



## **The Safe Demilitarized Border Zone**

On 27 September 2012, Sudan and South Sudan agreed to establish a Safe Demilitarized Border Zone (SDBZ), to run 10 km along either side of a centre-line, set out on a map created by the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP). Eighteen months on, the SDBZ remains militarized, and the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mission (JBVMM)—designed to verify the demilitarization of the zone—was suspended after South Sudan withdrew from the mission in November 2012. With the attention of both countries currently focused on internal conflicts, there is no prospect of a SDBZ being implemented in the near future.

However, both countries have recently reiterated their commitment to the SDBZ. On 22 March 2014, Sudan and South Sudan again agreed to implement the 27 September 2012 security agreement and establish the demilitarized zone. Both countries also committed to reactivating the JBVMM. These commitments were made again at a 5 April meeting between South Sudan President Salva Kiir and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, though no substantive steps were taken to re-establish the verification and monitoring mechanism. Such commitments have been repeatedly made since September 2012, but as part of a diplomatic calculus largely divorced from developments on the ground. While some substantive steps were taken toward establishing the SDBZ in March 2013—when both countries removed some of their forces from the border—these developments were quickly reversed, as the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) quickly moved troops back into the zone, and since then a series of disagreements has precluded demilitarization.

At present, both the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) and the Government of Sudan (GoS) are focused on ongoing internal conflicts, and the centrality of security concerns for both states means that a demilitarized border, and even the territorial integrity of the other state, is not a primary concern. On 7 April, Sudanese modified Antonov transport-planes and MiG jets flew over the north of Unity state, bombing the village of Neem, in an effort to disrupt the supply-lines of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), which is active in South Kordofan. On 8 April, the deputy governor of Unity state, Stephen Mabek Lang, said that SAF had recently moved closer to the Sudan–South Sudan border. South Sudanese officials have expressed concern that the GoS might attempt to take advantage of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement's (SPLM) current travails to occupy the contested border, especially in the region of Abyei. This seems unlikely: SAF's current focus is on clashes with the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) in South Kordofan, and the northern army's encroachment into Unity state must be seen in light of this. The SRF have important non-military supply-lines and bases in both Northern Bahr el Ghazal and Unity states. JEM, in particular, is reliant on the Bentiu–Pariang–Jaw supply-route, which stretches north from Unity's capital into South Kordofan, and past the SPLA's most northerly military base, at Jaw, which probably lies within the SDBZ, depending



on the final demarcation of the demilitarized zone. SAF attacks in Unity state, and troop movements near the border, are aimed at breaking these supply-lines. As long as conflict continues in South Kordofan, an SDBZ remains a remote possibility, as SAF will not demilitarize a border it needs to secure.

In any event, given JEM's presence in South Kordofan and Unity, it remains impossible for either government to demilitarize the border, as neither is in full control of it. SAF accuses the SPLA of using JEM in its internal conflicts. The SPLA denies this, but on 25 April, JEM clashed with the Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO) at the village of Manga, on the Bentiu–Pariang supply-route, and unconfirmed eyewitness reports suggest the presence of JEM troops in the SPLA forces that recaptured Bentiu on 4 May. Regardless of the degree to which JEM is involved in the South Sudanese conflict, it is clearly present along the Sudan-South Sudan border.

The SPLM counters that the GoS is supporting the SPLA-IO, and that the rebel forces are using bases inside South Kordofan, within the SDBZ. The GRSS claimed that SPLA-IO troops involved in the attack on Bentiu on 13-14 April were previously based near Hejlij, South Kordofan. On 9 April, the GRSS also claimed that the SPLA-IO who attacked Kaka town, Upper Nile, and the counties of Baliet and Adong, at the beginning of April, were based in Galachel, South Kordofan. Both countries thus accuse each other of supporting rebels across the border, in violation of the 27 September security agreement. There is no direct evidence for SAF sponsorship of the SPLA-IO, though South Kordofan was continuously used by SAF to support rebel groups within South Sudan in 2005–11. However, given that SAF is not in total control of the Unity/Upper Nile–South Kordofan border, it is possible that SPLA-IO troops are based in Sudan without GoS' authorization, underlining again the impossibility of an SDBZ running along a border that neither country controls.

