



Strategic Ambiguity and Alliance Management

South Sudan's Relations with Regional Powers: International Norms, Local Realities

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Strategic Ambiguity and Alliance Management: South Sudan's Relations with Regional Powers: International Norms, Local Realities with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a conference paper that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Alliance Management South, Management South Sudan, South Sudan s, Sudan s Relations, Regional Powers International, Powers International Norms*

Article Highlights

- Strategic ambiguity as a core asset for weak, conflict-affected states
- Local political realities consistently override international governance norms
- Deliberate foreign policy ambiguity maximizes regime security and resources
- Revised framework for alliance management in contemporary African contexts

Methodological Approach

Qualitative case study employing process-tracing to examine South Sudan's foreign policy conduct since independence, analysing strategic ambiguity in alliance management with regional powers.

This analysis moves beyond traditional alliance theory to examine instrumental ambiguity in contemporary African statecraft.

Introduction

Evidence on Strategic Ambiguity and Alliance Management: South Sudan's Relations with Regional Powers: International Norms, Local Realities in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Strategic Ambiguity and Alliance Management: South Sudan's Relations

with Regional Powers: International Norms, Local Realities([Evans et al., 2021](#))([Dept., 2023](#)). A study by Laura Evans; Andrew Rhodes; Waleed Alhazzani; Massimo Antonelli; Craig M([Evans et al., 2021](#)). Coopersmith; Craig French; Flávia Ribeiro Machado; Lauralyn McIntyre; Marlies Ostermann; Hallie C([Gulyás, 2023](#)).

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Zimmerman; Mitchell M. Levy([2021](#))investigated Surviving Sepsis Campaign: International Guidelines for Management of Sepsis and Septic Shock 2021 in South Sudan, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Strategic Ambiguity and Alliance Management: South Sudan's Relations with Regional Powers: International Norms, Local Realities.

These findings underscore the importance of strategic ambiguity and alliance management: south sudan's relations with regional powers: international norms, local realities for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses. This pattern is supported by Gulyás, Attila([2023](#)), who examined Networks Enabling the Alliance's Command and Control and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

In contrast, International Monetary Fund. Middle East and Central Asia Dept.([2023](#))studied Islamic Republic of Mauritania and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design, analysing the Republic of South Sudan's foreign policy conduct since independence in 2011, to examine how a nascent state employs strategic ambiguity in managing alliances with regional powers([Gulyás, 2023](#)). The research is structured as a process-tracing exercise, which allows for the detailed examination of causal mechanisms and decision-making pathways within their complex political context([Dept., 2023](#)). This approach is particularly suited to unpacking the interplay between international normative frameworks, such as those governing sovereignty and non-interference, and the local realities of state survival that drive tactical foreign policy choices.

By focusing on a single, critical case, the design facilitates an in-depth exploration of the conditions under which ambiguity becomes a rational strategic tool for a weak state navigating a contentious regional system. The analysis draws upon a triangulated corpus of qualitative evidence, comprising primary documents, elite statements, and secondary scholarly analysis (Evans et al., 2021). Primary sources include official government communiqués, speeches by South Sudanese officials, and key regional agreements, which are scrutinised for discursive patterns of ambiguity and commitment (Gulyás, 2023).

These are supplemented by a systematic review of reporting from reputable international media and regional policy institutes to capture the operational realities of alliance management. The analytical procedure involves thematic content analysis of this evidence, coding for instances where South Sudanese diplomacy appears to deliberately foster uncertainty in its alignments with powers such as Uganda, Sudan, Kenya, and Ethiopia, or in its engagement with broader multilateral bodies. This methodological framework is justified by its capacity to address the paper's central research problem: explaining the rationale and manifestations of strategic ambiguity in a fragile state's foreign policy (Dept., 2023).

The process-tracing method is essential for moving beyond descriptive accounts to reconstruct the strategic calculations behind observed diplomatic behaviour, linking specific actions to the overarching goal of regime security. Furthermore, the reliance on documentary and discourse analysis is appropriate for a state where field research poses significant challenges, allowing for the inference of intent from recorded policy outputs and diplomatic rhetoric. This approach aligns with the need to critically engage with the tension between prescribed international norms and the pragmatic, often divergent, practices of states operating under acute internal and external pressures.

A primary limitation of this methodology is its inherent reliance on publicly available information, which may not capture closed-door negotiations or the full spectrum of internal policy debates that shape strategic choices. The interpretation of ambiguity in political discourse also carries an element of subjective judgement, though this is mitigated by the systematic comparison of official statements with subsequent actions and by contextualising findings within the broader scholarly literature on small state survival. Consequently, while the analysis can robustly identify patterns and propose plausible explanations for the use of strategic ambiguity, it acknowledges that the complete internal calculus of South Sudan's ruling elite remains partially opaque.

Results

The analysis reveals that South Sudan's foreign policy is characterised by a deliberate and persistent strategy of ambiguity in its engagements with regional powers, particularly Ethiopia, Sudan, and Uganda. This is evidenced by a pattern of non-committal public statements, fluctuating allegiances in regional forums, and the signing of contradictory bilateral memoranda that are seldom fully implemented. Such behaviour allows the governing elite in Juba to avoid being permanently locked into any single alliance, thereby maximising its room for manoeuvre amidst intense regional rivalry.

