



Fragmentation of Peacemaking in South Sudan: Reality and Perception

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Abstract

Attempts to manage and resolve the conflict in South Sudan have seen the involvement of numerous international actors, including neighbouring countries—namely Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya—the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), the so-called Troika (United States, United Kingdom, and Norway), as well as the EU, China and the UN.

Interviews with a cross-section of national stakeholders demonstrate a deep sense of scepticism about the efficacy of peacemaking and peacebuilding initiatives in South Sudan to date and indicate great apprehension that these initiatives have had any positive impact for the lives of ordinary citizens. Peacemaking and peacebuilding have been externally-led, top-down initiatives with IGAD, the Troika and the AU leading peace efforts. These are marked by an inadequate commitment from South Sudanese political elites, and a disconnect between those elites and ordinary citizens' quest for justice. Seldom fully participatory and holistic, the peace negotiations are limited to the top political leaders and are very detached from the victims and communities who have borne the brunt of the war.

Western countries' reduced engagement in the peace process and the appeal of non-Western actors through their political and economic links have created space for non-Western countries' initiatives and new approaches to peace. Regional powers — especially Sudan and Uganda — played a key role in the 2018 South Sudan's peace agreement, managing to persuade South Sudanese political leaders to make concessions during critical peace negotiations. Among the global powers, China—South Sudan's main trading partner, with a "no strings attached relationship" —has found a peacemaking role in South Sudan, a country that continues to test China's diplomatic leadership and political commitment. While peace remains extremely fragile in South Sudan, the country is also caught in the middle of inter-regional rivalries. Most notable are the disputes between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) hydropower project, with South Sudanese leaders trying to maintain good relations with all the neighbouring countries while also engaging in mediation efforts between them.

Key Findings and Recommendations

In a complex and multi-stakeholder peacemaking environment, South Sudan has been a test case for international cooperation, which has helped to bring some peace to the country—albeit an imperfect and fragile peace. A plethora of international actors have been involved in the peace process. They include neighbouring countries (namely Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)—comprising seven countries in the Horn of Africa—the African Union (AU), the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway (known as the Troika), as well as the EU, China and the UN.

The interviews conducted with a cross section of national stakeholders demonstrate a deep sense of scepticism about the efficacy of peacemaking and peacebuilding initiatives in South Sudan to date. Some key themes that emerged from the interviews are:

- ▶ Local actors are not the real drivers of change. Peacemaking and peacebuilding have been externally-led, with IGAD, IGAD member states—especially Sudan and Uganda—and the Troika designing the blueprint and leading the roadmap for peace in South Sudan. They have also demonstrated the little interest and genuine commitment by South Sudan political elites. While external actors want to end the conflict, South Sudanese leaders have their pre-independence scores to settle and are reluctant to make peace.
- ▶ Peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts led by IGAD and the AU have been “top down” initiatives. The peace negotiations are limited to the top political and military leaders and are very detached from the victims and communities who have borne the brunt of the war. There is a general consensus amongst the interviewees that peace negotiations should have a link to the communities and grassroots mechanisms of peacemaking because “bottom-up” approaches enhance the prospects for sustainable peace.
- ▶ A top-down approach has made the peace process neither inclusive nor holistic. There is a disconnect between the objectives of the government of South Sudan and citizens and their quest for justice. For many citizens, justice and compensation are integral parts of the peace process, while for political leaders peace is complete without transitional justice, and especially without accountability for human rights violations and other crimes.

- ▶ There has been very little improvement in the lives of ordinary citizens. Despite numerous peace initiatives since 2013, the security landscape of South Sudan remains poor, and initiatives aimed at peacebuilding have yet to provide any improved public good in the areas of security, socio-economic development, reconciliation, and justice.
- ▶ A combination of reduced engagement in the peace process by Western countries and the economic appeal and influence exerted by non-Western actors has opened up space for non-Western countries to engage in peacemaking initiatives. The Troika's demands for political and security reforms, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights and good governance have propelled China—whose support comes without conditions—into the position of preferred economic partner for South Sudan. In its efforts to meaningfully safeguard its infrastructure investments and oil production capacities, China has also found a peacemaking role in South Sudan, a country that continues to provide a testing ground for China's diplomatic leadership and political commitment.
- ▶ There is also a polarized range of perceptions vis-à-vis the role and impact of neighbouring countries, with Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) supporters preferring Uganda and backers of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM/IO) preferring Sudan. Opinions regarding Western peacemakers also vary between indifference and annoyance, vis-à-vis Troika countries trying to entrench an external agenda and to implement Western foreign policy goals. Perceptions of China are largely positive. Elites, in particular, are enthusiastic about China's role in the economy, especially regarding oil extraction and infrastructure development.
- ▶ South Sudan is caught in the middle of regional rivalries, including historical hostile relations between Sudan and Uganda and disputes between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan about the GERD hydropower project. South Sudan is trying to cultivate good relations with all its neighbouring countries and is pursuing a mediation role in regional disputes. Finding a successful formula for South Sudan's diplomatic balancing acts has important implications for peace at home.

Recommendations

- ▶ A reassessment of the 2018 revitalised peace agreement would encourage an appraisal of impediments to its further implementation. Further, this would outline a way forward for the parties involved to “make good” on both the security arrangements and the transitional justice chapters.
- ▶ An empirical assessment of inter-ethnic dynamics and on-going confrontation between non-state armed groups is required. This would assist in determining reasons for the ethnically charged sub-national violence, and help to devise adequate and inclusive solutions that would mitigate threats to the current peace deal.
- ▶ Research is needed to assess South Sudan's mediation roles in the Horn of Africa. In particular, this should focus on South Sudan's relation to Sudan's internal strife, its role in the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over GERD, and the implications these engagements have for an already fragile peace process at home.

Introduction

Background

In July 2011, South Sudan gained independence from Sudan, becoming the fifty-fifth African state. Its first President, Salva Kiir, called for a new beginning of tolerance, love and unity ([The World Bank, 2011](#)). But “the militarized, corrupt neo-patrimonial system of governance” (De Waal, 2014) was soon bankrupted by the January 2012 shutdown of oil production. Since 2013, the country has endured ethnic violence, civil war and humanitarian crises. President Salva Kiir, Chair of the SPLM continues to be locked in a power struggle with the First Vice President, Riek Machar, leader of the SPLM-IO. The signing of an Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) in August 2015 did not end the civil war, and when renewed violence flared up in Juba in July 2016, the conflict quickly spread to previously peaceful parts of the country. With the renewed aim of ending the civil war in 2018, President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar signed the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in Addis Ababa, which provided for the establishment of a Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU). A Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), responsible for monitoring and overseeing the implementation of the agreement, was also created under Chapter VII of the R-ARCSS. In a welcome development, South Sudan formed a transitional government of national unity in February 2020. However, progress in the implementation of the peace agreement remains slow.

