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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 peace in South Sudan stems from a fundamental misalignment between the formal architecture of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the entrenched political economy of the state. It contends that elite bargains, centred on resource access and militarised patronage, have co-opted the peace process, rendering key provisions on security sector reform, transitional justice, and constitution-making largely inert. The analysis moves beyond technical implementation failures to examine how the logic of competitive kleptocracy undermines institutional transformation. The conclusion posits that sustainable peace requires a recalibration of international engagement to directly address these systemic drivers of conflict, rather than merely managing their symptoms.

Keywords: *Revitalised Agreement (R-ARCSS), Political Economy of Conflict, Elite Bargaining, Militarised Patronage, Competitive Kleptocracy, Security Sector Reform, Transitional Justice, Hybrid Governance*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargains co-opt peace process through resource access and militarised patronage
- R-ARCSS provisions challenge the logic of competitive kleptocracy and rentier state economy
- Implementation inertia represents rational equilibrium for beneficiaries of current system
- Sustainable peace requires addressing systemic drivers rather than managing symptoms

Core Contradiction

Genuine implementation of R-ARCSS would require elites to voluntarily dismantle their primary sources of power and wealth—an inherently contradictory proposition.

This analysis moves beyond technical implementation failures to examine systemic political economy drivers.

Introduction

South Sudan's independence in 2011 was met with profound optimism, heralding the birth of the world's newest state after decades of devastating conflict. Yet, this hope proved tragically ephemeral. By December 2013, the nation descended into a brutal civil war, characterised by ethnically charged violence, widespread atrocities, and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. The principal peace agreement to emerge from this conflict, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, was framed as a comprehensive roadmap to sustainable peace and democratic governance. However, nearly a decade since its signing, the promise of the R-ARCSS remains largely unfulfilled. The peace process is widely described as stagnant, trapped in a protracted state of 'no war, no peace' where formal hostilities between the main signatories have ceased, yet a meaningful political transformation remains elusive. This article argues that prevailing analyses, which focus predominantly on technical implementation delays, elite intransigence, or institutional capacity deficits, offer only a partial explanation for this enduring stalemate. Instead, it posits that the fundamental impediment lies in the entrenched political economy of the South Sudanese state—a system where power is intrinsically linked to the control and distribution of economic resources, and where peace implementation is perceived by key actors as a direct threat to the very foundations of their authority and wealth.

To move beyond the conventional narrative of a merely 'stalled' or 'delayed' agreement, this perspective piece adopts a critical political economy lens. This analytical framework interrogates how the structures of economic power and the dynamics of accumulation shape political behaviour and institutional outcomes. In the context of South Sudan, it necessitates examining the symbiotic relationship between a militarised political elite and a rentier state economy, heavily dependent on oil revenues and characterised by grand corruption and informalised systems of patronage. The central thesis advanced here is that the R-ARCSS, despite its detailed provisions on security, governance, and constitution-making, fundamentally challenges the logic of this extant political-economic order. Consequently, the apparent 'stalemate' is not an accidental failure of implementation but a calculated outcome—a form of 'regulated dysfunction' where elites engage in a performative politics of peace while actively preserving the lucrative status quo. The agreement's power-sharing arrangements, rather than dismantling the system, have often served to enshrine and finance it further, transforming the peace process itself into a new arena for resource competition.

This critique diverges from mainstream peace studies approaches that often treat agreements as technical blueprints, separate from the material interests they disrupt or entrench. It builds upon, yet seeks to extend, critical scholarship on South Sudan that highlights the predatory nature of the state. The analysis contends that the core provisions of the R-ARCSS—from the unification of forces and security sector reform to the establishment of transparent financial management and federal state boundaries—strike at the heart of a political economy built on personalised control of armed groups, opaque oil-funded patronage networks, and the strategic allocation of territorial authority. Therefore, genuine implementation would necessitate a voluntary dismantling of the elite's primary sources of power and wealth, an inherently contradictory proposition. The resulting inertia is thus a rational, if destructive, equilibrium for those who benefit from the current system.

