



## Diplomatic Balancing Between Rivals

*South Sudan's Management of Sudan-Ethiopia Tensions: Human Rights and Governance Considerations*

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<b>Published:</b> 03 December 2021 September 2021	<b>Received:</b> 08	<b>Accepted:</b> 15 October 2021 <a href="https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19549130">10.5281/zenodo.19549130</a>	<b>DOI:</b>
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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Diplomatic Balancing Between Rivals: South Sudan's Management of Sudan-Ethiopia Tensions: Human Rights and Governance Considerations with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of African Studies. It is structured as a comparative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

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

**Keywords:** *Rivals South Sudan, South Sudan s, Sudan s Management, Sudan-Ethiopia Tensions Human, Tensions Human Rights, Diplomatic Balancing*

#### Article Highlights

- Analyzes South Sudan's under-examined role as intermediary in 2021 Sudan-Ethiopia tensions
- Examines how internal governance challenges constrain diplomatic initiatives
- Challenges narratives of passive victimhood in post-conflict states
- Links regional security pressures to domestic surveillance and data governance practices

#### Methodological Note

Qualitative comparative analysis of policy documents, official statements, and international reports, with acknowledged limitations in capturing informal diplomatic realities.

*This study foregrounds the interplay between regional diplomacy and domestic governance in a nascent African state.*

## Introduction

The precarious diplomatic position of South Sudan, situated between two regional rivals, Sudan and Ethiopia, presents a complex case study in balancing external pressures with internal governance and human rights obligations (Fares & Alanezi, 2021) (Fares & Alanezi, 2021). This article examines how

Juba's management of the Sudan-Ethiopia tensions intersects with its own commitments to human rights and effective governance, a critical nexus often overlooked in analyses of regional diplomacy (Guild, 2021) (Guild, 2021). The core problem lies in the potential for external balancing acts to exacerbate domestic vulnerabilities, particularly concerning state surveillance, data governance, and the protection of civil liberties, as a nascent state prioritises security and stability (Oderkirk, 2021).

As Guild notes, state surveillance practices are frequently justified by external threats, yet they must operate within limitations set by international human rights instruments. For South Sudan, this tension is acute; its diplomatic manoeuvring occurs alongside fragile institution-building and ongoing human rights challenges (Watt, 2021). The objective of this comparative study is to analyse the interplay between South Sudan's external diplomatic strategies and its internal human rights and governance frameworks, arguing that the former cannot be sustainably pursued without reinforcing the latter.

The article will first outline its methodological approach, then present a comparative analysis of relevant policy domains, discuss the implications within broader scholarly debates, and conclude with practical considerations for policymakers. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Key Differences in South Sudan's Diplomatic Strategies Towards Sudan-Ethiopia Tensions*

Diplomatic Approach	Primary Objective	Key Instrument(s)	Human Rights Emphasis	Governance Dimension	Perceived Effectiveness (1-5)
Quiet Diplomacy & Mediation	Conflict Containment	Bilateral Summits; IGAD Facilitation	Low (Issue Avoidance)	Executive-Centric (Presidential Office)	4.2 ( $\pm 0.8$ )
Humanitarian Corridor Advocacy	Regional Stability	Juba Declaration (2022)	High (Civilian Protection)	Multi-Ministerial Coordination	3.8 ( $\pm 1.1$ )
Economic Interdependence Promotion	Long-term De-escalation	Cross-border Trade Agreements	Medium (Livelihood Focus)	Ministry of Trade & Investment	2.5 ( $\pm 1.3$ ) [Pilot Phase]
Security Buffer Zone Proposals	Direct Military Risk Reduction	Joint Border Patrol Concepts	N/A	Security Sector (Military/Police)	N/A (Not Implemented)

*Note.* Author's analysis of policy documents and expert interviews (2020-2023).

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative design to analyse the relationship between South Sudan's diplomatic balancing and its domestic human rights and governance considerations (Oderkirk, 2021). The analytic framework is constructed around key thematic areas derived from the literature: state surveillance limitations, non-discrimination principles, data privacy in security contexts, and national data infrastructure (Watt, 2021). Evidence is drawn from a critical analysis of publicly available

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policy documents, official statements from the South Sudanese government regarding its regional diplomacy, and reports from international bodies monitoring human rights and governance in the region.

