



The Safe Demilitarized Border Zone

On 27 September 2012 Sudan and South Sudan agreed to establish a Safe Demilitarized Border Zone (SDBZ) that would run 10 km along either side of a centre line. The SDBZ was to be monitored by the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mission (JBVMM), but this body was suspended on 22 November 2013 following South Sudan's withdrawal from the mission. On 27 May 2014 the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) told the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA)—which organizes the JBVMM—that it would resume its participation. Minimal aerial reconnaissance started on 16 June 2014. However, JBVMM aerial patrols are unable to accurately determine whether the SDBZ is demilitarized. There is also no agreement on the centre line of the demilitarized zone, while force protection for JBVMM ground patrols has still not deployed and is now a year behind schedule. With each country accusing the other of supporting rebels operating across the border and with neither side in total control of its own border zone, it is unlikely that a workable SDBZ will be operational in the near future.

Both countries have repeatedly reiterated their commitment to an SDBZ. Most recently, at the beginning of September 2014, South Sudanese president Salva Kiir wrote a letter to Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir requesting a meeting and indicating the GRSS's commitment to the 27 September 2012 security agreement. This is the latest in a series of statements issued by both sides since September 2012 as part of ongoing diplomatic manoeuvres largely divorced from events on the ground in which both countries decry the other's violations of the SDBZ while retaining their own forces in the demilitarized zone.

Over the last two years negotiations on the SDBZ have tracked—with a relatively high degree of accuracy—internal security conditions in the two countries. During periods in which the Government of Sudan (GoS) is worried about cross-border movement by the forces that constitute the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) it places great emphasis on the SDBZ and criticizes the GRSS for not implementing it. The GoS's concern is not with the SDBZ as such, but with cutting the SRF's supply routes into South Sudan. Military interventions by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF)—such as the April 2014 air raids on the north of Unity state—and diplomatic negotiation over the SDBZ are part of a continuum of options for the GoS to achieve this goal.

As of September 2014 both countries are involved with rebel groups in their neighbour's territory. In particular, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) were important allies of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) during the last bout of clashes with the Sudan



People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) in April and May 2014. Because JEM relies on routes from South Sudan into Sudan to move supplies and troops, it is unlikely that the GRSS would substantively demilitarize the border and thus imperil its support from the northern rebels. Overall, since South Sudan's crisis began in December 2013 both sides have found it advantageous to violate the SDBZ in order to obtain a military advantage in their respective internal conflicts.

The GRSS claims that the GoS is supporting the SPLA-IO, and that rebel troops involved in attacks in Unity and Upper Nile states in April and May 2014 came from bases in Galachel and Hejlj, South Kordofan. Given that SAF is not in total control of the South Kordofan border, it is possible that the SPLA-IO is using areas in South Kordofan without the GoS's approval. Nevertheless, both countries accuse the other of supporting rebels across the border in violation of the 27 September 2012 security agreement, creating a diplomatic impasse in which negotiations over the SDBZ become the stage for accusations, counter-accusations, and point scoring.

It is in neither side's interest to create a functional SDBZ. Both sides have military forces at strategically important positions in the border zone, notably at Radom, Hejlj, and Kwek for SAF, and around Kiir Adem, Jaw, and Wunthou for the SPLA. Continuing uncertainty about the location of the SDBZ allows both sides to maintain these forces while criticizing the other side for maintaining a military presence in the demilitarized zone.

But even if both sides wished to implement such a zone, it would prove extremely difficult. An SDBZ makes sense only if the two countries are in control of both their own territories and their own militaries. Insurrections in South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and Darfur, as well as in Unity and Upper Nile states, mean that neither country can ensure its control of the border zone. Equally, in economically straitened South Sudan, increasing numbers of desertions from the SPLA mean that the GRSS's control of its own military is becoming increasingly tenuous.

