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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 predatory political economy, rather than a mere deficit of political will. It analyses how elite bargains, formalised in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), have entrenched a system of rent distribution that actively disincentivises the establishment of a legitimate, functioning state. The article contends that the international community's technocratic focus on timelines and power-sharing has inadvertently reinforced this system, prioritising short-term stability among elites over transformative institutional reform. The conclusion posits that a sustainable peace requires a recalibrated approach addressing the core economic drivers of conflict.

Keywords: *South Sudan peace process, Political economy of conflict, R-ARCSS implementation, Elite bargains, Rentier state, Conflict stalemate, International peacebuilding, Institutional hybridity*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargains formalized in R-ARCSS entrench rent distribution systems
- International technocratic focus reinforces short-term stability over reform
- Stalemate represents strategic space for elite benefit, not transitional failure
- Sustainable peace requires addressing core economic drivers of conflict

Core Argument

South Sudan's peace stalemate is a predictable outcome of a system where elite power depends on controlling a rentier state and maintaining weak institutions.

This analysis moves beyond implementation delays to examine structural incentives perpetuating conflict.

Introduction

The signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018 was heralded as a definitive juncture, promising to steer the world's youngest nation away from a devastating civil war and towards a sustainable peace. Yet, more than half a decade later, the political landscape remains mired in a state of protracted stalemate. The formal peace architecture, painstakingly negotiated under regional and international auspices, stands largely unimplemented, with critical benchmarks—including the unification of forces, the drafting of a permanent constitution, and the conduct of credible elections—perpetually deferred. Conventional analyses within peace and conflict studies often frame this inertia as a problem of 'implementation delays,' attributing it to logistical constraints, technical capacity deficits, or a simple lack of political will. This perspective, however, offers a limited and ultimately superficial diagnosis. It fails to interrogate the underlying structural logics and vested interests that make the current condition of 'no war, no peace' functionally acceptable, and indeed profitable, for the nation's ruling elite. This perspective piece argues that to move beyond the cyclical narrative of delay and revitalisation, one must adopt a critical political economy lens. Such an approach reveals that the stalemate is not merely a failure of process but a predictable outcome of a system where elite power and wealth accumulation are intricately tied to the control of a rentier state and the deliberate maintenance of weak, patrimonial institutions.

The R-ARCSS itself is a product of a specific political economy, designed as a power-sharing arrangement that primarily redistributes offices and resources among competing elite factions rather than transforming the foundational structures of the state. Consequently, the agreement has effectively institutionalised a fragile equilibrium, where signatories are incentivised to maintain the status quo to preserve their access to the spoils of power, while avoiding the risks associated with genuine reform or electoral contestation. The protracted implementation phase, therefore, becomes a strategic space rather than a transitional one—a period where the benefits of state capture can be enjoyed without the accountability that might arise from a fully functional government or a legitimate political mandate. This dynamic perpetuates what has been termed a 'political marketplace' in which loyalties are commodified, and governance is subordinated to the logic of transactional politics and elite bargaining, directly undermining the construction of impersonal, public-oriented institutions. This article contends that the prevailing stalemate in South Sudan is a direct function of elite incentives that are fundamentally misaligned with the goals of substantive peacebuilding and state-building. For the incumbent leadership, a fully implemented peace agreement, culminating in credible elections, poses an existential threat, potentially dismantling the intricate networks of patronage and resource diversion that sustain their authority. Thus, the capture of state institutions—not for the purpose of effective service delivery or rule of law, but for the management of rent distribution and social control—becomes a rational strategy. The resulting 'institutionalisation of instability' ensures that formal processes, from security sector reform to fiscal management, are perpetually incomplete, preserving a system where power is exercised through personal networks rather than through accountable public agencies. In this context, the international community's continued emphasis on technical assistance and adherence to the R-ARCSS timeline, without a concomitant challenge to these deeper political economy drivers, risks becoming an exercise in facilitating 'performance' rather than progress. The following analysis will develop this argument in three stages. The subsequent section, 'Current Landscape,' will delineate the specific manifestations of the stalemate, examining the selective and

tactical implementation of the R-ARCSS that sustains elite cohesion while preventing transformative change. It will then proceed to a deeper interrogation of the ‘Political Economy of Stalemate,’ unpacking the systems of rentier governance, militarised patronage, and the strategic utility of violence that make the present equilibrium advantageous for ruling elites. Finally, the piece will conclude by exploring the ‘Implications for Peacebuilding,’ critiquing the limitations of the current international approach and considering what a reoriented strategy, cognisant of these entrenched political economy realities, might entail. By shifting the analytical focus from the technicalities of agreement implementation to the underlying incentives that shape elite behaviour, this perspective aims to provide a more sober and structurally

