

Research Article

# Ethnic Divisions, Geopolitical Pressures, and Foreign Policy Vulnerabilities: Pathways to Peace and Stability in South Sudan

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## Abstract

South Sudan's continued violence and political instability that engulfed the country since its independence stem from deep ethnic divisions exacerbated by political interests along the tribal lines and field by external geopolitical pressures and compounded by a weak foreign policy framework and lack of critical domestic policies to catalyse development, enhance peacebuilding, and promote self-reliance and access to basic services. This article analyses the interplay between Dinka-Nuer rivalries at the politico-national level, fuelled by inter-communal tensions and tendencies, and the effects of strategic interests of regional and global actors, highlighting their role in perpetuating conflict and continued national political divide. The article provides a critical analysis of South Sudan's diplomatic and economic vulnerabilities as a result of persistent instability and proposes a policy reform with a foreign policy centred on bilateral partnerships, regional collaboration, institutional transparency, and economic diversification. By addressing these dimensions, South Sudan can rebuild trust, gain integrity in the face of regional and international partners, and enhance partnerships with development partners to strengthen governance and chart a sustainable path to peace and stability. Drawing on conflict analysis and policy perspectives, this study offers actionable insights for stakeholders seeking to support South Sudan's recovery while providing a framework for the country's policy makers to initiate reforms, an institutional transparency and accountability framework as incentives to development and peacebuilding in the country.

## Keywords

Ethnic Conflict, Geopolitical Influences, Foreign Policy Reform, Peacebuilding, South Sudan

## 1. Introduction

South Sudan gained its independence through a secession from Sudan in 2011, amidst pockets of intercommunal and politically induced violence, some of which were attributed to the invisible hands and continued challenges of the transition, including the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) implementation challenges. [11] The notable events as noted by the International Alert included the border issues with the

Sudan, intercommunal violence between the Lou Nuer, Dinka Bor and Murle, as well as the post-election violence of Late Gen. George Athor and David Yau Yau among other skirmishes in the Bhar el Ghazel region and Equatoria between 2010 and 2012. The journey of South Sudan since its independence has not been as smooth as anticipated due to the conflicts and geopolitical pressures amid the policy formula-

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tion challenges of a new country. Ideally, the journey to develop a firm foreign policy to project the country's domestic policies and values has been challenging and hence requires a reformation process to meet the needs of South Sudanese and the nation at large. [4] A firm foreign policy that projects the national interest and domestic values would galvanise regional and international support, including through mobilization of adequate resources to provide for basic services, developmental programs and enhanced peacebuilding, reconciliation and healing in the nation's devastated areas by conflict and displacement. Aside from the political conflict that are being solve through the peace agreements including the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolutions of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCISS) that saw the establishment of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGONU), the ethnic rivalry such as between Dinka and Nuer, Nuer, Dinka and Murle and Dinka against Dinka, Nuer against Nuer have continued to the challenge the stability of the country and prevented development efforts in particular areas, especially the Upper Nile and Bhar El Ghazel Regions. The dynamics of such intercommunal violence could be attributed to the proliferation of arms in the hands of civilians, a possible interference that Khartoum was accused of prior to the independence of South Sudan. [4] This exacerbated the ethnic divisions and became a great catalyst for the socio-political wars in South Sudan later. While interference and political interests in South Sudan could be blamed on regional and international entities, the diplomatic efforts in the country's foreign policy and development efforts presented a weak point in achieving peace, stability and good governance for the country.

This article examines the critical contributions of ethnic conflict dimension, geopolitical interferences and foreign policy vulnerability impacts that have prevented South Sudan from achieving peace, stability and sustainable development. It proposes that, there is a critical need to overhaul the process by reforming the foreign policy and diplomatic engagements strategy to project the revised interest guided by the national development strategy to foster peace and stability, offering actionable pathways to strengthen governance, accountability and development framework for the country including through development and private sector partnership in various sectors. The renewed diplomatic strategy would be centred on rebuilding international trust, centred on regional integration and national interest on the efforts of "taking town to the people."

