

CSRF Meta-Analysis: regional dynamics and their impact in South Sudan

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The CSRF is implemented by a consortium of Saferworld and swisspeace and supports conflict-sensitive aid programming in South Sudan. The United Kingdom, Switzerland, Canada, the Netherlands and the European Union have joined forces to develop shared resources through the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility in South Sudan.

Introduction

The literature on regional dynamics in South Sudan prior to the outbreak of armed conflict in December 2013 tends to focus on Sudan’s and other neighbouring and regional states’ roles in the political, economic and security dynamics of South(ern) Sudan. Sudan has played a key role in reference to these different dimensions before and after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005. The literature explores relations between Sudan and South Sudan and contested issues such as the status of Abyei, the course and nature of the shared border, the support and hosting of armed opposition and oil. Publications from the post-2013 era put an emphasis on the neighbouring states’ role in armed conflicts in South Sudan and the peace process, the implementation of the Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), and the reception of South Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries. The questions below were developed with the aim of linking the interaction of regional actors with current conflict, peace and economic dynamics and better understanding these relationships and their impact on South Sudan.

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Dowd, Caitriona & Liezelle Kumalo (2022). [Better ways to build peace and resilience in South Sudan](#). International Crisis Group (2021). [Toward a Viable Future for South Sudan](#). Micheale Gebru (2020). [Seeking Peace in South Sudan: The Contributions and Challenges of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development \(IGAD\)](#). PAX (2017). [Sustaining Relative Peace: Report on cross-border peacebuilding in South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya](#). Jok, Madut J. (2015). [The Paradox of Peace in Sudan and South Sudan](#). Mesfin, Berouk (2015). [The Regionalisation of the South Sudanese Crisis](#).

1. **To what extent is regional engagement in South Sudan motivated by proxy conflicts?**
2. **What is the significance of refugee outflows in the region?**
3. **Which contentious issues between South Sudan and Sudan have not yet been addressed?**
4. **What role does South Sudan play in the region?**

1. To what extent is regional engagement in South Sudan motivated by proxy conflicts?

Regional competition and long-standing rivalries between different states have shaped their relations with South Sudan. It is often the interplay of these rivalries, for example between Sudan and Uganda, that has had a proxy effect on South Sudan.

Uganda and Sudan both wished to maintain their influence and political and financial benefits to ensure that South Sudan does not harbour opposition movements. The rivalry between the countries began in 1955, when Uganda supported the first rebellion in Southern Sudan. Sudan supported opposition movements against the Ugandan state, such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). During the second Sudanese civil war (1983 - 2005), Uganda provided substantial political and military support to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).

During the South Sudanese civil war (2013 – 2018), Sudan and Uganda once more supported different sides: Early on, Uganda sent troops into the county in support of the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) under President Salva Kiir. Sudan on the other hand, while seemingly supporting Kiir in the beginning¹, shifted its support to his rival Riek Machar, who headed the Sudan's People Liberation Movement in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) fighting the GRSS².

Relations between Sudan and Uganda improved over the course of the conflict: In February 2015, they reached an agreement to end their respective support for rebel groups in the other country through the formation of a joint security mechanism. This was followed by increased diplomatic visits and Uganda's refusal to let the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) – an armed group fighting the Government of Sudan (GoS) - leadership operate from its territory.

Moreover, in their functions as members of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development

(IGAD), Sudan and Uganda helped broker both the ARCSS in 2015 and the R-ARCSS in 2018.

Since then, however, Sudan has not been strong in holding South Sudan accountable for implementing the R-ARCSS given its own internal political changes and turmoil. This became even clearer after the fall of former Sudanese President Omar Bashir, who played an important role in maintaining the R-ARCSS.

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Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) (2022). [The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan \(R-ARCSS\)](#).
Zaid Al-Ali (2021). [The Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan Summary and Analysis](#).
Institute for Security Studies (2019). [Sudan after Bashir: Regional opportunities and challenges](#).
International Crisis Group (2016). [South Sudan: Rearranging the Chessboard](#).
Bereketeab, Redie (2015). [Why South Sudan conflict is proving intractable](#).
Mesfin, Berouk (2015). [The Regionalisation of the South Sudanese Crisis](#).