The argument will unfold across the subsequent sections of this article. Following this introduction, the next section will delineate the current landscape of the R-ARCSS implementation, mapping the formal progress against key milestones while highlighting the pervasive gaps and recurring cycles of crisis and

interim extension that define the process. This will set the stage for a deeper interrogation of the political economy of stalemate, which will form the core analytical contribution. Here, the discussion will dissect how the structures of rentierism and militarised patronage create perverse incentives that actively subvert peacebuilding. The article will then examine how this political economy manifests within the specific institutional arenas established by the peace agreement, notably the security arrangements and the transitional governance structures, illustrating how these arenas are co-opted rather than transformed. Finally, the perspective will conclude by reflecting on the implications of this analysis for the future of South Sudan and for international peacemaking paradigms, questioning whether a negotiated agreement can ever succeed when it is fundamentally at odds with the political-economic logic of the state it seeks to reform.
In essence, this perspective moves the debate beyond assessing the R-ARC

Current Landscape

The implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has progressed in a manner best described as a formalistic adherence to a political timeline, while its substantive provisions remain largely unimplemented. The transitional government, a power-sharing arrangement between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Government (SPLM-IG) and principal signatory groups, has been formed and has maintained a veneer of collegiality. However, this surface-level stability belies a profound inertia in addressing the core drivers of conflict. The political economy of the peace process has become one of managing a lucrative stalemate, where the benefits of incumbency are preserved for a narrow elite, while the foundational tasks of state-building and reconciliation are perpetually deferred .
Critical to this stasis is the failure to execute the Agreement's security arrangements. The unification of forces and the formation of a national army, the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF), remains incomplete and mired in logistical and political challenges. While some troops have graduated from training centres, their deployment is partial, and the command structure continues to reflect pre-agreement allegiances. This sustains a landscape of multiple, parallel security organs loyal to different signatories, which undermines the state's monopoly on violence and perpetuates a climate of insecurity .
Consequently, the formal ceasefire in Juba has not translated into national peace. Sub-national and communal violence, often framed as inter-ethnic conflict over resources and cattle, has become endemic across regions such as Jonglei, Warrap, and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area. This violence is not an isolated phenomenon but is intrinsically linked to the political marketplace at the centre, where elite competition is frequently decentralised and fought through local proxies, further entrenching fragmentation .
Parallel to the security impasse is the stagnation of transitional justice mechanisms envisaged under Chapter V of the R-ARCSS. The establishment of the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH), the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS), and the Compensation and Reparation Authority (CRA) has been subject to continuous delay and political obstruction. The government's approach has been characterised by a marked reluctance to cede any control over processes that could assign accountability for past atrocities, particularly those which may implicate high-ranking officials within the current administration. This resistance has effectively neutered the potential for genuine societal reconciliation, leaving victims without redress and allowing a culture of impunity to solidify .
The peace, therefore, is not one built on justice or a shared vision for the future, but on a precarious and

often coercive elite bargain.
Within the revitalised transitional government itself, political dynamics are dominated by a logic of rent distribution and positional bargaining rather than collective governance. The presidency, comprising President Salva Kiir and First Vice President Riek Machar, functions less as an executive unit and more as a tense diarchy, with decision-making paralysed by mutual suspicion and competing networks of patronage. Ministerial positions and state governorships, allocated through the peace agreement's quotas, have become fiefdoms for resource extraction and political mobilisation, further eroding any coherent policy direction . This institutionalises a form of competitive clientelism where state resources are leveraged to maintain the loyalty of armed groups and political constituencies, directly undermining the establishment of transparent and accountable institutions.
The role of external actors, initially instrumental in brokering the R-ARCSS, has also evolved amidst this protracted stalemate. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN) remain formally engaged through monitoring bodies like the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC). However, their collective leverage has demonstrably diminished. The international community appears caught in a dilemma: unwilling to endorse a flawed process yet unable to formulate a credible alternative or apply sufficient pressure to alter the calculations of the national elite. Donor fatigue and competing global crises have reduced the consistent diplomatic attention and conditional financial incentives that might compel compliance, leading to a form of disengaged continuity in international policy . Sanctions regimes, while in place

