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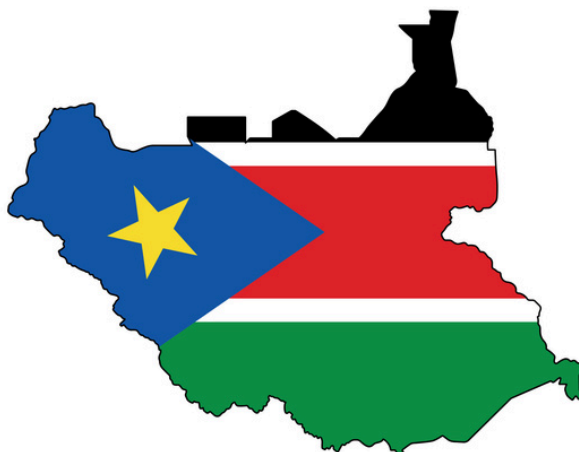
Digest

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Current Developments in South Sudan: Political Stalemate, Internal Fragmentation, and Regional Spillovers

The Context

The regional landscape in the Horn of Africa is becoming increasingly volatile, shaped by fluid geopolitical shifts within a global environment defined by heightened rivalry, systemic instability, and unpredictability. The rise of agnostic multipolarity—which tolerates parallel institutions, diverse governance models, and avoids normative judgments—has enabled fragmented regional orders to persist. This, in turn, allows political elites in the Horn to entrench poor governance without meaningful accountability. Nowhere is this more evident than in South Sudan, where a fragile, hard-won relative peace is steadily deteriorating. The country faces deepening political dysfunction, escalating violence in the Upper Nile, economic collapse, intensifying elite fragmentation, widespread insecurity, and increasing uncertainty over the unresolved question of presidential succession.

The 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), designed to end years of brutal civil war, is faltering under the weight of mistrust, power struggles, and bad faith among signatories. One of the principal signatories, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO), has become internally divided, further weakening the opposition's leverage in the transitional government. Tensions between the SPLM-IO and the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) have escalated, culminating in the house arrest of the SPLM-IO's military chief—a move widely condemned as a violation of the peace agreement and a serious escalation in political hostilities.

This combination of internal rifts within the opposition and deep mistrust between the government and opposition parties has paralyzed

the implementation of key provisions of the peace deal. Critical benchmarks such as the unification of rival armed forces, drafting of a permanent constitution, and establishing transitional justice mechanisms remain either unfulfilled or deliberately obstructed. National elections, initially scheduled under the peace framework, have been repeatedly postponed, contributing to growing public frustration and elite competition.

In a controversial move reflecting the government's growing authoritarian drift, President Salva Kiir requested a legal opinion from the Minister of Justice on whether the peace agreement remains binding. Although the ruling affirmed the agreement's continued validity, it has done little to reverse the entrenched political inertia. More concerning were the recent unilateral dismissals of senior government officials by President Kiir, in direct contravention of the R-ARCSS, which mandates consensus-based appointments within the transitional government. This deliberate sidelining of key opposition figures suggests a broader strategy aimed at weakening and fragmenting the opposition, often through patronage networks, co-optation of key figures, and exploitation of personal or clan-based relationships.

Even the ruling SPLM-(IG) is no longer immune to internal fractures, with decision-making becoming increasingly opaque and contested among competing factions. This internal disarray further undermines the government's ability to govern effectively and exacerbates the broader crisis of legitimacy.

Escalating Violence and Security Breakdown

As political tensions deepen, the security situation has deteriorated significantly. The Upper Nile region has become the epicenter of escalating armed conflict involving government forces, SPLM-IO factions, and community-based militias such as the White Army. These clashes have resulted in

significant casualties, massive displacement, and the further erosion of any semblance of state control in affected areas.

A particularly stark illustration of the growing lawlessness occurred when a UN helicopter, tasked with extracting stranded government soldiers, was shot down—resulting in the deaths of several UN crew members and a senior South Sudanese general. This incident underscores the extreme volatility of the conflict environment and the blurred lines between state and non-state actors.

In response to the growing military pressure, the government has increasingly resorted to mobilizing armed youth militias to supplement or even replace the national army, further fragmenting the monopoly of coercion beyond government control. This heavy reliance on irregular forces not only signals the weakness of the formal security apparatus but also risks further entrenching militia-led violence as the dominant mode of conflict in South Sudan. In some engagements, these militias have proven more effective than the regular army, raising alarming questions about the future of state authority and monopoly over the use of force.

