

# Operational Art in Peace Operations: Balancing the Peace Triangle

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## Abstract

*The article postulates a 'peace operations' triangle' with peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding as its three sides. It argues, through a case study of the UN's Abyei Mission, UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), that the three sides of the peace operations' triangle need to be ministered adequately for success of a mission. Through the lifecycle of the UNISFA, it foregrounds observations on the inter-linkages between the three sides. UNISFA's turn from being a mission with a largely military mandate to a multi-faceted mission indicates the significance of the three sides in peace operations. The operational art of peace operations, therefore, lies in arriving at a balance between the three.*

## Introduction

The heuristic on peacekeeping, made famous by Boutros-Boutros Ghali, had four components: peacekeeping, peacemaking, post-conflict peacebuilding and preventive diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> Preventive diplomacy, as the term suggests, is prior to the onset of violence. The other three lines of operation are not sequential and have a degree of overlap.<sup>2</sup> Challenges in peace operations are usually faced when there is imbalance in the attention and resources devoted to these. A peace operation's success depends on a masterly employment of the *tools* respective to each line of operation. As strategy, in general, is an art, so is efficacious employment of peace tools, termed here as the Operational Art of peace operations.

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In this article, a case study of the UN's Abyei Mission is undertaken through the 'peace operations' triangle<sup>3</sup>. The length of the three sides depicting that the salience of the side varies at different junctures in the lifecycle of a Mission. Preventive diplomacy brings about a peace agreement that allows for peacekeeping. The 'peace to keep' is used for peacebuilding, deepening constituencies in favour of peace, that in turn helps with peacemaking involving dealing with 'root causes'. Thus, an interactive relationship can be seen between the three. Slovenly peacemaking aggravates peacekeeping, thereby constricting space for peacebuilding. On the other hand, peacemaking expands the space for peacebuilding, easing the onus on peacekeeping. Operational Art lies in ensuring none of the three sides loses ballast, while the three are energised to situation-specific levels. The aim is a positive, self-reinforcing equilateral triangle.

### **Background to the Abyei Mission**

Abyei is a territorial dispute between Sudan and South Sudan,<sup>4</sup> a left over from the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) period.<sup>5</sup> Along with the Two Areas — Kordofan and Blue Nile — Abyei remained an outstanding border dispute issue, along their 2100 km long border.<sup>6</sup> The UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) was inserted as a military mission to prevent the territorial dispute from becoming a thorn in the relationship between the two new neighbours.<sup>7</sup> UNISFA acquired another significant dimension: that of border monitoring and verification.<sup>8</sup> The expanded mandate that brought about the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism (JBVMM)<sup>9</sup> assumed significance with the two States indulging in a brief border war in early 2012 over sharing of oil proceeds.<sup>10</sup>

The mission turned out not only the most remote one, but also unique in having a single troop contributing country (TCC), Ethiopia. There is a division of labour between the UN and the regional organizations — the African Union (AU) and the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) — with the latter two in the lead on peacemaking,<sup>11</sup> while the UN did peacekeeping. Peacebuilding in the form of humanitarian relief, reconstruction and support of refugee returns was the realm of respective UN Country Teams (UNCT). UNISFA, not being an integrated mission, limited its activity to provision of security for humanitarian actors

and lobbying the UNCT in both capitals to pay attention to Abyei's needs.

### **Lifecycle of UNISFA**

The intimate interplay between the triangle's sides can be seen over the lifecycle of the UNISFA.<sup>12</sup> In light of the border war outbreak in early 2012, the AU turned its attention through the AU High Level Panel (AUHIP)<sup>13</sup> to tidying up the CPA period leftovers. It put forward proposals on Abyei in September 2012<sup>14</sup> and an implementation matrix with a timeline in March 2013.<sup>15</sup>

Peacemaking in Abyei was through the implementation of June 2011 Abyei Agreement that had requested the Mission deployment.<sup>16</sup> The Agreement formed the basis of UNISFA mandate. Talks proceeded for setting up an interim joint administration over the disputed area, reporting to a joint oversight committee (AJOC) between the two sides. However, a debilitating setback occurred when in May 2013, the paramount chief of the Ngok Dinka community was assassinated by a Misseriya youth.<sup>17</sup>