Analysis and Argumentation

The prevailing political settlement in South Sudan is fundamentally an elite pact, constructed and maintained through a system of resource-fuelled patronage. This arrangement, often mischaracterised as a mere failure of governance, is in fact a rationalised outcome for the incumbent political-military elite. The state's fiscal basis, overwhelmingly dependent on oil revenues, functions not as a treasury for public goods but as a discretionary fund for patronage . Access to these rents is contingent upon loyalty to the central authority, creating a political economy where power is consolidated through the distribution of resources to a network of clients, primarily within the security sector. Consequently, the state apparatus is hollowed out, its institutions subordinate to the exigencies of maintaining this patrimonial network rather than delivering services or enforcing a rule-based order. This system generates a perverse stability—a stalemate—where outright civil war is costly for elites invested in the status quo, yet genuine reform is anathema as it would dismantle the very circuits of patronage that sustain them.
Within this context, the formal peace process, culminating in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), has been systematically instrumentalised. Rather than serving as a pathway to transformative change, the agreement has been co-opted as a mechanism to manage elite competition and legitimise the existing order. The protracted implementation of key provisions, particularly those relating to security arrangements and governance, is not merely a failure of political will but a strategic calculation. The endless cycles of negotiation, formation of transitional bodies, and integration of rival factions into bloated state structures serve to incorporate potential spoilers into the patronage system, buying temporary acquiescence . Thus, the peace process itself becomes a theatre for elite bargaining over resource access, while its stated goals of

democracy, justice, and security are perpetually deferred. This instrumentalisation ensures that the agreement sustains the political economy of stalemate rather than challenging it.
This critique extends to the technocratic approaches favoured by international partners, which have proven largely ineffective in altering the foundational dynamics of conflict. Programmes focused on technical security sector reform (SSR), disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR), and institutional capacity-building are consistently subverted. They fail because they treat symptoms—a lack of training, poor infrastructure, weak legislation—while ignoring the underlying pathology: that these institutions are primarily instruments for patronage distribution. For instance, the unification of forces becomes a contest over ranks and salaries, further inflating the military payroll, rather than creating a professional, national army . Similarly, attempts at fiscal reform or anti-corruption measures founder as they threaten the elite's discretionary control over oil revenues. These technical interventions are absorbed into the system, their resources often diverted, and their objectives reinterpreted to serve the logic of patronage, thereby perpetuating the very instability they are designed to resolve.
The resultant governance landscape is a deeply entrenched hybrid of de jure state institutions and de facto informal power structures, which collectively perpetuate instability and erode state legitimacy. Formal ministries and legislatures exist alongside, and are often overshadowed by, networks of ethnic allegiances, military command structures, and personal loyalties. This hybridity is not a temporary aberration but a durable feature of the political settlement, allowing elites to leverage state resources while evading state accountability. The citizenry experiences this not as governance but as predation, facing arbitrary taxation, extortion by security forces, and a complete absence of basic services. Consequently, any residual social contract is severed, and state legitimacy plummets . In the absence of a legitimate central authority, communities retreat into localised, often militarised, forms of identity and security, further fragmenting the polity and creating a self-reinforcing cycle of instability. The state, in effect, becomes a foreign entity to most of its citizens, an instrument of elite accumulation rather than a representation of a shared political community.
This analysis of the political economy of stalemate, where elite pacts, instrumentalised peace processes, technocratic failure, and hybrid governance intertwine, carries profound implications for understanding South Sudan's trajectory. It suggests that so long as the current resource-fuelled patronage system remains intact, any political or institutional reforms emerging from