Political Maneuvering and Regional Dynamics

Amidst this crisis, President Kiir's political strategy has become increasingly non-transparent. Faced with deep mistrust within the unity government, he appears focused on consolidating power while carefully managing succession. Although there are signs that Kiir is grooming a successor—evident through selective political appointments and the empowerment of certain individuals—no formal announcement or institutionalized process was made to manage this transition, further fueling uncertainty.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni continues to play a pivotal role in propping up Kiir's government. Museveni's rare foreign visits consistently prioritize Juba, signaling South Sudan's strategic importance to Kampala

politically and economically. Ugandan troops remain deployed in South Sudan, primarily as a deterrent against potential coup attempts and to bolster Kiir's embattled government. Museveni's involvement also highlights the regionalization of South Sudan's internal crisis, with neighboring states actively shaping the political and security outcomes. South Sudan has become an effective buffer zone.

Outlook and Risks

The central question now is whether South Sudan is on the brink of a return to the full-scale civil war seen in 2013–2015. While the current political and military landscape does not yet point to an imminent nationwide collapse—largely due to exhaustion among key factions and the absence of sufficient military capacity to sustain large-scale conflict—the risk of prolonged, low-intensity violence remains high. The fragmentation of both the state and its security forces, combined with deepening elite rivalries and the proliferation of armed groups, as well as an economy that has been mortgaged, points toward a future defined by chronic instability rather than outright war.

More concerning is the growing potential for the conflict dynamics to shift. What is currently framed as subnational and intercommunal violence could evolve into a more complex confrontation involving the formal signatories of the 2018 peace agreement, as well as increased involvement from external actors. Should this occur, the consequences would be devastating not only for South Sudan but also for the stability of the wider Horn of Africa region.

Developments Compounding the Current Crisis in South Sudan

What is currently happening in South Sudan is, in many ways, a continuation of long-standing patterns of crisis, but now with new and increasing layers of complexity. The country still faces ongoing humanitarian, economic, and security challenges. Communal violence remains the main cause of insecurity for civilians, especially affecting vulnerable and marginalized groups. Remnants of past crises—such as the ethnic politicization that fueled the conflict in Western Equatoria—are once again visible,

often in direct violation of ceasefire agreements. However, the situation has shifted from local ethnic clashes to a more complicated conflict involving the state, fragmented opposition groups, and many armed non-state actors. The rise of hybrid warfare tactics, along with the systematic weakening of already fragile state institutions, has sped up the collapse of governance. Civil service infrastructure, both as a system and physical structures, has become a repeated target of political violence and manipulation, further reducing the state's ability to provide even the most basic services.

Politically, the situation remains unstable and dangerously unpredictable. Ongoing power struggles have pushed some opposition factions toward violence to gain political leverage, undermining efforts to build stable local governments and weakening accountability and transparency mechanisms. The frequent reshuffling of cabinet members and sudden dismissals of top officials have become typical of President Salva Kiir's leadership, often happening right after his visits to the United Arab Emirates or Uganda. Rumors about Kiir's health have circulated for years, but despite these concerns, he still holds significant political power, making decisions unilaterally that strengthen his control over the state. However, the issue of succession is still unresolved and full of uncertainty. Deep divisions among the political elite have prevented the creation of a credible transition plan, and any potential successor might face sabotage from entrenched political spoilers committed to maintaining their own power and influence.

The humanitarian situation has reached catastrophic levels. Over one million refugees have entered South Sudan, fleeing conflicts in neighboring countries, particularly Sudan, with little prospect of returning home in the foreseeable future. Upper Nile State, already suffering from emergency-level food insecurity, has become a major transit point for refugees, further overwhelming an already collapsing humanitarian infrastructure. The government's capacity to absorb, assist, or integrate these displaced populations is virtually nonexistent.

Compounding the crisis is the steady decline in international aid, a consequence of donor fatigue, competing global crises, and shifting geopolitical priorities. Current levels of assistance fall far short of meeting even the most urgent needs, leaving millions vulnerable to hunger, disease, and violence.

The situation has been further exacerbated by the ongoing conflict in Sudan, particularly the control of key border areas by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This has severely disrupted trade routes, blocked humanitarian corridors, and increased tensions along the border. Rising incidents of ethnic targeting and intercommunal violence in these border regions are fueled by competition over land, water resources, and scarce humanitarian aid. The toxic spillover effects of Sudan's conflict are increasingly visible in South Sudan, most notably in the unrest that erupted in Juba and other areas following reports of the mass killing of South Sudanese nationals in Wad Madani, Sudan. These developments highlight how regional instability is directly undermining South Sudan's already fragile peace.

