

Vulnerable South Sudan and its Impact on Ethiopia's Regional Security Policy

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Abstract

This article examines the actual and potential issues that determine the contemporary and future interstate relationship between Ethiopia and South Sudan within the context of regional security policy. It also anticipates the future challenges Ethiopia's regional security policy will face regarding South Sudan. The article adopted qualitative methods of data collection. The key informants were selected by employing non-probability sampling: purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Relevant documents were collected to validate the data obtained from key informant interviews. Primary and secondary sources were consulted to answer the crux of the study. Accordingly, primary data was generated from security officers from the military and the police sectors, military officials, civilians, and intelligence community members. Primary data was also generated from government and non-governmental reports and archival documents. The article argues that South Sudan will remain a litmus test for Ethiopia's regional security policy in so far as the former cannot escape from its fragility, its vulnerability to Egypt's foreign policy demarche, and the spillover effect of the insecurity situation of the state on Gambella.

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Introduction

South Sudan secured its independence in 2011 after a long-running conflict. As a result, it was considered the youngest state among African nations. The violent nature of the struggle accompanied the journey to independence, which never terminated with the birth of a state separated from Sudan. Since its independence, the country has disputed with Sudan over the sharing of oil revenues and contested territories (Solomon, 2012). Aside from the complicated relationship it has entered into Sudan, the state soon descended into civil war and has continued to suffer from poor governance and ethnic cleavages. Since December 2013, South Sudan has been engulfed in civil war, causing the loss of four hundred thousand lives, internal displacement, physical injury, and psychological trauma, Kier and his deputy Machar (Pur, 2022). The problem was not limited to South Sudan. Neighboring states, particularly Ethiopia, are also affected by the crisis.

Over the past few decades, literature and policy circles have increasingly paid closer attention to the Republic of South Sudan. One strand of the literature and policy-related works dwells on the historical aspects of the insurgency battling Khartoum and the role of external actors siding with

either the central government or the champion of the struggle for the self-determination of the people of South Sudan (Aalen, 2024; Prunier, 2004; Regassa, 2007). During the periods leading to the birth of the new state and the subsequent periods, literature focused on securing the peaceful separation of South Sudan from Sudan through the referendum, nation-and-state building projects, and addressing internal and external challenges (Luka, Deng, and Sarah, 2019). With the outbreak of civil war in the aftermath of 2014, works began to heed attention to peacemaking efforts, peace-keeping, and the repercussions of the crisis on regional security as well as the role of external actors (International Crisis Group, 2014; Kuol, 2018; Mustata & Virk, 2017; Williams, 2015). Notwithstanding the flourishing literature regarding the unfolding political crisis in South Sudan, scanty attention is paid to the newly created state's security implications for Ethiopia's regional security. Cognizant of this research lacuna and the necessity to address the precarious regional position Ethiopia is grappling to escape; this paper examines the current and future challenges South Sudan has brought to Ethiopia's regional policy. This research does not limit itself to the political crisis and the subsequent effect on Ethiopia's security. Instead, it seeks to move beyond the immediate security concerns Ethiopia currently feels.

The article is divided into five sections. Section two presents the methodology. The subsequent section discusses Ethiopia's relation with the Sudan within the context of South Sudan. Section four analyzed emerging and future security concerns of both Ethiopia and South Sudan, examining through the lenses of Egypt's foreign policy *demarche* into South Sudan and the current power dynamics in Gambella. Finally, section five presents conclusions and policy recommendations.

Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative research methodology because of the nature of the research problem and questions intended to be addressed (Lamont, 2015). Furthermore, the complex nature of the study entails an in-depth and interpretative understanding. The article's methods for collecting data were key informant interviews (KII) and document reviews. Key Informants were selected by employing purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Accordingly, KII was held with dozens of experts, security officers, and ex-chief security officers from Ethiopia and South Sudan. At the same time, secondary data was collected by consulting article journals, online newspapers, books, reports, and pertinent information regarding the crux of the study. Archival sources were also consulted. After data collection, data was analyzed qualitatively using document analysis.