## 2. Ethnic Divisions and Conflict Dynamics

South Sudan is home to about sixty-four (64) ethnic groups or tribes with distinct identities, cultures, and languages, notably the Dinka, Nuer, Luo, Azande, Bari, and Toposa, among others. The Dinka and Nuer make up the half population of the

country, inhabiting Upper Nile and Bhar El Ghazel Regions, whereas Azande, Cholo and the Murle among others come in the second row of large ethnic groups. [9] It is worth noting that these distinct tribes or ethnic communities have coexisted and contributed in one way or another to the liberation struggles since the Ottoman Empire to the independence of South Sudan. The history of ethnic violence, intercommunal conflicts and political divide on ethnic lines has been recorded in South Sudan, with its genesis in the then Sudan and has since been polarized making the diversity supposedly to be cherished more than a curse. [8] These ethnic struggles could date back to Sudanese liberation times, including during the first Anya-nya revolution, to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A) led by the Dr John Garang, an ethnic Dinka who fell out with his close ally, Dr Riek Machar, an ethnic Nuer. During the 1991 split, Dr Riek Machar forces that were predominantly Nuer swept through the ethnic Dinka territories including the homeland to Dr Garang, displacing hundreds of thousands and committing atrocities that would be recorded as the infamous "Bor Massacre" in the region. This rift created an ethnic tension that would continue for ages, including contributing to the 2013 crisis that saw the same division on ethnic lines between the forces aligned with President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and those loyal to Dr. Riek Machar, a Nuer by origin.

The ethnic conflict dynamics have become one of the exploitative means for the political divide and causes of intercommunal violence, including the unending conflicts among the communities over cattle raids, grazing lands, and child abductions. [2] The tribal conflicts, politicized inter-communal violence, and continued rebellions and absorption of the other forces into the government forces have continued to characterize and define the dynamics of conflict in South Sudan, thus making it difficult to achieve peaceful coexistence and sustainable solutions to problems. [4] The conflict that broke out in 2013 has since widened the ethnic divides and contributed significantly to the already damaged social fabrics, creating more chaos and intensifying intercommunal violence across the country.

The 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolutions of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCISS) has not, for a reason, resolved most of these inter-communal violence and continued insurgencies in the country, as the hold-out groups, community-level militias, armed youth, and others continue to strike. The formation of the government of national unity (R-TGONU) only paved ways for the integration of political sector such as the executive, reconstitution of the legislatures at national and states levels as well as other units mainly at top levels but has since failed to achieve the unification of forces and integration of the army into a single national army as stipulated by the Agreement. [13] Political elites continue to use these ethnic tensions and divides for mobilization to advance their political agenda at the expense of the civil population, which often results in displacements, killings, and retaliations. The peace partners continue to trade accusations

over attacks on each other's positions but fail to finalize the implementation of key sections of the peace. As the peace agreement implementation continues, ethnic divides and tribalized kinds of conflict and political rhetoric continue to flare up among the political elites, inciting violence and insurgencies across the board, including the skirmishes among their ranks and files. A recent confrontation in Nasir, Upper Nile State between the white Army allied to the First Vice President and SPLM – IO and the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) that resulted in the killing of the SSPDF general and the UN Helicopter Crews during the evacuation processes is a case in point that indicates how fragile the situation continues to unfold with little or no efforts to salvage it, yet civilians continue to bear the brunt of such repercussions through displacements and destruction of properties.