Economically, the country is in free-fall. The cost of an average food basket has surged by 200 percent, inflation stands at a staggering 107 percent, and the government has been unable to pay civil servants for months. Oil revenues—the government's primary income stream—have been decimated by infrastructure degradation, poor management, increasing and expensive debt servicing, and the ripple effects of regional instability. Despite the resumption of some oil flows, the revenue generated remains insufficient to stabilize the economy or finance basic governance. A controversial oil-backed loan agreement with a UAE-based company has sparked widespread criticism, with concerns that the deal effectively mortgages South Sudan's future oil wealth in exchange for short-term financial relief. Critics argue that the loan is less about national development and more about securing liquidity to maintain political patronage networks ahead of an uncertain political transition.

Efforts to diversify South Sudan's revenue streams and expand its economic base have largely faltered, undermined by entrenched corruption, weak institutional oversight, and chronic mismanagement.

Public funds intended for national development are routinely diverted by political elites, while international aid disproportionately goes toward paying civil service salaries rather than addressing structural economic weaknesses or supporting sustainable livelihood programs. This misallocation not only stifles economic growth but also deepens public frustration over widespread poverty and lack of opportunity.

As global aid patterns shift and external support becomes increasingly conditional, unpredictable, and diverted toward other global crises, South Sudan's economic outlook grows ever more precarious. Rising economic grievances are becoming a powerful catalyst for public discontent, further heightening the risk of instability. Yet, international engagement remains narrowly fixated on political power struggles and security dynamics, consistently neglecting the equally urgent imperative for comprehensive economic reform. Without a decisive shift toward accountable economic governance, transparent resource management, and investment in productive sectors, South Sudan's prospects for stability, recovery, and sustainable development will remain bleak.

Despite the gravity of the crisis, South Sudan remains dangerously low on the international community's list of priorities. Global attention has drifted, and regional powers are deeply divided in both their assessments of the crisis and their willingness to engage constructively. Civil society, once a critical voice for accountability and peace, has been systematically suffocated through intimidation, restrictions, and outright repression. South Sudanese citizens are largely denied the space to articulate their own narratives or advocate for meaningful change. Perhaps the most damning indictment of the current peace process came when one of the original signatories to the 2018 Revitalized Agreement publicly admitted that the deal was never genuinely intended to be implemented—an admission that underscores the cynicism and bad faith that has defined the political landscape since its signing.

In sum, South Sudan faces a convergence of

political paralysis, humanitarian collapse, and economic freefall, all compounded by regional instability and the erosion of the state. Without urgent, sustained, and coordinated efforts toward genuine peacebuilding, institutional reform, and economic recovery, the country risks slipping further into a cycle of chronic instability, violence, and fragmentation that will reverberate across the Horn of Africa.

South Sudan: An Overlooked Flashpoint in the Regional Cascade

As international attention remains focused on Sudan's dramatic collapse, South Sudan—already a fragile and fractured state—is quietly absorbing immense pressure from the north. Since the outbreak of war in Sudan, over one million refugees have crossed into South Sudan, overwhelming an already overstretched state apparatus and straining the capacity of humanitarian agencies operating in the country. Despite the scale of this influx and its destabilizing effects, the growing interconnection between the Sudanese and South Sudanese theaters is not receiving adequate attention in regional or international policy circles. This blind spot is dangerous. Weapons are flowing unchecked across porous borders, and external actors—particularly Gulf States—are increasingly viewing South Sudan not merely as a humanitarian concern but as a secondary arena for influence, militarization, and economic extraction.

Among local populations, there is deep and growing anxiety over the spillover effects of Sudan's conflict. Armed groups and political factions in South Sudan with historical affiliations to either the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) or the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are now quietly reactivating old alliances. President Salva Kiir, whose own military background inclines him toward the SAF, is nonetheless navigating a complex balancing act. Thus far, Salva Kiir has carefully balanced relations with both sides of the Sudanese conflict. He maintains strong ties with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), which are critical for South Sudan's oil exports. At the same time, his government must engage with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), as parts of the oil pipeline run through RSF-controlled areas. Notably, on 1

November 2024, Kiir's government signed an agreement with the RSF to secure a 237-kilometer stretch of pipeline within their territory. Additionally, several members of Kiir's ruling coalition have developed business links with the RSF. Politically, the RSF raises the same questions that Salva Kiir once posed to Khartoum during South Sudan's struggle for independence. As a result, Kiir understands the grievances that drove Sudan's peripheral regions to take up arms.