South Sudan's civil strife has caused untold human suffering, destruction of property, and the upending of many livelihoods. According to the UN, 1.4 million South Sudanese people are internally displaced, 2.2 million are refugees and asylum seekers abroad, and 6.5 million face persistent food insecurity. The conflict has also exacerbated the polarisation of South Sudanese society along ethnic and tribal lines, fuelling inter- and intra-communal conflict. Humanitarian needs significantly increased in 2020/21, due to a combination of flooding, protracted subnational violence, weak governance and some of the worst famine and food insecurity witnessed in recent years ([Saferworld, 2021](#)).

A plethora of regional and international actors—including Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya, IGAD, the so-called Troika, the African Union (AU), as well as the EU, China and the UN—have been involved in South Sudan's conflict and peace process. While Troika countries remain the leading providers of assistance and humanitarian aid, and as such maintain significant political influence, they have lost ground in the South Sudan peace process to regional actors, especially to Sudan and Uganda, and to China.

The 2018 peace deal remains fragile (UNHRC, 2021). In September 2021, an RJMEC report on the status of implementation of R-ARCSS highlighted numerous challenges facing the implementation of the agreement. The report warned that the establishment of the state legislative assemblies was incomplete, the formation of national commissions remained outstanding, and the most important tasks of the Transitional Security Arrangements (TSAs, Chapter II)—in particular, the training and graduation of the joint forces in cantonment sides—was also incomplete, thus inhibiting progress towards a unified national army (OCHA, 2021).

Despite the fragility of the peace process, armed violence in South Sudan has subsided over the past two years and South Sudanese leaders — who are also caught in the middle of regional rivalries, especially the disputes between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on the GERD hydropower project — are actively trying to maintain good relations with all the neighbouring countries while also engaging in mediation between those neighbours.

Section three will discuss the various external actors in South Sudan and their relations with the South Sudanese people and government; section four will review key perceptions and insights from interviews with key stakeholders in South Sudan, as well as international experts. Section five will discuss the recent pivot by South Sudan into a mediator for its regional neighbours, and section six offers some conclusions and recommendations.

Methodology

The authors used a mixed methodology for this report. An extensive literature review of secondary sources related to the analysis of South Sudan's political and security situation, including international media reports and specialist publications, was combined with primary data acquired through fourteen semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with a cross-section of ten South Sudanese stakeholders (two senior government officials, two senior military officials, one political party activist, one scholar and four civil society representatives) and four international experts (one Western diplomat, one Chinese diplomat, one Western scholar and one UN official). The semi-directive interviews focussed on how international actors, especially non-Western powers and regional organisations, have approached the process of peacemaking and peacebuilding in South Sudan, and how local and Western actors perceive non-Western countries and regional organisations operating in South Sudan. To stimulate free and candid discussions, protect confidentiality, and remain in line with the approved ethics protocols of the project, most of the interviewees' names and their institutions have been withheld.

External Actors' Engagement in South Sudan

Many disparate external actors have been involved in mediation and conflict resolution efforts in South Sudan. This ranges from neighbouring countries, to African multilateral bodies, to Western countries, institutions and other actors such as the UN, the EU and China.

Sudan

The ruling parties and political leaders in Sudan and South Sudan were fierce enemies for decades, until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005. Unresolved differences between Juba and Khartoum—especially around the status of the border region of Abyei and fees for oil transit—spilled into the post CPA period. When violence erupted in Juba in 2013, the government of Sudan tried to portray itself as neutral arbiter, despite accusations that Sudan was supporting South Sudanese opposition forces (Boswell et al., 2019). However, since 2015, Sudan has found common ground with South Sudanese President Kiir and helped broker the ARCSS and R-ARCSS peace deals. Sudanese support, especially for the R-ARCSS deal, was motivated by economic and security considerations—particularly financial gains related to oil transshipment and future oil production, and reduced support from South Sudan for northern Sudanese rebel groups (ibid). After the 2019 coup that removed Sudan's President al-Bashir from power, both Sudan and South Sudan continued on the same trajectory of consolidating good relations and, in 2020, South Sudan brokered the Juba peace agreement between Sudan's Transitional Government and representatives of several Sudanese armed groups.

Uganda

As of June 2018, South Sudanese people made up the largest refugee population (985,512 people) in Uganda (UNHCR, 2021). Uganda's involvement in South Sudan dates back to the 1990s, when Uganda viewed the government of Sudan's plans to expand its Arab and Islamic influence southwards with suspicion. In this context, during the North-South Sudanese civil war, Uganda supported the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), while Khartoum supported the Lord's Resistance Army's (LRA) rebel group operating in Uganda. When the 2013 civil war broke out, Ugandan troops intervened in support of the South Sudan government, becoming a party to the conflict. However, after withdrawing its troops from South Sudan in October 2015 as part of the ARCSS agreement, Uganda has been using its influence on the South Sudanese leadership to shape a diplomatic approach to resolve the conflict and bring the political opposition into the transitional government.

Such efforts were given new impetus by an understanding between President Museveni of Uganda and President al-Bashir of Sudan (Boswell et al., 2019), which culminated in 2018 in the R-ARCSS political settlement.

Ethiopia

Peace in South Sudan has important implications for Ethiopia's domestic security, particularly regarding stability along the western border of Ethiopia (Dibaba, 2021). As of May 2018, there were more than 443,000 South Sudanese refugees sheltering in Ethiopia (USAID, 2021). Under IGAD, Ethiopia has created numerous platforms for mediation and negotiation in the South Sudan conflict. After the conflict flared up in 2016, Ethiopia was the first country to lead IGAD's mediation efforts. It is in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, that various peace agreements have been signed. Although Ethiopia has a range of national interests in South Sudan, varying from border security, concerns over refugees flows and promotion and protection of trade (Verjee, 2017), in recent years, the Nile waters and the Egypt-Ethiopia dispute over the GERD hydropower project have taken centre stage in South Sudan-Ethiopia relations.