Neither the ongoing clashes between SAF and the SRF, nor the current conflict in South Sudan, are simply internal. Both are linked to older civil war dynamics that stretch across the Sudan-South Sudan border: the SRF's struggles against the GoS are partly a product of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement's (CPA) vague resolutions regarding South Kordofan and Blue Nile, while the South Sudanese civil war reactivates divisions between the SPLA and the GoS-backed South Sudan Defence Forces that largely controlled the Greater Upper Nile region during the second civil war. That South Sudan is now an independent country, and that there is a national border running along its northern extent (whose precise delimitation is still contested), matters less to the logic of these conflicts in either country than these civil war continuities. Given the involvement of each country in the other's internal conflicts, neither government has much vested interest in the establishment of an SDBZ, despite frequent diplomatic protestations to the contrary.



During 2013, the uncertainty over the extent of the SDBZ created a pattern whereby both sides maintained troops within the zone while criticizing the other country for doing the same. If the JBVMM is reactivated, as the GRSS agreed in March 2014, this pattern is likely to be resurrected. The AUHIP map upon which the SDBZ was to be based is part of the problem. The map did not indicate with a centre-line for the 10 km demilitarized zone on either side of it with sufficient fidelity. In mid-2013, the African Union (AU) established the African Union Border Technical Team (AUBP-TT) to determine the centre-line. However, due to continuing disagreements between the GRSS and the GoS, and protests by local communities—which feared that the centre-line would affect them—the team was unable to complete its work. Repeated attempts to establish a centre-line in the second half of 2013 met with no success. An AU-sponsored workshop on the SDBZ, held on 13 November, ended in disagreement, as did a meeting on the Joint Security Committee (JSC), held on 26-27 November in Khartoum. JSC meetings originally scheduled for mid-December were cancelled following the outbreak of violence in South Sudan, and the JSC did not meet again until March 2014, when there was again a commitment to the establishment of a SDBZ, without substantive resolution of how it might work on the ground.

Without a centre-line, the SDBZ is unworkable, as either side can claim its forces are actually outside the SDBZ, depending on where the centre-line is located. Both sides have vested interests in the location of the centre-line. SAF maintains troops around the oil installation of Hejljij, South Kordofan, which is economically and strategically crucial to the GoS. At least some of these troops are likely to be within the SDBZ. The SPLA maintains troops within the 14-Mile Area that are vital for trade between East Darfur and Northern Bahr el Ghazal, and occupy strategic positions along the river Kiir. Neither side is likely to remove these forces.

Even if both countries did agree on the centre-line of the SDBZ, demarcating it on the ground would be problematic. In August 2013, local communities already blocked the work of the AUBP-TT due to fears that the SDBZ will mark the final border between the two countries. While the SDBZ is intended as an interim measure, and has no effect on negotiations over the final border between the two countries, local concerns have some substance. Should the SDBZ be determined, and negotiations over the border fail (there has been little progress in delimiting the border since 2005), then the demilitarized zone would become the *de facto* border, and this would mean the absence of military support for an indefinite period. In Unity and Northern Bahr el Ghazal states, for example, demilitarization would mean the withdrawal of SPLA protection from areas that experienced heavy raiding during the second civil war.

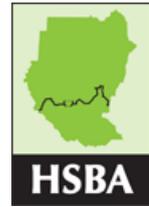
Even if both countries agreed on the centre-line of the SDBZ, and it was demarcated on the ground, it remains unlikely that the JBVMM would be able to effectively monitor the zone's



demilitarization. Prior to the suspension of the mission in November 2013, the JBVMM was unable to verify that the SDBZ was demilitarized because it was unable to undertake ground patrols, due to a lack of force protection. On 29 May 2013, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2014 attempted to resolve this impasse. It mandated that the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) would be augmented from 4,200 to 5,326 personnel, with the additional manpower designed to give force protection to the JBVMM. However, as of 1 May 2014, almost a year after the resolution was passed, only 117 soldiers of this extra force have deployed to the main JBVMM base at Kadugli, and this force is not sufficient to allow ground patrols to be conducted.