President Salva Kiir's expanding proximity to Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), the RSF leader, reflects more than personal diplomacy—it mirrors the shifting regional dynamics, particularly the deepening influence of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). UAE investments in South Sudan's mineral sectors, particularly gold and oil, are increasingly suspected of being funneled through RSF-linked networks, suggesting the emergence of a shadow political economy where war profiteering, rather than formal state governance, drives regional economic flows.

Further compounding the fragility, the RSF has now seized control of vast stretches of the border between Sudan and South Sudan. This development has profound economic and political implications. Credible reports indicate that significant quantities of illicit gold, much of it originating from conflict-ridden Darfur, are being smuggled through South Sudan into global markets via the UAE. This burgeoning cross-border illicit economy underscores not only the weakening of state institutions in both Sudan and South Sudan but also the growing dominance of war economies that are increasingly shaping the trajectory of regional politics. Should the RSF succeed in consolidating control over the entire Sudan–South Sudan border corridor, it would represent more than just a military or territorial gain. It would create a powerful extractive monopoly, allowing the RSF to self-finance its military operations, undermine the SAF, and exert immense leverage over Juba's government.

At the same time, such a development presents both risks and opportunities for President Kiir's

government. On one hand, the RSF's growing control threatens to further destabilize South Sudan's already fragile political environment, particularly by undermining the tenuous power-sharing agreement between Kiir's SPLM and opposition factions like the SPLA-IO. On the other hand, there is a strategic logic to potential tactical alignments. Cooperation between Kiir's government and the RSF in regulating cross-border movements could serve Juba's interests by weakening the SPLA-IO's operational capacity in border regions, particularly in Upper Nile and Unity States. There are already signs of this logic being applied to South Sudan's southern border as well, where the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) is reportedly expanding its presence in Kajokeji County. Under the pretext of stabilizing borderlands, the UPDF's encroachment mirrors the RSF's tactics in the north, raising concerns about the increasing militarization of South Sudan's borders from both the north and the south.

Meanwhile, the steady influx of weapons, the proliferation of militias, and the entrenchment of external economic and political interests are pushing South Sudan toward an even more precarious tipping point. The country's fragile political architecture—built around the 2018 peace agreement—is under escalating strain. If current trajectories are not reversed, South Sudan's internal conflicts are likely to become ever more deeply entangled with Sudan's war, creating a dangerous fusion of crises that could reverberate across the entire Horn of Africa and the broader Red Sea corridor.

Preventing such an outcome demands urgent diplomatic intervention, but diplomacy alone is insufficient. There is an immediate need for robust early warning mechanisms, cross-border security cooperation, and grassroots intercommunal dialogue—particularly between Sudanese and South Sudanese communities living in border areas such as Upper Nile, Unity, and Northern Bahr el Ghazal. Without these interventions, South Sudan risks becoming the next flashpoint in a cascading regional crisis—one whose consequences will extend far beyond its borders.

Unpacking Responses to the Crisis in South Sudan: Regional Incoherence and Interest-Driven Interventions

One of the most significant challenges in responding to the current crisis in South Sudan is the glaring absence of regional coherence. Regional cooperation is at a historic low, and the institutions mandated to uphold peace and security—particularly the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)—are operating without the requisite political will to enforce meaningful action. The peace and security architecture designed to manage conflicts in the region is faltering at a critical moment. Across the Horn of Africa, major conflicts—including those in Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia—are either at a protracted stalemate or deteriorating further. Peace initiatives have stalled, mediation efforts are deadlocked, and regional leadership appears increasingly absent. A core reason for this paralysis is the gradual withdrawal of member states from taking proactive leadership roles in peacemaking and conflict resolution.

In the vacuum created by the disengagement of key regional actors, extra-regional powers and neighboring states have stepped in, often pursuing their own strategic, security, or economic interests rather than prioritizing stability, good governance, or inclusive political settlements. This gap has also paved the way for a surge in unilateral and interest-driven bilateral interventions that sideline multilateral processes. Uganda, for instance, continues to exert considerable influence in South Sudan. It currently maintains approximately 3,000 troops deployed on South Sudanese territory. This military presence occurred with contested legality—officially justified as being at the request of the government in Juba, though critics argue it bypassed the agreed frameworks under the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU). The deployment is further complicated by reports that Ugandan troops have not been paid for several months, raising serious questions about the sustainability of their mission, the clarity of their mandate, and whether their

presence ultimately serves stabilization or furthers Kampala's strategic leverage over South Sudan.