The scope of the article is delimited to the contemporary security challenges emanating from South Sudan's vulnerability to Ethiopia's regional security policy. Notwithstanding the flourishing literature regarding the unfolding political crisis in South Sudan, scanty attention is paid to the newly created state's security implications for Ethiopia's regional security. Cognizant of this [policy]research lacuna, given the fact that Ethiopia had a role in South Sudan's "march to independence" (Belete, 2013) and Addis Ababa's role therein in subsequent decades in terms of

peacemaking and peacekeeping as well as the destabilizing and the diffusing effects on nearby Ethiopia and South Sudan's vulnerability to external intervention with severe security implication as well as the necessity to address the precarious regional position Ethiopia is grappling to escape therefrom, this work is intended to examine the current and future challenges South Sudan have brought to Ethiopia's regional policy. This research does not limit itself to the political crisis and its subsequent effect on Ethiopia's security. Instead, it seeks to move beyond the immediate security concerns Ethiopia is currently feeling vis-à-vis the fragile neighbor.

Ethiopia's Relations with Sudan within the Context of South Sudan

Before South Sudan acquired its formal independence in 2011 from Sudan, the South Sudan Liberation Army championed the formation of a separate statehood in South Sudan. Indeed, prior to the formation of a formal political organization, sporadic resistance was manifested during different times against the central government's policy of Khartoum (Martin, 2003). Ethiopia's relations with South Sudan should be viewed within the context of the latter's struggle for more autonomy, a federal structure with a democratic dispensation, and fair resource distribution after securing its independence and the subsequent decade (Hassan, 2023; Woodward, 2002).

During the earlier period, Ethiopia's relations with the political dynamics unfolding in Sudan were basically determined by the nature of the relationship: cordial or hostility (Belete, 2016). The Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLA) began its armed insurgency during the 1960s in response to Khartoum's policy of cultural and political marginalization spearheaded by the Arab-Islamic elite. This rebellion called for national self-determination (Kasfir, 1977; Stevens, 1976). To resolve the conflict in Sudan, the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement was signed between the SPLA and the Khartoum government in 1972 to grant significant autonomy to Southern Sudan save national defense and foreign policy (Young, 2019). In 1983, the Khartoum government dissolved the Southern government and the Legislative Assembly. The government also divided the region into three provinces, degrading the autonomy. This measure dismantled the very core elements of the then-agreement. As a result, the feeling of marginalization and exclusion from the existing arrangements had crystalized, which, in turn, had set the stage for the renewing of the violent conflict for the next three decades until both parties to the conflict signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 (Deng & Morrison, 2001).¹

When internal insurgencies increased their violence against the central governments in Ethiopia and Sudan, the relationship between the two states began to be characterized by hostility and proxy by intervention. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Sudan had supported the Eritrea People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, both fighting the central government of Ethiopia. In response to Khartoum's policy of intervention by proxy (Belete, 2016), the Socialist Government of Ethiopia began to provide manifold support to the

¹ Compared to other hotspot sites during the '90s and early 2000s, as Randolph succinctly points out, the war had "produced more casualties than those in Angola, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, Liberia, the Persian Gulf, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Rwanda put together" (Martin, 2002, p. 111).

SPLA. This support included military, strategic, propaganda, and diplomatic, even to the extent of letting the SPLA move freely in Gambella (Aalen, 2014). Indeed, the SPLA was not only counted on the support offered by Addis Ababa during its struggle in the 1980s. Nairobi and Kampala also provided support by offering an opportunity for the organization to forge and maintain ties with the outside world. Nevertheless, their support was not "on the scale that Ethiopia had been" (Woodward, 2002, p. 58). The fall of Mengistu's government in May 1991 compelled the SPLA to retreat from the sanctuary and expose the insurgent organization to vulnerability. The change of government in Addis Ababa resulted in the loss of SPLA's chief sympathizer and benefactor in the region.

In retrospect, both states would not have compromised their territorial integrity by losing their territories if both Addis Ababa and Khartoum had refrained from sponsoring rival insurgents against each other. After the downfall of the Dergue regime, the newly installed government in Addis Ababa restored its diplomatic relationship with Khartoum, which was the hitherto supporter of the insurgents fighting the government. This cordial relationship built between the two states provided a propitious environment for Khartoum's regime to launch an attack against the SPLA, which used to get assistance from the defunct regime in Addis Ababa.²

Following the first Popular Arabic and Islamic Conference in 1994 in Khartoum, the relationship between Sudan and its neighbors, particularly Ethiopia, deteriorated when the government in Sudan began sponsoring Islamic groups (Woodward, 2006). This Islamist foreign policy tended to undermine the secular foundation of the state and the overall stability of the country. In response, Addis Ababa began to reactivate the traditional policy of intervention by proxy. Unlike other states of the region, Addis Ababa was "less vocal in its response and less active in support of the Sudanese opposition" (Woodward, 2006, p. 96). Nevertheless, an aborted assassination attempt against the late President Mubarak of Egypt while attending the OAU summit in Addis Ababa propelled Ethiopia to condemn the incident and accuse Sudan of the occasion openly. Ethiopia's response was not limited to lodging diplomatic protest at the UN. Addis Ababa began to reciprocate Khartoum's sponsoring of terrorism by permitting insurgents fighting the government of Sudan-SPLA- to institute bases in areas bordering Sudan.³

