



**Kaleab T. Sigatu:<sup>1</sup> The role of regional actors in the South Sudan conflict<sup>2</sup>**

**Executive summary**

- The members of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), including Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, and Sudan, form a regional complex with interlinked regional security concerns. Neighbouring countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda have played a crucial role in supporting South Sudan's struggle for independence and its subsequent political and security developments.
- Fighting erupted in South Sudan in 2013 between the forces of President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar, quickly descending into violence along ethnic lines. The struggle for power in South Sudan is not only political but also driven by ethnic tensions between the Dinka and Nuer groups. Other communities, such as the Murle and Equatorians, have also been involved in the conflict.
- Negotiations to resolve the conflict were mediated by various international actors, including IGAD, the African Union, the United Nations, China, the EU, the US, and Norway. Different countries in the region had their own strategic interests and competed for leadership roles in the peace process, leading to tensions between Ethiopia and Kenya, and later between Uganda and Sudan.
- Ethiopia has invested heavily in the security sector in South Sudan, with more than 4,000 troops deployed in the UNISFA mission in Abyei. Kenya maintains strong ties with the South Sudanese government and opposition officials, who consider Nairobi a safe haven. Sudan is interested in maintaining its dominance in South Sudan and resisting Uganda's interference. In addition, Sudan has historically supported South Sudan's opposition forces and may continue to do so, while also providing sanctuary within its borders. Uganda has been the only country in the region willing to undertake direct military intervention in South Sudan.
- The Troika countries (US, UK, Norway) had a critical role behind the peace talks in South Sudan and were concerned about the potential for prolonged conflict, destabilizing the broader region as well.

**Introduction**

This study offers an overview of the civil war in South Sudan and the concerns surrounding competing regional interests and involvement in South Sudan, which pose a threat to the country's sovereignty. These interactions between South Sudan and IGAD member states and other actors play a significant role in shaping national sovereignty, and regional interests. However, it is acknowledged that South Sudan still needs to work on developing national interests and maintaining state sovereignty. Some

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scholars propose a ‘clean break’ from current leaders and power structures, suggesting the establishment of an international transitional administration. While some argue that an interim arrangement without these leaders is unrealistic, the involvement and commitment of neighbouring states are vital in any transitional arrangement and peace in South Sudan. The study concludes by emphasizing that nation-building is a greater challenge than gaining independence, as history has shown that nations that fail to build themselves often relapse into civil wars.

### **The Horn of Africa proto-regional security complex**

According to Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, the interstate security dynamics in Africa are often simply spillovers of domestic dynamics, particularly refugee flows, expulsions of foreigners, as well as civil wars and intervention by neighbours in domestic turbulence.<sup>3</sup> In the Horn of Africa proto-regional<sup>4</sup> security complex (proto-RSC)<sup>5</sup> the usual interactions are cross-border interventions in which the governments in each state support insurgencies in the other: Somalia and Ethiopia, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sudan and Uganda, Sudan and Eritrea, Sudan and Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup>

External actors in any given situation put their interests first, yet it can be instrumental with the right focus to bring a settlement of the dispute between parties.<sup>7</sup> This paper examines the role of the main regional actors, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda, and their relations with South Sudan concerning conflict.

Regional security in Africa is substantially defined by sub-state level, less about states threatening each other in the traditional way, and more about spillovers from domestic instabilities.<sup>8</sup> Concerning the South Sudan civil war, the spillover effects of the worsening civil war became intolerable for South Sudan’s neighbours, who concluded that the best option to sustain their security and economic interests is to carve out spheres of influence in the country.<sup>9</sup> These regional states have actually changed the complexion of the crisis that broke out in December 2013 by openly joining the conflict, by secretly making opportunistic alliances with the two militarily balanced sides, and either separately or together trying to mediate in the crisis.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> BUZAN, Barry – WAEVER Ole: *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 229.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper ‘region’ refers to the Horn of African states of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, and Sudan. These countries are members of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the regional bloc, which can be considered as the regional complex that reflect interlinked regional security. KLOSOWICZ, Robert: The Role of Ethiopia in the regional security complex of the Horn of Africa. *Ethiopian Journal of Social Sciences and Language Studies*, Volume 2, Issue 2, 83-97, pp. 84.

<sup>5</sup> A ‘proto-complex’ is when there is sufficient manifest security interdependence to delineate a region and differentiate it from its neighbours, but when the regional dynamics are still too thin and weak to think of the region as a fully-fledged RSC. BUZAN, Barry – WAEVER, Ole: *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> BUZAN and WAEVER, p. 242.

<sup>7</sup> GARANG, Aleu: *The impact of external actors on the prospects of a mediated settlement in South Sudan*. Paper presented at the Academic Conference on International Mediation, University of Pretoria, 2-4 June 2015, Pretoria, South Africa.

<sup>8</sup> BUZAN and WAEVER, p. 248.

<sup>9</sup> KNOPF, Kate Almquist: *Ending South Sudan’s Civil War*. Council on Foreign Relations. Council Special Report No. 77, November 2016.