Historically, IGAD's success in brokering peace—such as during the initial phases of South Sudan's independence and earlier negotiations—relied on one or more of its member states stepping up to assume ownership of the mediation process and the other members and the international community rallying behind. That dynamic of principled leadership is now largely absent. Instead, the AU and IGAD face a rapidly closing window to reclaim their relevance in a geopolitical context where bilateral deals, backchannel negotiations, and external mediation are increasingly becoming the norm. This shift toward external or non-transparent arrangements undermines African-led processes and risks weakening local political legitimacy. If left unchecked, this could have long-term repercussions not only for South Sudan's stability but also for the credibility of continental and regional institutions.

There are, however, tentative signs of renewed engagement. The new AU Chairperson has demonstrated a welcome level of commitment to addressing the crisis. His recent joint visit to Juba alongside senior IGAD officials signals a possible return to active continental diplomacy. This is a positive development, especially in light of the chronic inertia that has characterized AU and IGAD responses in recent years. Nevertheless, substantial political obstacles persist. One such example is the inability of the AU and IGAD envoys to meet opposition leader Riek Machar during their recent mission—a clear indication of the South Sudanese government's growing resistance to external oversight. Further underscoring this trend, the government in Juba pointedly refused to attend an extraordinary IGAD summit convened to discuss the crisis. It also blocked Raila Odinga, IGAD's special envoy and representative of Kenyan President William Ruto, from holding discussions with Riek Machar. This deliberate sidelining of IGAD's mediation efforts sends an unambiguous message about the South Sudanese government's disregard for regional accountability mechanisms.

Unless regional bodies are able to reassert their authority with the full backing and political

commitment of member states, even the most well-intentioned diplomatic interventions will continue to flounder. The current trajectory of fragmented, interest-driven diplomacy risks entrenching instability not only in South Sudan but across the broader Horn of Africa. Reinvigorating regional cooperation is no longer just desirable—it is an urgent necessity.

South Sudan's Crisis Amidst the Erosion of Regional Agency and Divergent Strategies

The Horn of Africa is steadily losing its agency in managing its peace and security. Caught between shifting global geopolitical currents and escalating aid fatigue, the region finds itself increasingly susceptible to external manipulation and internal fragmentation. Recent cuts in humanitarian and development assistance have only compounded existing vulnerabilities, leaving already fragile states dangerously exposed. Nowhere is this more evident than in South Sudan, which is teetering on the brink of full-scale conflict. The sharp rise in risks to the state's survival demands urgent and coordinated regional attention before the crisis spirals irreversibly out of control.

Despite sustained consultations among frontline states that share a vested interest in South Sudan's stability, there is no coherent or unified regional strategy. While Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia all agree on the imperative to prevent state collapse and avoid a return to large-scale violence, their approaches diverge sharply in terms of political engagement, levels of assertiveness, and strategic priorities. Among these actors, Uganda—under the leadership of President Yoweri Museveni—has emerged as the most assertive and unilateral player. Kampala's decision to deploy troops to South Sudan underscores Museveni's preference for direct influence, particularly over President Salva Kiir. Museveni's categorical rejection of the Tumaini Initiative—a Kenyan-led peace proposal—further signals his determination to maintain strategic autonomy and shape South Sudan's trajectory on his terms.

There is growing speculation that Museveni's entrenchment within the South Sudanese political landscape has become so deep that tensions are surfacing not only between Uganda and opposition forces but also between the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) and the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF). While Uganda's military presence may temporarily stabilize Juba, it risks inflaming hostilities with opposition groups. Riek Machar has already accused Uganda of violating the United Nations arms embargo, pointing to the deployment as a provocative move that undermines the fragile balance of power. Amplifying these tensions, Uganda's military chief, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, publicly declared on social media that "the UPDF only recognizes one president in South Sudan, Salva Kiir. Any move against him is a declaration of war against Uganda." This statement starkly highlights the high stakes now embedded in the relationship between Kiir's government and Uganda, elevating what is ostensibly an internal South Sudanese issue to a potential regional flashpoint.

Museveni's enduring preference for leadership in Juba remains anchored in the SPLM tradition, reflecting discomfort with any realignment that could threaten South Sudan's post-independence order. However, this dynamic is now shadowed by rising uncertainty over Museveni's hold on power in the future. Concerns about his health and the absence of a clear succession plan in both Kampala and Juba raise the prospect of further destabilization. Should Museveni exit the scene, the resulting leadership vacuum could exacerbate power struggles not only within South Sudan but also in Uganda's broader regional posture, removing one of the few actors with direct leverage over Salva Kiir.