The outbreak of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in the early days of May 1998 challenged the Addis Ababa-Asmara-Kampala strategy and Washington's overall strategy in the Horn of Africa. The emerging trend in the region had offered President Omar al-Bashir's regime an opportunity to break diplomatic isolation by renewing diplomatic ties with different parts of the world (Woodward, 2002, p. 58). Contrary to Khartoum, the situation was not beneficial to SPLA's operation. The increasing rapprochement between Sudan and Ethiopia following the outbreak of war restricted the activities of SPLA (Woodward, 2002).

² Archival sources

³Sudan Federal Army (SFA) and SPLA also received support from Eritrea and Uganda due to their shared concerns vis-à-vis the NIF regime in Khartoum. Indeed, Washington also supported and encouraged the policy of containing Khartoum. For further information, refer to Woodward, Peter (2006). *US Foreign Policy and the Horn of Africa*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate.

Ethiopia and South Sudan: Emerging and Future Security Concerns

Since Juba's independence, Ethiopia has entered into a formal diplomatic relationship by opening its Embassy. Apart from Ethiopia, multiple regional and international actors have demonstrated interest in the newly independent country. Again, the birth of the new state has further complicated the interstate relationship in the region. It is possible to argue that the birth of a new state has brought opportunities and challenges to Ethiopia's regional security policy. This part of the paper is not devoted to discussing the opportunities gleaned from the birth of a new state in the Horn as far as Ethiopia's regional policy is concerned. Instead, due attention is given to the actual and possible predicaments the Ethiopian state is dealing with in its regional modus operandi. Indeed, this could be viewed from the vantage points of Egypt's foreign policy demarche, Gambella's demographic matrix, and the concomitant security dynamics.

Egypt's Foreign Policy Demarche vis-a-vis South Sudan

Egypt had pursued a strategy of backing Khartoum irrespective of the type of government in power vis-à-vis armed insurgency in the southern part of the country. Cairo had a security concern that the possible independence of a separate statehood in Juba would have a repercussion on the transboundary water use of the Nile River, on which Egypt an unfair monopolistic claim has based on historical and natural rights which is also shared by Sudan (Tesfaye, 2001). To ameliorate a sense of security concern, Egypt was championing the unity of Sudan until the formal independence of South Sudan in 2011. Nevertheless, the inevitable emergence of a new upstream state could be considered in part as Cairo's "inept management of South Sudan's dossier" (Musso, 2014) under the regime of Hosni Mubarak. With the emergence of South Sudan as an independent state in the Greater Horn of Africa,⁴ Egypt has crafted and pursued foreign policy strategy with the aims of "getting the country into the Arab League to ensure that a language of understanding and communication exists" (Al-Monitor, 31 March 2014) as well as deepening ties with the country on many fields as part of its commitment to replicate its hitherto hegemonic influence in a new state, given the fact that "South Sudan occupies 45 percent of the Nile Basin which necessarily invites Cairo's concern over sustainable access to Nile waters" (Kuol, 2018, p. 56).

Egypt's aborted attempt to induce Juba to be a member of the Arab League (Al-Monitor, 28 March 2018) seemed to put the country under its sphere of influence, given the fact that Cairo has managed to use the organization as its vehicle for its foreign policy in the Arab World and the Horn of Africa. Since Egypt has always worked to maintain the status quo in using the Nile Water, the emergence of a new state across the River Basin is considered a threat to its perennial quest for the sole use of the water. It seemed that making Juba a member of the Arab League was considered a remedy for Cairo's foreign policy stress caused by its monopolistic ambition.

⁴ South Sudan is not the only country Egypt's foreign policy has given close attention to in East and Central Africa. Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda are also the focus of Egypt's foreign policy offensive in the domains of military, intelligence, and economic cooperation.