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, ossified into a state of protracted stalemate. While the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) provided a veneer of political settlement, the substantive provisions of the peace accord remain largely unimplemented, perpetuating a fragile and volatile status quo. The security sector, intended to be unified and reformed, is characterised by a proliferation of armed groups and the persistent maintenance of parallel command structures by the signatory parties. The critical task of forming a unified national army, the Necessary Unified Forces, has been mired in logistical failures, political obstruction, and a lack of genuine commitment to surrendering partisan military control. Consequently, localised violence and intercommunal conflict continue unabated, often fuelled by political elites, demonstrating that the formal ceasefire in Juba has not translated into human security across the nation. This security vacuum exists alongside profound governance deficits and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. The expansion of the executive and legislature, as mandated by the power-sharing formula, has resulted in a bloated and financially unsustainable government apparatus, prioritising elite accommodation over effective administration. Corruption is endemic, with state institutions routinely instrumentalised for personal and factional gain rather than public service. The humanitarian consequences are severe, with millions facing acute food insecurity, displacement, and a lack of basic services. This suffering is not merely a residual effect of past conflict but is actively reproduced by the political economy of the peace process itself, where the management of aid and resources often follows conflict logics. Furthermore, transitional justice mechanisms, including the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing and the Hybrid Court, have seen negligible progress, reflecting a deliberate reluctance among the political class to address accountability for past atrocities, thereby entrenching a culture of impunity. Economically, the state remains almost entirely dependent on oil revenues, which continue to be the central prize in the political settlement. These revenues are funnelled through opaque networks, sustaining a system of patronage that binds military and political loyalties to the centre. The formal economy is moribund, while informal and illicit economic networks, often intertwined with regional actors and security apparatuses, flourish. This arrangement ensures that elite accumulation is divorced from any need for broader economic productivity or the welfare of the citizenry. The much-discussed diversification of the economy or the development of non-oil revenue streams remains a rhetorical exercise, as the existing oil-fuelled patronage system effectively underpins the current, albeit unstable, political equilibrium.

Internationally, the engagement landscape is increasingly fragmented and marked by pronounced donor fatigue. The initial high-level diplomatic momentum that produced the R-ARCSS has dissipated, replaced by a disjointed and often contradictory set of approaches from regional and international actors. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), pivotal in the agreement's mediation, now exhibits limited leverage and internal divisions, while the African Union's role has been circumscribed. Western donors, frustrated by the lack of progress and pervasive corruption, have reduced direct budget support, channelling funds primarily through humanitarian agencies instead. This shift, while understandable, has further weakened the already tenuous link between the transitional government and any external pressure for reform, allowing national elites to operate with greater autonomy within a shrinking political space. The unified international front necessary to alter the cost-benefit calculations of South Sudan's leadership is conspicuously absent. Collectively, this landscape—defined by unimplemented security reforms, institutionalised governance failures, a predatory oil-based economy, and fragmented external engagement—constitutes more than just a delayed transition. It represents a deliberate and functional stalemate, where the formal peace architecture provides a legitimising cloak for the continuation of a deeply entrenched political economic system. The R-ARCSS, in its current state, has been absorbed into this system, becoming a framework for managing elite competition and resource distribution rather than a genuine blueprint for transformative change. This stasis sets the stage for a critical examination of the underlying structural drivers that perpetuate this condition beyond mere political unwillingness.