While the JBVMM is operational again, the most intractable problem related to the implementation of the SDBZ—the question of the centre line—has not been resolved. The centre line—from which the 10 km extent of the SDBZ on either side is to be measured—is indicated on a map created by the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP). Unfortunately, the map does not delimit this line with sufficient detail for it to be useful on the ground. A series of meetings were subsequently held between the two countries in 2013 to try to establish the SDBZ, but without success. In the absence of a centre line the SDBZ is unworkable, because either side can claim that its forces are actually outside it, depending on the location of the centre line. A difference of a few kilometres could have marked



consequences. SAF maintains troops around the oil fields of Hejlj, South Kordofan, which are economically and strategically central to the GoS. At least some of these troops are likely to be in the SDBZ. The SPLA has troops on the East Darfur-Northern Bahr el Ghazal border around strategically important positions that are likely to be inside the SDBZ. Neither side is likely to remove these forces.

It was a dispute over the centre line that caused the suspension of the JBVMM in November 2013. From March through November the JBVMM conducted aerial monitoring missions over the SDBZ. On 4 November a flight over the 14-Mile Area on the East Darfur-Northern Bahr el Ghazal border detected an SPLA presence around Warguit. The South Sudanese monitors who took part in the mission refused to sign a report on this violation written and signed by the UNISFA and Sudanese members of the patrol, and further claimed that the SPLA presence was actually outside the SDBZ—a position that turns on the uncertainty over its centre line. Subsequent to this patrol, on 22 November the SPLA sent UNISFA a letter announcing that South Sudan would suspend its involvement in the JBVMM until the centre line was determined.

On 27 May 2014 the GRSS told UNISFA that it would resume its participation in the JBVMM. It further claimed on 28 June that the reason it withdrew from the JBVMM was not due to a disagreement about the centre line—which was what was claimed in its letter to UNISFA—but because the centre line was to be used to demarcate border-crossing points and thus delimit a de facto border. While it is true that the African Union Border Programme Technical Team, which unsuccessfully attempted to demarcate the centre line in 2013, was also responsible for deciding on border-crossing points, these points would not in themselves have created a border, and in any event the GRSS had undertaken in the 27 September 2012 borders agreement to create just such crossing points. It is further unclear in the explanation given by the GRSS what prompted it to rejoin the JBVMM. The more likely motivating factor for its exit from and return to the JBVMM is given by developments in the security situation. Its initial withdrawal from the mission occurred just after aerial patrols had detected an SPLA presence in the SDBZ and thus prevented further patrols finding more SPLA forces in the demilitarized area. The GRSS's May announcement that it would participate in the JBVMM came just after SPLA-IO troops launched a successful assault on Bentiu in April 2014 after—the GRSS alleges—having been based in South Kordofan. The GRSS's decision to rejoin the JBVMM was thus likely motivated by a desire to draw attention to the presence of SPLA-IO troops in the SDBZ and to connections between SAF and the rebel forces. The peregrinations of the GRSS indicate the degree to which the implementation of the SDBZ is secondary to internal security concerns.



Since 16 June and the resumption of the JBVMM there has been minimal aerial reconnaissance of the SDBZ, with helicopter patrols taking off from the main headquarters of the mission in Kadugli, South Kordofan. These flights have found no evidence of military activity in the demilitarized zone. However, as the head of UNISFA indicated in April 2013 to the Joint Political and Security Mechanism—which is composed of Sudanese and South Sudanese representatives and addresses security concerns in the border zone—aerial reconnaissance is unable to reach definitive conclusions about the militarization of the SDBZ. This is because the patrols do not fly low enough to be able to truly verify the situation on the ground, and due to the fact that both sides take steps to disguise their deployments in the SDBZ, with satellite imagery from May and September 2013, for example, showing the SPLA attempting to conceal tanks in the demilitarized zone by hiding them under trees.

While the JBVMM is now operational, there is still no agreement on the centre line. On 20 August 2014 the Sudanese defence minister, Abdel Rahim Hussein, complained to the AUHIP that the GRSS was not implementing the 27 September 2012 security agreement. Without an agreement on the centre line, even if JBVMM aerial reconnaissance patrols were to find military forces in the SDBZ, either side could claim these troops were actually outside it, depending on the location of the centre line.