With the current outbreak of armed conflict between Sudan's Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that started on 15 April 2023, the role of Sudan as a guarantor of the R-ARCSS is further undermined. At the same time, the GRSS played a key role in brokering peace between the GoS and the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), who signed the Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan in 2020.

Tensions and competing interests between Ethiopia, Sudan and Eritrea also shaped the relations of these countries with South Sudan, and their proxy conflicts. Ethiopia has been an intermittent ally of South Sudan since 1983 and played a key part in supporting the Sudan's People Liberation Army (SPLA) during the second Sudanese civil war (1983 - 2005), allowing the young movement to set up bases and operations in its territory. At that time, Ethiopia was antagonised by Sudan's backing of Eritrean and Tigrayan rebels. When the Ethiopian president

¹ The New Humanitarian (2014): [Regional interests at stake in the South Sudan crisis](#).

² Campell, John (2018): [Political Splintering at the Root of Failing South Sudanese Peace Deals](#).

Mengistu fell in 1991, the SPLA was expelled, but relations soon improved again, and Ethiopia resumed its military support to the SPLA in 1993.

During the South Sudanese civil war (2013 - 2018), Ethiopia tried to take a neutral stance. Not least, because it was leading the mediation efforts of IGAD and wanted to portray itself as a reliable broker to the international community. But even more importantly because of its sensitivity to regional escalation and the proxy context.

Despite Ethiopia's efforts as peace broker, the GRSS under Kiir as well as the SPLM-IO by Machar accused it of supporting the other side respectively. On the one hand, Kiir saw Ethiopia's hosting of Machar as a sign of support and was critical of its close relationship with the US; the main proponent of tougher measures against the GRSS at the time. On the other hand, Ethiopia's mediating role as a member of IGAD together with Uganda, a staunch supporter of the GRSS, was perceived critically by Machar and the SPLM-IO. The armed conflict between the Ethiopian government and Tigrayan rebels that broke out in late 2020 led to the accusation that the GRSS was supporting the latter. A claim that the GRSS denied. Instead, the GRSS offered to mediate between the two groups.

In recent years, South Sudan has found itself drawn more into ongoing economic tensions between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia over the latter's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). In 2023, the GRSS, through Egypt's support, launched a controversial project to dredge the River tributary or the River Naam in South Sudan, meant to control the recurrent heavy floods in parts of South Sudan. This project has been seen by some analysts as an attempt by Egypt to recover the lost water through GERD. (see question 4).

2. What is the significance of refugee outflows in the region?

The UNHCR estimated that due to the last civil war and ongoing subnational level conflict, by June 2023 around 2.3 million South Sudanese refugees live in the five neighbouring states: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (56,536), Uganda (875,848), Kenya (157,402), Ethiopia (416,308) and Sudan (808,336).³ Such a significant refugee population puts tremendous pressure on these host countries' social fabric and public services.

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Ranga Gworo, Fynn Kaltenpoth and CSRF (2023). [Hydro-politics in the Sudd Wetland: The implications of past and current water development projects for South Sudan and the Nile Basin.](#)
 Rift Valley Institute (2023). [Sudan Conflict: Assessing the Risk of Regionalization.](#)
 UNHCR (2022). [South Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan, January - December 2022.](#)
 Stites, Elizabeth, Alex Humphrey & Roxani Krystalli (2021). [Social Connections and Displacement from South Sudan to Uganda.](#)
 Fredu Nega Tegebu (2020). [Climate Change-Induced Migration in the Horn of Africa.](#)
 Freddie Carver & Duol Ruach Guok (2020). ['No one can stay without someone'.](#)
 UNHCR (2020). [Refugees and asylum seekers from South Sudan in Gambella region.](#)

In the DRC, refugees live mostly in remote areas close to the border with South Sudan facing inadequate service provision and security risks. Around 40 percent of them live in one of the three formal camps Biringi, Bele and Meri. However, a fragile security context and lack of funding means that international support in these sites is limited, resulting in underdeveloped services and protection risks. For refugees living outside these formal camps among impoverished host communities, the security and socioeconomic situation is even worse.