Analysis and Argumentation

The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is widely interpreted as a framework for state-building and democratic transition. This analysis contends, however, that its primary function is more accurately understood as a sophisticated pact for elite resource distribution, deliberately eschewing the foundational work of constructing a viable state. The agreement's architecture, centred on a meticulously calibrated power-sharing formula, effectively codifies a ceasefire between the primary belligerent networks by allocating them predefined shares of formal authority. This creates a government of national unity that operates less as an executive body for public service delivery and more as a vehicle for managing access to rents and international legitimacy. The state, in this configuration, is not an entity to be built for the public good but a prize to be divided, with its institutions serving as conduits for patronage rather than instruments of governance. Consequently, the formal government established under the R-ARCSS functions principally as a mechanism for rent management. Key ministries and agencies, particularly those controlling security, finance, and natural resources, are distributed among the signatory parties not to enact coherent policy, but to control revenue streams and distribute patronage to respective clienteles. This system transforms public office into a commercial asset, where the objective is to extract and redistribute resources to maintain the loyalty of armed constituencies and political elites. The result is a hollow executive, paralysed by the competing demands of its constituent parts and fundamentally disinterested in the mundane tasks of administration, rule of law, or public welfare. Governance is reduced to a series of transactional arrangements between elite blocs, perpetually renegotiated behind closed doors, while the formal state apparatus remains dysfunctional and disconnected from the populace. The international community has played a critical, if often unintentional, role in legitimising and sustaining this equilibrium. By treating the signing of the R-ARCSS as the paramount political

achievement and conditioning diplomatic engagement and financial support on its nominal maintenance, external actors have conferred legitimacy upon a governance model designed for stasis. This approach mistakes the presence of a broad-based cabinet for genuine inclusivity and conflates the absence of major warfare with meaningful peace. International diplomacy, focused on maintaining the fragile coalition, often sidelines issues of corruption, accountability, and institutional reform for fear of destabilising the agreement itself. Thus, the peace process becomes self-perpetuating, where the primary goal for external actors is the survival of the agreement, inadvertently insulating the elite pact from the pressures of substantive reform and public accountability. This entrenched system generates powerful perverse incentives that actively militate against genuine political and economic transformation. For incumbent elites, any move towards transparent institutions, a professionalised civil service, or accountable security forces would undermine the very mechanisms of patronage and control that underpin their power. Meaningful reform would dismantle the rent-seeking architecture that the peace agreement institutionalised, threatening the delicate balance of interests. Therefore, maintaining a weak formal state—where institutions are ineffective but the flow of rents remains controlled—becomes a rational strategy for elite preservation. This creates a ‘political economy of stalemate’, where all major signatories have a vested interest in preventing state collapse but an equal disinterest in fostering a capable, democratic state that could challenge their discretionary control over resources. The implications of this analysis are profound. It suggests that the chronic instability in South Sudan is not merely a case of a ‘failed’ peace agreement but is symptomatic of a successfully functioning system of elite accommodation, which is inherently hostile to nation-building. The stalemate is a feature, not a bug, of a political settlement designed to manage conflict among the powerful while excluding the broader citizenry. This critical perspective moves beyond assessing technical implementation delays to interrogate the fundamental nature of the political order the R-ARCSS sustains. It sets the stage for considering the broader ramifications of this stalemate, which entrenches a predatory political economy, fuels localised violence, and perpetuates a humanitarian crisis, all while the formal structures of a peace government remain nominally in place.