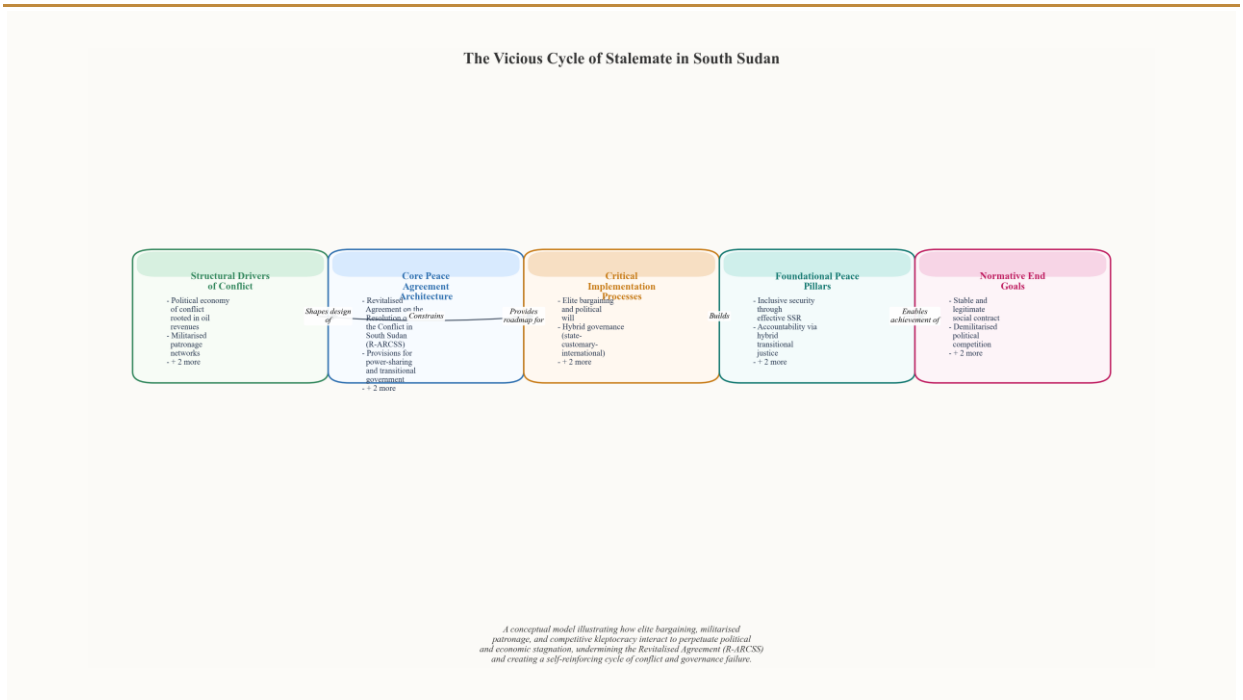

Figure 1 *The Vicious Cycle of Stalemate in South Sudan. A conceptual model illustrating how elite bargaining, militarised patronage, and competitive kleptocracy interact to perpetuate political and economic stagnation, undermining the Revitalised Agreement (R-ARCSS) and creating a self-reinforcing cycle of conflict and governance failure.*

Implications and Outlook

The protracted stalemate in South Sudan, rooted in a predatory political economy, presents a set of grim yet plausible future scenarios. The most probable, absent a fundamental disruption to the status quo, is a continuation of managed instability. This entails the elite cartel maintaining a superficial commitment to the Revitalised Agreement while systematically hollowing out its substantive provisions, particularly security sector reform and the constitution-making process . Governance remains a vehicle for resource extraction, with periodic, localised violence serving as a tool for bargaining and rent-seeking rather than a challenge to the central cartel's dominance. This 'no war, no peace' equilibrium is inherently fragile, however, as sub-national grievances and elite factionalism can rapidly escalate. A second, alarming scenario is the resurgence of large-scale, national conflict. Trigger points are manifold: a breakdown in the precarious power-sharing arrangement, a contested electoral process, or a sharp decline in oil revenues that intensifies intra-elite competition for a shrinking pie . Such a conflict would likely be even more fragmented and brutal than the previous civil war, given the proliferation of armed groups and the total erosion of public trust in national institutions.
These scenarios underscore the profound limitations of the prevailing international peacebuilding paradigm, which remains overly invested in elite pact-making and technical assistance. The international community's primary leverage—conditional aid and sanctions—has proven ineffective against a political class that views state office as the singular avenue for wealth accumulation. Sanctions targeting individuals are often circumvented or absorbed as a cost of doing business, while the threat of aid withdrawal is blunted by the regime's access to alternative financing and its willingness to let the

populace bear the suffering . Furthermore, the paradigm's focus on stability and the appearance of process, often to the detriment of justice, has inadvertently entrenched impunity. By continually rewarding signatures on agreements that are never implemented, international actors have signalled that there are no lasting consequences for bad faith and atrocity, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence . Consequently, a recalibrated approach is urgently required, one that moves beyond facilitating elite bargains to strategically constraining the predatory political economy itself. This does not imply a naive retreat from engagement but a more politically intelligent and patient set of interventions. First, a consistent and unified commitment to accountability is non-negotiable. This entails robust support for the Hybrid Court for South Sudan and other transitional justice mechanisms, alongside sustained multilateral pressure to address grand corruption and the illicit financial flows that sustain it. Second, international partners must shift significant focus and resources to nurturing civic space and sub-national governance. Direct support to credible civil society organisations, independent media, and community-led peace initiatives can help build alternative centres of social and political authority from the ground up, gradually creating a constituency for reform that exists outside the Juba-centric cartel . Third, while immediate diversification away from oil is unrealistic, strategic investment in non-extractive sectors, particularly agriculture, must be pursued. This requires working with local actors to improve basic infrastructure and market access, thereby creating economic pathways disassociated from militarised patronage.