Hardening of the Ngok Dinka position, led to a unilateral referendum by the Ngok Dinka on Abyei's status in October 2013. The referendum under AU auspices had been held up with disagreement over the definition of a 'resident'. The Misseriya are a migrant community that is present in Abyei Area only during the dry season for cattle grazing. On the other hand, the Ngok Dinka is a settled community, mostly residing in the southern part of Abyei Area.<sup>18</sup> In the event, the unilateral October 2013 referendum was not recognized by either South Sudan or the AU.<sup>19</sup>

Resulting insecurity at ground level held up local inter-community peacemaking and setback peacebuilding effort on part of UN Agencies, Funds and Programs (AFP). At the local level in Abyei, the Mission resorted temporarily to a 'zone of separation', wherein the Misseriya herds were not allowed to cross into settled Ngok Dinka areas for pasture. An intercommunity peace committee was formed in 2016 to dialogue on resumption of relations. This UNISFA supported the initiative for setting up of a joint market at Amiet. The Abyei common market became an economic hub, with a cascading effect on intercommunity relations as commercial stakeholders acquired a stake in peace. Equally, spoilers were active, periodically disrupting the peace effort with violence directed

at the common market. UNISFA used troops to secure the market, but also bid for formed police units for the task.<sup>20</sup>

By end 2013, South Sudan was in the midst of a deadly civil war.<sup>21</sup> This held up the political process at the national level. The period witnessed UNISFA slowly expanding its presence for border monitoring to a four point deployment on both sides at sector level, and, by 2018, also at team site level within a 20 km broad Safe Demilitarised Border Zone (SDBZ). The two sides promised to demilitarise the zone in anticipation of AU-coordinated demarcation activity, logistically supported by JBVMM.<sup>22</sup>

There was an interesting tug-of-war of sorts between Sudan that only wanted a military predominant mission, while the Mission attempted to expand its scope of activity as per best practices elsewhere in integrated missions. Security Council Resolutions added facets, such as human rights, women and child protection, to the UNISFA mandate. Sudan — the host state — being weak and internally distracted, asserted its sovereignty through being difficult with the Mission on issues as visas and transit of logistics.

Peacebuilding progress was reflected in the return of refugees and recovery activity. However, the divided responsibility between the two UNCTs, distracted from a joint effort. There was a sense of alienation in northern Abyei among the Misseriya, since Khartoum-based AFPs were thinly represented in Abyei.<sup>23</sup> The AFPs argued that the Misseriya were not as much conflict-affected as poverty-struck, precluding equivalence between the two communities.

In the interim, national level peacemaking under IGAD auspices concentrated on the fallout of the South Sudan civil war,<sup>24</sup> a proxy war of sorts between Sudan and South Sudan. The two sides were agreeable to disengaging from their proxy war and even went so far as to not only rein in respective proxies but bring them to the table for settlement with the opposite capital. By 2018, insurgencies in both sides ceased, brightening prospects that the two could now discuss Abyei and the border issue.

### **On the Cusp of an Exit Strategy**

Even as South Sudan embarked on implementing the Revitalized Agreement (R-ARCSS) signed on 12 September 2018 in Addis Ababa, the situation in Sudan unravelled. A civilian uprising



unseated Omar al Bashir in April 2019. However, the military continued with its peacemaking — with South Sudanese assistance — with Sudanese rebels in Darfur and Two Areas.<sup>25</sup> On the other side, the South Sudanese civil war protagonist, Riek Machar, re-joined the government in South Sudan in February 2020.<sup>26</sup> These political developments put in place the political atmospherics necessary for settlement.<sup>27</sup>

However, peace at the local level proved elusive. The Ngok Dinka worried that with inter-capital bonhomie might see their cause sold down-river. They sought to be more hardline. In turn, Sudanese followed up by putting in a unilateral local administration in place.<sup>28</sup> The two local administrations displaced the traditional chiefs, on whose back the local peace process was run, to a subordinate role. At the local level, the Ngok Dinka resiled from the local level peace process. A particularly gruesome incident in January 2020 had left some 35 Dinka dead.<sup>29</sup> The annual Misseriya migration was held up. Fallout has been in a *de-facto* separation of the north from southern Abyei. This irks the Ngok Dinka who emphasise the *de-jure* borders of Abyei, arrived at under Permanent Court of Arbitration award during the CPA period.<sup>30</sup>