The JBVMM would require ground patrols in order to verify aerial reconnaissance; however, currently no troops are available to protect such patrols. To overcome this problem UN Security Council Resolution 2104 of 29 May 2013 expanded UNISFA's force from 4,200 to 5,326 members, with the additional 1,126 troops supposed to give force protection to JBVMM patrols. These troops are to be split into four company-sized forces of 267 soldiers each and deploy to four JBVMM bases. Thus far, only 117 troops have deployed to the JBVMM headquarters in Kadugli, and such a small group is not sufficient to provide force protection. The remainder of the UNISFA force was supposed to deploy in November–December 2013. Ten months later it has still not deployed.

Part of the reason that this deployment is so delayed is due to problems with the construction of bases for this force. As of mid-September 2014 only two of the four JBVMM bases are operational. According to the 8 March 2013 implementation matrix the GRSS and GoS were to give UNISFA land for these bases by 10 April and the bases were to be established by 8 June.

UNISFA had already established the Kadugli headquarters in 2011 as a base for its peacekeepers in Abyei. This base has been adversely affected by clashes between the SRF and SAF, which have disrupted the delivery of rations and supplies. In 2014 work continued on the Kadugli base so that it can support a company-sized force. As of 1 September 2014 there are 25



UNISFA, 34 SAF, and 30 SPLA JBVMM monitors at the base, in addition to 79 of the 117 force protection troops mandated by Resolution 2104.

The JBVMM base at Gokk Machar, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, is also operational to some extent, although it is still not conducting ground patrols. Land for the base was provided on 26 March 2013 and an advance party of UNISFA monitors arrived on 17 April. On 25–27 June 2014 UNISFA moved 38 troops from Kadugli to Gokk Machar. Work on the base continues, however, and it is unable to house a company-sized force. A call for tenders for construction work announced on 5 August 2014 asks that ‘the contractor shall prepare the site clean [*sic*], cut trees, roots, any hard materials, rocks and level to start the work’, indicating that the base is far from being completed.

Work has not begun on either of the other two JBVMM bases. The GoS only gave UNISFA permission to build a base at Buram, Darfur, on 30 June 2013. As of September 2014, while an area of land for the base—next to an existing UN/African Union Mission in Darfur base—has been selected, work has yet to begin and no monitors or UNISFA troops have deployed to Darfur. In Malakal UNISFA only agreed on a site for the JBVMM base in December 2013. With clashes breaking out in Upper Nile shortly after this, work has not begun on the base. As of September 2014 Malakal is deserted and conflict continues in the state. It thus seems unlikely there will be a JBVMM presence in Upper Nile state in the foreseeable future.

Without bases, UNISFA will be unable to deploy its four companies. Without force protection, there can be no ground patrols and the JBVMM will be reliant on aerial patrols that cannot verify the situation on the ground. Thus, the establishment of an effective JBVMM is contingent on the resolution of the internal security situation in both countries, which would allow bases to be constructed. This is not a likely development in the foreseeable future.

Even if the bases are constructed, however, and the UNISFA force deploys, it is unlikely that the JBVMM will be able to effectively monitor the SDBZ. The Sudan–South Sudan border is 2,010 km long and four companies of 267 soldiers, together with 90 UNISFA military observers, will struggle to patrol regularly enough and cover sufficient territory to ensure that the SDBZ is demilitarized.

But it is highly unlikely that the JBVMM will be able to verify that the SDBZ is demilitarized even with the protection mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 2104. This is not only a question of coverage of a vast border zone. The border zone is often extremely difficult to access, and—given the absence of border checkpoints and uncertain state control over the border zone—is extremely porous.



As of September 2014 there is little incentive for either country to implement the SDBZ. Most fundamentally, both sides maintain military positions in the SDBZ that are important for internal struggles, i.e. against the SRF in the case of the GoS and in South Sudan's internal conflict. With internal security currently taking precedence over all other concerns, neither side is likely to demilitarize.

Updated 24 September 2014