This continued violence and ethnic based confrontations exacerbate the already ethnically polarized situation amidst the fragmented security sector. Over time, the SSPDF and opposition factions like the SPLA-In Opposition (SPLA-IO) have been seen to function as ethnic militias rather than a unified national army, as the unification and integration of forces, as indicated in the security arrangement delays and lack of centralized command for all forces, continue to be a challenge. Such a lack of centralized security sector command, a lack of unified forces, and the continued use of armed youth and other militias in support of various groups and the advancement of political elites' interests including the use of this military system of governance to perpetuate atrocities and human rights abuses as violence conflict continue to undermine the efforts of national cohesion and therefore affecting the peace process in the country. [7] Furthermore, the intervention of foreign forces such as Uganda, accusations and labels on other invisible hands in the conflict, such as Sudan, among others, continue to hamper the peace process, which requires immediate attention. [16] Addressing these divisions requires dismantling ethnic-based military structures, speeding up the unification and integration of forces into a single national army, and fostering inclusive governance.

### 3. Geopolitical Pressures and External Actors

South Sudan's strategic location, minerals, and major oil reserves draw significant geopolitical attention, not only to the regional neighbouring countries but equally to the international actors such as the Western, Eastern, and Middle Eastern economies, often intensifying the country's instability in one way or another. Regional actors like Uganda, Kenya, and Sudan pursue competing interests, while global powers such as China, the United States, and Russia vie for influence, including the scramble for South Sudan as a new centre to influence the region and perhaps a launching pad for some political missions. The Water and energy politics within the

region, as played out in the Nile Basin and the continued interest of international actors in minerals and oil, are among the top issues South Sudan is battling with, as well as the potential for its diplomacy should the leaders make a diplomatic reform to leverage on these resources. Accusations have been levelled at both regional and international allies for their interference or pressure on the country, derailing the progress, peace process, and governance reform. Specifically, government has voiced concern on arms embargo and sanctions regime enforced by the UN Security Council and the US as derailing the unification of forces and preventing the smooth implementation of key chapters in the peace agreement, whereas the international community keep pointing out the human rights abuses and lack of accountability and commitment from the leaders of South Sudan as the key factors justifying the targeted sanctions and arms embargos. Human rights bodies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, among others, have continued to advocate for exerting pressure on South Sudan, including keeping sanctions to pressure the country's elite to address the human rights violations and accountability issues. However, some analytical voices have assessed the situation and provided an analysis to the impacts of arms embargos, suggesting that these may not be effective and could undermine the peace process as the elites may fight back by ensuring that the civil population suffers the most amidst conflict and looting of resources. Suggestively, the embargos and sanction regimes are seen to have been used by foreign governments to divide and control the leaders of South Sudan, hence keeping the country where it is, with little progress on peace and development. [1, 3, 14, 17].

Globally, South Sudan is seen to struggle in keeping up with international partners such as China whose investment in the oil sector has continued for a long time as inherited from Sudan, the United States's souring relationship and diplomatic issues with South Sudan despite being recognized globally as the midwife of South Sudan's independency, the Russians hands in arms dealing and other possible engagements as well as the European countries interest couple with the neighbours' politics among others. South Sudan struggles with these realities amidst the conflict and internal strife that continue to push the country to the brink of collapse both politically and economically. The oil sector investment has perhaps flared up key issues including resources allocation, corruption allegations among the elites in the country, power struggles to control the resources and regional interest, especially with Sudan, that is having a stake in oil through its pipeline and refinery among others. South Sudan is now grappling with maintaining the relationships with both the Sudan government, led by Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the Sovereign Military Council, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo 'Hemedti', a situation that has placed South Sudan at the crossroad between risking the economy through the closure of oil and possibly standing in to support the peace process and ensure

