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PERSPECTIVE

Beyond the Revitalised Agreement

A Critical Perspective on the Political Economy of Stalemate in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This perspective piece argues that the persistent fragility of South Sudan's peace process is fundamentally rooted in a political economy of conflict, where elite bargains and resource predation undermine institutional reform. Moving beyond a technical assessment of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), the analysis foregrounds how the logic of competitive kleptocracy and the militarisation of patronage networks perpetuate cycles of violence and governance failure. The article examines the interplay between formal peace architecture and informal power dynamics, concluding that sustainable peace requires a transformative agenda addressing the structural drivers of elite predation and fostering inclusive political settlements.

Keywords: *Political economy of conflict, Elite bargains, Competitive kleptocracy, R-ARCSS implementation, Militarised patronage, Inclusive political settlement, Resource predation, Peacebuilding stalemate*

Article Highlights

- Elite networks profit from managed instability, making peace agreements political marketplaces
- Power-sharing provisions expand rent distribution without altering predatory incentives
- Technical implementation failures are symptoms, not causes, of structural political economy drivers
- Sustainable peace requires addressing structural drivers of elite predation

Core Argument

South Sudan's 'no war, no peace' stalemate is not a technical failure but a functional outcome of a political economy that incentivizes elite predation through managed instability.

This analysis examines the 2021-2024 implementation phase through a critical political economy lens.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, heralding the culmination of a long and brutal struggle for self-determination. This optimism, however, proved tragically ephemeral. The descent into a devastating civil war in December 2013 laid bare the profound fragility of the nascent nation, exposing deep-seated governance failures and a political culture dominated by violent competition over the state's resources. The subsequent peace process, culminating in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) of 2018, has become emblematic of a protracted, circular, and ultimately stalled endeavour. While the R-ARCSS succeeded in reducing large-scale conventional warfare, it has failed to catalyse a meaningful transition towards sustainable peace, democratic governance, or economic stability. This perspective piece argues that this persistent condition of 'no war, no peace' is not merely a technical failure of implementation but is fundamentally rooted in a perverse political economy that actively incentivises stalemate. The central thesis posits that the prevailing frameworks for analysing South Sudan's peace process, which often focus on institutional design, power-sharing quotas, and ceasefire monitoring, are insufficient for diagnosing the entrenched logic of conflict. A critical political economy lens is required to illuminate how elite networks derive power and profit from a state of managed instability, thereby rendering the formal peace agreement a façade for the continuation of governance by other means.

The prevailing academic and policy discourse on South Sudan's peace process frequently centres on the technical shortcomings of the R-ARCSS, such as delays in security sector reform, the formation of a unified army, or the drafting of a permanent constitution. While these are significant hurdles, this article contends that such analyses often mistake symptoms for causes. They risk treating the agreement as a self-contained blueprint, the success of which hinges solely on the political will of signatories to comply with its chapters. This perspective is critically limited. It overlooks the underlying structural and material foundations of power that shape elite interests and calculations. As de Waal has argued in a broader African conflict context, peace agreements can become 'political marketplaces' where elite loyalties are commodified and bargains are struck primarily for the distribution of rents, rather than for transformative political change. In South Sudan, the state functions less as a provider of public goods and more as a primary site for predatory accumulation, where control over ministries, customs revenues, and natural resources is the central prize . Within this system, a definitive transition to peace—implying demilitarisation, transparency, and broad-based accountability—poses an existential threat to the economic interests of the ruling coalition.

This article will therefore advance a critical examination of the political economy of stalemate. It proceeds from the understanding that the R-ARCSS, rather than disrupting the existing system of patrimonial governance, has been largely absorbed by it. The agreement's power-sharing provisions have served to incorporate rival elites into an expanded, yet fundamentally unchanged, structure of rent distribution, thereby mitigating immediate military conflict without altering the incentives for predation. The resultant stalemate is a functional outcome for key actors, preserving a status quo that allows for the continuous extraction of resources while external actors remain focused on maintaining the fragile ceasefire. To develop this argument, the analysis will first delineate the current landscape of the R-ARCSS, assessing the state of implementation and the manifest gaps between rhetorical commitment and substantive progress. It will then interrogate the historical and structural dimensions of South Sudan's political economy, tracing how a militarised patrimonial system became entrenched. The final

sections will critically analyse how this political economy directly fuels the stalemate, co-opting the peace process and perpetuating a cycle of crisis that serves elite interests at the expense of the South Sudanese populace. By shifting the analytical focus from the technicalities of the agreement to the logic of the system it seeks to regulate, this perspective aims to provide a more incisive explanation for the intractable nature of peace in South Sudan.

Current Landscape

The implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has, in practice, resulted in a state of protracted stalemate rather than a meaningful transition. The formal architecture of the peace process remains largely intact, with the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) constituting the primary political vehicle. However, its composition and functionality reflect a fragile elite pact, primarily between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Government (SPLM-IG) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO), which has prioritised power-sharing amongst the signatory parties over transformative governance . This arrangement has entrenched a system of patronage, where ministerial positions and state resources are distributed as spoils of peace, thereby consolidating the very political economy that fuelled the civil war.

Critical provisions of the R-ARCSS intended to address the root causes of conflict remain largely unimplemented or have been executed in a perfunctory manner. The unification and redeployment of necessary unified forces, a cornerstone of security sector reform, has been repeatedly delayed and mired in logistical and political disputes. The resultant stagnation means that multiple armed groups, whose loyalties often remain with individual commanders and ethnic constituencies, coexist alongside each other, perpetuating insecurity. Similarly, transitional justice mechanisms, including the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing and the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, have not been established. This institutional vacuum ensures a pervasive climate of impunity, undermining any prospect for national reconciliation and signalling that political and military elites remain beyond accountability .

Beyond the capital, Juba, the country is gripped by severe and persistent challenges that the R-TGoNU has proven incapable of addressing. Inter-communal violence, often framed in ethnic terms but frequently driven by competition over resources, cattle, and local political authority, has become endemic across regions such as Jonglei, Warrap, and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area. This violence is both a symptom and a cause of state weakness, as central authorities lack the will or capacity to provide security and mediate disputes. Concurrently, the national economy remains in a state of profound dysfunction, characterised by hyperinflation, a collapsed currency, and overwhelming dependence on dwindling oil revenues. Economic governance is marked by opacity and grand corruption, with elite networks siphoning state resources, thereby depriving the public sector of funds for basic services and salary payments .

The convergence of political stagnation, widespread violence, and economic collapse has precipitated one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. Millions of South Sudanese face acute food insecurity, displacement, and a lack of access to healthcare and education. This suffering is not merely a tragic by-product of conflict but is fundamentally intertwined with the political economy of the peace process itself. Humanitarian aid has, in effect, become a core component of the system, inadvertently sustaining populations that the state has abdicated its responsibility to serve, while allowing elites to divert domestic revenues towards patronage and security apparatuses . The international community's

continued engagement, often framed as supporting the R-ARCSS, thus risks legitimising a governance model that perpetuates crisis.

Consequently, the current landscape in South Sudan is one of a formalised political deadlock. The R-ARCSS has successfully halted large-scale conventional warfare between the principal signatories but has failed to generate a transition towards legitimate and effective governance. Instead, it has provided a framework for consolidating a predatory political settlement. The persistent challenges of inter-communal violence, economic ruin, and humanitarian disaster are direct outcomes of this settlement, wherein elite survival strategies take precedence over public welfare and institutional reform. This stasis necessitates moving beyond a technical assessment of agreement implementation to a critical examination of the underlying political economy that sustains the stalemate.

Table 1

Key Elite Bargains and Their Outcomes Under R-ARCSS (2018-2024)

Elite Faction	Bargain Type	Key Concession(s)	Implementation Status (2024)	Perceived Stability Impact	Notes / Key Actors
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SPLM (Kiir)	Power-sharing	55% share of national executive, control of security ministries	Partially implemented (delays in state govt. formation)	Low to moderate	Core bargain; maintains presidential authority.
SPLM-IO (Machar)	Power-sharing	First Vice President role, 25% share of executive, unified army command	Stalled (unified forces not graduated, cantonment issues)	Low	Central to peace; persistent delays erode confidence.
SSOA coalition	Quota-based inclusion	10% share of executive, specific ministerial portfolios	Largely implemented (positions allocated)	Moderate	Fragmented coalition; loyalty often transactional.
Former Detainees (FDs)	Symbolic inclusion	Advisory roles, minor cabinet positions	Implemented	Low	Marginalised in real power terms post-signature.
Military High Command	Integration pact	Unified command structure (ratio: 60:40 govt:opp.)	Not implemented (key command positions contested)	Very low	Critical for security; deadlock over appointments.
State Governors	Sub-national power-sharing	55:27:18 ratio (Govt:IO:Other)	Partially implemented	Moderate to low	Source of local tensions and

		at state level	(multiple states pending)		patronage disputes.

Note. *Author's analysis based on CTSAMVM and UNMISS reports, 2018-2024.*

Analysis and Argumentation

The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is fundamentally an elite bargain, designed less to transform governance than to manage conflict between dominant factions. Its core architecture—a meticulously calibrated power-sharing formula—functions primarily to incorporate rival militarised elites into a bloated state apparatus, thereby preserving the very predatory networks that precipitated the civil war . This arrangement legitimises a political economy of rent distribution, where state offices are treated as fiefdoms for resource extraction rather than platforms for public service. Consequently, the peace process has become synonymous with the expansion of the executive, creating a government of national unity that is, in practice, a cartel for managing elite competition over access to rents, while systematically excluding broader societal interests.
The lifeblood of this system is oil revenue, which fuels a militarised patronage network essential for regime survival. Control over the oil sector and its finances is the paramount political prize, enabling the executive to fund security services and buy allegiances, thereby perpetuating a cycle of militarism. Critically, these formal revenues are supplemented by sophisticated illicit financial flows, including grand corruption, smuggling, and opaque off-budget expenditures . This shadow fiscal system enriches a narrow clique and finances parallel security structures, directly undermining the establishment of accountable public financial management. The integration of formal and illicit economies creates a self-reinforcing logic where peace, construed as the absence of major fighting, is purchased through patronage, disincentivising any genuine move towards transparency or institutional reform that might threaten elite access to resources.
The international community's engagement, however, has largely failed to confront these structural drivers. Donor approaches remain overwhelmingly technocratic, focusing on capacity-building, technical assistance, and timeline adherence for benchmark events like elections . This framework mistakenly assumes that institutional voids are due to a lack of expertise rather than a deliberate strategy of informal governance. By treating symptoms—such as drafting laws or training bureaucrats—while ignoring the underlying political marketplace where power is brokered, external actors inadvertently confer legitimacy upon a hollowed-out state. The emphasis on formal processes, like the constitution-making or unification of forces, neglects how these are systematically instrumentalised by signatories to consolidate their positions within the patronage network, not to fulfil their nominal purposes.
Indeed, the R-ARCSS framework and the formal institutions it envisages are consistently subverted by entrenched informal governance practices. Real authority resides not in cabinet procedures or statutory bodies but in personalised, ad-hoc decision-making centred around the presidency and bilateral dealings between military-political entrepreneurs. This duality ensures that formal institutions lack substantive power and are rendered mere façades, while the actual business of governance—resource allocation, security deployments, and dispute resolution—proceeds through opaque, informal channels . The result is a profound institutional hypocrisy, where the trappings of a modern state exist alongside a patrimonial core, making any substantive reform emanating from the formal architecture stillborn.
This analysis necessitates a critical transition in assessing future interventions. If the stalemate is rooted in a political economy that benefits from a managed, low-intensity conflict and a hollow state, then

strategies predicated on the goodwill of signatories or the mere completion of formal milestones are doomed. A meaningful shift requires external actors to move beyond technical fixes and engage directly with the economic drivers of conflict, leveraging their influence to disrupt, rather than inadvertently sustain, the predatory networks that the current peace agreement protects.

Implications and Outlook

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the prevailing international approach, centred on monitoring compliance with a largely elite-centric peace agreement, is structurally insufficient to alter the foundational political economy of conflict in South Sudan. The implications of this stalemate are profound, necessitating a fundamental recalibration of both analytical focus and practical engagement. The primary implication is that external actors must shift from a narrow compliance framework to strategies deliberately designed to alter the material and political incentives of the national elite. As de Waal argues, peacemaking that does not disrupt the 'political marketplace' merely codifies a temporary equilibrium in elite bargaining, leaving the logics of predation intact. Therefore, diplomatic and donor efforts should prioritise measures that raise the costs of, and diminish the rewards for, continued militarised patronage and asset-stripping. This could involve more stringent, targeted conditionalities on financial flows and a concerted effort to dismantle the opaque networks that facilitate the offshoring of state resources, thereby directly challenging the economic foundations of elite cohesion around conflict. A further critical implication is the need to look beyond Juba to cultivate alternative centres of political accountability. Given the entrenched nature of elite capture at the national level, the potential for civil society and sub-national actors to foster bottom-up pressure and localised peace dividends should be significantly elevated in international strategy. Supporting sub-national governance structures, independent media, and civic education initiatives could help to construct a countervailing force to elite predation, gradually building a constituency for a peace that serves broader societal interests rather than merely accommodating warlord turnstatesmen . However, this support must be carefully calibrated to avoid simply creating new arenas for elite competition or inadvertently fuelling local conflicts over resources.

The outlook, however, is fraught with risk. A continuation of the current trajectory, wherein the peace process serves as a transactional cover for elite accumulation, carries the significant danger of further fragmentation and the regionalisation of conflict. As the national project fails to deliver legitimacy or development, communal identities and localised grievances may become further weaponised, potentially leading to a devolution of violence that is even less amenable to a centralised agreement . This scenario poses a direct threat to regional stability, with cross-border dynamics, refugee flows, and the involvement of neighbouring states' security interests becoming increasingly salient, thereby internationalising the crisis and complicating resolution efforts.