<sup>10</sup> MESFIN, Berouk: [The Regionalization of the South Sudanese Crisis](#). *East Africa Report*, [online], October 2015. Source: ISS Africa [10 07 2017]



### From independence to civil war

The Republic of South Sudan became the 54<sup>th</sup> independent state of Africa and 193<sup>rd</sup> member of the United Nations in July 2011. The world's youngest country gained its independence by an internationally recognized referendum on self-determination after fighting a civil war with the government of Sudan for almost 60 years. South Sudan is at the centre of Africa bordered by six countries, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic. It is rich in oil, but following decades of civil war it is also one of the least developed countries on Earth – only 15% of its citizens own a mobile phone and there were very few tarmac roads in an area bigger than Spain and Portugal combined.<sup>11</sup>

After nearly three years of civil war, South Sudan has ceased to perform even the minimal functions and responsibilities of a sovereign state. It exercises no monopoly over coercive power, and its ability to deliver public services, provide basic security, and administer justice is virtually non-existing.<sup>12</sup>

The states in the region were supporting South Sudan in achieving independence. It was in many respects the realization of a regional project supported by the major states of the Horn of Africa, particularly Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda for several decades. In deferent ways and with varying degrees of enthusiasm, successive governments of all three states provided crucial military, financial, diplomatic, political, and logistical assistance to the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).<sup>13</sup> Eritrea and Ethiopia helped the SPLM/A both politically and militarily during the war and Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda offered safe havens and support to the SPLM/A.<sup>14</sup>

Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda also played central roles, both within and outside IGAD, in bringing the SPLM/A and Khartoum to the negotiating table between 2002-2005. The negotiations ultimately resulted in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, which ended the north-south war, brought the SPLM/A into a power-sharing government, and fixed the timetable for a referendum on independence.<sup>15</sup>

All the three states have viewed – and continue to view to some extent – Khartoum as a chauvinistic, Islamist, Arab regime which intend to forcefully spread Islam and extend Arab populations further south across the continent, a perception which has held considerable validity in Sudanese politics in the past, particularly during the ascendancies of Gafaar Nimeiry (1969-1985) and Hassan al-Turabi (1989-1999).<sup>16</sup>

Sudan gets a share of South Sudan's oil revenues because it owns the pipeline that takes South Sudanese oil to East Asian markets. Other neighbours benefit from South Sudan's huge oil revenues through the country's open and lopsided trading arrangements. South Sudan can afford to buy commodities internationally, but it has nothing but oil to export. The lorries bringing goods to Juba from East Africa often return empty.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> [South Sudan: What is the fighting about?](#), [online], 10 05 2014. Source: BBC [02 08 2017]

<sup>12</sup> KNOFF, Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> FISHER, Jonathan: *Mapping 'Regional Security' in the Greater Horn of Africa: Between National Interests and Regional Cooperation*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Horn of Africa Security Dialogue. April 2014.

<sup>14</sup> SARWAR, Nadia: [Post-independence South Sudan: an era of hope and challenges](#), [online], 12 11 2012. Source: The Institute of Strategic Studies [30 10 2017]

<sup>15</sup> HEALY, Sally cited in FISHER, 2014, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> FISHER, Jonathan: Some more reliable than others: Image management, donor perceptions and the Global War on Terror in East African diplomacy. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Volume 51, Issue 1, 2013, pp. 1-31. pp. 16-19.

<sup>17</sup> YOSHINO, Yutaka et al.: [Enhancing the Recent Growth of Cross-Border Trade between South Sudan and Uganda](#), [online], October 2011. Source: World Bank [30 10 2017]



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After gaining independence South Sudan's trade with Ethiopia was negligible and trade with Sudan is still subject to intense political fluctuation. But trade with Uganda is significant for both countries: South Sudan is Uganda's biggest African export destination.<sup>18</sup>

The emerging markets of South Sudan are also of importance to East African economies looking to supply manufactured and agricultural products to the country. As a country struggling to recover from conflict, South Sudan depends on Kenya for overseas import commodities, on Uganda for agricultural products, and on Ethiopia for its hotel industry.<sup>19</sup> Thus, South Sudan maintains closer relations with neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, and as a landlocked country, they provide a lifeline to the economy of South Sudan.<sup>20</sup>

Uganda, together with Kenya, has been pushing a \$250 billion infrastructure project known as the Lamu – South Sudan – Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor, which comprises a port, an oil pipeline, a railway line, and a highway, and which will depend for its success on South Sudan.<sup>21</sup> This plan for developing regional infrastructure were perceived as a threat to Sudan's existing oil infrastructure and its economic interests in South Sudan.<sup>22</sup>

### The civil war

Two years after South Sudan gained independence, fighting erupted between rival forces of President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar in the capital, Juba on December 15, 2013. The crisis rooted in a power struggle between Kiir (an ethnic Dinka), and Machar (an ethnic Nuer), but hostilities between Kiir's Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA) and Machar's Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) were quickly marred by violence against civilians along ethnic lines. The armed conflict between the opposing armies and their allied militia groups continued through the coming years.