Four UNISFA companies are supposed to eventually deploy to the four proposed JBVMM bases (at Buram, Gokk Machar, Kadugli, and Malakal). As of May 2014, only the main base at Kadugli, and the base at Gokk Machar, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, are relatively operational, despite a commitment in the 8 March 2013 implementation matrix that all the bases should be running by 8 June 2013. The Kadugli base is affected by the ongoing conflict in South Kordofan, which disrupts supply routes and threatens the base. Work on a fully operational base at Gokk Machar is still ongoing. Nine months after construction began, UNISFA has now transported pre-fabricated hard-wall buildings to Gokk Machar from Kadugli. Construction work at Buram, Darfur, and Malakal, Upper Nile, has yet to begin, and given current levels of conflict in both states, is unlikely to start in the near future. As of the end of April 2014, there are 25 UNISFA monitors, along with 34 from Sudan and 33 from South Sudan, deployed to Kadugli. Two additional South Sudanese monitors, and two from UNISFA, are deployed to Gokk Machar. The deployment of the rest of the force authorized by UNSC Resolution 2014 was put on hold after the GRSS withdrew from the JBVMM in November 2013, pending the mission's reactivation.

From March to November 2013, the JBVMM conducted aerial monitoring missions over the JBVMM. These aerial patrols cannot see the situation on the ground with sufficient clarity to accurately monitor the SDBZ, as UNISFA conceded in a report to the Joint Political and Security Mechanism. However, these flights did lead to the suspension of the JBVMM. On 4 November 2013, a JBVMM flight over the 14-Mile Area detected an SPLA presence in the east of the territory, but the South Sudan monitors refused to sign a report written and signed by UNISFA and the Sudanese monitors attesting to an SPLA presence in the SDBZ. The GRSS' refusal to attest to an SPLA presence again turned on the uncertainty over the centre-line of the demilitarized zone. On 22 November, UNISFA received a letter from the SPLA announcing that South Sudan would suspend its involvement in the JBVMM until the centre-line of the SDBZ is determined. Following the GRSS withdrawal from the JBVMM, the mechanism stopped reconnaissance flights, and the JBVMM was suspended. While the GRSS has now announced it will participate in the JBVMM, no substantive moves have yet been made to make it operational again.



Even if the JBVMM is reactivated, the centre-line of the SDBZ agreed upon and demarcated, and UNISFA force protection for ground patrols is deployed, it remains unlikely that the SDBZ would be effective. JBVMM patrols give advanced notice to both sides. UNISFA claims this is to ensure there are no unexpected diplomatic hurdles for the patrols. However, this notification also allows both armies to know in advance the destination and time of the patrols, making it easier for army personnel in the SDBZ to escape detection. Evasion is made even easier by the fact that the UNISFA force will be split into four companies. The Sudan–South Sudan border is 2,010 km, and four companies of 267 troops each will struggle to monitor such a long and porous border, often inaccessible by land. The patrols conducted thus far also require all the monitors present on the mission to agree to what is being seen, raising the possibility that a military observer may simply deny seeing his own troops in the SDBZ. During flights over Tishwin in March 2013, for instance, the SPLA’s representatives in the JBVMM argued that the troops the mission had observed were not actually in the SDBZ, but in South Sudan.

With neither country in full control of its own border, and the diplomatic focus firmly on the two countries internal conflicts, the SDBZ is unlikely to be established in the near future. Even if it were to be so, the lack of resources confronting the JBVMM, and its weak mandate, means that the SDBZ would, in any event, be unlikely to be effective.

16 May 2014.