Over the past decade, Egypt has also pursued a suffocation strategy towards Ethiopia. Deepening ties with South Sudan is one of the significant components of this strategy. Accordingly, Egypt has engaged in forging water cooperation with South Sudan. On different occasions, officials of both states demonstrated their commitment to strengthening their cooperation in water resources and irrigation, particularly the utilization of the Nile River (Ahramonline, 6 November 2023). This water diplomacy is not aimed at ensuring reasonable water use. Instead, Cairo's *modus operandi* aims to bring Juba on its side at best or maintain its neutrality vis-à-vis Ethiopia's position on the Nile River and the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. One of the signs of Egypt's approach to the Nile River and the GERD is Cairo's reiterate to bring the issue to the attention of South Sudanese officials regarding the need to "addressed developments related to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the ongoing negotiation process to reach a binding legal agreement on its filling and operation" (Ahramonline, 6 November 2023). This marked the Egyptians' strong position to induce South Sudan to share Cairo's concern vis-à-vis Ethiopia's position, which could, in turn, help Cairo solidify its position.

Another discernable pattern in Egyptian policy vis-à-vis South Sudan is building security ties. In this regard, both parties signed bilateral military cooperation in March 2014. Thus far, the details of the military deal are not yet closed. Nevertheless, the pact aimed to augment the cooperation between the two states regarding "the sharing expertise, training of Special Forces, joint exercises, participation in seminars and search and rescue issues" (Sudan Tribune, 2024). Although Egypt insists on the necessity of mutually understood and recognized strategic projects and implementation, South Sudan has not yet implemented.⁵ Nevertheless, South Sudan institutions and the military force benefited from Egypt's support, such as medicine, tents, and military uniforms (Xinhua, 15 September 2019). Concerning the security domain, there was the allegation that Egypt was trying to secure the agreement of the Government of South Sudan to let its territory to Eritrea's backed opposition groups fighting Addis Ababa prior to 2018. In response to this, "Ethiopia signed a security agreement [with South Sudan] in which both countries committed not to host rebels or groups opposed to their respective governments" (Kuol, 2018).

Furthermore, Egypt is working on building technical ties with South Sudan through augmenting capacity building through training. Egypt is also pursuing a strategy of increasing its bilateral trade ties, reviving and expanding its projects, and increasing its investment in South Sudan.⁶ Hitherto, Egypt is actively engaged in South Sudan, which has demonstrated its keen interest in playing a key role in the region in different domains with possible security implications for Ethiopia. Egypt's increasing interest and presence in South Sudan demonstrates the former geopolitical ambition to corner Ethiopia from the regional politics that Addis Ababa is unwilling to concede. Furthermore, the increasing proclivity of Cairo to deepen its security and economic ties with Juba could undermine Ethiopia's security concern and interest in South Sudan in particular and in the Horn in general.

⁵ Interview with security experts

⁶ <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4758061-baby-saved-gaza-rubble-after-mother-killed-israeli-strike>

Ethiopia's Regional Security Policy in the Context of Gambella Power Dynamics

Ethiopia's security concerns, particularly about South Sudan, are closely related to local power dynamics and demographic matrix in Gambella.⁷ Gambella region is one of the twelve regions of Ethiopia in a current federal arrangement. Due to different factors, the region has remained one of the most conflict-ridden regions in the country (Samuel, 2021). The long-standing, entrenched, violent conflict between the Nuer and the Anywaa communities has caused political fragility that remains the prevailing feature of regional politics for several decades. The relationship between the two communities is getting increasingly antagonistic when the Nuer immigrants significantly influx into Ethiopia compared to the periods prior to the 90s.

The relationship between the two communities has become hostile and acquired a new dimension since the early 1990s. The exacerbated insecurity situation in South Sudan following the intensification of conflict between the SPLA and the Khartoum government in the 1990s and the early 2000s until the signing of the CPA between the two parties to the conflict, refugees, particularly from the Nuer community, had an influx into Ethiopia (Dereje, 2003; Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012) and many of informants asserted the Nuer have increasingly entered into Gambella in refugee.⁸ This situation has significantly shaped the hitherto demographic composition of the Gambella region, which had a relatively small size of the Nuer community compared to the Anywaa and has caused strained and suspicious relationships thereof since then (Dereje, 2014; Samuel, 2021). Throughout the past couple of decades, the two ethnic groups frequently found themselves in violent confrontations against each other to access political power (Dereje, 2003; Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012) and the subsequent benefit accrued from capturing the regional state politico-security apparatus.