First, in March 2013, tension within the SPLA/M leaders rose when Machar and SPLM secretary-general Pa'gan Amum Okiech announced their intention to run for party chairmanship, and for presidency in the 2015 election. Following this, Kiir removed Machar's executive powers, dissolved the national reconciliation committee, and cancelled the whole process, which was chaired by Machar. He then removed Machar and Amum from their power and dissolved the entire cabinet of ministers.<sup>23</sup>

The next event that led to an outbreak of fighting in December was a conference where a dissident group held a press conference criticizing Salva Kiir's leadership of the party and the government. They called upon the president to convene a meeting of the SPLM Political Bureau (later dissolved) and announced a public opposition rally to be held in Juba on December 14.

The SPLM Secretariat announced that a meeting of the National Liberation Council (NLC) would be held on the same day. The public rally was postponed, and the NLC meeting was opened by the president, who attacked Riek in his opening address, reminding the audience of his role in splitting the SPLM/A in the 1990s. Motions proposed by the dissident group were voted down and they boycotted the meeting the next day when the party's policy documents were passed without substantial debate.

<sup>18</sup> THOMAS, Edward. *South Sudan: A Slow Libration*. London, Zed Books, 2015, p. 290.

<sup>19</sup> WASSARA, Samson S.: South Sudan: state sovereignty challenged at infancy, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Volume 9, Issue 4, 2015, p. 636.

<sup>20</sup> [In landlocked South Sudan, one road is a lifeline - and a bottleneck](#) [online], 30 09 2013. Source: Reuters [30 07 2017]

<sup>21</sup> KIGAMBO, Gaaki: [Regional Tensions Complicate South Sudan's Crisis](#) [online], 28 02 2014. Source: World Politics Review [30 10 2017]

<sup>22</sup> WASSARA, Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> MERESSA, K. Dessu: ['South Sudan's Independence' Nothing to celebrate in 2017](#), [online], 07 07 2017. Source: ISS Africa, [17 07 2017]



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On December 15 the president ordered the disarmament of the presidential guard, a combination of SPLA veterans and recently integrated Nuer militiamen, during which fighting broke out between largely Nuer and Dinka soldiers and spread to other garrisons around Juba. On December 16 Salva Kiir announced on television that an attempted coup had been foiled, and throughout the next few days security forces, including specially recruited troops from the president's home area, combed through different neighbourhoods in Juba, targeting Nuer civilians and arresting the opposition politicians.<sup>24</sup>

Mutinies of largely Nuer units in Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity states followed in close succession, and Riek Machar, escaping to Jonglei, called on the army to overthrow Salva Kiir. Large groups of armed Nuer civilians were recruited into Riek's forces, later named SPLA-IO (the Sudan People's Liberation Army – In Opposition), and during several months fighting continued in the three states. Large number of civilians were killed, often brutally. The SPLA received help against Riek's forces from units of the Ugandan army, already based in South Sudan as part of an anti-Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) force, as well as the other faction of SPLA-North from neighbouring Blue Nile state and the Darfur Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) allied to the SPLA-North in neighbouring South Kordofan.<sup>25</sup>

Neither the government nor the opposition enjoyed widespread support.<sup>26</sup> The divergence between the two leaders was a contentious nature of Southern Sudanese politics. Common characteristics were also the high level of militarization across the society at large; the ineffectiveness of the peace agreement; and the presence of high ranking, discontent members of the elites who could benefit from further violence.<sup>27</sup> In some cases, subclasses of Nuer and Dinka (the main ethnic cleavage represented by Vice President Riek Machar and President Salva Kiir, respectively) were fighting against their dominant clan association (SPLA-IO and SPLA, respectively) as well.

Because of the weak formal state, political power in South Sudan was to a large extent vested in informal patronage networks within the civil administration and the army.<sup>28</sup> The militarization of rural communities and the government's inability to control groups and networks of armed civilians also impeded security.<sup>29</sup> The struggle between the president, Salva Kiir and the vice-president, Riek Machar was not only about primacy, but also one between the two leading ethnic groups, the Dinka and the Nuer.<sup>30</sup> However multiple groups are in fact involved in conflict, including Murle, Equatorians, and Misseriya communities.<sup>31</sup> The army was split and there have been clashes around the country. There have been mass killings along ethnic lines as well.<sup>32</sup>

Until July 2016, almost 17,000 people have been killed in the five years since gaining independence; over 15,000 since the outbreak of the 'civil war' of 2013.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, in August 2016, the United Nations (UN) Security Council passed Resolution 2304, extended the mandate of the UN

<sup>24</sup> JOHNSON, Douglas H.: *The Political Crisis in South Sudan*. African Studies Association, 2014. p. 172.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 171.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 172.

<sup>27</sup> [Armed Conflict Location and Event Digest. Country Report: South Sudan Conflict Update](#) [online], May 2017. Source: Reliefweb, [15 07 2017]

<sup>28</sup> ROLANDSEN, Øystein H.: Another civil war in South Sudan: the failure of Guerrilla Government? *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 2015, p. 169.

<sup>29</sup> ROLANDSEN, Øystein H.: [Why Is Violence Escalating in Southern Sudan?](#) [online], February 2010. Source: Norwegian Peacebuilding Center [15 07 2017]

<sup>30</sup> HETTYEY, Andras – MARSAL, Viktor: Africa and the regional security complexes theory. In: HADA, Bela et. al.: *Regional Security Studies*. Budapest: NKE Szolgaltato Nonprofit Ltd, 2016, p. 233.