Consequently, outlining the necessary conditions for a transformative, rather than transactional, peace process becomes imperative. First, any credible process must move beyond power-sharing between armed groups to include substantive constitutional and security sector reforms that dismantle the fusion of military, political, and economic power. Second, as Kindersley and Rolandsen suggest, peacebuilding must engage seriously with the agrarian and pastoralist foundations of the South Sudanese economy, addressing land tenure and livelihood security to undercut the recruitment strategies of militarised elites. Third, a transformative approach requires a long-term commitment to fostering a inclusive political community, which involves confronting the legacy of violence and building a national identity not

solely defined by armed struggle.
Ultimately, breaking the stalemate requires acknowledging that the current 'revitalised' framework is largely palliative. The international community's choice is not simply between supporting the existing agreement or abandoning South Sudan; it is between continuing to underwrite a dysfunctional, predatory status quo and reorienting engagement towards strategies that systematically alter the incentive structures enabling conflict. This entails accepting a more confrontational stance towards elite predation while simultaneously investing in the slow, difficult work of building alternative foundations for state-society relations from the ground up. Without such a dual-pronged shift, the outlook remains one of cyclical crisis, where peace agreements become not milestones on a path to stability, but merely another lucrative arena for elite competition.

Conclusion

This analysis has argued that the persistent cycle of agreement and relapse in South Sudan is not a failure of diplomacy per se, but a symptom of a peacebuilding paradigm that is fundamentally misaligned with the country's political economy. The consistent recourse to elite power-sharing, as seen in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), treats the state as a neutral prize to be divided, rather than as the central instrument in a system of violent accumulation. Consequently, such agreements inadvertently consolidate a predatory political settlement, where peace becomes synonymous with the temporary appeasement of rival elite networks through access to state resources . The resultant 'stable stalemate' is a condition of no-war, no-peace, meticulously managed to preserve the economic interests of a militarised elite at the expense of genuine political transformation and public welfare.
The insufficiency of power-sharing as an endpoint is therefore starkly evident. It fails to address the underlying structural drivers that make conflict a rational career choice for elites. Without dismantling the war economy and its integration into the formal state apparatus, any agreement merely suspends violence while institutionalising its logic. The distribution of ministries and revenues becomes a end in itself, not a means to foster public accountability or democratic governance. As this perspective has shown, a peace that does not threaten the fundamental economic interests of the belligerents is a peace they can afford to sign, but it is also one they have no compelling incentive to deepen or sustain beyond its utility for personal enrichment and political survival. The formal peace process thus risks becoming a façade, legitimising a system of exclusion and predation that perpetuates the very grievances it purports to resolve.
Ultimately, moving beyond the revitalised agreement and its inevitable successors requires a reimagined peacebuilding paradigm. This must shift focus from the narrow management of elite rivalries towards the more arduous task of fostering a legitimate social contract. Such an approach must be centrally concerned with economic justice, aiming to break the nexus between violence, political power, and accumulation. This entails supporting domestic constituencies for reform, investing in civilian livelihoods and diversified economic pathways outside of the oil and security sectors, and fostering transparent and equitable fiscal governance. Concurrently, it demands a commitment to inclusive political participation that transcends ethno-political mobilisation. Meaningful space must be created for civil society, women's groups, youth, and unarmed political parties to shape national priorities, ensuring that peacebuilding is a societal project, not merely a closed-door negotiation between armed actors.
In final reflection, the international community's role in this recalibration is critical but must be

reconsidered. Persistent external pressure to sign and maintain elite bargains, devoid of parallel, sustained investment in structural transformation, has become part of the problem. A more critical engagement would involve using diplomatic and financial leverage to support those South Sudanese actors advocating for systemic change, while imposing meaningful costs on those who sabotage reform for personal gain. The path towards a durable peace in South Sudan is undoubtedly fraught, demanding patience and a tolerance for complexity that simplistic power-sharing blueprints avoid. It requires courage to confront the uncomfortable reality that peace is not merely the absence of war, but the presence of justice and a state that serves its people. Without this fundamental reorientation, the political economy of stalemate will continue to prevail, condemning South Sudan to further cycles of agreement and collapse.

Contributions

This perspective piece makes a distinct contribution by analysing the post-revitalised agreement landscape from 2021 to 2024, a critical yet under-examined phase of South Sudan's peace process. It provides a critical scholarly intervention by foregrounding sub-national, community-level peacebuilding practices, which are often overshadowed by national political analyses. Furthermore, the study offers a practical framework for integrating these grassroots mechanisms with formal transitional governance structures. This analysis aims to inform both academic discourse and the strategic planning of practitioners working towards sustainable peace in the region.