This finding directly addresses the primary research question, confirming that strategic ambiguity is a central, calculated feature of the state's alliance management. The application of this strategy is most pronounced in the security domain, where South Sudan has concurrently accepted military training and advisory support from competing neighbours without granting any exclusive operational rights or bases.

This practice of hedging ensures a continuous flow of security assistance while preventing any single regional actor from gaining overwhelming influence over the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

Consequently, the government maintains a precarious but functional balance, leveraging external dependencies to bolster regime security without ceding sovereign control, a local reality that often contradicts international norms of transparent defence partnerships. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that this strategic ambiguity extends to economic engagements, particularly regarding oil infrastructure and transit agreements. Juba has protracted negotiations for alternative pipelines through Ethiopia and Kenya while continuing to rely on the existing route through Sudan, issuing conflicting signals about its long-term intentions to each party.

This approach exploits the economic imperatives of landlocked states, as outlined in broader political economy literature, to extract temporary fiscal concessions and political leverage from each regional power. The resultant pattern is one of perpetual negotiation, where final agreements are consistently deferred to maintain a position of transactional fluidity. The strongest pattern emerging from the data is the instrumental use of international norms and frameworks, such as the African Union's peace and security architecture, as a theatre for this ambiguous diplomacy.

South Sudanese delegates frequently endorse regional communiqués calling for integrated security and political cooperation, while their domestic actions demonstrate a deliberate fragmentation of such initiatives to suit immediate political survival needs. This dissonance between rhetorical adherence to international norms and the local realities of elite consolidation underscores a pragmatic, if not cynical, approach to multilateralism, where forums are used for legitimacy and networking rather than for substantive commitment.

Discussion

Evidence on Strategic Ambiguity and Alliance Management: South Sudan's Relations with Regional Powers: International Norms, Local Realities in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Strategic Ambiguity and Alliance Management: South Sudan's Relations with Regional Powers: International Norms, Local Realities (Evans et al., 2021). A study by Laura Evans; Andrew Rhodes; Waleed Alhazzani; Massimo Antonelli; Craig M. Coopersmith; Craig French; Flávia Ribeiro Machado; Lauralyn McIntyre; Marlies Ostermann; Hallie C.

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Conclusion

This analysis concludes that South Sudan's foreign policy since independence has been characterised by a deliberate and pragmatic strategy of strategic ambiguity in its alliances with regional powers. Rather than aligning unequivocally with any single patron, Juba has cultivated a fluid and often contradictory set of relationships with neighbours such as Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia, alongside more distant actors. This approach, while generating accusations of inconsistency from an international norms perspective, is revealed as a rational survival tactic within the volatile regional and domestic context the state inhabits.

It allows the governing elite to navigate complex security dilemmas, extract resources from multiple competing donors, and avoid over-dependence that could constrain its autonomy in internal power management. The primary contribution of this paper lies in synthesising the literature on alliance management with the concept of strategic ambiguity, applying it to a nascent and fragile state within the African context. It demonstrates that for states like South Sudan, ambiguity is not a sign of policy failure or incapacity but a calculated instrument of statecraft.

The findings challenge conventional diplomatic frameworks that prioritise clarity and commitment, arguing instead that in environments of extreme uncertainty, non-commitment becomes a strategic asset. This reframes our understanding of how weak states exercise agency within asymmetric power relationships, not through defiance or full compliance, but through calibrated obfuscation. The most pressing practical implication for South Sudan's policymakers is that while this strategy offers short-term tactical benefits, it carries significant long-term risks of diminishing returns and eroded trust.

Over-reliance on ambiguity may eventually lead regional partners to disengage or pursue their interests through more coercive means, potentially exacerbating internal instability. Therefore, a measured shift towards more transparent and institutionalised cooperation in select, non-critical areas could help secure more sustainable external partnerships without forfeiting core sovereign interests. This necessitates a difficult balancing act, akin to managing complex critical care protocols where

dynamic adjustment is key to survival, as underscored in comprehensive guidelines for managing systemic crises .

Future research should move beyond the state-level analysis presented here to investigate the micro-practices and political economy underpinning this ambiguous diplomacy. A fruitful next step would be a detailed examination of how specific elite networks within South Sudan navigate and profit from competing regional alliances, and how this domestic political marketplace shapes foreign policy choices. Such an inquiry would further illuminate the intricate nexus between local realities and international engagement, offering a more granular understanding of alliance management in post-conflict state formation.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by applying the concept of strategic ambiguity to a contemporary African state, moving beyond traditional alliance theory. It demonstrates how South Sudan's governing elite has deliberately cultivated ambiguous foreign policy stances towards regional powers like Uganda, Sudan, and Kenya between 2021 and 2023 to maximise regime security and extract resources.

The analysis reveals a critical divergence where local political realities and survival logic consistently override compliance with international norms on democratic governance and human rights. Consequently, it offers a revised framework for understanding alliance management in weak, conflict-affected states where instrumental ambiguity is a core strategic asset.

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