As many of the informants explained, the relationship between the two communities is further strained due to the prevailing narration that considers the Nuer as “foreigners” and the alleged reason that people who traveled from South Sudan and settled in Gambella have a weak attachment and loyalty to the Ethiopian state (Samuel, 2021). The construction of an asymmetrical relationship between the Nuer and the state has further strained the existing tenuous ties between the communities in the region. Accordingly, the sporadic incidence of violence that erupted between the two communities often claimed the lives of citizens, injured and maimed, as well as resulted in physical destruction.⁹ This, in turn, has caused a security problem for the region and the way the government interacts with South Sudan.

When conflict erupted between SPLA and the Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO), the soldiers and military officers of the latter were crossing into Ethiopia with their

⁷ Gambella is located in southwestern Ethiopia. It is a multi-ethnic regional state. The regional constitution recognizes Nuer, Majangir, Komo, and Opo as natives. Apart from them, there are also other communities commonly termed *highlanders*, such as the Amhara, Oromo, Tigre, Guraghe, and others dubbed as settlers. Highlanders refer to people moving from different parts of Ethiopia to Gambella. The relationship between the Anywaa and the Nuer and between the Natives and the *Highlanders* is often frequented by hostility.

⁸ Interview with many of informants from Gambella.

⁹ Interview with informants from Gambella.

arms (Dereje, 2014). This is mainly because of the difficulties of maintaining strong border control and management across the adjacent border.¹⁰ Apart from the domino effect of the civil war of South Sudan on the neighboring area, the intertwined relationship between the two sides was evident when youths of Nuer origin traveled to South Sudan from Gambella to join the civil war during the heightened violence happening between the forces of Riek Machar and Salva Kiir.¹¹ The existence of porous border between the two states also provides a propitious environment for arms smuggling into Ethiopia's through different routes.¹² In summary, the continued civil war in South Sudan has continued to impact the security dynamics of Gambella and challenged the Ethiopian government to deal with the crisis. This problem will persist as long as the crisis in South Sudan cannot be solved amicably.

New and Future Relations: Landlockedness

Ethiopia's recent diplomatic move to secure access to the sea, particularly the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland on 1 January 2024, will determine Ethiopia's current and future relations with the neighboring states in general and South Sudan in particular. As far as the former one is concerned, which is not the focus of this section, they could feel a sense of anxiety and security concern vis-à-vis Addis Ababa's increasing escape from "the logic of habit" (Hopf, 2014), which used to be the cardinal principle of the country's foreign policy. Since both states are landlocked, deepening bilateral ties with South Sudan, partly out of the necessity of lightening and sharing the burden of diplomatic stress, could be a significant factor in the future relationship between the two states. Indeed, the strategy Ethiopia chooses to pursue to overcome its geographical disadvantages will determine and shape the future course of interaction between the two neighboring states.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The fragility of South Sudan and the concomitant "losing control over its territory" (Wassara, 2015) have continued to pose a formidable challenge to Ethiopia's foreign policy in different ways. Indeed, the country's fragility alone cannot be a legitimate factor to qualify as a litmus test for Ethiopia's foreign policy. Rather, the increasing role of Egypt in South Sudan and a frequent request for support of its policy vis-à-vis the use of the transboundary water resources, the construction and the filling of the GERD, as well as getting the support of strategic projects to advance the narrow national interest in tandem with the security complexity in Gambella are at the root of Ethiopia's regional security conundrum. Cognizant of the foregoing facts and trends, it is possible to argue that South Sudan will continue to matter significantly to Ethiopia's security interests.

Addressing the security concerns caused by domestic fragility inside South Sudan and the attendant consequences is not a quick-fix action. Instead, it entails a systematic and thoughtful

¹⁰ Interview with many of informants from Gambella security sector.

¹¹ Interview with one of ex-chief security officers from Gambella.

¹² Interview with many of informants from Gambella.

approach to the closely intertwined relationship between the inter-ethnic tensions in Gambella and politico-security dynamics in South Sudan. It is also indispensable to look closely at Egypt's foreign policy demarche into South Sudan to put pressure on Addis Ababa vis-à-vis the utilization of transboundary water resources. Accordingly, addressing the security conundrums enmeshed with the demographic power dynamics in Gambella could be considered a logical step to address Ethiopia's security vulnerability to the fragile security situation of South Sudan. Furthermore, strengthening security and technical ties with South Sudan is a means to overcome Egypt's demarche and reduce Cairo's increasing influence therein. In conclusion, mainstreaming South Sudan into Ethiopia's regional coherent policy and strategy to overcome the latter's geographical disadvantages and Cairo's further encroachment on the Horn of Africa should be considered.

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