stability in the Sudan, it once accused of meddling in the affairs of South Sudan including support of militia groups. [15] On one hand, the stability in the Sudan benefits South Sudan in terms of economic dividends and trade, whereas the instability comes with the proliferation of arms to South Sudan, the influx of displaced population and economic impacts, including the shutdown of oil and possible border incursions. The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect recently voiced a concern on the risk that may ensue against the civil population of South Sudan should the internal conflict continue unaverted, especially in relation to the conflict in Sudan and ongoing confrontations in the Upper Nile region, which would contribute to human rights atrocities. [6] Keeping up with these pressures and the internal conflict has not been easy for South Sudan and it is not in any way going to be a walk in the park but requires an immediate overhaul in thinking by taking actionable strategies that would not only contribute to the stability and peace in the country, but equally by engaging critically on bringing peace to the Sudan and restoring calm within the region as it part of fulfilling foreign policy objectives in regional peace and integration. These cannot be achieved without a proper foreign policy reform and diplomatic strategies that speak to the national interest and regional consolidation, as well as international relationships that work for the common good of South Sudanese and nation-building. South Sudan is required to revisit its foreign policy, address the vulnerabilities and shortcomings, as well as enhance its relationships, restoring the fragmented lines and cementing the broken bonds in order to succeed regionally and win trust internationally.

#### 4. Foreign Policy Vulnerabilities

South Sudan's foreign policy like any other country's foreign policy acts as the means of exhibiting the national interest, a display of its socio-cultural and economic diplomacy, a means of relating politically with other states and nations with common interest and shared activities including regional aspects, business or any other potential economic support. South Sudan in its foreign policy objectives outlined clearly the broader areas of engagement, including promotion of international cooperation with international and regional bodies, economic integration, human rights, international order and justice, respect for international law and dispute resolution mechanisms, non-interference in other countries affairs and combating international and transnational crimes among others. [12] Marked by the ambitious and well-indicated objectives, the country has seen numerous setbacks in its foreign policy including the weakening economic challenges, owing to the continued internal conflict and geopolitical dynamics that its struggles with. The internal conflict for instance, has played a critical role in the foreign policy vulnerability including preventing the government from advancing on the good approaches and mechanisms to ensure the foreign policy achieve the anticipated national

interest due to the fears of regime change agenda coming from the unknown. [10] The presumptive or rather a foreseen concern on the regime change agenda, couple with the continued violence, opposition to the government and geopolitical pressures have rendered the government to formulate a kind of a reactionary foreign policy engagements which has been shaped by exerting controls to the collapse of the system, prevention of all-out civil war and working towards achieving peace in any means including accepting any availed options by the regional bodies such as the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) with support of the African Union (AU) and international bodies among others. In his statement during the signing of the Revitalized Peace Agreement (R-ARCISS), H.E. President Salva said that the peace agreement will not collapse, citing the first (2015) agreement as an enforced peace against the will of South Sudanese, leading to its collapse marked by the J1 dogfight of July 2016. [5] However, analyst and observers have continuously pointed out the critical areas that are yet to be implemented to date including the security arrangements which has only seen the first level of integration of forces at senior levels, but much is left undone and conflict continue to ensue, leaving the regional and international community wondering how the peace's success will be assured.

There is a lack of trust building at the diplomatic levels as South Sudan struggles to contain the violence and conflict within, leaving a lot of room with no diplomatic engagements and foreign policy progress to gain trust and international recognition on key areas as well as promoting investment and diplomatic relationships. The country's foreign policy and diplomatic engagements have not been able to address the concerns and the trust between South Sudan, the West and other bodies, which has rendered many countries, including at the regional level, not to regard South Sudan seriously on the diplomatic stage. Economically, the reliance on oil as the country's only revenue-generating sector has present the country vulnerable as conflict disruption and geopolitical issues affecting Sudan highly impacted on the oil pipeline and sells yet the country lacks other remedies due to unformulated processes of a strong policy. The level of mistrust, reactionary policy and unstable positioning at the regional and geopolitical levels has resulted into a state's deteriorating economy and lack of support even to implement the governance reforms, economic transformation and promotion of other sectors to pave the way for sustainable peace and stability. It is therefore importance to prioritise the foreign policy reform to address the geopolitical pressures, political interferences and positioning of the country at the diplomatic levels in order to win trust and establish strong relationships that will enable the country reforms its systems and address conflict and peacebuilding concerns, among them the ethnic polarization, institution reforms and governance as well as the security and agricultural sectors.