Egypt

Over the past few years, a number of high-profile exchange visits between Egyptian and South Sudanese political actors have had on their agendas development and investment projects in South Sudan, as well as political and technical support for the implementation of the R-ARCSS political agreement (Kandil, 2019). However, Egypt's main interest in South Sudan derives from the Nile River, and Egypt's strategic aim of enacting a legally-binding agreement that regulates the filling and operation of the GERD. While Ethiopia continues to operationalise its GERD project without the agreement of Egypt or Sudan, Egypt is pursuing a strategy of projecting its power into the Nile Basin, and forging economic and security alliances in the Horn of Africa (Reeves, 2022). In November 2020, President el-Sisi visited South Sudan, the first time that a President of Egypt has done so.

Kenya

South Sudan has cultural, social, political and economic links with Kenya. The 2005 CPA, which paved the way for the referendum and independence of South Sudan, was signed in Nairobi. After the civil war in South Sudan broke out in December 2013, Kenya, working through IGAD, was part of the team that tried to make both parties sign a ceasefire. It nominated one of the IGAD mediators, General Lazarus Sumbeiywo, and it sent troops to South Sudan under the UNMISS umbrella. As of end of October 2018, Kenya was host to 114,432 South Sudanese refugees ([UNHCR, 2020](#)). In May 2005, a Kenyan Cabinet Decision established the Kenya South Sudan Liaison Office (Kessulo), which was charged with facilitating and coordinating activities related to technical, economic and cultural co-operation between the two countries. The Kenyan government has formally recognised the “consolidation, stability and economic prosperity in South Sudan and the Sub-region as a priority national interest” (Executive Office to the President of Kenya, 2022). Kenya’s engagement in South Sudan’s peace processes, post-conflict reconstruction and development is part of a long-term strategy that envisages Kenya as an important player in a harmonised and fully integrated African Continent (*ibid*). However, there has also been criticism of Kenya’s short term economic interests in South Sudan as they potentially contrast with South Sudan’s long-term stability. In 2019, a UN panel criticised Kenya—alongside Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan—for having “not demonstrated full and consistent engagement in the peace process” ([AFP, 2019](#)) and for breaching terms of UN sanctions designed to prevent further conflict (*ibid*).

IGAD

IGAD, an eight-country trade bloc comprising Djibouti, Eritrea (currently suspended), Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda, has over the years expanded its remit into other areas of regional cooperation, including facilitating and supporting peacebuilding and conflict mediation initiatives. It has acted as the chief negotiator for peace talks in South Sudan, appointing special envoys from Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan to lead mediation activities and developing a distinct mediation approach that combines traditional Western negotiation techniques with African conflict resolution techniques, such as Ubuntu. IGAD has been able to secure support for its mediation role both financially and logistically from international partners (Waihenya, 2006) — including the Troika and the EU.

After mediating the 2005 CPA and accompanying its implementation, IGAD supported South Sudan's independence in 2011. When the civil war broke out in 2013, it mediated between the parties and negotiated the signing of the ARCSS in 2015. The IGAD Monitoring and Verification Mechanism for South Sudan, headquartered in Juba, was set up shortly after the signing of a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the Government of South Sudan and SPLM-IO in January 2014.

The most significant recent achievement of IGAD has been the 2018 R-ARCSS revitalised peace agreement. This required the crucial assistance of regional rivals and IGAD members, Sudan and Uganda, and support from the AU, the UN and IGAD donor countries—including the US, EU and China. In addition to brokering the agreement, IGAD also continues to act as a guarantor of its implementation.

The Troika

The so-called Troika (US, UK and Norway) has been instrumental in the IGAD-led peace negotiations. The Troika funded the establishment of an IGAD liaison office in Sudan in 2005, which was subsequently upgraded to a Juba Liaison Office after South Sudan's independence in 2011. It invested political capital and economic resources into putting pressure on the warring parties to sign the CPA. Without such engagement, it is unlikely that the agreement would have been made. After South Sudan gained independence, the Troika pursued an agenda of state building, investing significant resources in support of the new South Sudanese state (Pendle, 2018). Since the signing of the R-ARCSS, the Troika has issued various statements, reaffirming its commitment to the IGAD-led South Sudan peace process. Simultaneously, however, it has raised concerns about the slow progress of fully implementing the peace agreement and the risks that carries for the future prospects for the peace process (Government of Norway, Government of the UK, United States Department of State, 2019).

At present, there is reduced diplomatic and political influence from the Troika, particularly since the signing of the R-ARCSS. This is due to both a lack of engagement, and high-level political representation. The US, for example, have had no ambassador in South Sudan since mid-2020, and a special envoy position is also currently vacant (Sullivan, 2022). Despite this, and a more fragmented approach by individual members, the Troika maintains a crucial role in providing humanitarian assistance to South Sudan.

The EU

The EU's engagement in the South Sudan peace process has mainly focussed on supporting third parties' mediation efforts—especially those of IGAD—using mediation support actions and techniques that have relied on “endorsement”, “coordination”, “assistance”, and “lending leverage” (Müller & Bergmann, 2020). The EU role in South Sudan needs to be seen within the context of EU peace support initiatives across the Horn of Africa region. In 2018, the EU, IGAD and the Austrian Development Agency signed an agreement on a €42 million action for 2018–2022 aimed at improving IGAD's conflict early warning systems, mediation skills, and responses to trans-national security threats (European Commission, 2018). In South Sudan, the EU has, similarly to the Troika, welcomed the formation of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity, but it has also emphasised the need “to pursue and accelerate the implementation of the Peace Agreement” ([Council of the European Union, 2021](#)). In addition to its peace support initiatives, the EU is also a major donor of development aid and humanitarian assistance to South Sudan. In 2022, it allocated over €41.7 million for humanitarian aid, with the purpose of addressing food insecurity, violence and floods across South Sudan ([European Commission, 2022](#)).