<sup>31</sup> [Country report: Sudan and South Sudan](#), [online], January 2015. Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Digest [20 05 2017]

<sup>32</sup> [South Sudan: What is the fighting about?](#), [online], 10 05 2014. Source: BBC [02 07 2017]

<sup>33</sup> [Country report: South Sudan Conflict Update](#), [online], July 2016. Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Digest [20 05 2017]



Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and approved the creation of a Regional Protection Force (RPF) of 4,000 additional peacekeepers to supplement the slightly more than 12,000 peacekeepers already deployed to the country under UNMISS. Back in 2011, the Security Council established UNMISS to consolidate peace and security and to help to establish conditions for development in the new country. However, after, violence broke out in South Sudan's capital in 2013, Juba, and quickly spread to other locations in the country, resulting in a deep nation-wide political and security crisis by May 2014, the Security Council decided to reinforce UNMISS and re-prioritized its mandate towards protecting civilians, human rights monitoring, and support for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. The RPF was mandated to operate within Juba and was vested with specific tasks related to the protection of civilians and strategic installations in the capital, such as the airport.<sup>34</sup>

### The role of major regional actors

In August 2016, after Riak Machar had nearly been assassinated and had escaped to the DRC<sup>35</sup>, he had been exfiltrated from Goma by a Sudanese plane, together with his wife, son, and a number of top-ranking SPLM/IO officers. This then led to a bizarre diplomatic drama where Riak was at first sent (at his own request) to Addis Ababa. Nevertheless, there he was told he could not stay and had to go back to Khartoum. In Khartoum, he was re-deported to Ethiopia with the message that he could not come back to Sudan. Stranded in Addis, he was finally picked up by the South Africans who sent him to Johannesburg where he remains under house arrest to this day.<sup>36</sup> This shows how Ethiopia and Sudan are very careful in intervening in the conflict in South Sudan.

After the conflict started, negotiations were mediated by IGAD and the African Union, the United Nations, China, the EU, the US, the UK and Norway. On 27 December 2016 an IGAD summit took place in Nairobi. The leaders of Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti and Somalia attended alongside the 1<sup>st</sup> vice-president of Sudan; South Sudan's foreign minister, and the deputy chairperson of the African Union Commission. Neither Salva Kiir, nor Riek Machar was present. A final communiqué condemned all unconstitutional actions, in particular any efforts to change the Government of South Sudan using force. A former minister of foreign affairs of Ethiopia, Seyoum Mesfin, General Lazaro Sumbeiywo, former Chief of Staff of the Kenyan army and the Sudanese general, Mohammed Ahmed Mustapha al-Dabi were appointed as IGAD's Special Envoys for South Sudan.<sup>37</sup>

Each country in the region had its own strategic interests. The venue and leadership of the talks were initially a matter of tension between Ethiopia and Kenya and latter between Uganda and Sudan.<sup>38</sup> A hegemonic competition took place in relation to South Sudan (Ethiopia versus Uganda), and a competition over the leading role in the peace process (Ethiopia versus Kenya). There was direct support to opposing belligerents (Uganda versus Sudan) and at times directly opposing national interests of several neighbouring countries in South Sudan (Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya). The refugee crisis in South Sudan also created problems in the neighbouring countries.<sup>39</sup>

On the military side, there appeared to be several tacitly accepted red lines among neighbouring countries. If Ugandan forces were to engage farther north, beyond Gadiang, a reaction from both Sudan

<sup>34</sup> [Adopting Resolution 2304 \(2016\), Security Council Extends Mission I South Sudan, Authorizes Expanded Peacekeeping Force to Bolster Civilian Protection Efforts](#). [online], 12 08 2016. Source: United Nations [10 07 2017]

<sup>35</sup> [Machar flees South Sudan after botched assassination attempt](#). [online], 18 08 2016. Source: Africanews [10 07 2017]

<sup>36</sup> PRUNIER, Gerard: [The Deal Behind Riek Machar's House Arrest](#). [online], 27 06 2017. [30 10 2017]

<sup>37</sup> JOHNSON, Hilde F.: *South Sudan: The Untold Story from Independence to Civil War*. I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, London, 2016, p. 265.

<sup>38</sup> JOHNSON Hilde F., p. 272.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



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and Ethiopia might have been negative. Similarly, if Sudan moved in ground forces – for example to assist the SPLM/A-IO to occupy oil fields in Upper Nile State –, strong reactions might be expected from other neighbours. In this way, the IGAD countries watched each other and had a deterrent impact, preventing any of them from overstepping the line.<sup>40</sup>

The urgency of the IGAD engagement to end the fighting could be illustrated by the events in Bor alone, in which incident South Sudanese and minorities including Ethiopians, Eritreans, Kenyans and Ugandans had been targeted in December 2013. There were also allegations of extrajudicial killings, rape, abduction, and other abuses. What unfolded during December 2013 had clearly alarmed the region. Neighbouring countries knew that the civil war would hit them hard with refugee flows and serious impacts on their economy and security.<sup>41</sup> UNMISS was seen to provide a security blanket for the fragile government against external threats, even if the biggest threat was evidently inside the country.<sup>42</sup>

