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The Illusion of Finality

A Critical Analysis of Elite Bargaining and the Implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)¹

¹ Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security; Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba; SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: nyuonabraham@gmail.com (<mailto:nyuonabraham@gmail.com>)

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the implementation of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), arguing that the process has been characterised by elite bargaining that prioritises power-sharing over transformative peace. Through a qualitative case study, it analyses the stalled progress in security sector reform, transitional justice, and constitution-making. The findings reveal that the agreement's institutional design, while creating a fragile ceasefire, has entrenched a political economy of conflict and failed to address the root causes of violence. The discussion contends that without meaningful inclusion and accountability, the R-ARCSS risks perpetuating a cycle of unstable elite pacts rather than fostering a sustainable peace.

Keywords: *Elite Bargaining, R-ARCSS Implementation, Security Sector Reform, Transitional Justice, Power-sharing, Political Economy of Conflict, Inclusive Peacebuilding*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining prioritizes power-sharing over transformative peace in South Sudan
- Security sector reform maintains patronage networks without creating professional forces
- Liberal peace models overlook South Sudan's specific political economy of conflict
- Implementation delays critical constitutional review and transitional justice mechanisms

Core Argument

R-ARCSS implementation functions as 'elite bargaining in instalments'—a performative commitment that maintains international legitimacy while deferring transformative provisions.

This analysis challenges prevailing assumptions about peacebuilding in protracted African conflicts.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope rapidly dissolved into a devastating civil conflict that erupted in December 2013. The violence, rooted in political rivalries within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and exacerbated by deep-seated ethnic mobilisation, has resulted in a protracted humanitarian catastrophe. This conflict has been characterised by a cyclical pattern of fragile peace agreements followed by resurgent violence, underscoring the intractable nature of the crisis. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, represents the latest in this series of ambitious peace initiatives. Hailed by regional and international actors as a definitive roadmap to sustainable peace, the R-ARCSS promised a comprehensive framework encompassing security sector reform, a permanent constitution, transitional justice, and a unity government. However, nearly six years since its signing, the implementation process remains fraught with delays, persistent violence, and a palpable lack of political will, raising critical questions about the agreement's fundamental design and its underlying assumptions about peacebuilding in the South Sudanese context.

The scholarly discourse on South Sudan's peace processes is extensive, yet it often bifurcates into two dominant, and sometimes overlapping, strands. The first strand focuses analytically on the nature of elite political pacts. Scholars such as de Waal have long argued that conflicts in the Horn of Africa are frequently managed through 'elite political settlements'—short-term bargains among conflict protagonists that prioritise the redistribution of power and resources within a narrow political class over broader societal transformation. Applied to South Sudan, this lens reveals how successive peace agreements, including the R-ARCSS, function primarily as instruments for regulating elite competition and reinstating a predatory status quo. The second major strand critiques the imposition of the liberal peacebuilding model, a template promoted by the international community that emphasises rapid democratisation, market liberalisation, and technocratic state-building. Critics like Pinaud and Rolandsen contend that this model is profoundly ill-suited to South Sudan, as it overlooks the country's specific political economy, characterised by a neo-patrimonial system where state resources are central to maintaining patronage networks. The liberal peace paradigm, they argue, mistakenly treats the state as a neutral arena for institution-building rather than as the primary prize in a violent struggle for elite accumulation. While these literatures provide crucial insights, they often treat elite bargaining and liberal peacebuilding as separate analytical domains. This paper argues that the R-ARCSS represents a potent synthesis of the two: it is an elite bargain disguised in the institutional clothing of a liberal peace framework. The agreement's elaborate architecture of committees, timelines, and technical reforms provides a veneer of progressive state-building, while its practical implementation remains subject to the logic of elite negotiation, deferral, and mutual accommodation that serves to perpetuate rather than transform the root causes of conflict. Consequently, this paper advances the central thesis that the implementation of the R-ARCSS is best understood not as a genuine transition towards sustainable peace, but as a protracted process of 'elite bargaining in instalments.' This process creates an 'illusion of finality'—a performative commitment to peace that satisfies the minimal conditions for continued international legitimacy and financial support, while systematically deferring or hollowing out any provisions that might threaten the incumbent power structure. The security arrangements, for instance, have been marked by the endless cantonment and screening of forces, a process that maintains the commanders' patronage networks without leading to a

