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## African Union's Role in Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution in South Sudan

**Vikram Arjun**

Research Scholar, Department of African Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

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**Corresponding Author:** Vikram Arjun

### Abstract

The African Union (AU) has emerged as a central regional institution in promoting peace, security, and conflict resolution across Africa. This paper critically examines the African Union's role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in South Sudan following the country's independence in 2011. Drawing on secondary sources, policy reports, and scholarly literature, the study analyses the origins of the South Sudan conflict, the AU's mediation initiatives, collaboration with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and major peace agreements, including the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The paper further evaluates the AU's peacekeeping missions, humanitarian interventions, institutional capacity-building programmes, and support for transitional justice mechanisms such as the proposed Hybrid Court for South Sudan. While the AU has played a significant role in facilitating dialogue, reducing violence, and promoting regional cooperation, its effectiveness has been constrained by inadequate financial resources, weak enforcement mechanisms, competing interests among member states, and external geopolitical influences. The findings suggest that although the AU has contributed meaningfully to preventing further escalation of conflict and sustaining political negotiations, durable peace in South Sudan requires stronger institutional coordination, enhanced implementation mechanisms, greater accountability, inclusive governance, and sustained commitment from regional and international stakeholders. The study concludes that strengthening the AU's conflict prevention and peacebuilding capacities remains essential for achieving long-term stability and sustainable peace in South Sudan and across the African continent.

**Keywords:** African Union (AU), South Sudan, Peacebuilding, Conflict Resolution, IGAD

### Introduction

Following the end of World War II, many events indicated that peace and stability needed to be established by institutions strong enough to enforce them. Notably, the continent of Africa found a pressing need for better governance, especially after the failure of the "Organisation of African Unity (AU) and the United Nations (UN)" to prevent significant crises, such as the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the war in Somalia during the 1990s, and the Darfur crisis from 1990 to 2003. These failures motivated African leaders to create a more potent institution that could address the growing issues surrounding peace and security. As a result, in July 2002, the African Union was established following the ratification of the Constitutive Act. The creation of the AU paralleled the disintegration of the USSR

and the advent of a novel global geopolitical framework. The architects of the "African Union Constitutive Act (AFRICAN UNIONCA)" aimed to remedy limitations of the African Union Charter through the integration of innovative mechanisms. Since the inception of the African Union's participation in managing conflicts, it shows mixed results, with significant challenges & some unexpected obstacles.

The South Sudan got independence in July 2011 after 50 years of civil war, is a perfect example of these challenges. However, it did not address many critical issues such as the management of Nile waters, with potential risks of confrontation between South Sudan and regional stakeholders, in particular, Egypt. South Sudan should focus on state and nation-building, strengthen peace-building

initiatives, avoid further conflict, enhance security, and expedite economic growth to reduce poverty levels. Within this context, AU has played a critical role in the resolving inter-state conflicts in South Sudan. Being the leading organization committed to promoting peace and socio-economic integration across the continent, the African Union has engaged in mediation efforts and sent several missions aimed at resolving the struggle. An analysis of the African Union's endeavor in South Sudan does provide a good insight into understanding the effectiveness of the organization, the impact of divergent factors on the outcome of its actions, and reasons for the differential results encountered in different scenarios.

### Historical Background

Although South Sudan initially appeared to have a promising future as a newly independent state, it remains plagued by war and extreme poverty despite international support from donors for state-building and its vast oil resources. The country continues to rank among the poorest in the world, with one of the lowest literacy rates, largely due to decades of conflict with its northern counterpart. Its underdevelopment is also attributed to the neglect of the southern region by Sudan's former leadership. (Dagne, 2012) <sup>[6]</sup>. In 2013, President Kir fired his deputy, Riek Machar due to stern misconduct charges, sparking the current conflict. Machar's supporters were incensed by this move and turned into rebels who opposed the administration. Despite the AU, Kiir charged Machar with trying to pull out a coup. Rebels fighting against the government. Though evidence is The situation has since deteriorated, with the conflict threatening to escalate into a full-scale civil war, aligning with the World Bank's observation that countries emerging from war often relapse into conflict within a few years. The ongoing violence has had devastating effects on both the population and government institutions.

