



Keeping the Hotline Open Between Sudan and South Sudan

A UN mission has largely succeeded in keeping the peace in Abyei, an oil-rich area claimed by both Sudan and South Sudan. But there has been less progress made on the mission's work in aiding political mechanisms to determine the final status of Abyei and demilitarise and demarcate the border. As the UN Security Council debates the mission's scope, these mechanisms deserve ongoing support.

In 2011, Sudan and South Sudan sought outside help to prevent a return to war along what would become their international border. This effort followed a resurgence of violence in border areas: a new insurgency in South Sudan's Unity State in April; the Sudanese army's move into Abyei, an oil-rich area claimed by both countries, in May; and renewed fighting in the Sudanese states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile (known as the "Two Areas") in June. Part of the UN Security Council's response to their requests for support was its deployment of a peacekeeping mission, the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA).

The pressing need for UNISFA became abundantly clear within a year. In 2012, border clashes escalated until South Sudanese army units struck into Sudanese-controlled territory and destroyed oil production facilities in Heglig, a town close to Abyei. Only the concerted efforts of the Security Council, the African Union, international partners, notably the U.S., and neighbouring countries averted a larger confrontation. A set of Cooperation Agreements concluded in Addis Ababa has largely held and has formed the basis of Sudan-South Sudan bilateral relations since then.

UNISFA's mandate, in essence, is twofold. First, it keeps the peace and protects civilians

in Abyei. Second, its mandate was expanded to support political mechanisms the two sides agreed to, notably one providing for regular meetings between senior Sudanese and South Sudanese officials (the Joint Political and Security Mechanism, or JPSM) and another tasked with monitoring a demilitarised zone along the whole Sudan-South Sudan border (the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism, or JBVMM). JPSM delegations are typically led by the respective defence ministers while the JBVMM teams are led by generals working under those ministers. UNISFA peacekeepers are mostly Ethiopians; both parties pre-identified Ethiopia as the primary troop contributor, believing its forces were willing, capable and neutral.

UNISFA has largely succeeded in fulfilling the first part of its mandate. For the most part, peacekeepers have deterred armed clashes in Abyei, thus protecting civilians and reducing the risk of flare-ups between Sudan and South

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Sudan. Indeed, when South Sudan’s civil war led to fighting along the border in 2014, UNISFA’s presence was part of the reason Abyei was the only border area unaffected by armed group activity. The presence of peacekeepers also allows the impoverished Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities – which are often at odds – to operate a joint market and has created conditions for other activities that might enable the area’s socio-economic development.

But the political cooperation mechanisms that UNISFA supports – the JPSM and the JBVMM – have been less successful. Talks on Abyei’s final status – whether the area will be part of Sudan or South Sudan – and border demarcation, both politically sensitive subjects, have been put on the back burner amid more pressing bilateral challenges. Not all of the border is completely demilitarised and both government forces and rebel groups operate along it. The JBVMM has not deployed beyond the Sudanese and South Sudanese capitals of Khartoum and Juba.

Members of the UN Security Council are currently reviewing UNISFA’s mandate. The U.S., in particular, has argued for cutting back its role supporting the JBVMM. The Security Council must decide in the coming days if that support will continue.

The desire to strip back those parts of UNISFA’s work that have seen least success is understandable. But eliminating its support for the JBVMM and, by extension undermining the JPSM which relies on the JBVMM’s infrastructure, would be a mistake. Both play valuable roles. They serve as discrete fora for political and security coordination between Sudan and South Sudan. Reducing UN support

for them could curtail critical efforts by the Security Council to promote peace between the two countries and within both. It could also undercut UNISFA’s wider work and leave its peacekeepers exposed.

Meeting benchmarks

Previous Security Council debates over the mission’s mandate, in May and November 2017, were tense. U.S. diplomats pushed to end UNISFA’s support to the JBVMM, arguing that Sudan and South Sudan had not done their part to make the mechanism operational. In the end, Ethiopia – which is on the Security Council through 2018 – and other Council members persuaded the body to maintain that role.

The Security Council did, however, introduce a set of benchmarks (in Resolution 2386 in November 2017) for the JBVMM to become operational. These included facilitating full freedom of movement for UNISFA; opening border crossing corridors; reactivating the ad hoc committee for the Mile 14 area (which extends fourteen miles south of the Kiir Adem/Bahr el Arab river, abutting Abyei on the west, and which Sudan had bombed on several occasions); operationalising JBVMM sites outside Juba and Khartoum; and convening at least two JPSM meetings to resolve these issues. The resolution also decided that this would be the final extension of UNISFA support to the JBVMM unless these measures were taken.

The UN Secretary-General’s latest report on Abyei, submitted to the Security Council earlier this month, asserts that Sudan and South Sudan have met these benchmarks. It notes that the JBVMM has made “notable progress as both governments have put considerable

effort into implementing their agreements on the border”. Indeed, it identifies more progress in the previous five months on operationalising the JBVMM than had been made in the previous five years.

Most notably, Sudan and South Sudan have resumed discussions on border demarcation, identified border crossings to be opened in Phase I of the JBVMM’s deployment and reactivated the ad hoc committee for Mile 14. Progress on border crossings is crucial to support the movement of people and trade along the border, including the import of desperately needed food into South Sudan. The parties also have held JPSM meetings.

Beyond the border crossings referred to in the mandate, progress also has been made on humanitarian access. Three “humanitarian corridors” have been opened to allow the World Food Program to bring aid from Sudan into South Sudan.