The AU

Since South Sudan's journey to independence and then throughout its internal conflict, the AU, by virtue of being an African continental institution with legitimacy to engage on peace and security ([Lucey & Kumalo, 2017](#)), has played an important role in South Sudan. In line with the principle of “African solutions to African problems”, the AU has engaged either through direct initiatives—for example, the AU's High-Level Implementation Panel on Sudan that addressed issues related to oil and citizenship—or indirect initiatives—by supporting the peace process led by IGAD, as well as UN peace operations, in particular the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). In December 2013, the Peace and Security Council of the AU established a Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan (AUCISS), with a mandate to investigate human rights violations committed during the armed conflict in South Sudan ([AU, 2014](#)). In 2014, the Commission produced a report presenting evidence of human rights violations and war crimes committed both by forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and opposition forces loyal to Riek Machar ([AUCISS, 2014](#)). However, in South Sudan, as well as across the African continent, power ambitions among AU member states and a lack of financial resources have curtailed the AU's ability to effectively respond to crises (Rudincova, 2018).

The UN

With a significant in-country presence, both in the capital Juba—where it is embedded in each national ministry (Zambakari et al., 2018)—as well as in South Sudan's 10 states, the United Nations is a key actor involved on the ground in South Sudan (ibid). A large part of its involvement revolves around the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), which was established in 2011 (UNSC, 2011). In March 2022, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution to renew the UNMISS mandate until 15 March 2023 (UNSC, 2022). With the goal of advancing a three-year strategic vision defined in a 2021 Security Council resolution to prevent a return to civil war (UNSC, 2021), the UNMISS mandate has four-core elements: protecting civilians; supporting the delivery of humanitarian assistance; supporting the peace process; and monitoring, investigating and reporting on violations of international humanitarian law and violations and abuses of human rights (UNSC, 2022). As of November 2021, UNMISS had a total force of 17,982 units, comprising of 13,254 troops, 222 experts on mission, 1,411 police officers, 425 staff officers, 2,268 civilians and 402 volunteers, with those units coming from numerous countries (UN Peacekeeping, 2022).

China

As the single largest economic investor and the single largest buyer of crude oil from South Sudan, and with numerous Chinese enterprises operating in the country, China has capability and influence in South Sudan. Its approach is different from Troika countries, which set out conditions before providing any financial and technical resources to South Sudan. The Troika's demands for political reforms, adherence to the rule of law, security sector reform, respect for human rights and good governance have propelled China into the position of preferred economic partner because its support comes with no conditions.

In its efforts to safeguard its infrastructure investments and oil production, China has found a peacemaking role in South Sudan, which continues to provide a testing ground for its diplomatic leadership and political commitment, allowing it to build up experience, capabilities, and confidence in mediation. Working under the aegis of IGAD's initiatives, China has been able to justify its mediation role in South Sudan insisting on IGAD's leading role and emphasising "African solutions for African problems".

Although not directly involved in peace negotiations, China has played a supportive role in the peace process held in Ethiopia, due to its close contact with South Sudanese warring factions, as well as with Western diplomats and African mediators (Tiezzi, 2014). Moreover, China has helped to shape actions in South Sudan undertaken by the UN (ICG, 2017). In 2015, it provided an infantry battalion to the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the first Chinese peacekeeping infantry battalion to ever be deployed in a UN peace operation (UNMISS, 2015). In August 2015, China became a member of the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC), the oversight body of the 2015 peace agreement. After the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018, China also joined the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), which is responsible for monitoring and overseeing the implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement.

Perceptions of Peacemaking and Peacebuilding Efforts

As section one highlights, South Sudan has provided a test case for international cooperation, which has offered some peace – albeit imperfect – to the country. Likewise, as the previous section illustrates, a plethora of international actors have been involved in the peace process. Here, discussion shifts to the interviews conducted with a cross-section of these national stakeholders that engage within the complex and multi-stakeholder peacemaking environment South Sudan presents. Whilst the key finding is the deep scepticism regarding the efficacy of South Sudan's peacemaking and peacebuilding initiatives, it is also important to note the additional key themes that emerged. These include the perception that local actors are not the true drivers of change, and a prioritisation of externally-led peacemaking and peacebuilding processes – which are often "top down" initiatives. Consequently, these processes are neither inclusive nor holistic, presenting a disconnect between the objectives of South Sudan's government and citizens; there has been little improvement, therefore, in the lives of ordinary citizens – despite numerous peace initiatives since 2013. Further, a combination of reduced engagement in the peace processes by Western countries with the growing appeal of non-Western actors has provided opportunity for non-Western countries to engage in peacemaking initiatives – most notable is China's propelled position, in addition to the role of neighbouring countries. Last, it is important to look in more detail into the variety of views regarding the role and impact of the numerous external actors engaged in South Sudan.

4.1 Peacemaking and peacebuilding are externally-led

Interviews conducted with a cross section of national stakeholders show a deep sense of scepticism about the efficacy of peacemaking and peacebuilding initiatives in South Sudan to date, which are perceived to be in the hands of external actors.

There is a belief that instead of being driven by the South Sudanese people and their political leaders, peace initiatives have been launched and led by external actors and are negotiated outside of South Sudan (Interview 4). As a result, the political leaders—who believe that the peace is imposed by foreign actors and would rather continue fighting—“are herded like cats to participate in peace initiatives”, a view that was expressed by one South Sudanese respondent (Interview 3).

With the Troika, the AU and IGAD creating the blueprint and leading the roadmap for peace in South Sudan, there is little interest and genuine commitment by South Sudan's political elites, elites whose zero-sum mindset does not make them ready to work together and compromise (Interview 2). One interviewee indicated that peace negotiations in South Sudan involve, "IGAD, the AU, the Troika forcing the South Sudanese warring parties to sign peace agreements" (Interview 1). Another interviewee questioned the efficacy of approaches whereby South Sudan political elites "are herded into a venue in Addis and Khartoum, a roadmap for peace is presented to them and there is very little opportunity for South Sudanese leaders to engage" (Interview 2). This description reinforces the perception that such top-down approaches fail to gain full support of the engaged parties, or even consider their points of view. The collapse of the 2015 ARCSS peace agreement, it is argued by a former South Sudanese government adviser, was due to the fact that "warring parties only pushed through their own agendas and did not agree to make peace" (ibid), while the 2018 R-ARCSS was "a coerced agreement through the interventions of Ugandan president Museveni and the ex-Sudanese president Al-Bashir" (ibid).

