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To save South Sudan, put it on life support

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South Sudan marked its fifth anniversary as a state this month not with celebrations but with rival armed factions shooting at each other in the streets of the capital. Several hundred people were killed in less than a week, tens of thousands displaced, and even sacrosanct UN camps protecting civilians were attacked. South Sudan ceased to perform even the minimal functions and responsibilities of a sovereign state long ago, and today the likelihood of a larger pogrom and escalating civil war is high.

A power-sharing agreement to end a conflict that started in December 2013 was centred around two people – President Salva Kiir and opposition leader First Vice President Riek Machar – who are irredeemably compromised among segments of the population, who view them as posing an existential threat to their communities. An African Union (AU) Commission of Inquiry found Kiir and Machar’s forces both responsible for killings that constituted war crimes and crimes against humanity. Sharing power between them has now failed disastrously on two separate occasions, and further attempts can only be expected to produce more of the same: immense human suffering and regional instability.

There is, however, another way: put South Sudan on “life support” by establishing an executive mandate for the UN and the AU to administer the country until institutions exist to manage politics nonviolently and break up the patronage networks underlying the conflict. This will realistically take 10-15 years. Planning for it at the outset, however, is more sensible than the accumulation of one-year mandates over decades, as is the case with other peacekeeping missions.

Given South Sudan’s extreme degree of state failure, temporary external administration is the only remaining path to protect and restore its sovereignty. It would empower the people of South Sudan to take ownership of their future and develop a new vision for their country. While a morally bankrupt and predatory elite will falsely characterise such an initiative as a violation of sovereignty, it is this very elite that has put the country’s survival at risk. Though seemingly radical, international administration is not unprecedented and has previously been employed to guide Kosovo, East Timor and other countries out of conflict. In South Sudan, the stakes are no less.

While brokering such a transition would require sophisticated and committed diplomacy by the US, African governments, the UN and western countries with long-standing interests in South Sudan, such as the UK and Norway, it would be no costlier than the current approach and in fact promises a better chance of success. Since 2005, the US alone has spent more than \$11bn in humanitarian, peacekeeping and reconstruction assistance, with little to show for the investment and no end in sight.

The US now needs to undertake a new diplomatic initiative in concert with regional and international partners to recognise the futility of the current approach and secure support for a UN/AU administration that protects the South Sudanese.

This would include:

- Negotiating an exit for Kiir and Machar
- Earning the support of a plurality of the South Sudanese security services, major armed groups and tribal constituencies for UN/AU administration
- Establishing a jointly administered UN/AU oversight structure for South Sudan and placing the country's oil revenue in escrow under its control
- Restructuring the UN peacekeeping intervention to include enhanced enforcement capabilities

A combination of power and force can weaken any actors with an incentive to obstruct the transitional administration. The AU and South Sudan's neighbours especially will have to be united on this, putting diplomatic and military muscle behind the AU's principle of non-indifference to intervene in cases of genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes.

The exclusion of Kiir and Machar from the transition can defuse a major driver of the war, as well as opposition to UN/AU administration among important tribal constituencies. To expedite their departure, the US and the other regional and international guarantors of the current peace agreement should offer Kiir and Machar immunity from prosecution and safe haven abroad.

The UN Security Council should also impose a strict arms embargo and institute time-triggered sanctions on both Kiir and Machar to induce their departure. To give the threat of prosecution credibility, the AU should move quickly to establish a Hybrid Court for South Sudan following its summit in Kigali this week. Finally, the US, the UK and other like-minded states should put in place pre-emptive contract sanctions on business deals the current regime signs, rendering these contracts unenforceable in US and UK courts.

A diplomatic initiative can also persuade the South Sudanese military and other national security organs that UN/AU administration is the least bad alternative to direct military intervention, the carving up of the country into spheres of influence by Ethiopia, Sudan, and Uganda, and the consequent open-ended loss of sovereignty. Many South Sudanese military leaders would embrace the pause provided by an international presence to restructure and professionalise their fractured forces. In parallel, the political weight of non-Dinka ethnic groups which have been alienated by government measures that benefit Kiir's tribe at their expense could be brought to bear in support of a UN/AU administration that reverses these measures.

Deployment of a peace intervention force with credible coercive force could then deter and defeat remaining spoilers. While requiring robust rules of engagement, an effective command structure and assets to enable mobility, the size and cost of such a peace intervention force would certainly not exceed that of the current UN peacekeeping operation. Instead, in a political context where core elements of government and opposition forces would not oppose the international administration, a smaller number of troop contributors with a demonstrated willingness to use deadly force could be deployed. Security arrangements that have succeeded in ending other civil wars have not been characterised by massive deployments or the widespread use of force but rather by a convincing commitment to enforcement in support of a coherent political strategy. Moreover, since the country is broke, the international administration could require South Sudanese soldiers to return to barracks in order to stay on the payroll.

Left to its present course, South Sudan's demise will compound the threats already posed by state failure, weak governance, conflict, migration and extremism in a region set to more than double in population by 2050. The international community needs an approach with the prospects of a better return on investment. The people of South Sudan deserve not band aids but a definitive end to their unrelenting nightmare.

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