## 5. Reforming Foreign Policy and Achieving Sustainable Peace and Stability

The interplay of ethnic divisions, politically motivated tribal conflicts, and geopolitical pressures has entrenched South Sudan's instability, with the country's foreign policy vulnerabilities amplifying the crisis, resulting in no sustainable means to achieve peace and development. Reforming the foreign policy by not only refocusing the diplomatic engagements on critical areas but realistically reviewing every bit of diplomacy, alliances, and bilateral partnerships is key to the achievement of highly anticipated peace, sustainable development, and economic stability of the country. The foreign policy reform comes with several areas of alignment including anchoring it on domestic policies and social values and shaping it to achieve the national interest at all costs. South Sudan should be made attractive to regional and international members while strengthening the diplomatic engagements with the regional and international community, widening the scope in both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy as well as promoting cultural, social, and economic diplomacy at all levels. [4] South Sudan is home to dynamic cultures, social values and greater resources such as minerals that would be used to shape its diplomacy, "showing the faces of South Sudanese" globally and changing the perceptions of many through new, invigorated narratives that align with critical reforms and implementation of key development initiatives. The foreign policy should position the country as a credible, honest and transparent partner at the region and an important player on the world stage, including on providing a platform for investment and economic stimulation.

The reformation of the foreign policy will require domestic stability through peace, inclusive governance, security sector reform, and reconciliation initiatives to rebuild the foundation on which the policy is anchored on South Sudanese coexistence, social values, and stability. Secondly, there is a high need for economic diversification and overall transformation using the viable models including enhancing public-private partnerships policies, development of critical economic policies based on the context, resources and anticipated future goals of a vibrant, regionally leading economy and a food basket that is resilience, transforming and a good example to all. Third, institutional reform and capacity strengthening to rise to the challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century diplomacy and international relations building, including fostering strong relationships with critical allies such as the United State of America, the State of Israel, other neutral and business allies with the goals of achieving economic independency and stronger institutions as well as regional cooperation. The aim should not be on more diplomatic partners and allies, but effective and impactful alliances in terms of enhancing the country's development, institutional strengthening, economic stability, and stronger governance. This is to project the

country's national interest as one that builds on regional integration, prioritizes peacebuilding, diplomatic relationships with key allies, and economic diplomacy that builds on the resilience and values of the people of South Sudan, promoting stability and security.

## 6. Conclusion

South Sudan's conflict reflects the corrosive dynamics of ethnic based conflicts, coupled with political polarization of the tribes such as the majority Dinka and Nuer, within the mix of regional and international interferences and manipulations that have kept South Sudan in instability and a persisting lack of development since the country gained its independence in 2011. The interplay between these ethnic dynamics and geopolitical pressures continues to hamper the political development and policy reform, while delaying the country from progressing in peace and prosperity as envisioned during the liberation time. This has further weakened the country's foreign policy as its only focuses on safeguarding and protecting the leadership from the assumed or rather voiced "regime change" agenda of the supposedly regional or international entities that the country's politicians deem as having a vested interest in the country's resources. The recognition of these vulnerabilities and the role played by the ethnic polarization and geopolitical influences allows South Sudanese to retract, review the policies and the current affairs, reevaluate the foreign policy against the current of the 21<sup>st</sup> century diplomacy and refocus the country's engagement at the regional, continental and international arena to position and project South Sudan as a honest, accountable, transparent and impactful partner that would contribute better at the regional and international stage. This policy reform would not only aim at projecting a good foreign policy, but would equally review the alliances and partnerships, diplomatic engagements and in return, review some domestic policies to align well with the new positioning so the country strategically be placed at the world stage, while promoting its cultural, social and economic diplomacy at all levels.

## Abbreviations

R-ARCISS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolutions of Conflict in South Sudan
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
AU	African Union
SPLM/A-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army in Opposition
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
R-TGONU	Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army

UN United Nations

## Author Contributions

Daniel Ajak Magai is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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