### *Ethiopia*

Ethiopia is seen to invest a lot in the security sector in South Sudan.<sup>43</sup> By mid-2017, Ethiopia had more than 4,000 troops in the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) deployed to prevent a border war between Sudan and South Sudan. Ethiopia was also actively involved in efforts by the African Union to broker high-level peace talks between South Sudan and Sudan as well as between Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement – North, which is part of the SRF.<sup>44</sup> (Ethiopia has friendly relations with all its direct neighbouring states except Eritrea.) Ethiopia is also a natural ally of South Sudan as the SPLM originated within Ethiopia in 1983. Ethiopia has avoided becoming directly embroiled in the South Sudanese crisis because of wider geopolitical and security considerations.

Ethiopia believes that a unilateral military intervention would be counter-productive, and the military intervention of Uganda produced deleterious regional dynamics and endangers the mediation efforts of IGAD, of which Uganda is a member. Thus, it has strongly pushed Uganda to pull its troops out, even if they entered South Sudan at the request of the South Sudanese government.<sup>45</sup>

After the civil war began, the United Nations said that about 5,000 civilians were forced to seek refuge in neighbouring Ethiopia due to escalating clashes near Pagak, the headquarters of the opposition group led by Riek Machar.<sup>46</sup> The war has also stimulated simmering ethnic rivalries in the states where the South Sudanese had sought refuge. Communal fighting broke out on Ethiopia's side of the border with South Sudan in early 2016, and Ethiopian troops were deployed into South Sudan's Jonglei state in April 2016, following a particularly brazen incursion into Ethiopia's Gambella region by a South Sudanese tribal militia.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Ethiopia was also very concerned that a South Sudan-

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>42</sup> NEWBERY, Katharina: *Mapping National Security Interests in the Horn of Africa: Summary Report*. Horn of Africa Security Dialogue. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. September 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> MESFIN: [The Regionalization of the South Sudanese Crisis](#), Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> [More villagers flee as government troops advance on Pagak: official](#). [online], 17 07 2017. Source: Radio Tamazuj [20 07 2017]

<sup>47</sup> KNOPF, Ibid.



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style crisis could materialize in Sudan and ultimately lead to a full-fledged war between the two countries.<sup>48</sup>

The crisis presented Ethiopia with a political opportunity to prove itself as a reliable partner of the international community, which has struggled to exert direct influence over events in South Sudan.<sup>49</sup> However, the only possible scenario where Ethiopia would intervene militarily would be if Eritrea was playing a belligerent role in the conflict that would also affect Ethiopia negatively.<sup>50</sup>

According to Berouk Mesfin, there are three strategic security reasons of Ethiopian interest over South Sudan's crisis.<sup>51</sup> First, the influx of large numbers of refugees into Ethiopia (nearly 250,000) who are mostly suffering Nuer women and children. Second, Ethiopia feels that the crisis must be stopped before it transforms into an ethnic conflict beyond repair, complicating and even sharpening the political divide between the Nuer and Anuak ethnic groups that live in Ethiopia's Gambella region. Ethiopia's main security concern is thus that the crisis could spill over its borders and could aggravate the already tense situation. Third, the deteriorating security situation on Ethiopia's long, porous and politically explosive borders with both Sudan and South Sudan poses a direct security threat to Ethiopia. Therefore, it seeks to prevent, at all costs, the total collapse of the South Sudanese government and a prolonged civil war. Ethiopian officials claim that the situation could, in turn, enable Eritrea to use the border areas of South Sudan to infiltrate Ethiopian rebel groups in order to conduct destabilizing activities inside Ethiopia. Credible sources affirm that Eritrean operatives may be covertly providing support to the South Sudanese opposition forces. This potentially inimical support is deeply unsettling to Ethiopia, which sees Eritrea as the principal source of instability in the Horn of Africa.<sup>52</sup>

Ethiopia had a strong interest in maintaining good relations with Khartoum. Sudan supported the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile, a mega-project opposed by Egypt. It was critical for the Ethiopians that this support continues. While Ethiopia remained largely impartial in relation to the South Sudanese conflict, it therefore also had to be careful in confronting Sudan.<sup>53</sup>

Ethiopia has a large Nuer population and given the history of conflict in the region; the Ethiopian government had to tread carefully.<sup>54</sup> Changes along the Ethiopian–South Sudan border were influencing international relations. Ethnic groups previously in the lead now felt marginalized, both politically and economically. For the first time, in Gambella state in Ethiopia a Nuer governor was appointed. Ethiopian Nuers were calling for intervention to rescue their brothers in South Sudan, and for a change of government in Juba.<sup>55</sup> This is why Ethiopia wants to stay neutral by neither siding with Kiir nor Machar. This position is made more difficult by the close ethnic links between Ethiopia's Gambella region and the South Sudanese Nuer community to which Machar belongs.<sup>56</sup>

Because of the decision of the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, not to be part of the 'spoiled game' in the South Sudan, Ethiopia did not promote commerce and economic relations with its new neighbours like Kenya, Uganda, and Eritrea, which were investing and making better use of the opportunities in South Sudan.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> MESFIN, Berouk: [The full-blown political and military crisis in South Sudan has increasingly important implications for Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea](#). [online], 26 05 2014, Source: ISS Africa [10 06 2017]

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> AWOLICH, Abraham A.: The Question of Ugandan Troops in South Sudan. *Weekly Review*, March 4, 2014.