The conflict b/w Kiir and former deputy Machar, is rooted in their rivalry and ethnic differences. The two leaders hail from South Sudan's largest tribes, with Kiir belonging to the Dinka tribe and Machar to the Nuer, the second-largest ethnic group. These ethnic divisions have escalated what began as a political disagreement into an ethnic conflict, with both leaders drawing significant support from their respective tribes (Deng, 2011) <sup>[7]</sup>. The conflict has deepened mistrust and hostility between the Dinka and Nuer communities, making reconciliation between the two leaders and their tribes exceedingly difficult without addressing the underlying animosity. The insurgency, which involves a mainly Nuer ethnic group, has overrun vast areas of the country, including key oil-producing regions, fueling the crisis. Finally, in 2018, a new peace agreement, the 'Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS)', was signed between President Kiir and Machar, aiming to end the conflict and establish a transitional government. However civil war started on 15 dec 2013 was officially ended on 22 feb 2020 after the implementation of the agreement with the greater consistent efforts of the AU.

### Study Area

This landlocked nation, which is officially called as 'the

Republic of South Sudan', is situated in 'East Central Africa'. Juba is part of the UN subregion for North Africa, is the state's capital and main city. Ethiopia is the nation's eastern neighbour; Kenya is its southeast neighbour; Uganda is its southern neighbour; the DRC is its south-west neighbour; the Central African Republic is its western neighbour; and Sudan is its northern neighbour. There are an estimated 13 million people living in South Sudan, and their number is increasing at a pace of about 2.7% each year. It is estimated that 22% of the population resides in urban areas, primarily in large cities and towns like Malakal, Juba, Awil and yei.

South Sudan accommodates a variety of religious beliefs, though Christianity and Animism are the most commonly practiced faiths. The country is one of Africa's most ethnically and racially diverse nations. Ethnic communities in South Sudan include but are not limited to, the "Murle, Mandari, Didinga, Ndogo, Dinka, Kakwa, Bari, Lango, Dungotona, Azande, Shilluk, Kuku, Bviri, Lndi, Anuak, Bongo, and Acholi. The country recognizes multiple languages, with Arabic, Nuer, Bari, Zande, Dinka, and Shilluk being widely spoken alongside many others".

### Conflict in 'South Sudan'

The conflict in South Sudan has been ongoing even before the country declared its independence in 2011. Various parties, including external powers like the United States, China, and Russia, have been involved in fierce competition for control of the country's vast natural resources, which are central to the crisis. Amid the ongoing wars, no party can effectively pursue its strategic interests in South Sudan. Numerous countries, including the United States, Russia, China, and certain members of IGAD, have vested interests in the region. These external powers exert significant influence over South Sudanese politics and view one another with suspicion while pursuing their often conflicting agendas. Consequently, it is clear that the African Union's peace efforts in South Sudan are unlikely to succeed or endure until the interests of these major external powers are reconciled. South Sudan needs to develop strategies and initiatives to address the competing interests of these three countries and to maximize its oil, mineral wealth, and political capital (Okwuokei, V.C., & Efebeh, V.E. 2024) <sup>[18]</sup>. Garang, J. (1992) <sup>[10]</sup> in "*The Call for Democracy in Sudan*" examines an all-inclusive overview of the origins and objectives of 'the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)' in partnership with the 'Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA)', founded by 'John Garang de Mabior'. A native of Southern Sudan, Garang was a strong proponent of democracy within the region. He fought for the "rights and interests of the people of Sudan" irrespective of color, faith, or gender. This edition has four additional chapters that provide historical backgrounds to the development of SPLM. SPLM attempts to negotiate peace to solve the problem of Sudan after failure of the Koka Dam. The discussion ends with Garang's observations on the collapse of Sudan's third parliamentary democracy and the birth of the third military dictatorship in June 1989. Beswick, S. (2004) <sup>[3]</sup> in "*Sudan's Blood Memory: The Legacy of War, Ethnicity, and Slavery in Early South Sudan*." marked an oral tradition of South Sudan's people, with concerns for migration, environmental factors, and social and cultural