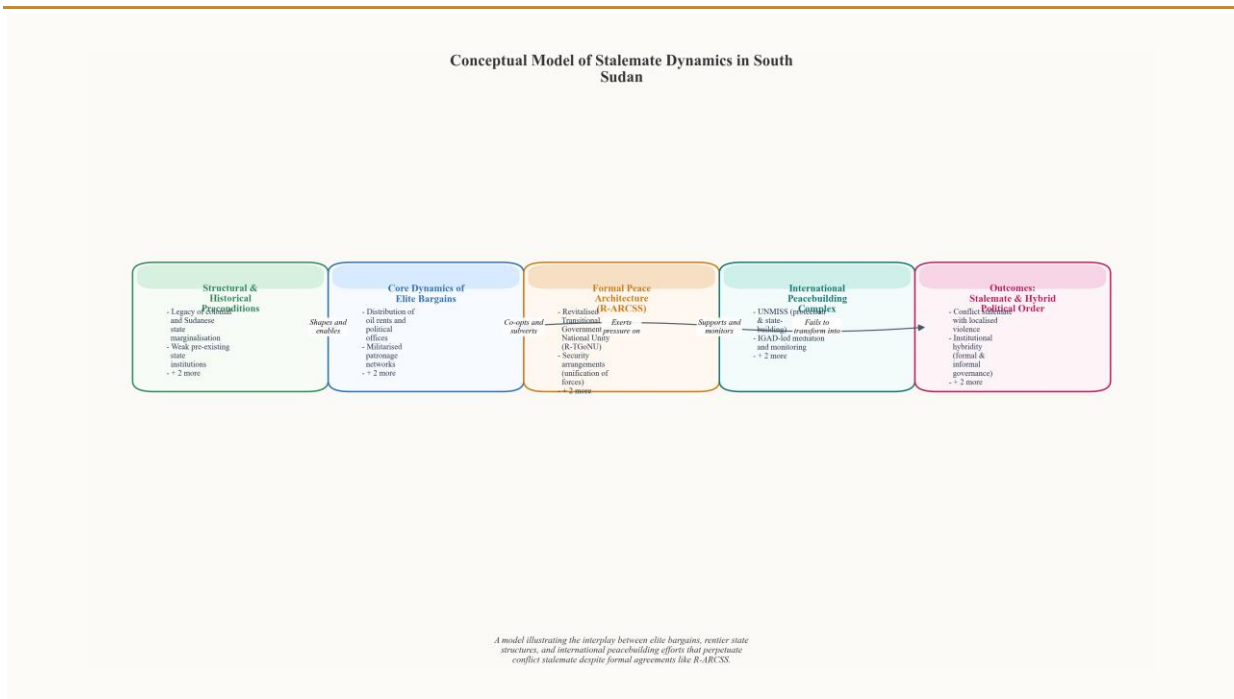


Figure 1 Conceptual Model of Stalemate Dynamics in South Sudan. A model illustrating the interplay between elite bargains, rentier state structures, and international peacebuilding efforts that perpetuate conflict stalemate despite formal agreements like R-ARCSS.

Implications and Outlook

The current political economy of stalemate in South Sudan, characterised by elite collusion within a hybrid governance framework, projects a future of profound uncertainty. The trajectory from here is not linear, but several plausible scenarios can be delineated, each carrying distinct implications for the state and its citizens. The most probable, in the immediate term, is one of managed stagnation, wherein the signatories to the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) maintain a fragile, transactional peace in Juba while effectively postponing meaningful democratic consolidation and service delivery. This scenario perpetuates a form of ‘violent peace’, where the absence of large-scale conflict is mistaken for stability, yet the underlying drivers of fragility remain unaddressed. The risk, however, is that managed stagnation is inherently unstable. It could easily devolve into renewed fragmentation, should the intricate system of patronage become insolvent or should internal rivalries within the ruling coalition escalate beyond the power-sharing cabinet’s capacity to contain them. Such a fragmentation would likely manifest not as a simple return to a binary north-south civil war, but as a more complex, multi-layered conflict involving defecting factions, sub-national grievances, and inter-communal violence, further eroding the very concept of a unified state.

The continuation of this hybrid governance model, where formal institutions are hollowed out by informal elite pacts, poses a grave long-term threat to state legitimacy and social cohesion. When the state is perceived primarily as a cartel for resource distribution among a select few, its legitimacy in the eyes of the populace evaporates. This creates a vacuum filled by sub-national identities and loyalties, accelerating the country’s drift towards a de facto kleptocratic confederation. The social contract is

replaced by a series of exploitative, patrimonial relationships, undermining any collective national project. Consequently, the prospects for building a cohesive civic identity, essential for any functioning nation-state, are severely damaged. The political economy of stalemate does not merely postpone development; it actively manufactures conditions for future conflict by entrenching exclusion and fuelling widespread public disillusionment. Given this analysis, the international community's prevailing approach, which remains overly fixated on top-level political timelines and the technical implementation of the R-ARCSS, requires fundamental recalibration. A more effective strategy would involve a patient, long-term shift in focus towards supporting the foundations of a functional polity, rather than continually reinforcing the very elite bargains that perpetuate crisis. This entails two critical, interlinked priorities. First, deliberate and sustained investment in expanding civic and political space is paramount. International partners should move beyond rhetorical support to actively protect and resource South Sudanese civil society, independent media, and grassroots peacebuilders who articulate alternative visions for governance. Second, engagement must seriously address economic diversification to dilute the destructive 'resource curse'. This involves technical support for non-extractive sectors like agriculture and livestock, but more importantly, diplomatic pressure for transparency and the redirection of oil revenues towards public goods, rather than elite security budgets. The goal is to gradually alter the incentive structures that make violent kleptocracy more profitable than peace for the ruling coalition. Ultimately, while international actors can reshape the context, the most potent pressures for change are likely to be endogenous. The burdens of the stalemate—hyperinflation, rampant insecurity, and the collapse of basic services—are borne overwhelmingly by the population. This has already spurred forms of everyday resistance and localised coping mechanisms. The potential for these pressures to catalyse more organised political demands should not be underestimated. Sub-national authorities, while often co-opted, may also become sites of contention and alternative governance practices, particularly if they face intense local pressure to deliver. Furthermore, a new generation of South Sudanese, increasingly disillusioned with the liberation-era political lexicon, may yet forge new movements that challenge the stagnant political settlement. The future will thus be shaped by the complex interplay between an entrenched elite seeking to preserve its privileges, a frustrated international community, and a weary yet resilient citizenry whose actions may eventually make the current system of stalemate untenable.

