

Roundtable Report  
**Southern Sudan:  
the option of secession and  
its regional implications**



Compiled by Andrews Atta-Asamoah and Jort Hemmer  
ISS Nairobi Conference Room, Nairobi, Kenya, Thursday 30 September 2010



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# Introduction

As Sudan enters the final and most critical year of its post-war transition period, the other countries that form the Horn and central Africa are on the alert. Southern Sudan's self-determination referendum, scheduled for January 2011, could very well result in the partition of the country and the emergence of an independent state in the south. The founding of a sovereign Southern Sudanese state would have profound implications for the region's political playing field and reshape its security and economic environment.

On the threshold of the self-determination referendum, the African Conflict Prevention Programme of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and the

Conflict Research Unit of the Netherlands Institute of International Relations ('Clingendael') jointly organised an expert roundtable with the objective of identifying future challenges and opportunities for a peaceful coexistence and cooperation between (a potentially independent) Southern Sudan and its neighbours. The roundtable brought together a select but diverse group of 37 experts and practitioners, who exchanged information and discussed the north-south question, the prospect for an independent Southern Sudan, regional security challenges and opportunities to promote good neighbourliness in the region. Key aspects of these discussions are captured in this report.

# Sudan's north-south problems

Deliberations on existing north-south problems centred on contentious issues in the run-up to the referendum, and the challenges of making unity attractive to both parties. It became apparent from the discussions that a number of critical issues remain to be resolved before the referendum takes place in January 2011. These include, among others, border demarcation; the question of citizenship; the division of oil revenues; currency; debt management; the fate of integrated state institutions, particularly the security agency; and the implications of a potential split for treaties and international conventions binding on Sudan.

In line with provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), it was noted that some efforts are being made to make unity attractive, also by Sudan's civil society. These include the establishment of a non-partisan organisation made up of distinguished Sudanese personalities and charged with promoting unity. Known as the National Organization for Voluntary Unity (NOVU), the organisation's consultations have led to proposals on three levels of possible relations between the north and south within the framework of making unity attractive to the parties to the CPA:

- A unified country on a new basis to be agreed upon by the two partners and other political forces in the north and south
- The two governments establish joint decisions to administer oil production, citizenship, security matters and other areas of mutual concern
- The option of two independent countries living in peace and guided by the principles of good neighbourliness and economic cooperation

However, efforts towards unity appear to be too late to realise the objective of making a unified Sudan attractive to the people and political actors in the south. It appears that the recent drive towards unity from the north is not really resonating with the common voter in the south, even though it remains popular among elites.

Participants in the roundtable acknowledged the technical and logistical difficulty of holding the referendum and stressed the need for international and regional actors, as well as guarantors of the CPA, to tailor their efforts towards guaranteeing a free and fair referendum in order that its results will be recognised by all parties and to prevent any possible resumption of violence.

A number of deficiencies in the CPA were noted. These include a failing in the decision-making processes between the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), leading the SPLM to believe that there is no equity in decision making surrounding the CPA at the national level. The second deficiency concerns the exclusion of other political forces from the provisions of the CPA. Against this background, even though the CPA provides the general framework for southern independence, it is not the optimum solution for the north-south problem because it does not address the most pressing concerns of the people in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile states. Neither does it explicitly specify the means and channels for a continuing relationship between the south and north in the event of secession. Having noted these failings, it was deemed necessary that the issue of public consultations, or alternative mechanisms for the Blue Nile and Nuba Mountains states, is treated with urgent attention, as these regions will have an important role to play in the maintenance of stability in Sudan, especially after the referendum.

# Prospects for an independent Southern Sudan

Discussions in the roundtable indicated that most southerners firmly believe in the inevitability of secession and that in the event of secession, the south will not be a failed state, but one that will pursue positive policies and initiatives both domestically and within the region. However, some participants had serious concerns about the stability of Southern Sudan after the referendum. Such fears were partly traced to the existence of several unresolved internal challenges in the south, such as the nature of politics, the difficult relationship with the north, border issues, inefficient disarmament and demobilisation processes, and tribal conflicts – which are capable of eroding plans and commitments to create a stable state. More importantly, it remains to be seen whether the SPLM will be able to accommodate the interests of different factions and realise inclusive governance.