practices. Despite foreign aids promises and governmental budgets to an economy, the country has, so far, seen minimal economic progress in critical areas such as healthcare, infrastructure, and education. The book is a historical account dating back centuries; it traces the period, from the 14th century, on how, precisely, wars, tribalism, and the trade of slaves have impacted the culture and religious practices of the later years.

Dagne, T. in “*Sudan: The Crisis in North-South Peace Agreement*” provides a contextual background and a critical analysis of events in 2007, in view of the political climate and the situation of the CPA. The paper mainly concentrates on the Darfur crisis but touches briefly on the problems facing South Sudan and the CPA as well. Analysis: Issues considered in the paper include government-decided redeployment throughout Southern Sudan, particularly in oil-rich areas (Dagne, 2008) [5] African Union has continued to shaped the context of Africa. The writer covers the African Union's focus of development from the sole issue of African sovereignty to be enlarged to broader global interests: the ambition of becoming one and prosperous Africa ever increasingly independent from foreign help. The current objectives for the African Union are “economic progress, good governance, social development, and peace based on cooperation, self-reliance, and development which is sustainable” (Hirsch J., 2014) [12].

Johnson, H. F. (2016) [14] in his article “*South Sudan: The Untold Story from Independence to Civil War.*” analyses the conflict ranges from when South Sudan announced its independence in July 2011 to 2014, although it has placed more emphasis on the democratic turmoil that unfolded during the year 2013. Having witnessed firsthand these events in South Sudan, the African Union gives a detailed account of the challenges that occurred during this period. The text then deconstructs the draft report which “the African Union Commission of Inquiry published in 2014.” Using the nomenclature of “Southern Sudan” and “Southern Sudanese” while describing the state and people, the narrative of the history of South Sudan follows a rather direct and strong connection to personal experiences, and comprehensive field research at all levels and in course of study.

### Key Findings of “Human Rights Watch World Report 2024 on South Sudan Crisis”

**Ongoing Armed Conflict:** Despite the formation of a unity government in 2020 intended to end civil war, violent clashes between the government and opposing party continued which resulted in widespread insecurity.

**Human Rights Violations:** There are numerous reports of human rights abuses such as arbitrary detentions, killings and, torture. Civilians remain at risk of violence, particularly in conflict-affected areas.

**Displacement Crisis:** Millions of South Sudanese have been internally displaced, and many seek refuge from Sudan due to ongoing violence and instability there. The humanitarian situation is critical, with severe food insecurity affecting a large portion of the population.

**Restrictions on Freedoms:** The government has imposed restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. Journalists and activists face harassment and imprisonment for criticizing the government.

**Ethnic conflict:** According to the UN, in January 2024 “violence between Nuer and Murle communities in Jonglei and the greater Pibor Administrative Area linked to revenge killings and cattle raiding by organized armed groups and community defence militias”

The overall atmosphere in South Sudan remains precarious, with urgent needs for humanitarian aid and a concerted effort to address human rights violations.

### AU - IGAD's Peace Process in South Sudan

Okwuokei, V.C., & Efebeh, V.E. (2024) [18] found that the “African Union's Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)” had a substantial impact on the violence in South Sudan. The study also discovered that reducing violence in South Sudan was easier by using an ‘early warning system and a panel of wise people.’ ‘The African Standby Force, the Early Warning System, and the Peace and Security Commission’ are just a few of the components of the African Union Peace and Security Architecture that the report suggests should be strengthened and revitalized to give it a renewed capacity to perform. It took nearly two years for peace talks in South Sudan to reach an agreement, but the impact of this agreement is expected to be minimal. ‘The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)’ has been a prominent organization involved in mediating the conflict, along with special envoys from three major regional powers: Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan. Despite IGAD's efforts, the warring parties continue to refuse to resolve their differences.