³ UNHCR (2023). [Operational Data Portal: South Sudan \[14 June 2023\].](#)

With 875,848 South Sudanese refugees in 2023, Uganda is the host country with the highest number of refugees. The large influx during the South Sudanese civil war (2013 – 2018) and the recent Covid-19 pandemic have put the country's refugee policy to a test. Public services and resources – particularly land – have become overstretched and humanitarian and development partners do not have the capacity to fill the void. Another growing challenge is food security: With recurrent budget cuts since 2021, the World Food Programme (WFP) has scaled back food assistance for refugees in Uganda⁴. In the face of growing hardship, some South Sudanese have returned to their home country.

By 2023 Ethiopia hosted around 416,308 South Sudanese refugees, most of them in the Gambella region. The existence of such a large refugee population is especially delicate there and could lead to heightened tensions between Anuaks and Nuers, since both groups are present in South Sudan as well, increasing the risks of possible spillover effects in case of conflict. In 2019, the Ethiopian government issued a policy ordering the relocation of most new arrivals in Gambella to another context, the Benishangul-Gumuz Region.

Kenya hosts about 157,402 South Sudanese refugees in 2023, most of them in the Kakuma refugee camp and Kalobeyei settlement in Turkana County. In addition, large South Sudanese diaspora communities live in cities like Nairobi. Longstanding ties exist between the political and business elites in the two countries and many South Sudanese officials maintain houses, families and assets in Nairobi.

In 2023, around 808,336 South Sudanese refugees lived in Sudan, most of them fleeing their country due to violence or food insecurity. Their current legal status is ambiguous. In contrast to the previous civil war when many Southerners fled to the North, South Sudanese

are no longer de jure citizens of Sudan since independence in 2011. As such, they may face difficulties accessing public services such as education or entering the labour market.⁵

In April 2023, fighting broke out between rivaling factions within the transitional government in Sudan. The quickly escalating violence, starting in Khartoum before spreading to other parts of the country, prompted up to 104,000 South Sudanese to flee the country by June that year and return to South Sudan.⁶

3. Which contentious issues between South Sudan and Sudan have not yet been addressed?

The border between Sudan and South Sudan remains highly contested. The disputed border zones include the Kafia Kingi enclave, the border with Northern Bahr el-Ghazal and Abyei, and areas of Unity and Upper Nile. Since the independence of South Sudan, there have been localised fighting and clashes over the border in different areas.

In 2012, fighting broke out over the Heglig/Panthou oil production site, an area claimed by both Sudan and South Sudan. The SPLA occupied the site previously under the control of the GoS. Disputes have periodically led to border closure and undermined food security in the northern areas of South Sudan.

A special case is Abyei, whose status has not been resolved yet. According to the CPA signed in 2005, residents of Abyei have the right to decide in a referendum whether to join South Sudan or not. An unrecognised, unilateral referendum was held by the Dinka Ngok in 2013, which neither Sudan nor the international community recognised; Sudan argues the transhumant Misseriya are eligible to vote. While bilateral relations between the Sudanese and

⁴ WFP (2023). [WFP prioritises food assistance for the most vulnerable refugees in Uganda as needs outstrip resources.](#)

⁵ NRC (2021). [South Sudanese refugees in Khartoum are still in limbo.](#)

⁶ Republic of South Sudan, UNHCR & IOM (2023). [Population Movement from Sudan to South Sudan \[14 June 2023\].](#)

South Sudanese governments have improved since 2011, the dispute between the groups in Abyei remains an unresolved issue but seems not to be a priority in Juba and Khartoum.

In the absence of a viable solution, violent disputes between the groups have recurred: In 2011 and 2015, Misseriya militias from Sudan with support of the Sudan Armed Forces attacked Abyei. And in 2022, the highest number of violent incidents was recorded. UN Peacekeepers who have been stationed in Abyei since 2011 through UNISFA have not been able to prevent such incidents.