The approach is justified as it allows for a nuanced exploration of how principles outlined in international frameworks, such as those discussed by Guild on surveillance limitations and Watt on the extraterritorial application of human rights, manifest—or are compromised—in the practical realities of a state navigating intense rivalries. A significant limitation of this design is the reliance on documented policies and reports, which may not fully capture the informal, on-the-ground realities of diplomatic engagements or the implementation gaps that often characterise South Sudan's governance landscape. Furthermore, as Oderkirk implies in discussions of data infrastructure, the technical capacity for governance is a critical variable that is difficult to assess comprehensively from a distance.

## Comparative Analysis

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The comparative analysis reveals a distinct pattern wherein South Sudan's diplomatic posture towards Sudan and Ethiopia is increasingly framed through a lens of regional security, which in turn influences domestic governance approaches with direct human rights implications ([Fares & Alanezi, 2021](#)). Evidence suggests that initiatives justified by border security and intelligence-sharing with both rivals have led to an expansion of state surveillance capabilities ([Guild, 2021](#)). As Guild argues, such expansions must be necessary and proportionate, yet in South Sudan's context, they often lack the robust legal and oversight frameworks required.

This is paralleled in the digital domain; discussions around cross-border contact tracing or security coordination, akin to the applications analysed by Fares & Alanezi, highlight tensions between public security and privacy rights. The strongest pattern emerging is the instrumental use of external tensions to legitimise the centralisation of control and data collection, often at the expense of transparency and accountability. For instance, efforts to manage relations with both Khartoum and Addis Ababa have seen Juba emphasise national data sovereignty and security infrastructure, themes reflected in Oderkirk's survey on health data governance but here applied to a broader security context.

This finding directly connects to the article's core question by demonstrating that the management of rivalries is not a purely external affair but actively shapes internal policies that can encroach upon civil liberties, particularly when governance institutions are weak.

## Discussion

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Interpreting these findings, it becomes clear that South Sudan's diplomatic balancing act is not neutral in its domestic effects; it actively reconfigures the state's relationship with human rights norms ([Oderkirk, 2021](#)). The centralisation of security apparatus and data governance, accelerated by external pressures, risks creating a governance model where rights are conditional upon perceived security needs ([Watt, 2021](#)). This resonates with Watt's exploration of non-discrimination, as such securitisation can lead to the marginalisation of groups perceived as having cross-border ethnic or political ties to either rival.

The implications for South Sudan are profound. While short-term stability may be sought through agile diplomacy, the long-term legitimacy of the state depends on its ability to uphold its human rights

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obligations. The practical relevance lies in recognising that sustainable diplomacy requires credible domestic governance.

As Fares & Alanezi caution in the context of tracking applications, without strong legal safeguards, technologies adopted for security can undermine public trust. Therefore, the discussion moves beyond a simple tally of diplomatic successes to argue that the integrity of South Sudan's balancing strategy is intrinsically linked to its adherence to the principles outlined by Guild and others—namely, that any limitation on rights must be legally prescribed, necessary, and non-discriminatory.

## Conclusion

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In conclusion, South Sudan's management of Sudan-Ethiopia tensions cannot be effectively understood in isolation from its concurrent human rights and governance challenges. The article's contribution is to demonstrate that the diplomatic balancing act, while aimed at ensuring external stability, has tangible and often negative repercussions for domestic rights protections, particularly in the spheres of surveillance and data governance. The most practical implication for Juba is that a foreign policy perceived as legitimate by its own citizens and the international community must be built upon a foundation of accountable governance, not at its expense.

A sustainable approach requires integrating human rights due diligence, as framed by Watt regarding extraterritorial obligations, into the very fabric of its diplomatic and security engagements with both Khartoum and Addis Ababa. As a next step, further research should investigate the specific mechanisms through which regional diplomacy influences budget allocations and institutional priorities within South Sudan's security sector, building on the infrastructure concerns noted by Oderkirk to provide a more granular picture of this critical interplay.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to the literature on African agency in regional diplomacy by analysing South Sudan's under-examined role as an intermediary between Khartoum and Addis Ababa during the 2021 border tensions. It provides a novel empirical case of a nascent state leveraging its unique position to pursue conflict management, thereby challenging narratives of passive victimhood.

Furthermore, the research critically examines how South Sudan's internal governance and human rights challenges shaped and constrained its diplomatic initiatives, offering a more holistic understanding of the interplay between domestic fragility and foreign policy in post-conflict states.

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