Security Council members, including the U.S. and UK, argue that these steps are positive but minimal and that meaningful progress is likely to be slow. This is true enough. But the small forward steps along the border should be seen in the context of wider improving relations between the two countries, especially given the dismal state of those relations six years ago.

Most significantly, cross-border support to rebels has ceased – a far cry from when Juba backed Sudanese rebel groups and Khartoum backed the South Sudanese armed opposition. The two sides also have made progress on oil agreements: South Sudan has compromised on its original insistence that no Sudanese should be involved in oil production in South Sudan and allowed Sudanese technicians back in return for Sudanese support in the Unity fields. The two sides agreed to share security responsibility for those fields, addressing oil companies’ prerequisite to return and restart production.

The presence of UNISFA and the reasonably peaceful situation in Abyei contributed to this result. The relative stability along the border has provided breathing room for both to tackle

other outstanding issues that, if left unresolved, could also trigger conflict between the two states.

Risks in cutting support to the JBVMM

Discussions on UNISFA also should factor in potential consequences of changing the mandate.

First, cutting UNISFA’s support for the JBVMM and, by extension, undermining the JPSM, would endanger the direct and discreet communications channel both mechanisms offer when inflammatory incidents inevitably occur between the two countries. Behind the scenes and with strong U.S. support, the JPSM and the bilateral connections it facilitated were used at the height of South Sudan’s civil war to ensure proxy conflict on the borders did not spread.

Without the funding for the JBVMM that comes through UNISFA, it is unlikely that the mechanism would function as it currently does and the diminished support could undermine the working-level operations that feed into the JPSM. While the parties would continue bilateral meetings, they would likely be less transparent and more disconnected from other aspects of the 2012 Cooperation Agreements or peacekeeping in Abyei.

Second, a mission focused narrowly on Abyei – in other words, without the JBVMM’s wider border monitoring role – would limit the UN’s ability to engage in wider Sudan-South Sudan relations. Were that support withdrawn, it would find it more difficult to mediate in the future were Sudan and South Sudan relations to again deteriorate, given both Sudan and South Sudan’s tetchy relationships with the UN.

Both Khartoum and Juba resist UN involvement in their internal and bilateral affairs, but they trust the Security Council’s approach on UNISFA and, for now, are comfortable with Ethiopia’s role as the mission’s “face”. The parties’ consent to UNISFA’s role in their bilateral

affairs would not automatically transfer to other UN bodies.

Third, closing all support for the JBVMM, and potentially winding down the infrastructure that has been set up, would curtail any future opportunity to monitor the border.

Fourth, it could leave Ethiopian peacekeepers in a more difficult position. To be effective, they require the support of both Sudan and South Sudan. Narrowing their mission, particularly by delinking it from the political processes, could undercut that support, in turn undermining the mission's ability to maintain peace in Abyei.

UNISFA represents a balance between, on the one hand, monitoring and conflict prevention through on-the-ground peacekeepers – which often strains relationships between host governments and the UN – and, on the other, support for dialogue via accepted interlocutors, which the parties desire and which contributes to their acceptance of peacekeeping forces.

Upsetting this carefully negotiated balance could leave Ethiopian forces more exposed. In a worst case scenario, Ethiopia might withdraw from the mission or adopt a less proactive posture toward parties on the ground.

Last, the JBVMM office in Juba plays other constructive roles. It provides humanitarian flight security clearances in South Sudan, thanks to professional staff and reliable electricity and internet (most other offices face frequent blackouts). This avoids delays and saves humanitarian workers from making risky trips to obtain such clearances from the South Sudanese security forces' headquarters.

Halting support to that office would likely mean changes to humanitarian flight approval procedures and the officials responsible. Given the animosity Juba feels toward parts of the international community, particularly over sanctions, it could exploit the need for changed procedures to complicate and further politicise humanitarian clearances, with potentially deleterious effects upon the millions of South Sudanese who rely on humanitarian support.

This is particularly crucial given the very real risk of famine between May and July and the need for uninterrupted aid delivery to prevent it.

In normal circumstances, the UN and other humanitarian actors should be able to find an alternative mechanism; fulfilling this role in itself would not be enough of a reason to maintain UNISFA's support for the JBVMM. But, added to the risks listed above, it might weigh on Security Council members' considerations.

Updated benchmarks

The Security Council should always seek ways to make peace operations more effective; this applies to UNISFA as much as to other missions. Overall, though, the Abyei mission has been a success.

Ideally its support for the JBVMM should continue and its core mandate remain unchanged beyond the next renewal in May. It should continue to prevent violence and protect civilians in Abyei, while supporting the JPSM and JBVMM and using the leverage that support provides to urge progress between Khartoum and Juba.

The Security Council should consider updating the benchmarks in Resolution 2386. This would mean pushing for further meetings of the JPSM, further discussions on border demarcation (particularly in areas where the border is relatively uncontested), increased freedom of movement for UNISFA and a renewed focus on border crossings.

Outstanding issues related to South Sudan's independence, such as border demarcation and Abyei's final status, are deeply contentious and unlikely to be achieved in the near term, even with outside pressure. UNISFA's continued presence nonetheless can help the two countries maintain their slowly improving relations, by providing bilateral forums to mitigate potential conflict and prevent backsliding, in addition to stabilising Abyei and improving the lives of civilians living there.