Besides unresolved border disputes, the historic interlinkages between the two countries are maybe most prominent in the context of South Sudan's oil production and export through its Northern neighbour. Sudan's primary economic

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- ACLED (2023). [Deadly Violence in the Disputed Abyei Area](#).
- Mohammed, Abubakar & Yahaya T. Baba (2021). [Secession and border disputes in Africa: The case of Sudan and South Sudan border](#).
- Martin Ochaya Lino (2020). [Local Peace Agreement in Abyei: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities](#).
- Abraham A. Awolich (2019). [The Implications of Al Bashir's Downfall on South Sudan](#).
- International Crisis Group (2016). [South Sudan: Rearranging the Chessboard](#).
- James, Laura. M. (2015). [Fields of Control: Oil and \(in\) security in Sudan and South Sudan](#).

interest in South Sudan is access to its oil and the substantial transit fees agreed for the use of its pipeline to Port Sudan. Yet tension over their payment led to a shutdown of oil production in 2012, which resulted in decreased oil production in South Sudan in the following years and lower oil revenues for both countries (see CSRF Meta-analysis: Economy). In 2012, a Cooperation Agreement was reached that included the restructuring of transit fees and a mutual commitment to stop hosting and supporting armed opposition forces from the other country.

However, the agreement was never fully implemented. In light of this, Sudan's domestic politics has a great influence on South Sudan's oil industry.

4. What role does South Sudan play in the region?

South Sudan is member to several regional organizations: the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the East Africa Community (EAC) and the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). These memberships are not without problems.

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- CSRF (2023). [Hydro-politics in the Sudd Wetland: The implications of past and current water development projects for South Sudan and the Nile Basin](#).
- Aeby, Michael (2022). [How African Organisations Envision Peacemaking: AU, IGAD and SADC policies and structures for African solutions](#).
- Verhoeven, Harry (2022). [Energy and Water for Sovereignty: South Sudan's Regional Diplomacy and the Geopolitics of the Nile Basin](#).
- IGAD (2020). [Lessons for IGAD Mediation arising from the South Sudanese Peace Talks 2013-15](#).

Especially South Sudan's membership in IGAD and the AU has been an issue in the context of the South Sudanese civil war and the peace process, since both organizations played an important role in the latter. This is not only limited to the brokering of the ARCSS and the R-ARCSS but also the role of the AU and IGAD in overseeing the ceasefire between the SPLM-IO and the GRSS. Given various members states' support for the GRSS and Kiir, such as Uganda, the SPLM-IO under Machar have been critical of the AU and IGAD in the peace process (see also question 1).⁷

⁷ Campell, John (2018): [Political Splintering at the Root of Failing South Sudanese Peace Deals](#).

Joining the EAC in September 2016 was likewise controversial, given the civil war at the time and the deteriorating economic situation.

In 2012, Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia signed an agreement for the Lamu Port, South Sudan, Ethiopian Transport Corridor (LAPSSET). The project would provide an integrated rail, road and oil pipeline between the two countries. As of spring 2023, planning of the project is ongoing.

Besides its membership in regional organizations, South Sudan's location as an upstream country in the Nile Basin also enhances its role in the region. This is most evident in the context of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project. The controversial dam is seen by Ethiopia as boosting its domestic power supply and that of its neighbours. At the same time, the downstream countries Egypt and Sudan fear that GERD will dramatically undermine their energy security and have been critical of the project since the start. In this context, South Sudan has been courted by both sides: On the one hand, Egypt has sought to develop closer ties with the GRSS and intensified bilateral cooperation in the fields of energy and water management to counter Ethiopian influence; on the other hand, the Ethiopian and South Sudanese government struck a deal in 2022 that ensures up to 400MW of electricity supply from GERD for South Sudan.⁸

[Further publications on international engagement in South Sudan are available in the CSRf Research Repository.](#)

⁸ Al-Monitor (2022). [Ethiopia to supply South Sudan with electricity, as Nile dam talks continue to falter.](#)