<sup>51</sup> MESFIN: [The Regionalization of the South Sudanese Crisis](#), Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> NEWBERY, Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> JOHNSON Hilde F., p. 275.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> NEWBERY, Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.





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### *Kenya*

The current crisis has fuelled insecurity along the Kenya – South Sudan border as well. Kenya served for decades as host to South Sudanese refugees fleeing the conflicts with Sudan and – even though to a lesser degree than Ethiopia – it has been affected by the recent influx of refugees who fled the current crisis.<sup>58</sup>

The Kenyan government was mainly involved in South Sudan through capacity building programs, which provided training to judges, diplomats, developing the education system, and to some extent, training in the security sector.<sup>59</sup> This gave Kenya influence and a positive role in the new state and because Kenya was interested in peace and security in South Sudan to enable economic development.

Kenya retains strong ties with many South Sudan government and opposition officials who regard Nairobi as a second home and even as ‘a sort of safe haven’. It seems Kenya does not want to alienate either of the two warring sides. It also seems that Kenya is playing a complex double game, publicly supporting Ethiopia’s IGAD-sanctioned diplomatic facilitation, while subtly endorsing the manoeuvres of likeminded Uganda.<sup>60</sup>

Embroided in serious internal security and political problems, as well as its military involvement in Somalia, Kenya unquestionably wishes to preserve its economic and financial interests in South Sudan that were endangered by the current crisis, as South Sudan has become one of Kenya’s most important export destinations.

Kenya had made significant investments in South Sudan’s finance and banking sectors: Kenyan banks, including Kenya Commercial Bank and Equity Bank, have dominated South Sudan’s financial services. This means, although Ethiopia takes a leading role in IGAD, this is not perceived as a threat or as competition to Kenya’s position in the region.<sup>61</sup>

### *Sudan*

Sudan’s internal stability is clearly tied to the security situation in South Sudan.<sup>62</sup> In addition, Sudan still ‘enjoys a special relationship with South Sudan because of inescapable and deep political, demographic, cultural and economic bonds. For example, many members of the political and economic elites of South Sudan speak Arabic and have attended school in Khartoum or served in Sudanese government institutions.

We can identify competing national interests in the Horn concerning South Sudan between Sudan and Uganda. Sudan is mainly interested in maintaining its status of the dominant power in South Sudan, while resisting Uganda’s northward interference.

The feeling of Sudanese officials is that ‘Ugandan active policy is to rob South Sudan of its oil wealth and also to weaken Sudanese influence in the region, as well as to deprive Khartoum of any political or financial benefit in South Sudan.’<sup>63</sup> In geopolitical terms, they consider the growing Ugandan military presence, both land-based and aerial, in the Horn of Africa as a direct threat to Sudanese national security.

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<sup>58</sup> MESFIN: [The full-blown political and military crisis in South Sudan...](#), Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> NEWBERY, Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> MESFIN: [The full-blown political and military crisis in South Sudan...](#), Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> NEWBERY, Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> MESFIN: [The full-blown political and military crisis in South Sudan...](#), Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



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In addition, Sudan was deeply concerned by the possibility of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), a coalition of armed groups opposed to Sudan, getting significant amounts of weapons from Uganda.

The visit of Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir to South Sudan in early January 2014 was supposed to symbolize his personal support for Kiir's government against Machar, who had been for so many years Sudan's key ally.<sup>64</sup> This might be the reversion of his longstanding tactics of supporting South Sudan's disaffected opposition forces, which are undoubtedly on the lookout for foreign sponsors and conduits of military support in the region.

The economies of the two states have continued to depend on each other after the secession, especially with respect to the energy sector, as South Sudanese oil can reach its target markets only through Sudan's pipelines and territory, what offers Sudan tight controls over South Sudan's oil exports, while Khartoum also gets substantial transit fees.<sup>65</sup>

Especially the opposition in Sudan has an interest in throwing a wedge between the leaders of the two governments by convincing Juba that the NCP regime in Khartoum supports the opposition in the South. There is little, however, indication that SPLM-IO receives significant foreign assistance.<sup>66</sup> It appears that beyond providing sanctuary within the borders of Sudan, president al-Bashir holds back support to Riek Machar and the other rebels in the South. If Sudan were to support the rebels, it is likely that Salva Kiir would provide arms to rebels in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile – thereby strengthening opposition forces within Sudan in a period of regime fragility.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the South Sudanese government has repeatedly claimed that opposition forces have been allowed to make full use of Sudan's territory to carry out military operations.<sup>68</sup>

In January 2014 the Juba government concluded a rapprochement with Khartoum, even briefly considering a reoccupation of South Sudan's oil fields by the security forces of its erstwhile adversary. Juba had blamed every other South Sudanese mutiny of the past nine years on Khartoum, regardless of the many local contradictions that each mutiny reflected. When the big mutiny arrived, Khartoum's interest in the stability of South Sudan's government became very visible. The oil shutdown contributed to a sharp contraction in the Sudanese economy.

