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## Peacekeeping in South Sudan is a race against time for the UN

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In the context of fraught geopolitical relations following Russia's war in Ukraine, the UN Security Council's decision to renew the mandate of the Mission in South Sudan is a major achievement. But the potential for escalating violence in the country make the Mission's future uncertain.

A notable consequence of **Russia's invasion** of Ukraine has been the near-complete breakdown of what was already a deeply fraught relationship among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Unsurprisingly, the war has also drawn diplomatic focus and media attention away from a depressingly long list of other crises facing the world body. Efforts to overcome divisions and find common ground among key Council members on conflicts in places such as Syria and Mali have effectively ground to a halt, giving way instead to a further sharpening of power rivalry and competition.

Considering these developments, the Council's decision on 15 March 2022 to **renew the mandate** of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) stands out as a major achievement. Russia and China abstained in the final vote on mandate renewal. However, the decision ensures that the mission in South Sudan maintains its existing troop ceiling of 17,000 peacekeepers and 2,100 police officers for one more year. The mission, which was **first established** in July 2011, will continue its focus on four major tasks:

- Protecting civilians
- Supporting the delivery of humanitarian aid
- Assisting the peace process
- Monitoring violations of human rights

The mandate extension grants South Sudan's Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity much-needed time to complete the implementation of a **peace agreement** reached in 2018, which brought about a major reduction in violence arising from the **civil war** that started in 2013, two years into South Sudan's independence.

As part of a transitional period, President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar formed a coalition government in **February 2020**. The transitional period was expected to culminate in "free, fair and peaceful elections" in early 2023. However, the realism of this ambition – given the many challenges and unresolved issues that lie ahead for South Sudan – is looking ever more questionable. That's because the implementation of the peace agreement's key provisions has stalled. It is now significantly behind schedule.

## The roadblocks

Among the major concerns are a lack of progress on the writing of the constitution. There is also the coalition government's failure to agree on the details and the timetable for elections. This includes clarity around the UN mission's precise role in supporting the electoral process.

Aside from the technical and logistical arrangements required for credible elections to go ahead, there is a more formidable challenge. The country needs to establish a political, civic and security environment that is conducive to competitive electoral politics. This environment doesn't yet exist. Further, levels of local, sub-national and communal violence **remain high** and are increasing in parts of the country. Some **eight million people** are facing severe food insecurity, and nearly two million remain **internally displaced**.

Even as it renewed the South Sudan mission's mandate and acknowledged signs of progress over the past year, the **UN Security Council** expressed "deep concern regarding the political, security, economic and humanitarian crisis" in the country.

## Signs of progress

However, the UN mission's **record** in tackling multiple and interacting challenges should not be dismissed. The mission has responded in proactive ways to instability and persistent levels of violence in South Sudan. For example, it has reduced static peacekeeping deployments in favour of creating more temporary operating bases. These have been set up near conflict hot spots. Combined with extensive patrolling, they have enhanced the peacekeeper's mobility and ability to respond in a timely fashion to threats against civilians.

The mission has also encouraged community-level dialogue and supported the negotiation of numerous local peace agreements. This has helped build trust among communities and contributed further to the protection of civilians. However, despite these achievements, the larger picture remains bleak.

The fundamentals of South Sudan's political economy of conflict and its **militarised form of governance** have undermined the UN's limited capacities to control violence, let alone support the move towards more inclusive forms of governance. In late 2020, an independent strategic review of the South Sudan mission requested by the Security Council **concluded** that: "achieving

“durable and inclusive peace in South Sudan requires addressing deeply entrenched power dynamics and political systems that have primarily fuelled violence rather than served to protect citizens and create conditions for them to prosper”. Those power dynamics and systems have not been broken.

The country has a long-established pattern of shifting political allegiances among well-armed ethno-political factions. This has resulted in defections and splintering. Power-sharing arrangements are often short-lived, creating a constant threat of wider breakdown and an upsurge in violence. In January 2022, President Salva Kir struck an **agreement** on military leadership with two opposition commanders who broke away from Vice President Riek Machar. This deal is symptomatic of this pattern.

## Why the elections matter

Against the backdrop of a deteriorating geopolitical environment – and with less than a year to go before the end of the transitional period – the preparations, conduct and aftermath of the elections in South Sudan will prove critical to the prospects for peace and stability. In theory, post-conflict elections are meant to confer domestic and international legitimacy on fragile, post-war governing structures. They are meant to encourage the growth of non-violent politics and support societal transformation towards durable peace.

In reality, introducing electoral competition into war-torn and deeply divided societies has often had the very opposite effect. It has sharpened and exacerbated conflict rather than mitigated it. The “winner-takes-all approach” to politics and elections makes this a real danger in South Sudan. As Nick Haysom, head of the UN mission in the country, **noted** in 2021, unless technical and political preparations are in place, the elections “could be a catastrophe instead of a turning point”. Yet, the time for preparation is short.

From a political perspective, a formula for power sharing, irrespective of who wins, should be worked out before elections are held. Also, the mission’s role in brokering local peace agreements and supporting non-military forms of

civilian protection through its field offices will become more critical as the elections loom.

Last, but not least, mobilising and actively engaging neighbouring states, key regional players and organisations – specifically the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the African Union – in support of South Sudan’s peace process have become even more important. This follows the geopolitical fall-out from the war in Ukraine and the **deepening of tensions** within the UN Security Council.

The proposed 2023 elections may be postponed, as they have in the **past**. However, Security Council politics make this less likely. If the elections were to go ahead, resulting in increased violence or even a return to full-scale civil war, there is no guarantee that the Council will again renew the UN’s presence in South Sudan.

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*Photo: Contingent of Nepalese Peacekeepers Arrives in Juba from Haiti. UN Photo/Isaac Billy. 4 February 2014. Juba, South Sudan. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

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