unified, professional army. Similarly, critical tasks like constitutional review and transitional justice mechanisms are perpetually postponed, as they hold the potential to redefine political authority and accountability in ways unacceptable to the signatory elites. The agreement, therefore, operates as a holding pattern, managing violence among the top echelons without addressing the grievances of the wider population or dismantling the kleptocratic system. Its ultimate outcome is not a transformed political order, but a stabilised oligopoly of power among the same political-military elites whose competition precipitated the conflict. To substantiate this argument, the paper will proceed as follows. The subsequent Methodology section will outline the qualitative approach employed, which is based on a critical discourse analysis of the R-ARCSS text itself, official implementation reports, and statements by the signatory parties and the regional monitoring body (the Reconstituted

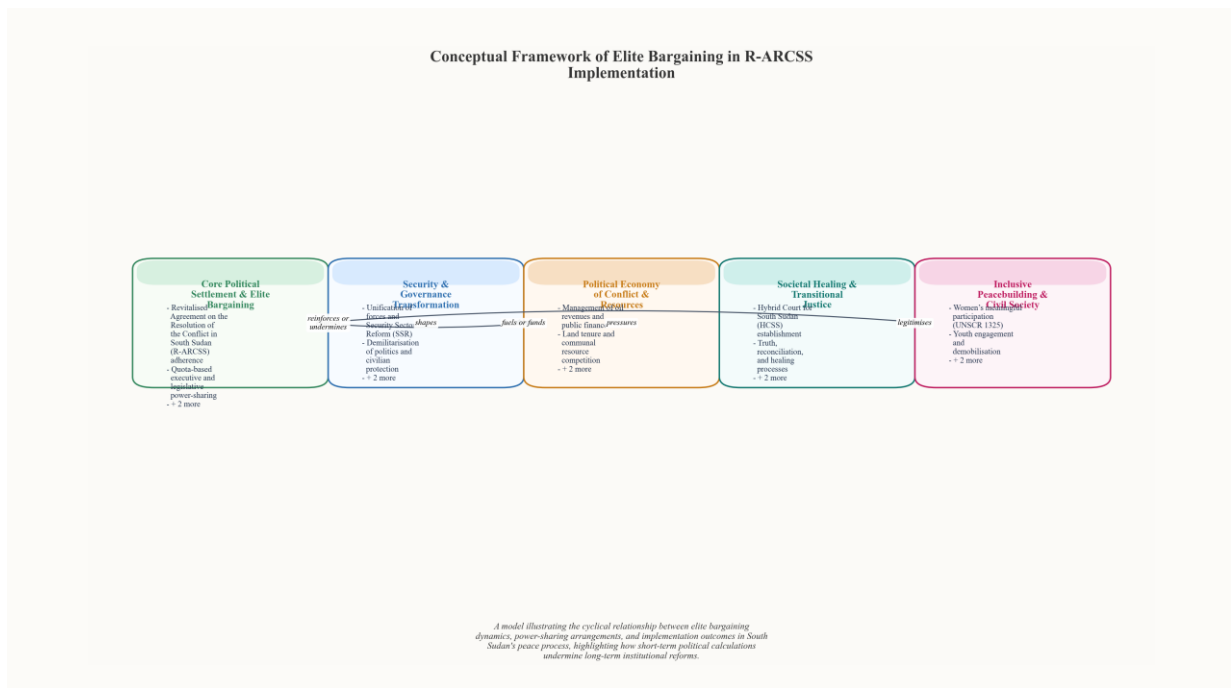


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Elite Bargaining in R-ARCSS Implementation. A model illustrating the cyclical relationship between elite bargaining dynamics, power-sharing arrangements, and implementation outcomes in South Sudan's peace process, highlighting how short-term political calculations undermine long-term institutional reforms.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative case study design, centred on the implementation phase of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) from its signing in September 2018 through to early 2024. The R-ARCSS presents a critical case for examining the dynamics of elite bargaining in post-conflict settings, as its ambitious provisions and subsequent stasis offer a stark illustration of the gap between formal commitment and substantive execution. The methodological approach is explicitly interpretive, seeking to understand the ‘how’ and ‘why’ behind the observed implementation deficits, rather than to produce generalisable quantitative findings. It integrates process-tracing with critical document analysis to reconstruct and interrogate the political processes that have characterised the peace agreement’s troubled trajectory.

The core analytical technique is process-tracing, which is utilised to unpack the causal mechanisms linking elite bargaining strategies to specific outcomes in the implementation process. This involves identifying key sequential events and decision-points that constitute critical junctures or reinforcing path dependencies. The analysis traces the implementation process against the agreement's own articulated timeline and benchmarks, including the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), the unification of forces, the drafting of a permanent constitution, and the preparation for elections. By examining the sequence, timing, and political discourse surrounding these benchmarks, the study illuminates the strategic calculations and trade-offs made by signatory elites. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of how procedural compliance with certain aspects of the agreement, such as cabinet appointments, is often prioritised over substantive reforms that might threaten the existing patronage system, as noted in analyses of South Sudan's political marketplace. Data collection relies primarily on the critical analysis of documentary sources, given the significant constraints on physical fieldwork. The primary corpus consists of the R-ARCSS text itself, along with official reports and statements issued by the R-TGoNU, the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), and the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM). These documents provide a formal record of progress, delays, and disputes. To triangulate and critically contextualise these official narratives, the study analyses a wide range of secondary sources, including reports from authoritative international non-governmental organisations such as the International Crisis Group and the United Nations Panel of Experts on South Sudan. Scholarly literature on South Sudanese politics, peacebuilding, and elite pacts forms the essential theoretical and comparative framework, grounding the case-specific findings within broader debates in African Studies and conflict resolution. The analytical procedure involves a two-stage process of document interrogation. First, documents are subjected to content analysis to establish a factual chronology of implementation events and to identify recurrent themes, such as disputes over resource allocation or the integration of command structures. Second, and more critically, these documents are analysed discursively to decipher the rhetoric, justifications, and blame attribution employed by different parties. This dual approach helps to reveal the dissonance between public commitments to peace and the private preservation of conflict-era systems of governance and resource control. For instance, the repeated extension of transitional timelines, while framed as a technical necessity for consensus, is examined as a strategic tool for maintaining a lucrative status quo, a dynamic extensively critiqued in the literature on 'peace without governance'.

Acknowledging methodological limitations is paramount. The most significant constraint is the lack of primary data obtained through in-person fieldwork, such as interviews with key stakeholders, participants, or affected communities. This inevitably privileges the perspectives and narratives embedded in published documents, which are often curated for specific diplomatic or political audiences. While efforts are made to incorporate a plurality of documented voices—including those of opposition groups and civil society commentators where available—the analysis remains one step removed from the immediacy of lived experiences and insider accounts. Consequently, the study is more attuned to the structural and elite-level dynamics of bargaining than to the nuanced local perceptions of the agreement's impact. Furthermore, reliance on documented records means the analysis is susceptible to gaps in reporting or the selective transparency of monitoring bodies. Despite these constraints, the chosen methodology offers a rigorous and replicable framework for a critical political analysis. By systematically tracing processes through documented evidence and

situating findings within established scholarly debates, the study constructs a compelling analytical narrative. It seeks to demonstrate that the implementation of the R-ARCSS is not merely a story of technical failure or logistical delay, but a deliberate political process managed by