Sudan had an obvious interest in the security of oil supply lines, but Uganda's intervention and the involvement of the Darfur rebels<sup>69</sup> seemed more important in determining Khartoum's next moves. Rumours of arms deliveries to the opposition via Eritrea multiplied, as well as of direct Eritrean involvement. Later there were more substantial indications that Sudan and Iran were providing direct support, and that Qatar was contributing financially.<sup>70</sup> Sudan was probably playing both sides up to mid/end of 2014, but there was clearly an increasing tilt towards Machar's camp.<sup>71</sup>

Khartoum's support for the opposition is a legacy of decades of civil war, and the mentality remains: the hardliners believe that the weaker the Southerners are, the better for Khartoum it is. The long-time support of proxy militia was publicly acknowledged by Sudan in September 2012 in the context of the AUHIP negotiations.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> [South Sudan vows to shut down oil fields, pipeline over high transportation fees.](#) [online], 08 01 2016. Source: Sudan Tribune [10 06 2017]

<sup>66</sup> ROLANDSEN, Øystein H.: Another civil war in South Sudan..., p. 167.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> MESFIN: [The full-blown political and military crisis in South Sudan...](#), Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> The South Sudanese government received support from the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) in Darfur, particularly in Unity state where the SPLA was particularly weak. (JOHNSON Hilde F., p. 273.)

<sup>70</sup> JOHNSON Hilde F., pp. 273-274.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> JOHNSON Hilde F., p. 274.



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### *Uganda*

Uganda is the only country in the region willing to undertake unilateral, direct military intervention in South Sudan.<sup>73</sup> It had historically provided substantial political and military support to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) during its armed struggle against Sudan, which reciprocated it by giving support to the Lord's Resistance Army.<sup>74</sup>

The number of South Sudanese who have fled to Uganda has surpassed one million. The nearly four-year civil war has pushed an average of 1,800 South Sudanese into neighbouring Uganda every day for the past year.<sup>75</sup> Uganda's welcoming attitude towards refugees (for example, giving South Sudanese a plot of land to build a home and farm) has been praised by the UN and other international organizations.<sup>76</sup>

President Museveni, who cultivated close personal ties with South Sudanese president Salva Kiir and the Ugandan government, has long been a key ally of the SPLM. When the new war broke out, the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) was quick to provide military assistance to Salva Kiir's government, without which government troops would have probably been unable to check the rebels' southwards advance towards Juba.<sup>77</sup> The SPLM–IO has lost the momentum and without a massive defection from Salva Kiir's camp, or outside support, there is little chance that it would be able to extend the war beyond the Greater Upper Nile states.<sup>78</sup>

Uganda is not playing a role in the talks spearheaded by IGAD, does not cooperate with regional countries, and it does not seem to have a precise plan for the conduct of the peace negotiations. An indication of this is that it has allowed Machar to open an office in Kampala, even though Uganda's government still supports Kiir.<sup>79</sup>

The government drew on the support of the Ugandan army to secure its capital and the road leading to the Ugandan border. In addition, the problems of small arms proliferation and refugees, a renewed civil war is feared to give Uganda's enemies an opportunity to infiltrate and create bases in South Sudan.<sup>80</sup>

The direct neighbourhood of the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, that are both unstable with deleterious spillover effects, is unfavourable for Uganda.<sup>81</sup> Uganda has argued that the primary motives for its military intervention in South Sudan were to protect Ugandan civilians in the country and to prevent genocide or ethnic cleansing of the local population. Uganda had withdrawn its troops in 2015 to implement the failed peace agreement signed between President Kiir and vice president Machar, a move that was a key demand of rebels during peace negotiations in Ethiopia to end the nation's conflict. However, according to accusations, Ugandan and South Sudanese governments have secretly been working on a plan to allow Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) to re-enter South Sudan and control specific locations, like the main roads linking the two countries.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile IGAD, contrary to its initial stand, approved Uganda's early intervention for the

<sup>73</sup> MESFIN: [The Regionalization of the South Sudanese Crisis](#), Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> UN: [Over one million South Sudanese refugees in Uganda](#). [online], 18 08 2017. Source: BBC [18 09 2017]

<sup>76</sup> [Uganda receives one million South Sudan refugees](#). [online], 17 08 2017. Source: BBC [18 09 2017]

<sup>77</sup> [South Sudan: A Civil War by Any Other Name](#), [online], April 2014. Source: International Crisis Group [16 07 2017]

<sup>78</sup> ROLANDSEN, Øystein H.: Another civil war in South Sudan..., p. 170.