Regarding existing disputes, it came up that many southern Sudanese refer to the 1956 border demarcation as a tool that could be used when settling local territorial disputes between competing groups. The widespread perception that a reversion to the 1956 borders is the solution to local territorial disputes is, however, problematic in terms of its applicability and legal validity, as it is based

on a particular interpretation of the CPA that was not intended to refer to all borders. Some participants argued that such historical boundaries may not exist save for the demarcation of the north-south border.

Expectations of instability in the south are also fuelled by the fact that there is no consensus among southerners on what is in the best interests of their country. The vision of what the referendum ought to deliver features prominently in this assumption. In reality, although a majority vote in favour of unity is improbable, not all southerners are equally eager for secession, particularly when one takes into account the areas with strong connections to the north. In western Bahr el Ghazal, for example, concerns about continued northern oppression when weighed against the perceived administrative weaknesses of the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) make the decision complex for some of the population there.

There was a consensus, however, that regardless of which scenario unfolds in the referendum, the north and south will remain each other's most important neighbours for the years to come. Ties between Southern Sudan and its neighbours will, therefore, have to be assessed and understood within such a context and background.

# Regional security implications and challenges

The region in general – and the bordering countries in particular – will influence the referendum and its possible outcome. If a credible referendum is held in accordance with the CPA and the Interim National Constitution, and if the NCP subsequently endorses the results, recognition of the new state would be relatively easy for the states in the region. However, in the case of any confusion resulting from the referendum, regional states and institutions will need to consider how best to respond to ensure respect for the CPA and the right of self-determination enshrined therein.

It became clear from the roundtable that even if Southern Sudan manages to keep its peace and stability after the referendum, the prospect of it emerging as a weak state and a largely ungoverned entity raises issues about security in the region. Upon emerging as a new state, there will be long-term challenges to the ability of GoSS to, firstly, obtain the monopoly on the use of force; secondly, secure and control its borders; thirdly, contain the proliferation of small arms and light weapons; and, fourthly, effectively govern its territories. This raises a number of questions concerning security for the region.

Other implications for the region include the issue of contested borders. Borders between Southern Sudan and

some of its neighbours are not clearly demarcated. They include the Ilemi triangle claimed by Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya, as well as the Gambella region of Ethiopia. Even though these are not new issues in the geopolitical dynamics of the region, the discovery of oil deposits in some of these areas in recent times has the potential of raising the stakes in the contestation over these territories.

Related to the above is the fear that Southern Sudan may join forces with countries that are currently contesting the existing Nile agreements. As stated by one participant, Egypt is particularly afraid that Southern Sudan will ‘drink the Nile dry’. Some participants were of the view that Southern Sudan may act in such a way that it avoids harming Egypt’s interests.

Another key regional security dynamic relates to the problem of the activities of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). Concerns were raised about the presence of Ugandan forces pursuing LRA leaders in the region, including in Southern Sudan, and the likelihood that the independence of Southern Sudan may be a game changer, since the new state may want to exert its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

# Towards good neighbourliness

An independent Southern Sudan will be a landlocked state and will consequently require infrastructure to ship its exports and imports. It will be confronted with challenges such as the sustainable management of natural resources, training of civil servants, attracting foreign direct investments, technological transfers from its neighbours and regional integration. These issues will, therefore, be instrumental in the formulation of its foreign policy and its relations with other states in the region.

The practice of good neighbourliness will thus be inevitable if Southern Sudan is to succeed as an actor in

the region. In the past, Southern Sudan has maintained good relations with its closest neighbours. Trade between Southern Sudan, Kenya and Uganda took off after the signing of the CPA; an independent and stable Southern Sudan will be a huge market for these states.

In the event of independence, Southern Sudan will be of great importance for the region's oil economy. The new state's oil may trigger competition, but may also foster cooperation. Being landlocked, Southern Sudan may want to decrease its dependence on the north by resorting to strategic relations with other states in the region, especially in the management of its resources.



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