The mechanism AJOC, that was to oversee the joint administration as per the June 2011 Agreement, went into a limbo. The last time the AJOC met was at Addis Ababa in November 2017, when the AU facilitator last exerted his political role. At the time the chieftains of both sides also met.<sup>31</sup> The Ngok Dinka viewed a joint local administration as Khartoum's way to reassert its sway over the area. They want a time bound joint administration charged with holding a referendum. The Misseriya want the joint local administration to restore sway of Sudan over southern Abyei Area.

The Mission brought the two sides to dialogue again in Abyei in 2020.<sup>32</sup> Peacemaking involves inclusivity, but this brings the problem of too many voices at the table and conflicting agendas. The national authorities like to play the lower levels against each other, sometimes using plausibly-deniable violence through non-state armed groups. This aggravates the protection of civilians (POC) task. Insecurity keeps peacebuilding from moving from humanitarian recovery to the development stage with donors shying away. Counter-intuitively, the Mission's peacekeeping success served to setback peacemaking at the national level, since the

two sides were each distracted with other more compelling crises. Peacebuilding in terms of reconciliation, therefore, got held up at the ground level, subject as the two communities are, to cues from the national level. Reviving the grassroots peace process has been the Mission's priority, which has only recently borne fruit. The Mission brought the two together for three conferences over 2020, to little avail. An innovation was in the Mission taking their representatives to a peace conference in Northern Bahr el Gazal State of South Sudan in 2021.<sup>33</sup> This was followed up by another peace conference in Entebbe in May 2022.<sup>34</sup>

The competing demands on the transitional administrations in both capitals, and bouts of instability such as most recently in Sudan,<sup>35</sup> make the Abyei issue recede further from national priorities. The UN is thus left with a lack of peacemaking to complement peacekeeping. This put paid to an exit strategy, eating up limited UN resources.

Lack of an exit strategy leads to risk from unforeseen events. The Sudanese-Ethiopian relations soured over a border issue in wake of outbreak of the Ethiopian civil war.<sup>36</sup> Sudan asked for a changeover from the single TCC format.<sup>37</sup> India has reportedly volunteered one battalion.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the Mission is in midst of transition, opening up space to spoilers.<sup>39</sup> At the local level, such risks are reflected in the spate of intra-Dinka violence with its unexpected onset in southern Abyei, between the Ngok Dinka and the Twic Dinka, from Twic County, Warrap State, South Sudan, to the south.<sup>40</sup>

With improved relations, prospects of advance on vexed issues such as the border, stand enhanced. In anticipation, local border communities have become more assertive, worried that their traditional homelands will be rent asunder by modern-day borders. The local communities evicted the JBVMM from three sites in the SDBZ and a sector headquarters in 2021.<sup>41</sup> The two defence ministers meet periodically in a Joint Security Committee (JSC) to resolve such matters. The JSC could use the improved relations to put confidence building measures in place on the common border as per the security agreements of 2012. Whereas a border war has not recurred, proxy war has occurred across the SDBZ. The JBVMM can be enlarged to assist with border management, pending territorial resolution. The Abyei issue also

awaits joint attention.<sup>42</sup> Abyei is part of the basket of border problems, numbering 10 sites.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it will be part of the give-and-take of border negotiations. The Mission may therefore have to craft a pragmatic exit strategy with a time horizon into mid-decade, taking on board the political compulsions of the two sides.<sup>44</sup>

### **Conclusion — From a Scalene to an Equilateral Triangle**

As seen from this case study on Abyei, each of the sides — peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding — is significant on its own count, as also the three together are mutually reinforcing. Operational Art is to get to a successful closure through synergy between the three. To be sure, there would be periods of predominance of one: unless security is provisioned by peacekeeping, peacebuilding cannot proceed; peacemaking opens up space for peacekeeping; and bottom-up peacebuilding and national level peacemaking are intertwined. Strategizing for a peace operation can use the visualization of an equilateral triangle as guide for operational planning and decisions.