Additionally, IGAD members have faced accusations of bias in the mediation process due to rivalries and long-standing regional divisions. To address these challenges, IGAD has expanded its efforts through the “IGAD-PLUS” initiative, which brings together “the African Union, the United Nations, China, the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Norway, and the IGAD Partners Forum” to enhance the steps taken to resolve the crisis.

### African Union Initiatives in Contemporary ‘South Sudan’ Crises

The African Union (AU) is actively involved in fostering peace and stability in South Sudan. Some of the initiatives by the AU in South Sudan include:

Addis Ababa meeting 2014 was mediated by AU and headed by ‘Salva Kiir and Riek Machar’ to ceasefire the conflict started in Dec 2013. An agreement was signed but hostilities continued. After its failure, AU Commission conducted Namibia meeting (2015) including conflicting parties and AU members. The AU Commission shows its concern and criticizes the conflict and addresses it to AU’s ‘Peace and Security Council’ about the state of affairs in newly independent South Sudan. AU suggested for dialogues to solve the conflict and to put sanctions on the leaders. “AU through IGAD and other East African

countries has initiated and held many meetings in Addis Ababa, Nigeria, South Africa, and Namibia to try and bring the two warring parties to agreement in an attempt to end the bloodshed. Without these meetings and initiatives, perhaps many more people would have lost their lives”

“Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (August 2015)” was made signed by both the conflicting parties and mediated by the ‘AU Peace and Security Council.’ The document said as follows: “the requirement to promote stability and peace; the need to end the conflict since 2013 and it also acknowledged that the conflict has historical roots and in the power struggle between different ethnicities. By signing the documents, the two parties committed themselves to accountability, reconciliation, healing, as well as the need to end impunity in the country.” After signing of ARCSS, first half of 2016 saw a peaceful situation in South Sudan as the two parties attempted to adhere to the provisions of the Agreement. But violence started on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2016.

‘The African Union (AU) Mission in South Sudan’, in 2016 aimed to ‘promote peace, stability, and security in the country. The mission was authorized to deploy a peacekeeping force to South Sudan, following the outbreak of violence in July 2016. The key objective of the AU Mission was to protect civilians, including those fleeing violence and seeking refuge in UN bases. The mission aimed to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid to affected populations. The AU mission worked to support the implementation of the “Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, signed in August 2015.” The Chairperson of the African Union Commission emphasizes the urgent need for strong political leadership and accountability from the “Transitional Government of National Unity in South Sudan” to restore peace and security in the country. It called for the deep investigations into recent violent incidents, including the deadly clashes in Juba. This mission also focused the importance of both national and international leaders in fostering commitment to lasting peace.’

Hybrid Court in 2017: ‘The African Union Commission’ in as per the 2015 Agreement started a mission in Juba in July 2017 with the South Sudan Transitional Government decided to establish the Hybrid Court for South Sudan in 2017

In 2019 AU conducted “National Training on Open source Geographic Information System Software” in context of “Pan-African Tsetse and Trypanosomiasis Eradication Campaign” of African Union which aims to eliminate tsetse flies and the diseases they transmit, specifically trypanosomiasis, from African countries.

**“AU Peace and Security Council Three-day Mission to the Republic of South Sudan”, 2020:** This mission assessed the implementation status of the ‘Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)’, which was signed on 12 September 2018. This evaluation is important as the ‘Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGONU)’ is scheduled to be established on 22 February 2020. Additionally, the mission aimed to demonstrate the ‘African Union’s solidarity with the people and government of South Sudan’ during this crucial period for the nation.