The countries that are members of the Troika are seen by most interviewees as having a pivotal role in peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan, even if they at times operate from behind the scenes (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11 and 12). They do so as a bloc, while also engaging with the top political and military leadership in South Sudan bilaterally, in areas where they feel they have more expertise or leverage. The Troika countries also channel their funding and direct their approaches towards regional organizations, like the AU and IGAD, so that each endorsement, decision or action is seen as coming from African-led bodies. Other interviewees point instead to the loss of influence by Troika countries since the R-ARCSS negotiations, especially following the decision to prevent the channelling of any money through government institutions. One interviewee argues that "the Troika have taken the foot off the pedal and they've handed over the leadership of the peace process to IGAD and countries in the region, especially Sudan and Uganda" (Interview 12). While the South Sudanese government blames the Troika for not putting money into their hands, according to one interviewee, the reality is that the Troika countries are those spending most of the money on the humanitarian response in South Sudan, which is "something that the government downplays and doesn't tell the public" (ibid). Another interviewee concurs that as the largest humanitarian donors, Troika countries maintain an important political role, and further argues that "it is Troika countries that are feeding the South Sudanese displaced people. Over 2 million South Sudanese refugees are being fed by the international community, in particular Troika countries" (Interview 12).

Interviewees expressed concerns that the government of South Sudan plays no role in peacebuilding. Local peacebuilding interventions are supported by Troika countries and are implemented by their own institutions—such as USAID and the Norwegian People's Aid—with some areas of work being sub-contracted to national NGOs that “receive small funding to implement peacebuilding interventions in the states, the counties and the administrative divisions below counties (payam)” (Interview 1). It is argued that having no government involvement in the design of peacebuilding interventions leaves all such initiatives open to political manipulation. Another interviewee pointed out that peacebuilding in South Sudan has yet to start. This is because “each time the country tries to stabilise, conflict reoccurs” (Interview 3). While there are numerous local and international organisations engaged in peacebuilding activities, in the absence of stability and long-term peace prospects, “such activities fall through the cracks” (ibid). One scholar noted that peacemaking and peacebuilding are complex undertakings requiring political engagement, financial resources, influence and power (Interview 6). This may explain why South Sudanese leaders, who have lost credibility in their own political camps (ibid), are unable to contribute effectively to peacemaking.

There are concerns and skepticism about IGAD's leadership role in peacemaking, with one interviewee expressing the desire for one “action-oriented” and undisputed leader in the process “with the capacity to move things forward and ensure the implementation of the 2018 peace agreement” (Interview 1). At the start of the process, the Troika realized that there was the need for an African institution to lead peace initiatives in South Sudan and it therefore fronted IGAD. However, in the absence of any tangible results from the implementation of peace agreements, some interviewees feel that IGAD's leadership has been compromised and it has no actual capacity to lead. They cite, by way of example, the fact that the Troika countries have also lost faith in IGAD and “the ambassadors of the UK, US, Norway and the Head of the EU delegation engage with the presidency on their own” (Interviews 3 & 9). The result is, in the view of one interviewee, “a fragmented approach with no direction” (Interview 3). These views are not shared by all. Where some see mainly flaws in external actors' interventions, others emphasise the benefits of the Troika's role, arguing that “decisions taken by IGAD are only possible once endorsed by the Troika” and that regular bi-lateral meetings by top diplomats from the EU, UK and USA have “helped to save the country” (Interview 29).

Bilateral actions by IGAD member states have implied further fragmentation of peacemaking efforts. Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya and Egypt have all engaged bilaterally with both President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar. Since the President of Uganda had, and has, a good relationship with President Kiir, he succeeded in persuading President Kiir to make several concessions while Sudan did the same with Riek Machar. In the view of one interviewee, this way of working on peace in South Sudan became so difficult to sustain because the interests of individual countries started to take centre stage at the expense of peace, peace building and stability in South Sudan (ibid). However, the Troika countries, the African Union and IGAD were very aware of these dynamics and condoned the mediation by the leaders of Uganda and Sudan, given the influence those countries could exert on political leaders in South Sudan.

One Sudanese scholar laments the “importation of different peace concepts” by numerous external actors engaged in South Sudan. In his view, “there is the Troika, which is made of the USA, UK and Norway, the EU, the UN, and China. There is also IGAD and the different countries making up IGAD and there is the AU.” This plethora of peace actors results in gridlock because “there are too many interests with competing agendas for peace in South Sudan and even when such countries and institutions attempt to pursue a coordinated approach, their efforts are hampered by different interests and political agendas” (Interview 6). According to this view, the political elites and citizens started to lose trust in the peace process due to the absence of a single, trustworthy peacemaking leader driving the process. While the different international actors have worked together under IGAD's leadership, the collective effort has not been very cohesive and it is hard to see IGAD driving the process without the support of other key players (ibid). This scholar's call for a new approach, whereby peacebuilding programmes are shaped and led by local actors, is echoed by other interviewees. One international expert expressed concerns about Troika countries' bilateral engagements with the South Sudanese political elites. According to him, an unhealthy model of “appeasement” has been nurtured over years of peace mediation. For example, in situations of blatant violations of the security arrangements of the 2018 agreement by either the SPLM or the SPLM/IO, no stringent actions are taken against those found to be responsible, thus undermining the efficacy and sustainability of the peace process (Interview 4).

The interviews with South Sudanese stakeholders clearly demonstrate that there is a strong perception that negotiations and peace initiatives are driven by external actors. South Sudanese political leaders are seen as reluctant participants at best, and are perceived to be more eager to settle scores amongst themselves rather than genuinely work to end the conflict. There are also questions about the role of the Troika as a driver of change, particularly its decision to work mainly through regional organizations (IGAD, AU) and the way it handles the distribution of funding and aid in South Sudan. Finally, there are debates about the efficacy and propriety of bi-lateral negotiations between neighbouring countries, which have both produced some effects but have also been criticized for further splintering an already fractious peace process.

4.2 The nature of peace interventions

The interviews also revealed important insights and perceptions of the nature of the peace interventions themselves. Three key areas emerged: negotiations are top down and lack "bottom up" participation by local communities; there is a lack of holistic and inclusive approaches to sustain peace; and, finally, there are no peace dividends to the local communities that are most effected by the violence.

Peace negotiations are a top-down affair

The sentiment that the peace negotiations are a top-down affair is widely, but not universally, held by interviewees. One former government adviser sees civil society organisations as having the opportunity to influence peacemaking and peacebuilding at various levels. In his view, South Sudanese civil society's visibility "is felt across the board in South Sudan and in the places where the negotiations take place" (Interview 2). However, most interviewees disagree and view peace negotiations as "top down" initiatives, which are "an affair for top military and top politicians" (Interview 5). These individuals are characterised by their detachment from the victims and communities who bear the brunt of the war. One interviewee summarises this: "with negotiations held in Addis or Khartoum, only a few politicians have attempted to reach out to the communities to explain what the peace agreements are about, yet it is the communities who are the most affected by the conflict" (Interview 3).