Here Abyei has served as locale for application of this model of Operational Art. The Mission has been hobbled by outsourcing of peacemaking to the regional organizations. Its local level peacemaking suffered since the two communities adapted their stances to suit the position of the two national capitals. Constrained by an outdated June 2011 Agreement, the Mission can facilitate peacemaking, rather than take on mediator role. This deficit in peacemaking places a premium on peacekeeping. While a single TCC model has its advantages, particularly in a mid-sized mission, the regional political flux led to substitution by a multi-national force. Peacekeeping is thus back to square one with the resulting loss in institutional memory and preoccupation with transition logistics, the latter being difficult at the best of times in a UN setting, made worse in Abyei's case as it's the most remote mission in the world besides being only helicopter supported.

Given the vicissitudes of peacekeeping, peacebuilding faces the challenge of resource mobilization. The new Mission in Sudan, the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS),<sup>45</sup> which is an integrated Mission, can oversee AFP activity in northern Abyei, easing Misseriya concerns. However, it

is challenged by the scope of needs, stretching as they are from the newly opened up Two Areas and Darfur, to refugees from the Ethiopian civil war.<sup>46</sup> The Abyei Mission is poised for continuing tension between the three sides of the peace operations' triangle, balancing which should keep the Mission leadership, the Secretariat and the Security Council engaged out to the middle term. Once the two States have had their respective UN-supported democratic elections, UNISFA may return to center stage. It would have to persist with enlightened conflict management in the interim.

### Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> The term is inspired by Johan Galtung's 1969 paper, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research*, 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-191.

<sup>4</sup> Ajay Jaswal, "United Nations Interim Security Force in Abyei (UNISFA): A New Mission in the Hot Spot of Sudan," *USI Journal*, CXLII, Jan-Mar 2012, 90-104, <https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/united-nations-interim-security-force-in-abyei-unisfa-a-mission-in-the-hotspot-of-sudan/>.

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<sup>6</sup> Details on UNISFA are at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/unisfa>.

<sup>7</sup> Security Council Resolution S/RES/1990 (2011), June 27, 2011, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1990>.

<sup>8</sup> Security Council Resolution S/RES/2024 (2011), December 14, 2011, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2024>.

<sup>9</sup> "Agreement on the Border Monitoring Support Mission between the Government of the Sudan and the Government of South Sudan," July 30, 2011, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/view/1372>.

<sup>10</sup> Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Abyei," S/2012/358, May 24, 2012.

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<sup>13</sup> Aman Sethi, “Deadlock on Abyei persists,” October 25, 2012, *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/deadlock-on-abyei-persists/article4028441.ece>.

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<sup>15</sup> AU press release, March 9, 2013, <https://au.int/en/newsevents/20130309/chairperson-commission-welcomes-signing-agreement-modalities-implementation>.

<sup>16</sup> “Agreement between the Government of Republic of Sudan and the Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army on the Temporary Arrangements for the Administration and Security in the Abyei Area,” June 20, 2011, [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SD\\_110620\\_Agreement TemporaryArrangementsAbyeiArea.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SD_110620_Agreement%20TemporaryArrangementsAbyeiArea.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Abyei,” S/2013/294, May 17, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan, “Update on Abyei,” *Small Arms Survey*, July 13, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> AU press release, October 28, 2013, <https://au.int/en/newsevents/20131028/african-union-strongly-condemns-holding-unilateral-referendum-abyei>.

<sup>20</sup> For the 2018 UNISFA Strategic Review, that dwells on the Mission during its consolidation phase, see “Letter dated 20 August 2018 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council,” <https://undocs.org/S/2018/778>.

<sup>21</sup> Global Conflict Tracker, “Civil War in South Sudan,” Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-south-sudan>.

<sup>22</sup> “Special report of the Secretary-General on the review of the mandate of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (S/2017/293),”

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<sup>24</sup> United States Institute of Peace, “South Sudan Peace Process: Key Facts,” <https://www.usip.org/south-sudan-peace-process-key-facts>.

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