Kenya and Ethiopia, while well-positioned to play constructive roles in South Sudan, have so far adopted cautious and fragmented approaches. Kenya initially signaled leadership through the Tumaini Initiative, designed to engage actors excluded from the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). However, the initiative ultimately fell short. Rather than bridging divides, Tumaini inadvertently deepened political fault lines, undermining the

implementation of the R-ARCSS without delivering tangible progress toward sustainable peace. Disillusioned by the political costs and repeated failures of mediation in the region, Kenya has since recalibrated its engagement. Ethiopia, once a central player in South Sudan's peace processes, has seen its role diminish. Its current approach appears narrowly aligned with President Salva Kiir, including tacit support for his succession plans, rather than broader national reconciliation. Ethiopia's efforts have largely stalled since an earlier attempt in 2019 to mediate between SPLM and SPLM-IO leaders. Any renewed effort now risks being contested by other stakeholders. Ethiopia has also expressed skepticism about Uganda's unilateral military deployment, questioning whether it contributes to peace or merely exacerbates tensions.

Compounding Ethiopia's constrained role is Eritrea's increasingly antagonistic stance toward Addis Ababa. Eritrea's ties with anyone in Juba will aim at weakening Ethiopia's traditional diplomatic leverage but also inject an additional layer of geopolitical rivalry into an already volatile situation. This shifting dynamic further fragments the regional response to South Sudan's crisis, reducing the prospects for coherent mediation. These divergent approaches underscore a sobering reality: while the space for collaboration among frontline states exists, achieving a coherent and binding tripartite agreement will require careful diplomacy, confidence-building, and likely the facilitation of external actors such as the African Union (AU) or IGAD. However, both institutions are themselves struggling with legitimacy crises and diminished enforcement capacity.

The AU's Peace and Security Council has deliberated on South Sudan more than on any country other than Somalia. Yet, these repeated engagements have failed to translate into decisive or enforceable outcomes. The AU's and IGAD's enforcement mechanisms remain weak, hampered by fragmented political will, divergent member state interests, and an inability to compel compliance with the peace agreements. The absence of a unified regional strategy is no longer

a theoretical problem—it is an urgent operational failure with real consequences for South Sudan's survival.

Divergent postures among frontline states—Uganda's militarized interventionism, Kenya's cautious disengagement, and Ethiopia's constrained diplomacy—combined with the disruptive roles of peripheral but influential actors like Eritrea and the UAE, are sending mixed signals. These conflicting agendas have severely undermined the prospects for a coordinated and effective response to the crisis.

The time has come for the region and the continent to draw a decisive line on South Sudan. This moment demands more than rhetorical commitments or symbolic diplomacy; it requires sustained, principled, and coordinated engagement with all relevant stakeholders. Regional capitals must align their messaging and strategies, while continental bodies like the AU and IGAD must reclaim their leadership roles in enforcing peace, security, and governance. Without such a reset, the consequences will not be confined to South Sudan alone but will reverberate throughout an already volatile Horn of Africa.

South Sudan's Deteriorating Political and Security Situation and the Role of the International Community

Despite its inherent limitations, the United Nations remains one of the most trusted and consistent actors in South Sudan. Over the years, the UN has played a critical role in damage control, helping to mitigate the worst impacts of the country's prolonged crises. Its contributions include the protection of civilians, facilitation of humanitarian assistance, support for the implementation of the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement, and monitoring and reporting on human rights abuses. Additionally, the UN is uniquely positioned to assist in electoral planning and support the establishment of credible political processes that could help transition the country toward stability. However, the continuation of the current "new normal"—marked by political paralysis, elite fragmentation, and escalating violence—risks eroding what remains of South Sudan's fragile state institutions. As the nation teeters dangerously on the brink of renewed full-

scale conflict, the international community faces mounting pressure to act decisively before the situation deteriorates beyond repair.

According to the UN Commission on Human Rights, more than two million South Sudanese are currently internally displaced, and an additional 2.28 million have sought refuge in neighboring countries. The Commission's report further highlights that over half of the country's population is facing acute food insecurity. It underscores that without a meaningful political dialogue, trust-building, and a recommitment to the peace process, South Sudan risks sliding back into a devastating civil war. The recent surge in violence has only reinforced the urgency of breaking the political deadlock and ensuring that the key provisions of the peace agreement—such as security sector reform, transitional justice, and the conduct of credible elections—are implemented. Failure to act will not only plunge South Sudan into another ruinous cycle of conflict but will also destabilize the broader Horn of Africa, with serious humanitarian and security repercussions for the region.