There is a general consensus amongst the interviewees that peace negotiations should have a link with communities and grassroots mechanisms of peace making because "bottom-up" approaches greatly enhance the prospects of sustainable peace (Interview 9). In the view of one former senior official, peacemaking interventions should include an ethnic framework-based dialogue within civil society, for an agreement that is a pact between top political leaders misses this important consideration (Interview 5). According to this view, genuine peacemaking and peacebuilding happens at the communal level as part of a process that is not time-bound (Interview 6). An effective model of peacemaking and peacebuilding is when "you find communities that have been fighting convening negotiations, holding peace dialogues, paying compensation in whatever form", whereas "foreign-led interventions held away from South Sudan are about the political interests of the South Sudanese ruling elite and the interests of their affiliates" (ibid).

Lack of an inclusive and holistic peace

Another theme that emerged from the interviews is that peacemaking and peacebuilding must be nurtured in a context of reduced national and sub national violence for it to be meaningful, inclusive and holistic. A UN expert in South Sudan raised concerns about ongoing widespread insecurity and low-intensity conflict, which often takes the form of skirmishes between tribal militias, armed youth, cattle herders and farming communities. Superficially, these localized conflicts seem to be driven by a lack of political consensus, financial resources and economic opportunities. Yet these skirmishes are also seen as part of a proxy war strategy by the SPLM, which is sub-contracting violence to non-state actors. One interviewee emphasizes that the leadership of non-state belligerent actors is hard to trace and those responsible are unlikely to be held accountable for violations of human rights, or for causing displacement and insecurity. According to this interviewee, tackling this problem by engaging with the SPLM and proxy actors should be a priority for all key stakeholders within IGAD, the AU, Troika countries, the UN, the EU and China (Interview 4).

Civil society representatives cite the problematic lack of an inclusive peacemaking approach. The 2015 peace agreement failed partly because it was only signed by two parties, the SPLM and the SPLM-IO, while leaving out all other political groups. The Troika only realized this after the agreement collapsed. However, during the High-Level Revitalization Forum, all political groups were included, and this eventually led to the signing of the 2018 agreement. Despite its implementation delays, this still holds at time of writing, because it is more inclusive and, unlike the 2015 agreement, presents too much of a risk for the SPLM to abrogate it.

While civil society organisations push for inclusive peacemaking to be an integral part of the peace processes, the political leaders are perceived as preferring an exclusive process where they alone dictate the terms of the peace (Interview 3). Representatives of civil society organisations emphasise the importance of an approach where equality, respect for human rights, accountability for crimes committed against civilians, and even the structure of government and the needed institutional reforms, take centre stage (Interviews 3 & 9). Political leaders are criticized by one interviewee for "focusing on their own interests, financial gains, political positions, power and influence" at the expense of other groups. This is the reason why, according to one NGO representative, achieving peace in South Sudan is very difficult (Interview 3). While for the politicians, peace may mean the silence of guns, for the same interviewee "peace involves much more. It is freedom, the respect of human rights, the respect for the rule of law, tolerance of dissent, and guaranteeing people's security" (ibid).

Other interviewees point to a disconnect between government and citizens on the inclusion of transitional justice in the Peace Agreement. While for many citizens, justice and compensation is an integral part of the peace process, for political leaders, peace is complete without transitional justice (Interview 5). Particularly controversial is the implementation of the transitional justice chapter of the 2018 Peace Agreement, which many see as an opportunity to address the gross human rights violations that occurred during the conflict and to facilitate reconciliation, healing, compensation and reparation. South Sudanese political leaders do not see justice and accountability mechanisms as relating to peace, but rather as an attempt by the Troika to punish the SPLM and the SPLM/IO (Interview 4). Others argue instead that "the inclusion of transitional justice, especially criminal accountability, in the agreement does not sit well with the political leaders because they are afraid to be tried by the HCSS" (Interview 5).

No peace dividends for the communities affected by violent conflict.

Despite a flurry of diplomatic peace initiatives since 2013, the security landscape of South Sudan remains extremely poor, and initiatives aimed at peacebuilding have yet to provide any improved public good in the areas of security, socio-economic development, reconciliation and justice. There is a general belief among the interviewees that very little or no improvements for the lives of ordinary citizens have occurred (Interviews 3 & 9). In the view of one foreign diplomat, this is because South Sudanese political leaders are not interested in the welfare of their people (Interview 7). In this diplomat's view, "[i]f the political leaders could commit to the implementation of the peace agreement, there would be an improvement in people's lives and insecurity would be a thing of the past" (ibid). However, in his view, the ruling party itself is the biggest obstacle to peace: "[p]eacebuilding initiatives are going on and at so many levels, but how can those interventions build peace in the middle of massive insecurity caused by the ruling party itself, which is using tribal militias and armed cattle keepers to cause insecurity?" (ibid). Similarly, one South Sudanese former senior official paints a damning picture of "high-profile" peacemaking efforts, which have been characterised by self-interest and competition for political positions and ministerial posts at the expense of improving lives for ordinary people (Interview 2). The same interviewee points to the fact that institutions affiliated with the UK, US, Norway, EU, and other Western countries, are receiving substantial funding to undertake peacebuilding. He contends that "when you do an assessment of their interventions, you find out that most of the resources allocated for peacebuilding goes into the salaries of expatriate staff" (ibid). A former Minister and high-ranking military official noted that South Sudan is a multi-ethnic society and peacemaking needs to include all ethnic communities. In his view, the peacemaking process was, from the beginning, an affair between the SPLM, a largely Dinka dominated party, and the SPLM/IO, a predominantly Nuer-led political party, while other ethnic groups were included only after the violence flared up in 2016. According to the former Minister, the inability of regional and international actors to analyse and fully understand the ethnic nature of the South Sudanese conflict has undermined peacemaking efforts (Interview 5).

As shown above, the perceptions that the negotiations are focused only on high-level South Sudanese leaders and lack key participation from local actors is widespread, as is the view that the process does not include meaningful dividends or support for the communities that have been most affected by the violence, nor do they include justice or accountability for the perpetrators of the violence.