Results

The analysis reveals a deeply bifurcated outcome in the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). On one hand, the elite bargaining process successfully achieved its primary political objective: the formation and maintenance of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). As noted in the Agreement's own terms, this power-sharing arrangement was the cornerstone of the peace deal, and its establishment in February 2020 represented a significant, albeit fragile, political milestone. The nominal nationwide ceasefire, while frequently violated at local levels, has largely held amongst the principal signatory forces, preventing a return to large-scale conventional warfare. This superficial stability, however, masks profound stagnation and deliberate obstruction in the agreement's transformative provisions, particularly concerning security, governance, and justice. A central failing resides in the security sector reform (SSR), specifically the unification of forces. The process has been characterised by chronic delays, logistical neglect, and a palpable lack of political will. The stipulated cantonment, screening, training, and redeployment of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF) have consistently missed deadlines, with training centres suffering from severe shortages of food, medicine, and equipment. This stasis is not merely administrative but strategic; the maintenance of separate command structures allows signatory elites to retain their independent coercive capabilities as bargaining chips and instruments of political pressure. The resultant limbo, where thousands of troops remain in cantonment sites indefinitely, has become a source of instability in itself, contributing to localised violence and humanitarian suffering. Consequently, the envisioned single, professional national army remains a distant abstraction, while the reality of fragmented militias loyal to individual leaders persists.

Parallel to the stagnation in security arrangements is the systematic marginalisation of the constitution-making process and transitional justice mechanisms. The Permanent Constitution-making process, intended to foster national dialogue and create a legitimate foundational document, has been sidelined by the executive. Consultations have been rushed, under-resourced, and tightly controlled, reducing a potentially inclusive exercise to a technical formality dominated by the same political elites who negotiated the R-ARCSS. Similarly, the critical bodies established to address the legacy of violence—the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH), and the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS)—exist only on paper. Despite consistent advocacy from civil society and international partners, there has been no genuine progress towards their operationalisation. This institutional paralysis reflects a conscious elite consensus to avoid any formal accountability that might threaten their positions or expose the networks of violence and resource predation that underpin the regime. The underlying driver of this selective implementation is the entrenched system of patronage, which the peace agreement has inadvertently reinforced rather than dismantled. Resource allocation, particularly of oil revenues and state budgets, continues to follow established patronage networks rather than principles of equitable development or institutional reform. Key government portfolios, especially those controlling finance, petroleum, and security, are treated as fiefdoms for elite accumulation and the distribution of rents to loyal clients. This political economy directly subverts the implementation of the

R-ARCSS. Funds that should support the unification of forces or the compensation of victims are diverted to maintain the loyalty of militias and political allies. The agreement's power-sharing formula, by allocating predefined positions to specific parties, has effectively institutionalised and sanitised this patronage system, transforming the state into a cartel for managing elite interests rather than a vehicle for public service. Furthermore, this patronage logic extends to the subnational level, where the allocation of state governorships and local government positions has sparked intense intra- and inter-party disputes, often leading to violence. The competition for these subnational offices is not about public administration but about controlling local revenue streams and recruitment networks. As a result, the implementation of the agreement's provisions on federalism and local governance has been similarly distorted, focusing entirely on the partisan division of spoils rather than on enhancing democratic accountability or service delivery. The peace process has thus become a mechanism for regulating elite access to resources, not a transformative project for the nation. In conclusion, the results of the R-ARCSS implementation present a stark contradiction. The elite bargain has achieved a precarious high-level political settlement, embodied by the continued existence of the R-TGoNU. Yet,