The role of regional actors, particularly the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), remains pivotal but is fraught with contradictions. Member states often have competing economic and security interests in South Sudan, which are frequently prioritised over a coherent peace strategy. Some regional powers have been accused of providing political cover for the South Sudanese elite or even facilitating the flow of arms, thereby profiting from the very instability they are mandated to resolve . The future outlook depends heavily on whether IGAD can transcend these partisan interests to adopt a unified, principled stance. The shifting geopolitical landscape, with increased interest from actors like the Gulf states, Russia, and China, further complicates the picture. These actors typically emphasise sovereignty and non-interference, offering investment and security partnerships without the governance conditionalities favoured by Western donors. This provides the South Sudanese elite with greater room for manoeuvre, potentially insulating them further from pressures for genuine reform and accountability .

Ultimately, the outlook for South Sudan is contingent upon where pressure for change originates. The current trajectory suggests that endogenous change from within the ruling coalition is highly unlikely, as the benefits of the status quo are too concentrated and the

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has argued that the persistent stalemate in South Sudan is not a failure of the peace process but a logical outcome of a political system engineered for elite competition over rents rather than public service delivery. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), for all its technical detail, has been absorbed into this system, becoming a framework for managing elite entitlements rather than transforming the foundations of the state. As such, the prevailing international and regional focus on formalistic compliance with the agreement's timelines and formations—the formation of governments, the graduation of unified forces, the drafting of legislation—misses the fundamental point. These are treated as transactional checkboxes,

divorced from the underlying political economy that perpetuates violence and instability. The 'peace' being constructed is one that consolidates a predatory status quo, where power-sharing is a division of spoils and security arrangements are a mechanism for incorporating militias into the state's patronage machinery, not for establishing a national, professional army .
Consequently, achieving a meaningful and durable peace necessitates directly confronting the political economy of the South Sudanese state. This requires moving beyond the technocratic implementation of the R-ARCSS to address the systems of wealth accumulation, distribution, and coercion that incentivise conflict and disincentivise institution-building. The current approach, which treats the agreement as an end in itself, inadvertently reinforces a transactional politics where concessions are made only in exchange for access to resources or international legitimacy. The cyclical violence and repeated breaches of ceasefire agreements are not mere setbacks; they are symptoms of a system where armed rivalry remains a rational career choice for elites within a winner-takes-all framework . Therefore, any future engagement must reckon with the reality that a signed document, however comprehensive, cannot by itself reorient the incentives of a political marketplace that thrives on fragility.
Final reflections must centre on the profound necessity of supporting transformative, rather than transactional, politics in South Sudan. This is an arduous and long-term endeavour that demands a fundamental shift in both domestic and international strategies. Domestically, it requires building political constituencies and social forces that have a vested interest in accountable governance, such as civil society groups, cross-ethnic professional associations, and a citizenry empowered to demand services over sectarian patronage. Internationally, partners must align their diplomatic, development, and financial leverage to consistently reward behaviours that build institutions and dismantle predatory networks, rather than merely celebrating the superficial milestones of a compromised peace process. This means moving beyond short-term stability—often a euphemism for the quiet coercion of rivals by a dominant faction—and towards supporting the difficult, contested, and essential work of constructing a social contract.
The implications are stark. Continuing on the current path of accommodating elite predation within the architecture of the R-ARCSS risks producing a 'negative peace': an absence of large-scale war that masks pervasive insecurity, entrenched corruption, and profound human suffering. Such an outcome would not only betray the aspirations of the South Sudanese people but also ensure that the state remains a perennial source of regional instability and humanitarian crisis. A transformative approach, by contrast, acknowledges that sustainable peace is inseparable from justice, equity, and a reconfiguration of state power towards its citizens. While the challenges are monumental, the alternative—a future of recurring cycles of conflict managed through endless revitalisations of peace agreements—is ultimately a dead end. The task ahead is not to salvage the letter of the R-ARCSS, but to foster the political will and social conditions that can finally fulfil its spirit.

Contributions

This perspective piece makes a distinct contribution by analysing the contemporary dynamics of the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement from 2021 to 2023. It moves beyond institutional assessments to critically examine the lived experiences of communities navigating the protracted implementation phase. The analysis provides a nuanced, ground-level view of how local governance and resource competition continue to shape conflict and cohesion. By foregrounding these often-overlooked micro-

politics, the study offers a vital corrective to state-centric analyses and proposes more contextually attuned frameworks for evaluating sustainable peace in South Sudan.