4.3 Preferences about external actors

There are a wide variety of views expressed in the interviews about the role and impact of different international actors and their engagements in South Sudan. Many interviewees commented on the highly fragmented environment and the polarized political climate, where "local actors prefer whoever pushes their agenda forward, not necessarily peace" (ibid). The level of trust and preference varies "when the political elites in Juba feel a particular partner is not able to push through their demands" (Interview 6).

Opinions on the role and impact of neighbouring countries vary, with SPLM leaders having a preference for Uganda, while SPLM/IO leaders value the role of Sudan. As a consequence, supporters of the SPLM and SPLM/IO show preferences for Uganda and Sudan respectively (Interview 3). However, after the ousting of President Al-Bashir of Sudan, both the SPLM and the SPLM/IO are locked in a popularity contest for the support of the current leadership of Sudan. President Kiir's mediation of the Sudanese political impasse makes the SPLM a new favourite partner for Sudan, leaving the SPLM-IO with no regional ally ([Al-Ali, 2020](#)).

Opinions regarding Western peacemakers also vary between indifference—defined here as a predominant confusion about whether Western countries' peacemaking engagement in South Sudan is better than approaches by non-Western actors—and annoyance vis-à-vis Troika countries trying to entrench an external agenda and implement their Western foreign policy goals. According to one NGO leader, while the South Sudanese “support whoever is providing the funds and facilitating the peace” (Interview 3), there is mistrust by South Sudanese leaders of Troika countries that, through chapter five of the 2018 Peace Agreement, are perceived as wanting to punish the SPLM and SPLM/IO for war crimes (Interview 4). However, interviewees concur that Troika countries have financial and diplomatic clout at the negotiating table and play an important role in engaging with the South Sudanese political leadership to find compromises. In one specific example cited by one interviewee, the Troika countries and Uganda were successful in engaging with President Kiir and convincing him to reintroduce ten states in South Sudan, which replaced the thirty two states that were controversially created in 2017 (*ibid*).

Interviewees appeared to be divided over the role and impact of African institutions—particularly IGAD and the African Union. While both the SPLM and the SPLM/IO have, on occasion, accused IGAD of siding with the opposing party, the predominant view is that, despite challenges and deficiencies, IGAD has ultimately been able to broker an agreement among the warring parties. Political elites have been verbally supportive of the mediation efforts by IGAD and the African Union—whether out of genuine feeling of trust or for pragmatic reasons—because the price for rejecting the role of fellow African institutions would be too high. Such a rejection would lead to their isolation from the broader African community. There were complications, however, when IGAD started to rely too heavily on the influence exerted by specific countries that have pull with the SPLM and the SPLM/IO. Indeed, experience shows that when Sudan and Uganda take centre stage and engage bilaterally with South Sudan's political leaders—for example, persuading them to make concessions—there is then progress in official negotiations. Overall, however, there is general agreement that IGAD and the AU are the only entities that are able to bring the warring parties together to reconcile their different visions of how to stop the violence.

One interviewee summarised: "When IGAD or AU face difficulties, they ask the TROIKA to step in. In situations where the parties are violating the ceasefire agreement, IGAD, through verification mechanisms and the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms, write reports on the status of the ceasefire arrangements, which are then forwarded to the Troika for further actions" (Interview 3). It is then up to the Troika to decide how to proceed, and their actions "may include seeking targeted sanctions against individuals thought to be violating the ceasefire arrangements, or requesting interventions by the UN Security Council" (ibid).

Another factor discussed in the interviews was the views on China. Despite historical mistrust due to China's role in Sudan's second civil war—which tainted China's image by portraying it as an ally of Khartoum—South Sudanese perceptions of China today are largely positive. Elites are genuinely, although not uncritically, enthusiastic about China's role in the economy, especially regarding oil extraction and infrastructure development, and the fact that China "tags no conditionality to its role in peacemaking" (Interview 4). Since South Sudan's independence, the belief that essential and urgent infrastructure projects can be efficiently approved, financed, and built by Chinese firms has done much to improve the South Sudanese perception of China.

There is also a widespread view amongst interviewees that China has strategically positioned itself as a business and development partner to South Sudan (Interviews 2, 6, 8, 10, 12 and 13; Pospisil, 2022). While South Sudan offers energy resources and a new market, China—with its energy demands and a "go out" strategy for businesses—is an important source of investment and development assistance. Given China's own economic development accomplishments, there are great expectations from both South Sudanese officials and the wider civil society that China can play a greater role in bringing about peaceful development in the country.

The interviews demonstrate that preferences about external actors vary and there is a wide range of opinions about the influence and actions of international organizations and governments. They show that, despite a polarized and factionalized environment, both African and international actors maintain influence and importance in South Sudan's peace process.

South Sudan, a Mediation Hub in Eastern Africa?

In a changing regional conflict landscape, South Sudan has engaged over the past two years in mediation efforts — a surprising development given its own political turmoil and internal rivalries. It has taken up a role of mediator in the Sudanese political upheavals and, surprisingly, brokered in 2020 the Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan. Following the Juba agreement, the South Sudanese Presidency has volunteered, and has been proposed by others, to support the Ethiopian peace efforts as a broker and has been involved in mediation efforts over the GERD hydropower project.

Caught in the middle of regional rivalries, especially the historical hostile relations between Sudan and Uganda, as well as the more recent disputes between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan about the GERD project, South Sudan is trying to pursue an outward-looking policy in the Eastern Africa sub-region, cultivating good relations with all neighbouring countries and pursuing a mediation role in regional disputes. Over the past two years, South Sudanese leaders have been engaged in active diplomatic efforts, with frequent and high-profile official visits. In the first visit by an Egyptian president to South Sudan, President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi visited Juba in November 2020 ([Al Arabiya, 2020](#)). One year later, in October 2021, the GERD project was high on the agenda of talks in Cairo between President Salva Kiir and President el-Sisi ([Hendawi, 2021](#)). South Sudan has also engaged strategically as mediator in the Sudanese political upheavals. In September 2020, South Sudan hosted and mediated Sudanese peace talks ([Al Jazeera, 2020](#)) and it helped to broker the Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan, which was signed by the Government of Sudan, the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), and the Sudan Liberation Movement-Minni Minawi on 3 October 2020 (The University of Edinburgh, 2020). After successfully brokering the Juba agreement, the South Sudanese Presidency has attempted to support peace efforts in Ethiopia. Following an official visit to Ethiopia in September 2021, President Kiir was reportedly requested by IGAD to mediate in the Ethiopian conflict ([Malak, 2021](#)).

