

Future Defense Policymaking in South Sudan and its Implications for Domestic Stability and US Interests in Eastern Africa


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INTRODUCTION

One of South Sudan's major challenges as it prepares for the formation of a government of national unity this year is the design of a new defense policy to address the security challenges facing the country. Designed in 2008, the country's current defense policy, the SPLA White Paper on Defence, is a relic from the past, overtaken by an evolved security environment that is significantly different from what it was envisaged to address 12 years ago. Mediators in South Sudan's shaky peace process recognize that a new defense policy is required as part of a comprehensive security sector transformation that includes determining future command, size and composition of South Sudan's national army.

The *raison d'être* of the SPLA White Paper is force transformation, which entailed modernizing the Sudan People's Liberation Army (the rebel army that fought the Sudanese state before independence in 2011) to improve its lethality and rapidity of response. The strategic environment that dictated the drafting of the defense policy was the acrimonious relationship between the South and the North in the lead-up to the referendum in January 2010. Disputes on border demarcation, oil revenue remittances and the impending referendum marked the strained ties between both entities. The defense policy thus identified Sudan as the most serious threat to the South, noting that this threat would originate from an attack by ground troops supported by mechanized units and militia proxies along the northern border. Force transformation was essentially informed by the need to counter this threat on the northern border. A key stipulation in the policy to trim the bloated size of the SPLA — at the time estimated to be 210,000 — was thus not implemented due to, among other issues, concern about this invasion.

There is need for policymakers to rethink defense policymaking in a radical manner to take stock of the country's evolving security environment. Although force transformation was necessary and is likely to be a significant plank of any security sector reform process going forward, policymakers need to look beyond it. They must embrace a dynamic defense policy that steers away from an over-emphasized aspect — the use of force — to address security challenges and focus more on strategies to win hearts and minds. This is because even if and when the current peace deal ends the present conflict, the threat of insurgency and militarized cattle raiding among the country's pastoralist communities will still constitute major security threats in the next political dispensation. Confronting these challenges requires a governmental rethink that prioritizes the building of a social contract that will restore the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of aggrieved social groups and disincentivize insurgency.



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WHY SOUTH SUDAN NEEDS A NEW DEFENSE POLICY

The end of the 22-year-old Sudanese civil war in 2005 ushered in liberal state-building interventions by the international community in South Sudan. Rebuilding South Sudan's military and helping it transition from a guerrilla force into a conventional army was a key component of the liberal post-conflict intervention. Starting from 2006 until 2012, the U.S. alone spent between \$150 million to \$300 million in non-lethal support aimed at professionalizing the Sudan People's Liberation Army.

The largest contributors to the military transformation process — the United States, Britain and Switzerland — focused on technical aspects such as professional military education, training non-commissioned officers and drafting guidelines for the transformation process, including a defense policy. The U.S. helped realize South Sudan's creation. However, a simmering rivalry between two factions in the ruling party, after independence in 2011, failed to induce South Sudan's closest friend, the U.S., to intervene in a manner to influence outcomes and thwart the possibility of war.

As the tensions in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) worsened, the transformation process was undermined considerably. A key stipulation to build a non-partisan army that was accountable to civilian oversight was upended. In the lead-up to open war in December 2013, the government recruited several ethnic militias, well-known among them the Mathiang Anyoor (Brown Caterpillar), to give it an edge over a budding insurgency led by former vice president-turned-rebel-leader Riek Machar. The onset of war marked the end of the liberal state-building intervention in the security sector as donors terminated support and focused on humanitarian assistance instead.

Yet regime security, visible in acts such as the recruitment of auxiliary militia forces, is not the only motivation for undermining the implementation of the defense policy. A major evolution in security threats ensued after independence in 2011. Notably, the main security threat — an invasion along the northern border — was blunted. South Sudan and Sudan stopped supporting each other's insurgents and forged closer ties for economic survival. A landlocked country,

South Sudan's oil reaches global markets via Sudan; pumped through a pipeline to a port on the Red Sea coast. Pipe rental fees are crucial for Sudan's ailing economy. Secondly, whereas in the past the Sudanese army may have posed a significant threat, the present security threats in South Sudan are homegrown insurgencies and militarized cattle rustling. At independence, South Sudan's new government faced a plethora of challenges; rampant corruption and nepotism alienated social groups and heightened competition for the spoils of state between rival elites in the ruling party. This high-stakes contest plunged the country into a civil war in December 2013. Subsequently, armed insurgencies have emerged to challenge the authority of the state. Even with the signature of the present shaky peace deal, some holdout groups have declined to sign the pact and continue to wage war against the government.