Conclusion

This perspective piece has argued that the persistent cycle of conflict and fragile peace in South Sudan is fundamentally rooted in a political economy of elite predation, which formal peace agreements have thus far failed to dismantle. As demonstrated, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), much like its predecessors, has been subsumed by this logic. The agreement's primary function has become the management of elite competition through power-sharing and wealth-sharing arrangements, which effectively institutionalise and legitimise the very system of patrimonial governance that perpetuates instability. Consequently, a technical compliance with the agreement's timelines and formations, while politically expedient for signatories and international guarantors, is a woefully insufficient metric for meaningful peace. Sustainable peacebuilding must therefore move beyond the technocratic implementation of accords to directly confront the underlying structures of an extractive political economy that incentivises conflict and disincentivises public goods provision.

The analysis underscores that the international community's predominant focus on securing elite signatures and maintaining a nominal ceasefire, while overlooking the economic foundations of the state, has been a critical strategic shortcoming. As noted, the peace process has become a 'high-stakes boardroom negotiation' where the dividends of peace are privatised among signatories, entrenching a system where state offices are valued primarily as conduits for rent extraction and patronage distribution. This environment renders genuine reform, such as security sector transformation or transparent resource management, anathema to the ruling coalition's interests. The resultant stalemate is not an absence of politics, but a deliberate political outcome—a 'stable instability' that preserves elite access to resources while externalising the catastrophic costs of this system onto the civilian population through violence, displacement, and impoverishment. Therefore, a reorientation of peacebuilding strategy is imperative. It must aim to alter the fundamental calculus of South Sudan's political elites by reshaping the political and economic incentives that currently make predation more lucrative than peace. This necessitates moving beyond exclusive engagement with Juba-based powerbrokers to deliberately foster alternative centres of social accountability and economic opportunity. Supporting subnational governance structures, civil society organisations, and independent media can help construct a countervailing pressure against unaccountable elite power. Critically, international partners must recalibrate their economic engagements to avoid reinforcing the very systems they seek to change. This involves rigorously ensuring that financial flows, including development aid and oil revenues, are subject to transparent public oversight rather than being funnelled through opaque patronage networks. Ultimately, a sustainable peace in South Sudan will not be brokered solely in luxury hotels in neighbouring capitals. It must be built from the ground up by empowering those constituencies for whom peace offers tangible improvements in security, justice, and livelihoods. This requires a long-term commitment to supporting economic diversification and community-level resilience that exists outside the elite pact. While challenging, such an approach represents the only viable path to breaking the debilitating stalemate. The alternative—a continued cycle of agreements that serve primarily to renew the licence of a predatory political economy—condemns South Sudan to perpetual fragility. The conclusion is inescapable: without a concerted effort to dismantle the architecture of elite predation, the nation's future will remain hostage to the very interests that have profited from its violent past.

Contributions

This perspective piece contributes to the scholarly discourse by offering a critical, contemporary analysis of the peace process in South Sudan, grounded in the political realities of 2021. It moves beyond theoretical frameworks to examine the tangible impediments to the Revitalised Agreement's implementation, focusing on localised conflict dynamics and elite bargaining. The analysis provides a structured evaluation of that year's transitional government performance, identifying specific institutional and security sector challenges. Consequently, it proposes a revised set of criteria for assessing meaningful progress in South Sudan's peacebuilding, arguing for a shift from milestone-based to governance-based benchmarks.