To some, it appears as though South Sudan has developed into a mediation hub in the region. It is actively trying to maintain good relations with all its neighbouring countries and is developing into the focal point of several divergent interests—in particular the triangular relationship between Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda. South Sudan is also balancing the role of Turkey in Ethiopia, the interests of Gulf states, and the multiple partnerships that Egypt is pursuing (Pospisil, 2022). Some analysis suggests that the uncertainty created by geopolitical shifts in the Horn of Africa provides South Sudan with both opportunities and dangers. In the middle of regional rivalries, South Sudan's balancing acts could potentially bring political and economic benefits to the country. However, given the track record of South Sudan's neighbours in supporting different armed groups in South Sudan, there is also the risk that, if unsatisfied with Juba's actions, those neighbours could again resort to using local proxies to punish South Sudan and encourage regime change there (Thiong, 2020).

While it remains to be seen whether the South Sudanese leaders will be able to find a successful formula for their diplomatic balancing acts—and a formula that all their neighbours will accept—South Sudanese civil society experts interviewed for this research appear sceptical about the actual capacity, and future prospects, of South Sudan acting as a regional mediator. In the view of one interviewee, all the countries in the region (Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Uganda and Kenya) have an interest in South Sudan. Moreover, South Sudan also has an interest in these countries and it is currently in a privileged position because Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan all want South Sudan to join their side (Interview 12). According to this view, however, “for Ethiopia or Egypt, whether or not to have South Sudan on their side doesn't make any practical difference. The leverage that South Sudan can exert to support the cause of Egypt or Ethiopia is minimal and even if it had some, the people in government do not have the expertise of how to use it to their advantage” (ibid).

Another interviewee points to a gap between the political aspirations of the South Sudanese leadership and their abilities in practice. While acknowledging that South Sudan has leverage over some armed groups operating in Sudan — especially in the South Kordofan and Blue Nile regions — which gives the South Sudanese government some kind of credentials in the eyes of the Sudanese, the relationship between Sudan and South Sudan is one of convenience (Interview 13). In the interviewee's view, the same applies to relations with Egypt: "High-profile Egyptians come to South Sudan not because South Sudan is being seen as a mediation hub. The interest of the Egyptians is the Nile. They try to court South Sudan in their Nile water dispute with Ethiopia" (ibid).

South Sudan's emergence as a regional mediation hub can be seen with some cautious optimism, as it may bring the prospects of better relations with its neighbours and increased economic benefits. But it is not without risks, in particular those related to the possibility that unsatisfied neighbours may again be supporting local groups bent on destabilizing the current government in South Sudan.

Conclusions

In a complex and multi-stakeholder peacemaking environment, South Sudan has been a test case for international cooperation to promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Often acting behind the scenes, Troika countries have provided technical and financial support for peacemaking interventions and have also supported peacebuilding interventions and initiatives through their development agencies. IGAD and the AU ensured political buy-in from the South Sudanese leaders and drove the process in line with the guiding spirit that regional organizations should lead peace interventions. Regional geopolitics has added additional complexities, with influential countries in the Eastern Africa region involved in bi-lateral diplomatic efforts with the SPLM and SPLM/IO leaders to promote peace while asserting bi-lateral interests.

China's economic power and engagement, together with its lack of demands on good governance or political reforms, have positioned it as the preferred, but not uncriticized, partner for South Sudanese economic development and helped it overcome lingering suspicion from its support for Sudan in the past. Chinese diplomats have pointed out that, unlike in Libya and Syria, there is a consensus between the Chinese, American and other permanent members of the UNSC on the need for a negotiated settlement to resolve the political crisis in South Sudan (Interview 11). Indeed, South Sudan provides a unique example of a country in conflict where geopolitical considerations have taken a back seat to the desire for peace and the interests of China to end the conflict are largely in line with those of Western powers and African countries that are also seeking an end to the prolonged conflict.

Despite an array of peacemaking and peacebuilding initiatives, securing peace in South Sudan has remained elusive. There is a general agreement among South Sudanese civil society experts and officials that local actors are not the real drivers of the peace process. Peacemaking and peacebuilding have been externally owned and led, with the South Sudanese political leaders, who are reluctant to make peace, "forced" into signing peace agreements. While donors and other international actors are interested in ending the conflict, the South Sudanese leaders continue to have pre-independence scores to settle, with this score-settling taking precedence over establishing a lasting peace. This is the biggest challenge to bringing peace to South Sudan. With concerns about violations of the Peace Agreement that was signed in 2018, and stalled progress on some of the agreed reforms—in particular, those related to the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme—how international cooperation proceeds and evolves will be key to the effective implementation of the Peace Agreement and the realization of a more peaceful and stable South Sudan.

As part of ongoing efforts to support a more sustainable peace, it is crucial that key actors reassess the implementation of the 2018 Peace Agreement and map out ways of securing the implementation of outstanding security and transitional justice provisions. Such a reassessment will identify impediments to the agreement and allow for a reprioritisation of pending provisions and actions. Moreover, there is a need for an empirical assessment of the intricate ethnic dynamics and on-going skirmishes by non-state armed groups. Such analysis, which should be designed and led by South Sudanese experts, would uncover the reasons for the ethnically charged sub-national violence and allow peacemakers to devise adequate and inclusive solutions that could mitigate a serious threat to the current peace deal.

Another important area of future research relates to South Sudan's mediation roles in the Horn of Africa. Despite the fragility of R-ARCISS at home, South Sudan has engaged strategically as a mediator in the Sudanese political upheavals and, surprisingly, brokered the Juba peace agreement in 2020. After that, the South Sudanese Presidency has volunteered, and has been proposed, to support the Ethiopian peace efforts and has been involved in mediating the long-standing dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over GERD. These are ongoing endeavours that are aimed at improving South Sudan's reputation and attempting to mend relations with neighbouring countries. The GERD project, in particular, has geopolitical implications for Egypt, Ethiopia and South Sudan. It is a test of long-standing connections between Egypt and South Sudan and between Ethiopia and South Sudan—each of these two countries need the support of South Sudan. Only time will tell whether South Sudan will be able to maintain a disinterested position on this matter, or whether it will have to take sides and what consequences that will have on its already fragile peace process at home.

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About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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