There is a broad consensus that international attention to South Sudan has sharply declined. Some observers argue that Western financial institutions have effectively captured Juba through predatory loan arrangements, reducing the relevance of political engagement. These financial deals often carry high interest rates that saddle South Sudan with unsustainable debt, making any prospect of future economic recovery increasingly bleak. At the same time, shifting global strategic priorities have further sidelined sustained support for the peace process. This disengagement reflects a wider trend: the erosion of international consensus on peace operations amid rising geopolitical fragmentation. As rivalries between major powers deepen, mobilizing political and financial support for robust interventions has become increasingly difficult. Even the United Nations is entering a new phase of constrained peacekeeping, marked by reduced willingness to commit to long-term, resource-intensive missions in complex crises like South Sudan.

Nevertheless, South Sudan's deep-rooted challenges cannot be resolved by external actors alone. They require coordinated efforts that bring together both regional and international partners more pragmatically and cohesively. Such cooperation must be anchored in the recognition that without genuine political will from South Sudan's leadership, external interventions—no matter how well-intentioned—cannot succeed. A central lesson from previous engagements is that peace cannot be imposed; it must be owned by South Sudanese leaders and society at large. However, this does not absolve the international community of responsibility. Moving forward, any renewed peace framework must include robust enforcement mechanisms that hold parties accountable for violations. Guarantors of the peace process must be prepared to implement meaningful consequences when commitments are breached.

One of the critical barriers to effective international engagement has been the stranglehold that South Sudan's political elites maintain over the peace process. The very actors responsible for the conflict are the same ones tasked with implementing the agreement. This circular logic has left the country trapped, with little room for meaningful progress. A fresh approach is needed—one that creates mechanisms for the international community to listen directly to the voices of ordinary South Sudanese beyond the elite political class. Civil society organizations, faith groups, women's groups, and youth movements must be empowered as legitimate stakeholders in shaping the country's future.

Furthermore, concerned national actors within South Sudan must seize the opportunity presented by growing external pressure. They must work collectively to demand accountability from their leaders and push for an urgent course correction. South Sudan's top leadership must be compelled—both by internal demands and by coordinated regional and international pressure—to step back from the brink and prioritize a genuine transition toward stability and governance reform. Without this dual pressure—from both the international community and domestic constituencies—South Sudan's trajectory will remain dangerously uncertain, with profound consequences not only for its people but for the entire Horn of Africa.

Conclusion

Despite successive peace initiatives and the partial implementation of the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement, South Sudan remains trapped in a state of chronic political paralysis. The power-sharing model envisioned in the agreement has largely failed to deliver either stability or progress. Instead of fostering national cohesion and a pathway toward democratic governance, the country remains mired in a political deadlock, crippled by elite fragmentation, militarized governance, and widespread mistrust. What is particularly alarming is how the dysfunctional status quo has been normalized. The government has become skilled at managing internal rivalries and maintaining external expectations at the bare minimum—delaying elections, tolerating persistent insecurity, and sustaining a fragile equilibrium that avoids collapse without enabling progress. Much like the 2018 agreement, the Tumaini initiative has been repurposed not as a vehicle for genuine transformation but as a mechanism for deferring real political change. The longer this pattern continues, the higher the risk of institutional collapse and an eventual return to widespread conflict.

Breaking this impasse requires moving beyond the illusion that elite-based power-sharing alone can secure peace. The bare minimum now is to shift toward mobilizing the population for credible, inclusive, and transparent elections. Without a genuine political transition anchored in popular legitimacy rather than elite accommodation, South Sudan will remain trapped in an endless cycle of transitional governments that deliver no real transition. Real change must be driven not by the legalistic extension of flawed agreements but by the will of the South Sudanese people, who have for far too long been sidelined from the political process.

The lack of a coherent and coordinated regional approach has further deepened the crisis.

Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia often operate in isolation from one another, each driven by distinct national interests rather than a shared vision for regional stability. Sudan's internal crisis adds to South Sudan's problems. Eritrea's regional role complicates Ethiopia's ability to play a meaningful leadership role in the diplomatic process. Against this backdrop, the idea of forging a tripartite framework among Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia deserves serious consideration. A coordinated approach by these three influential neighbors could play a decisive role in ensuring a peaceful and stable succession in South Sudan. Already, quiet disagreements are surfacing over whether President Salva Kiir's preferred successor is acceptable—not only within South Sudan but also among key regional actors who wield significant influence over the country's political trajectory. This emerging discord is highly risky and could further destabilize an already fragile situation.

A unified approach by Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia could help mitigate these tensions and support a credible transition. However, much depends on whether Uganda, with its considerable leverage and deeper influence in Juba compared to other regional actors, is willing to commit to a genuinely collaborative process. Without Uganda's buy-in, any coordinated effort is unlikely to gain sufficient traction. Uganda's impending elections in 2026 add urgency to understanding President Museveni's ambitions and their implications for South Sudan's trajectory. Ethiopia and Kenya, though more restrained, possess significant diplomatic leverage and credibility that could be harnessed for constructive engagement. A unified regional roadmap—endorsed by the African Union and supported by international partners—could represent the most viable pathway to pulling South Sudan back from the brink.