<sup>79</sup> MESFIN: [The Regionalization of the South Sudanese Crisis](#), Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> NEWBERY, Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> AWOLICH, Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> [Exclusive: Ugandan troops to return to South Sudan](#), [online], 14 06 2017. Source: South Sudan News Agency [01 09 2017]



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‘protection to vital installations.’ However, Katharina Newbery stated, despite the military influence of Ethiopia and the economic influence of Kenya, that ‘Juba will always rely on Kampala.’<sup>83</sup>

### *Other actors*

It was not only neighbouring states that had political interests in South Sudan, and in how the conflict evolved. The stakes were also high for the Troika – the US, UK, and Norway, with their critical role behind the CPA.<sup>84</sup> They knew that in a prolonged conflict South Sudan was at a risk of imploding and fragmenting, with a potentially destabilizing impact on the whole region. Their special envoys followed the talks closely and supported the IGAD mediation through every step of the way, also helped to fund the mediation efforts and the Monitoring and Verification Mechanism of IGAD.<sup>85</sup>

The US administration watched with growing anger and impatience as the conflict unfolded, and was the first to impose sanctions against individuals identified as responsible for the worst violence in South Sudan.<sup>86</sup>

China had the potential to play an important role in South Sudan. Chinese companies were the most significant oil producers in the country.<sup>87</sup> The Chinese special envoy engaged actively with the parties to the conflict, and at times in consultation also with his counterparts in the Troika.<sup>88</sup> But the Chinese operate discreetly and it has remained undisclosed what messages had been conveyed to the South Sudanese parties.<sup>89</sup> It was clear, however, that major Chinese commercial interests were at stake if the conflict continued; it would be in China’s interest to help it end.

### **Conclusions**

Competing regional interests and involvement in affairs of South Sudan are a matter of concern for the future of the country and challenge South Sudan’s sovereignty. They serve as milestones for assessing those interactions between South Sudan and IGAD member states that affect its national sovereignty and national interests. Much work is still needed in South Sudan to conceive national interests and to maintain state sovereignty.<sup>90</sup>

However, as some scholars suggest, the best option for South Sudan would be a ‘clean break’ from its leaders and power structures, which means establishing an international transitional administration with the mandate of governing the country and building internal capacity that would allow self-rule.<sup>91</sup> Which is a peace intervention force of soldiers and police; a joint UN–African Union executive administration to provide basic services, oversee financial operations, and appoint ministers and personnel. Others argue that an interim arrangement without them is, at present, unrealistic.<sup>92</sup> However, in any option the need for involving the diplomatic commitment of neighbouring states vital in forming in any transitional arrangement.

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<sup>83</sup> NEWBERY, Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> MUTASA, Charles – KUDRAT, Virk: [Building Peace in South Sudan: Progress, Problems, and Prospects](#). [online], 01 06 2017. Source: Centre for Conflict Resolution [30 08 2017]

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> [U.S. sanctions both sides of South Sudan conflict](#). [online], 06 05 2014. Source: Reuters [30 10 2017]

<sup>87</sup> [China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan](#). [online], 10 08 2017. Source: Crisis Group [30 10 2017]

<sup>88</sup> LARGE, Daniel: China and South Sudan’s Civil War, 2013-2015. In: *African Studies Quarterly*, 2016, Volume 16, Issue 3-4, pp. 35-54.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> WASSARA, p. 637.

<sup>91</sup> KNOPF, Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> JOHNSON, Douglas H., p. 173.



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At last, nation building is a bigger challenge than gaining independence. History, especially in Africa, illustrates that nations that gained independence but failed to build themselves, only reverted to civil wars. Nation-building requires leadership, vision, and the right policies.<sup>93</sup> This is what the peoples of the region should focus on.

<b>Ethiopia</b>	<b>Kenya</b>	<b>Sudan</b>	<b>Uganda</b>	<b>Other actors</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Prevent state collapse in South Sudan: Instability has internal political implication for e.g. influx of refugees and insecurity in the Gambella region</li> <li>* Political influence</li> <li>* Contain the influence of Eritrea</li> <li>* Investment opportunities</li> <li>* Economic incentives: oil and LAPSSET.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Prevent state collapse in South Sudan</li> <li>* Influence in South Sudan through investment and capacity building</li> <li>* Establish trade relations</li> <li>* Economic interests: oil and LAPSSET</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Stability in South Sudan</li> <li>* Economic incentive: access to oil</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Prevent state collapse in South Sudan</li> <li>* Military engagement, not possible to withdraw now.</li> <li>* “Re-hat” troops under multilateral peace operation.</li> <li>* Economic interests: trade and oil</li> <li>* Influence in South Sudan and the region (Seen as personal ambition of President Museveni)</li> <li>* Troops: strategic leverage</li> </ul>	<p><b>US</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* The US’ interests emanated from the fact that the independence of South Sudan was seen as a major US foreign policy success.</li> <li>* The US’ other interests are based on containment of China’s ambitions in the local and regional oil industry</li> </ul> <p><b>China</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* China’s state oil corporations shared the Chinese government’s concern at protecting Chinese workers operating in the conflict-affected areas, and in protecting their oil investments.</li> </ul>

Table 1: The summary of major actors’ role in the South Sudan conflict (edited by the author)<sup>94</sup>

<sup>93</sup> SARWAR, Nadia: [Post-independence South Sudan: an era of hope and challenges](#), Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> The summaries of Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda are from NEWBERY, Ibid.



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