Cattle rustling has emerged as a significant threat that is increasingly militarized, transcending the use of traditional weapons such as bows and spears. The proliferation of small arms in the country and the region has ensured cattle herders' access to modern weaponry, thus increasing the scope and ferocity of cattle rustling. Furthermore, traditional conflict-solving methods that have worked for generations have been rendered obsolete as the power and authority of traditional leaders has been undermined. The situation is exacerbated by the politicization of cattle rustling by elites in the capital, meaning rustling is increasingly part of political cleavages at the center, often expressed in violent terms at the peripheries of the country.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

A tenuous peace deal signed in September 2018 and marked by significant implementation delays is currently holding, pending the successful cantonment of troops, agreement on the number of new states for the country and the formation of a government of national unity. A peace agreement that resolves a conflict between armed protagonists is usually underpinned by elaborate security arrangements; in this case, troop cantonment is a critical aspect of the deal for its utility to integrate rebel and government troops into a single army. A new deadlock over the issue of new states has stalemated progress on the implementation of the peace

deal. Nevertheless, whether the agreement succeeds or not will largely depend on how the parties to the conflict handle troop cantonment, which at this moment is far from being completed. Among other issues, the agreement recognizes that the parochial nature of the military in South Sudan is a contributing factor to the perpetuation of war and calls for a radical defense review that will delineate force size, composition, doctrine and a new defense policy.

OUTLINES OF A NEW DEFENSE POLICY AND A POSSIBLE U.S. ROLE

Many objectives of the SPLA White Paper on Defence are far from being achieved and the document itself ceased to be of relevance for policymakers. Force transformation remains a work in progress. Improving operational capabilities is incomplete on many fronts. For instance, the policy envisaged a nascent air capacity for transport and logistics purposes. To date, the army lacks strategic airlift capacity although the policy stipulated the purchase of fixed wing aircraft in 2017. The four Mi-24 helicopters in the possession of the military are inadequate to meet strategic airlift needs in a country in which most of the road infrastructure is non-existent or submerged in water for half of the year during the rainy season. This debacle presents challenges for the rapid deployment of troops and armor to hotspots around the country and compromises the ability to respond effectively to security threats in a timely manner. A new defense policy must build capacity for long-term strategic advantage on the home front and in the sub-region. This can be accomplished by embracing technology, investing in research and development, and strengthening homegrown abilities for military industry aimed at self-sufficiency in the manufacture of a wide array of military assets, both for internal and external consumption.

The design of a new defense policy must have the buy-in and participation of various and relevant stakeholders as noted in the peace agreement. This process should be conducted in an open and transparent manner that establishes strong benchmarks for accountability to undercut corrupt practices. In this respect, a new defense policy must reform business practices related to defense. It should prioritize transparency, accountability, budgetary implementation, affordability, harness innovation and improve the rapid deployment of assets.

A new defense policy must prioritize civilian oversight to hold government officials accountable. The failure to realize the aspirations of the current defense policy also arises from the fact that the ruling party and the army are interlinked deeply from a structural and philosophical perspective. The ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement treats the army as its armed wing, rather than as a national army. This means that it wields the army opportunistically to advance narrow objectives of elite politicians. As a result, democratic civilian oversight of the army is ineffective or non-existent. Cementing civilian oversight means the National Legislative Assembly must regularly review defense requirements, be active in policymaking and compel policymakers to produce

timely defense strategy documents. Long delays in producing timely defense strategies compromise the country's ability to respond adequately to security threats. Relegating the task of policymaking to government officials creates room for the abuse of public resources and the formulation of parochial policies. Most of all, the assembly must regularly review how defense ministry officials plan to implement outcomes envisaged in a national security architecture to ensure that defense policy is plugged into this structure and not work in isolation.

Equally important is the role that the U.S. should play in realizing defense policy outcomes in the future that are of utility to South Sudanese and to American interests in the region. South Sudan is in the American sphere of influence. American support for future defense transformation in South Sudan is critical to warding off the influence of malign powers in the world's newest country and entrenching an open governance system. Such support, however, should be conditioned on accountable procedures that avoid the mistakes of the past in the military transformation process and entrench democratic oversight on South Sudan's military when a peace agreement that is acceptable to all stakeholders takes hold.



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About the Author

Brian Adeba is deputy director of policy at the Enough Project in Washington, D.C., where he focuses on peace, conflict and governance issues in East Africa. Adeba also provides leadership and direction to the research, analysis and investigations conducted by The Sentry, an investigative and policy team working to counter the main drivers of conflict and create new leverage for peace, human rights and good governance in Africa.

A journalist by training, Adeba was previously an associate of the Security Governance Group, a think tank that focuses on security sector reform in fragile countries. Over the last few years, his research interests have focused on the interlinkages of media, conflict, human rights and security. He has supervised the coverage of the conflict zones of Darfur, Southern Kordofan, Blue Nile and Eastern Sudan for the Boston-based Education Development Center's Sudan Radio Service project in Nairobi, Kenya. Prior to this, he served as a project and publications coordinator at The Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo, Canada. In the media, Adeba edited Tech Media Reports (now the Wire Report) in Ottawa, Canada, where he focused on regulatory issues in the Canadian parliament. He holds a masters degree in journalism from Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada.