

# The GLOCEPS

## Policy Brief

Research and Analysis in Security and Defence Pillar

### The Fragility of South Sudan: Revisiting Key Impediments to Lasting Peace and Security

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#### Executive Summary

South Sudan's peace processes have been consistently undermined by cycles of violence, political rivalries, and weak institutional frameworks since its independence in 2011. The recent escalation of tensions threatens not only the stability of South Sudan but also the broader Horn of Africa (HoA) region. The intensifying hostilities risk exacerbating an already dire security situation and humanitarian crisis. This brief argues that the personalization of politics, political apathy towards peace implementation, lack of national ownership, competing regional and international interests, and institutional weaknesses continue to obstruct the effective realization of peace agreements in South Sudan. To address these

challenges, it recommends, holding political leaders accountable for delaying elections or derailing the peace processes through domestic legal actions and international sanctions; effective integration of civil society, women, and youth into peace processes; establishing a clear, non-extendable election timeline to ensure free and fair polls; operationalizing the National Election Commission; implementing security sector reforms, including the integration of militias into a unified national army; and aligning international efforts with South Sudan's specific peacebuilding needs, avoiding imposed external agendas. These recommendations will go a long way in enhancing sustainable peace and security in South Sudan.



## Context

The origins of South Sudan's conflict can be traced back to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended decades of war with Sudan and paved the way for independence in 2011. While the CPA successfully facilitated the South's secession, it failed to address internal governance issues and ethnic tensions between the Dinka, Nuer, and other communities. The fragility of the state is mirrored in the politicization of ethnicity, where political affiliations are often defined along ethnic lines, particularly between the dominant Dinka (36%) and the Nuer (16%). This fragility was exposed in 2013 when President Kiir accused his then-deputy Riek Machar of plotting a coup, igniting a devastating civil war that lasted five years. The conflict led to the killing of an estimated 400,000 people and the displacement of more than 3.9 million individuals.

Despite a series of peace agreements and ceasefire arrangements notably in 2005, 2015, 2017, and 2018 South Sudan remains engulfed in instability. The latest escalation in 2025 underscores how fragile the situation has become. Armed confrontations between the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF) and opposition forces under Riek Machar's Sudan People's Liberation Army–In Opposition (SPLA-IO) have intensified in key regions such as Upper Nile. These developments not only risk plunging South Sudan into another full-scale civil war but also present serious threats to regional peace and security, especially with the involvement of external actors such as Uganda, whose troops have been deployed to Juba.

While the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) sought to restore peace, it quickly collapsed due to mistrust, poor implementation, and renewed violence in 2016. The 2018 Revitalized Agreement (R-ARCSS), though more comprehensive, has equally struggled under the weight of delayed reforms, fragile ceasefires, and weak enforcement mechanisms leading to instability. The house

arrest of Machar, the killing of General Majur Dak, and the sacking of key opposition figures by President Kiir signal a dangerous unraveling of the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement. The situation further deteriorated when the White Army, a militia aligned with Machar and composed of Nuer youths, overran a government base in Nasir, prompting retaliatory airstrikes by the SSPDF.

The R-ARCSS was intended to provide a road map for lasting peace by addressing core issues such as power-sharing, security sector reforms, and election preparations. Its signing led to the formation of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU) in 2020, bringing together Kiir, Machar, and other factions. However, its implementation has been severely delayed. Security arrangements have stagnated as rival groups retain control over their forces, anticipating future conflict rather than national integration. The ongoing postponement of general elections, now delayed to December 2026, has deepened public disillusionment and cast doubts over the commitment of the ruling elite to democratic transition. Inter-communal violence, especially in rural areas, continues unabated, revealing the failure of national institutions to impose order or deliver services. Meanwhile, critical provisions such as the unification of security forces and the establishment of a permanent constitution remain largely unmet.

Compounding the political discontent situation is the lack of genuine national ownership of the peace process. Past agreements have often been externally brokered and rushed under international



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pressure, with signatories compelled to comply for diplomatic optics rather than sincere commitment. This approach has led to agreements serving elite interests through power-sharing arrangements rather than addressing grassroots grievances. The Nairobi-based Tumann Initiative envisioned as a complementary peace track, has faced boycotts, further signaling the fragmentation of peace efforts. Moreover, institutional weakness reflected in a hardly functioning judiciary, partisan military, and an incapacitated public service continues to impede meaningful reform and state-building, leaving the country vulnerable to renewed conflict and manipulation.

The humanitarian dimension of South Sudan's crisis cannot be overstated. Another civil war will cause an unprecedented refugee crisis leading to a strain on the struggling economies of HoA states. Currently, it is estimated that since the tensions, Kenya has been receiving 20 South Sudanese refugees daily. Host countries such as Kenya will be forced to further divert resources for national development towards humanitarian aid. With millions internally displaced and thousands more arriving from Sudan, South Sudan's overstretched systems are unable to cope, particularly amid an economic collapse triggered by disruptions to oil exports, the country's primary revenue source. Unless decisive reforms are implemented and inclusive dialogue is fostered, South Sudan risks spiraling into another protracted conflict with far-reaching regional implications.

## Key Issues

The following issues represent key impediments to the effectiveness of peace processes in South Sudan.

### Personalization of Politics

The concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals has personalized South Sudanese politics, undermining peace processes. The enduring conflict in South Sudan is deeply rooted in the historic and ethnic rivalry between the Dinka and Nuer communities, which has shaped the country's political dynamics since independence.



This rivalry, exemplified by the long-standing opposition between John Garang and Riek Machar, continues today with Machar's persistent opposition to President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and is likely to persist unless this fundamental divide is addressed. South Sudanese politics has become highly personalized and militarized, with political and military leaders commanding loyalty based on ethnic affiliation rather than institutional legitimacy. As a result, governance has devolved into a contest between factions, where allegiance to individuals supersedes national interest, and power is centralized in the hands of a few elites.

This personalization of power has severely undermined the implementation of peace agreements, most notably the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict and its 2018 revitalized version. Mutual distrust between Kiir and Machar has stalled critical reforms such as the integration of security forces and the adoption of federalism. The lack of a professional, unified military has further complicated peace processes, as armed forces remain fragmented and loyal to individual leaders rather than the state. Incidents like Machar's recent detention and the expulsion of his allies reflect a return to exclusionary tactics that mirror the breakdown of past agreements, particularly the 2016 Juba clashes. These developments highlight the fragility of elite-driven peace deals in a context where the state apparatus is weak, security institutions are politicized, and ethnic grievances remain unresolved.



The repeated postponement of elections now deferred to December 2026 underscores the reactive and self-serving nature of governance in South Sudan. Decisions such as election delays are made within tightly controlled political circles, often without public or legislative input, and are perceived by many as strategies to entrench power rather than to ensure stability. This lack of transparency and inclusivity erodes public trust and discourages grassroots reconciliation, as ordinary citizens increasingly view politics as a power struggle between elites. International actors have inadvertently reinforced this political duopoly, by focusing negotiations and peace efforts on Kiir and Machar, sidelining broader societal participation. For peace to be durable, South Sudan should confront the structural issues of ethnicized politics, depersonalize governance, and professionalize its military institutions otherwise, elections will remain potential triggers for violence, rather than a democratic remedy.



## Political Apathy

Sustainable peace and security relies on the full implementation of peace agreements and addressing the root causes of conflict. Inadequate political will between Kiir and Machar to honour the various peace initiatives undermines the success of the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU). The signatories of the agreement include Kiir as the President, Machar as the First Vice President as well as four other vice presidents from the opposition parties. The transition period has been postponed four times, now to 2026, causing massive unrest and dissatisfaction. To date, the National Election

Commission has not been fully operationalized and continues to face hurdles such as inadequate funding. Equally, the lack of political will has delayed the implementation of security sector reforms seeking to have one army command. Integration of the militias into the army is a step towards addressing the root causes of the South Sudan conflict as it will enhance security coordination in the coalition government. However, this is yet to be realized.

The Tsumaini Initiative, launched in Nairobi, in May 2024, faces similar impediments. The initiative facilitated negotiations between the South Sudanese government and the opposition groups under the United People's Alliance (UPA), excluded from the 2018 R-ARCSS Peace Agreement. Unwillingness to share power has caused involved actors such as the South Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) to boycott the talks. Addressing the grievances of the UPA is critical to achieving stability. Failure to act may escalate the conflict as these armed groups may use the current tensions to cause more violence. The Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) should ensure accountability in the implementation of R-ARCSS by facilitating holistic negotiations between all affected parties.

## Ownership Deficits

The sustainability of peace agreements is closely tied to the sense of ownership among South Sudanese stakeholders. When parties are pressured into signing accords without genuine commitment or understanding, implementation becomes superficial. The 2018 Revitalized Agreement, while comprehensive, has continued to face criticism for being externally driven, with limited input from local communities. Equally, the 2015 Agreement, signed under threat of United Nations (UN) sanctions, collapsed within months when Kiir and Machar rejected power-sharing. This disconnect has led to challenges in translating agreements into tangible peace on the ground, as local grievances and dynamics



are often overlooked.



Civil society groups, sidelined in negotiations, now resist disarmament campaigns, viewing them as tools of suppression. This dynamic fosters resentment. Sustainable peace requires inclusive dialogue, yet international mediators often prioritize expediency over inclusivity, undermining legitimacy. Effective peacebuilding requires that agreements reflect the aspirations and realities of those directly affected by the conflict, ensuring that solutions are not only top-down but also bottom-up.

## Competing Regional and International Interests

Regional actors, while instrumental in brokering peace, often prioritize strategic interests over stability. Uganda's military intervention in 2013–2014 to bolster Kiir's regime entrenched divisions, casting doubt on its neutrality. Recent visits by Ugandan President Museveni in April 2025 to mediate have been viewed skeptically, given his historical alignment with Kiir. Uganda has been accused of interfering with regional agreements to suit Kiir due to uncertainties about its interests if Machar assumes power. Sudan has also been accused of fuelling conflicts by supplying arms to militias under the SPLM-IO. This has caused sporadic eruptions of violence and ethnic clashes, especially in the Abyei border resulting in massive civilian casualties. Such involvement complicates peace efforts, as support for one faction over another fuels suspicions and hampers reconciliation. Additionally, reports indicate that weapons continue to flow into

South Sudan through neighboring countries, despite arms embargoes, further destabilizing the region.

International actors, including the UN, the African Union (AU), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), have initiated mediation efforts, but their impact has been limited by competing interests and a lack of cohesive strategy. While these actors aim to facilitate dialogue, their effectiveness is often hindered by the complex web of alliances and enmities within South Sudan and the broader region. Meanwhile,



the United States (US) and European Union (EU) pressure for elections overlooks local realities, such as inadequate voter registration infrastructure. These fragmented efforts enable elites to exploit external support, perpetuating dependency rather than ownership. On the other hand, China which is largely involved in oil exploration in South Sudan sometimes seeks to protect its interests at the expense of peace in South Sudan. For instance, China has consistently opposed efforts to impose a UN arms embargo on South Sudan, abstaining on various occasions. To date, the civilian population is highly militarized due to the unregulated proliferation of weapons as a self-defense strategy in ungoverned spaces.

## Institutional Weaknesses

South Sudan's nascent institutions lack the capacity and independence to enforce peace agreements effectively. The judiciary, security apparatus, and civil service are often underfunded and politicized, rendering them ineffective



in upholding the rule of law and delivering services. The Kroc Institute's report highlights that critical provisions of the 2018 agreement remain unimplemented, reflecting institutional paralysis. Without robust institutions to mediate conflicts, enforce agreements, and provide public goods, peace remains elusive.

The security sector, in particular, has been a focal point of contention, with delayed reforms and the integration of various armed groups into a unified national army. The lack of progress in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs has left numerous combatants without livelihoods, making them susceptible to remobilization. This institutional fragility not only undermines current peace efforts but also poses a significant risk to future stability.

## Conclusion

Peace initiatives in South Sudan, including the R-ARCSS, continue to face significant impediments, resulting in recurring conflicts that threaten both national cohesion and regional stability. The escalation of hostilities risks deepening an already dire humanitarian crisis and exacerbating regional fragility through the potential spillover of refugees and cross-border security threats, such as the proliferation of small

arms. In the already volatile HoA region, a holistic and inclusive approach is essential to address South Sudan's persistent tensions. Key challenges including personalized politics, lack of national ownership, insufficient political will, institutional weaknesses, and competing regional and international interests undermine sustainable peace. The current political environment, marked by a lack of goodwill, unaddressed grievances, and external interference, places the current peace initiatives at serious risk of collapse. A renewed conflict would have far-reaching humanitarian and economic consequences. Therefore, it is imperative that the regional and international community redouble efforts to facilitate genuine dialogue among South Sudanese leaders and ensure that peace-building addresses the root causes.



## Recommendations

1. The South Sudanese Government should:
  - a) establish a clear, non-extendable election timeline to ensure free and fair polls;
  - b) strengthen inclusivity in power-sharing frameworks by effectively integrating civil society organizations, women, and youth into peace talks and decision-making mechanisms;
  - c) fully operationalize the National Election Commission; and
  - d) implement security sector reforms including the integration of militias into a unified national army.





2. UN, AU, IGAD, and EAC should;

- a) facilitate inclusive dialogue between President Kiir, Vice President Riek Machar, and all armed groups involved;
- b) mandate IGAD/AU-led mediation with binding commitments, penalizing spoilers via domestic legal actions and international sanctions, and provide cooperation incentives, such as aid and recognition;
- c) channel international aid into judiciary and security reforms, conditioning support on anti-corruption progress;
- d) align international efforts with South Sudan's specific peace-building needs, avoiding imposed external agendas;
- e) develop a coordinated regional and international peace road map in support of South Sudan's peace and democracy; and
- f) create a monitoring and evaluation task force that independently verifies progress on key peace milestones pegged on the peace agreements with clear benchmarks and implementation deadlines.



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