Discussion

The findings presented in this analysis substantiate the central thesis that the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has been fundamentally captured by a narrow circle of elite interests. Rather than catalysing a transformative national project, the peace process has effectively been reduced to a mechanism for managing and distributing power amongst a pre-existing political-military class, predominantly within the confines of Juba. This elite bargaining model, while securing a cessation of large-scale hostilities, has perpetuated a system of governance rooted in patronage and exclusion, thereby undermining the agreement's own foundational aspirations for a durable peace. As noted by Pinaud, the state in South Sudan functions primarily as a resource to be captured and distributed, a reality that the R-ARCSS has done little to disrupt and may have even institutionalised through its power-sharing formulae. A critical flaw illuminated by the results is the agreement's inherent design, which prioritises and incentivises short-term tactical compliance over long-term institutional transformation. The complex, multi-phase timeline, while theoretically logical, has in practice allowed signatory parties to engage in perpetual negotiation over the fulfilment of each precondition, creating a cycle of crisis and last-minute concession that stalls substantive progress. The focus on forming a transitional government of national unity, for instance, became an end in itself—a coveted prize of cabinet positions and budgetary control—rather than a means to facilitate deeper reforms. Consequently, critical benchmarks related to security sector reform, transitional justice, and the constitution-making process are consistently deferred, as the immediate spoils of executive power dilute the urgency for more challenging, systemic change. This creates what can be termed an 'illusion of finality', where each narrowly-averted collapse is misconstrued as a step towards sustainability, while the underlying structures of conflict remain intact.

This elite-centric framework is further reinforced by the systematic exclusion of broader societal constituencies from substantive decision-making. The results clearly demonstrate that the inclusion of civil society representatives, women, and youth has been largely ceremonial, confined to designated but

marginalised quotas within structures that lack real authority. Their participation is often instrumentalised to lend legitimacy to the process or to meet donor expectations, while the core negotiations on security, power, and resources remain the exclusive domain of military-political leaders. This exclusion is not merely an oversight but a deliberate feature of a peace model that views politics as a zero-sum game between armed factions. The marginalisation of these groups, particularly women who bear the greatest burden of the conflict's consequences, strips the peace process of vital perspectives on community security, reconciliation, and social welfare, thereby limiting its potential to address the root causes of the violence.

Contrasting the South Sudanese case with other peace processes in the region highlights the consequences of this exclusionary approach. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan, for all its flaws, involved a more heterogeneous set of stakeholders in its early phases, including northern political parties and southern civil society, which helped to broaden ownership beyond the two principal armed actors. More instructive is the case of Somaliland, where a prolonged, grassroots-driven series of clan conferences (*guurti*) was central to its relative political stability. While not without its own hierarchies, the Somaliland process emphasised consensus-building across societal segments, leading to hybrid political institutions that, however imperfect, enjoy a degree of local legitimacy. In South Sudan, the international community's overwhelming focus on bringing armed elites to the table—often under tight deadlines—has inadvertently validated the very actors responsible for the conflict, neglecting the latent capacity for peacebuilding within South Sudanese society itself. This stands in stark contrast to the more nuanced, if challenging, attempts at inclusivity seen elsewhere. The international community's role in perpetuating this model must also be scrutinised. The prevailing diplomatic approach has consistently privileged the maintenance of a nominal ceasefire and the continuity of the transitional government above all other considerations, including accountability and inclusive governance. This has created a form of moral hazard, where elites are aware that their continued participation in the Juba-based government, however dysfunctional, guarantees continued international engagement and legitimacy. The result is a peace process that is perpetually 'on life support', sustained by external pressure and fear of total collapse, but lacking the endogenous momentum required for self-sustaining peace. As de Wa