What is urgently needed now is clarity of purpose, political courage, and a genuine commitment to the South Sudanese people, who have waited too long for a peace that has repeatedly been promised but never delivered. The stark reality is that South Sudan

cannot continue applying the same flawed formulas and expect different results. One of the most significant but ignored recommendations from South Sudan's own National Dialogue was the voluntary exit of both President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar. This proposal, which argued for moving beyond the political rivalry between these two figures, was ultimately shelved—a powerful symbol of the elite's deep-seated unwillingness to relinquish power or embrace meaningful reform.

While elections are often cited as a pathway out of the deadlock, they are not a panacea. The assumption that elections can resolve the crisis is dangerously simplistic given the current lack of political will, institutional capacity, and national consensus. Core preconditions for credible elections—including administrative readiness, a secure political environment, freedom of political expression, and public trust in electoral institutions—are conspicuously absent. Moreover, in the absence of deeper structural reforms, elections risk reinforcing rather than transforming entrenched power dynamics. A relapse into full-scale war is a risk that neither South Sudan nor the wider Horn of Africa can afford.

To avert further deterioration, a clear, credible, and enforceable roadmap toward transition is urgently needed. This roadmap must reflect the aspirations of the South Sudanese people, secure the buy-in of major political actors, and be championed by at least one influential regional state—ideally within a broader coalition involving Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and the African Union. Such a framework should detail concrete steps toward credible elections, including security guarantees, electoral preparations, dispute-resolution mechanisms, and strategies to contain spoilers. It should also incorporate plans for economic recovery, transitional justice, and trauma-informed governance to address the deep psychological scars left by decades of conflict.

A particularly underappreciated factor in South Sudan's crisis is the role of collective trauma in shaping political behavior. The political elite are not only products of war but are also captives of its psychological legacies. Decision-making is often shaped by survivalist instincts, zero-sum thinking, and deep-seated mistrust—all of which stem from decades of betrayal, violence, and loss. Any credible reform effort must take this reality seriously, embedding trauma healing, reconciliation, and psychosocial support into peacebuilding and governance strategies. Failure to address this invisible driver of conflict will only perpetuate the cycles of violence, grievance, and authoritarianism that have defined South Sudan's post-independence history.

A further unresolved question is whether economic stabilization should be prioritized over political reform given the severe deadlock at the political level. While economic recovery may offer short-term relief, it cannot substitute for political transformation. Without political legitimacy, any economic gains will remain fragile and vulnerable to capture by corrupt elites. Both tracks—political reform and economic stabilization—must proceed in tandem. Elections, accountability, and governance reform must form the cornerstone of any credible path forward. Anything less will only defer the crisis rather than resolve it.

Recommendations: Responding to Escalating Risks in South Sudan

- **Prioritize Urgent Regional Action:** Recognize South Sudan's escalating crisis as a serious regional threat, with risks of cross-border displacement, arms proliferation, and proxy conflicts. Swift, coordinated action is essential to prevent further collapse.
- **Coordinate a Regional Strategy on Succession and Transition:** Foster alignment among Uganda, Ethiopia, and Kenya to jointly push Juba toward a credible transition roadmap and electoral preparations. Leverage Museveni's influence over Kiir, supported by discreet engagement

with the UAE to secure broader buy-in or non-obstruction.

- **Revitalize the 2018 Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS):** Push for a pragmatic revival of the R-ARCSS, expanding it beyond elite power-sharing to include civil society, youth, and non-signatories. Link implementation to clear reform benchmarks and conditional international support.
- **Re-engage the Troika with Clear Mandates:** Strengthen the diplomatic role of the Troika (Norway, UK, US), with Norway leveraging its institutional memory for confidence-building. Focus their efforts on supporting political transition, electoral readiness, and tighter international coordination.
- **Mitigate Cross-Border Risks and Foster Local Dialogue:** Establish mechanisms for cross-border conflict prevention, especially along the Sudan-South Sudan border. Support community-based dialogue platforms to manage grievances, prevent escalation, and promote social cohesion.
- **Prepare for Economic Collapse and Its Fallout:** Anticipate worsening economic conditions by providing technical support on fiscal management, inflation control, and economic stabilization. Address the risks of political unrest, grievance-driven militarization, and further state erosion resulting from prolonged economic distress.