**Capacity Building and Training Program in South Sudan, 2023:** The AU has provided training and capacity-building programs for South Sudanese stakeholders, including youth and civil society organizations. These initiatives aim to enhance their skills and knowledge in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and governance. The AU has emphasized the importance of youth inclusion in peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes. The organization has supported initiatives that promote youth participation and empowerment in South Sudan

**Humanitarian Assistance 2024:** The AU has provided humanitarian assistance to “affected populations in South Sudan, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)”.

These initiatives demonstrate the AU’s commitment to promoting ‘peace, stability, and development in South Sudan.’

### **The Challenges faced by the “AFRICAN UNION AND IGAD” in resolving the conflict**

“The African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)” have crucial roles in resolving conflicts in South Sudan. While they have achieved some success, they face several challenges too

1. **Resource Constraints:** A significant challenge for the AU is its reliance on external funding for peacekeeping operations and conflict management initiatives. Inadequate resources can hinder the AU’s ability to respond promptly and independently to conflicts (African Union, 2021).
2. **Lack of Enforcement Mechanisms:** The AU often struggles to enforce peace agreements and ensure compliance from warring parties. Without effective mechanisms for sanctions and enforcement, the implementation of peace agreements can be undermined.
3. **Divisions Among Member States:** The effectiveness of the AU can be compromised by divisions among its member states, particularly when different states have conflicting interests in a given conflict. This situation can impede the efforts of organizations like IGAD, which also faces resource limitations. Financial and logistical challenges can restrict IGAD’s capacity to respond to conflicts, affecting the scope and scale of its conflict management initiatives.
4. **Complexity of Conflicts:** The Horn of Africa, where IGAD is particularly active, is marked by complex and protracted conflicts. Successfully mediating and resolving these multifaceted issues requires patience, perseverance, and the ability to navigate intricate political landscapes.
5. **Differing Member State Interests:** IGAD’s effectiveness in managing conflicts can be undermined when member states have varying interests in a particular situation. Balancing these competing interests while maintaining a united front is a significant challenge.
6. **Lack of Adequate Finances:** Insufficient financial resources and logistical support create a significant barrier to effective collaboration between the AU and IGAD in the areas of peace and security. This lack of

resources hampers their ability to intervene effectively in ongoing civil conflicts in the region, such as those in 'South Sudan and Somalia'.

Despite these challenges, a key question remains: Can the existing political settlement framework established by the AU in South Sudan foster both political stability and economic prosperity?

### Conclusion

The experience of South Sudan demonstrates both the potential and the limitations of regional organizations in managing complex intra-state conflicts. Since South Sudan's independence in 2011, the African Union has played a vital role in facilitating peace negotiations, supporting mediation through IGAD, encouraging humanitarian assistance, promoting institutional reforms, and advocating accountability through mechanisms such as the proposed Hybrid Court. These interventions have contributed to important milestones, including the ARCSS (2015) and the R-ARCSS (2018), which created opportunities for political dialogue and the establishment of transitional governance structures.

Despite these achievements, the persistence of political instability, ethnic violence, humanitarian crises, and delays in implementing peace agreements reveal that the AU's interventions alone have been insufficient to secure lasting peace. Structural challenges-including limited financial and logistical capacity, weak enforcement of peace agreements, divergent interests among member states, and the strategic involvement of external powers-continue to undermine the effectiveness of regional peace initiatives. Moreover, sustainable peace in South Sudan depends not only on political settlements among elite actors but also on inclusive governance, reconciliation among communities, institutional strengthening, economic recovery, and respect for human rights.

The South Sudan case highlights the importance of strengthening the African Peace and Security Architecture through greater financial autonomy, improved coordination between the AU, IGAD, the United Nations, and international partners, and more robust mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing peace agreements. Future peacebuilding efforts should prioritize local ownership, youth and women's participation, transitional justice, and long-term state-building rather than focusing solely on ceasefire negotiations. Ultimately, while the African Union has established itself as an indispensable actor in regional conflict management, its long-term success in South Sudan will depend on transforming peace agreements into sustainable institutions capable of addressing the underlying political, ethnic, and socio-economic drivers of conflict.

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