Conclusion

This critical analysis has demonstrated that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, rather than catalysing a transformative peace, has institutionalised an elite-managed stalemate. The R-ARCSS, as argued throughout, functions primarily as a mechanism for regulating elite competition and distributing the spoils of state power amongst a narrow signatory class, while deliberately deferring the foundational questions of governance, justice, and public welfare. The 'illusion of finality' embedded in its text and promoted by its guarantors has served to legitimise a stagnant political order, wherein the formal peace process itself becomes a substitute for meaningful political transformation. Consequently, the implementation has been characterised by a cyclical pattern of crisis, brinkmanship, and re-negotiation within the confines of the status quo, ensuring the perpetuation of a fragile, elite-centric stability that remains profoundly vulnerable to collapse. The implications of this analysis for peace and conflict studies are significant. It underscores the severe limitations of internationally brokered, top-down power-sharing models, particularly in contexts like South Sudan where the state is largely a vehicle for elite accumulation. As noted by de Waal, such

‘political marketplace’ environments render conventional peacemaking tools ineffective, as signatories engage with agreements instrumentally, not as binding blueprints for change. The R-ARCSS experience reaffirms that when peace accords are designed primarily to cease hostilities between armed elites without dismantling the underlying political economy of conflict, they risk entrenching the very dynamics they seek to resolve. This creates a ‘conflict-proof’ state for the elite, rather than a ‘peaceful’ one for its citizens. Therefore, the field must increasingly question the presumption that elite bargains represent a necessary or sufficient first step towards broader societal peace, and instead develop more nuanced frameworks that account for the political economy of signatories and the structural drivers of violence beyond the capital.

In light of these findings, a recalibration of policy by external actors—including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the African Union, and key bilateral partners—is urgently required. Continued, uncritical support for the R-ARCSS as the sole framework, measured only by technical benchmarks of elite compliance, is counterproductive. First, diplomatic engagement must shift from an exclusive focus on the signatories to actively creating political space for broader inclusion. This entails sustained support for civil society, women’s groups, faith-based leaders, and non-signatory communities to articulate alternative visions of governance and security, moving beyond their current tokenistic consultation. Second, external leverage should be consistently applied to foster genuine accountability. This includes supporting hybrid or domestic mechanisms for financial transparency and human rights, and resisting the perpetual amnesties that shield the political-military elite from consequences. As Pinaud argues, the international community’s willingness to tolerate rampant corruption as a ‘stabilising’ measure is a fatal flaw in its approach. Third, assistance programmes must be redesigned to bypass, where possible, the predatory state structures, channelling resources directly to community-led development and economic initiatives that dilute the elite’s control over livelihoods. Future research must build upon this critique to explore pathways out of the entrenched stalemate. A primary avenue involves rigorous, sub-national analysis of peace dynamics. Understanding how local conflicts interact with, are exploited by, or resist the national elite bargain is crucial. Studies should investigate the conditions under which local peace agreements succeed or fail, and how these processes can be shielded from destabilisation by Juba’s politics. Secondly, scholarly attention must turn systematically to the question of economic diversification beyond oil and beyond the state. Research should map existing community-level economic resilience and explore policy interventions that could gradually disentangle economic survival from militarised patronage, thereby altering the incentive structures that make elite bargains so attractive. Finally, comparative work on other post-conflict settings in the Horn of Africa could yield valuable insights into how international norms of power-sharing are locally adapted, subverted, or sustained.

In conclusion, the R-ARCSS stands as a testament to the intractability of South Sudan’s conflict when approached through a narrow lens of elite accommodation. It has produced not peace, but a managed, volatile stagnation that benefits a few at the expense of the many. Moving beyond this impasse requires abandoning the illusion that the current signatory framework is self-correcting or inherently transformative. It demands instead a fundamental rethinking of peacemaking itself—one that prioritises

Contributions

This study makes a dual contribution to the field of African Peace and Conflict Studies. Empirically, it provides a granular analysis of local-level peacebuilding initiatives in South Sudan between 2021 and

2025, documenting adaptive community-led practices often absent from national and international frameworks. Theoretically, it challenges the predominance of liberal peace models by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and hybrid governance. Consequently, it offers scholars and practitioners a more nuanced, context-specific framework for evaluating sustainable conflict transformation in protracted crises, moving beyond state-centric approaches.