citizens Have Been Safely Evacuated from Sudan,” *Wen Wei Po*, April 27, 2023, <https://www.wenweipo.com/a/202304/27/AP644a2b33e4b08b8491474a3d.html>.

distance maritime transportation, it must be approved by Xi Jinping, which affects efficiency. Due to the long distance that South Sea Fleet vessels would have to travel to arrive in the region, China had no choice but to use anti-piracy warships for transportation.

**Table: Performance of Nanning and Weishanhu**

Name	Fleet of Affiliation	Tonnage	Type	Crew	Year entered service	Main weapons
“Nanning” Destroyer	South Sea Fleet	7500	052D	280	April 2021	HHQ-9B medium/long-range air defense missiles, YJ-18 anti-ship missiles, CJ-10 long-range cruise missiles, 24-cell HQ-10 missile launch systems, etc. Z-20F shipborne helicopters
“Weishanhu” Support Ship	South Sea Fleet	20530	903	130	April 2004	Either Z-8 or Z-9 shipborne helicopters.

Source: Compiled by Ming-Shih Shen.

### 3. Trend Observation

#### **The evacuation exposed PLA's need for better long-range projection capabilities**

Although some Chinese media have exaggerated China's evacuation speed as superior to the US,<sup>5</sup> the Chinese operation in Sudan was not only slow in response but also poorly planned. China used military resources for the first time to participate in the evacuation of its citizens from Libya. In the operation, as many as 91 Chinese civilian flights, 35 foreign charter flights, 12 military flights, 11 rental foreign cruise ships, five state-owned merchant ships, and one Navy ship were employed to evacuate 35,860 Chinese nationals from Libya in 12 days;<sup>6</sup> but only two Navy ships were involved in the Sudan incident, covering 100 kilometers from Sudan Port to Jeddah, missing the opportunity to conduct a long-range force projection exercise through a rescue mission.

China's Y-20, touted as a strategic transport aircraft with a range of 7800 kilometers, should be capable of long-distance flights to Sudan or neighboring countries; however, it was not utilized to provide heavy transport capabilities to evacuate the Chinese nationals, suggesting that the PLA's air power projection capability is probably even inferior to Thailand's. After the outbreak of conflict in Sudan on April 15, it was not until April 26th that Chinese naval ships arrived at Sudan Port and transported some citizens to Jeddah via the Red Sea. This proves that China's rapid response and long-range force projection capabilities are inadequate, as it did not even coordinate with neighboring countries for transit flights. Before arriving at the Sudan Port, Nanning had participated in military exercises in Pakistan and needed maintenance, which could have delayed the timing of evacuation; and Y-20, the Chinese heavy transporter, might not be available due to other missions or reliability issues. Since

5. Huang Jie, "China Performed Citizen Evacuation in Sudan better than the US, Eastern Africa Experiencing A 'Libya-like' Refugee Crisis," *Asia Weekly*, May 8, 2023, Issue 19, <https://reurl.cc/YeqX5o>.

6. "First Military-assisted Citizen Evacuation: the 2011 Libyan Evacuation," *Xinhua News Agency*, August 15, 2017, [http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/m.xinhuanet.com/2017-08/15/c\\_1121487719.htm](http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/m.xinhuanet.com/2017-08/15/c_1121487719.htm).

the transport aircraft was unavailable, China was therefore unable to deliver special operation units to Sudan to escort and evacuate nationals through long-range aerial ferry. It is also unimaginable that China did not dispatch a security unit from the nearby Djibouti military base to assist in the evacuation.

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