

STRATEGIC AIRLIFT CAPACITY

A CALL TO ACTION IN SOUTH SUDAN



ABOUT THIS SERIES

This collection of policy briefs explores national security priorities in the Transitional Period. Published jointly by the Center for Strategic and Policy Studies (CSPS) and the Security Studies Network (SSN), the policy briefs offer succinct and actionable recommendations for South Sudanese policymakers.

SERIES EDITOR

Brian Adeba

THE SOUTH SUDAN CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND POLICY STUDIES

The South Sudan Center for Strategic and Policy Studies (CSPS) is a non-profit organization, established in South Sudan just after independence, with the objective of producing policy relevant research that will enable the generation of critical and analytical thinking aimed at informing policy.

THE SECURITY STUDIES NETWORK

The Security Studies Network (SSN) is a volunteer and non-profit organization that brings together academics, researchers, practitioners, and students to exchange knowledge on best practices, explore collaborative research projects, link members to research resources, contribute to scholarship, and widen the scope of understanding security policy in South Sudan.

SUMMARY

- The national security risks to South Sudan will increase significantly in the near and short term. For the SSPDF to respond robustly to these complex set of threats, improving strategic airlift capacity is of utmost importance.
- Defense policymakers should begin exploring the possibility of acquiring strategic airlift capacity now.
- At the bare minimum, the SSPDF should have two fixed wing aircraft that can transport a battalion-sized force to any operational theater in South Sudan within three hours.

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers should prioritize the acquisition of strategic airlift capacity for the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) to enable a robust response to national security threats. Natural disasters, armed banditry, militarized cattle-raiding, porous and contested border areas, and incursions by armed nomadic tribes from neighboring countries, constitute the national security threats facing South Sudan. These threats are increasing daily, placing a great deal of pressure on the army to respond adequately. Equipping the SSPDF with the right technology to enhance its efficiency in providing security will be critical going forward.

The good news for policymakers is that the framework for boosting the airlift capacity of the SSPDF already exists. The revitalized peace agreement has established the premise for a strategic defense review, which covers a wide range of issues, including improving the operational capabilities of the armed forces.¹ So far, this review has delineated the force structure by cutting down the bloated size of the SSPDF, from an estimated 200,000 troops to 53,000 troops. In practical terms, there is still a lot of work to cover in the strategic review. Much of it will depend on whether the partners to the peace agreement muster the political will to achieve all the stipulations of the defense review. More broadly, the consolidation of the peace process will be a critical element in efforts to improve capacities in the SSPDF.

However, the efficiency of the nimble army called for in the defense review, will depend on technology. Force multipliers, such as aircraft with adequate payload capacities, are crucial for rapid response and troop escalation in times of threat. But in many countries, defense acquisition cycles are long and are marked by inevitable delays. To offset these delays, an early start to long-term big-ticket acquisitions is useful. The interim period is an opportune time to kickstart acquisition processes. Policymakers should take deliberate steps and think strategically about the need to source airlift capacity for the SSPDF. Incorporating such thinking into the work of the Revitalized Strategic Defense and Security Review Board and signalling the importance of airlift capacity will convince other levels of government, especially the executive and the National Legislative Assembly, to be on board. South Sudanese defense policy planners have two tasks to achieve in the interim period: 1) Estimate the present airlift capabilities and 2) predict what the future requirements are.

¹ IGAD, “Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan,” (Addis Ababa, September 18, 2018): 36.

CURRENT AIRLIFT CAPACITY: THE CASE FOR IMPROVEMENT

There are two types of airlift capacity for armed forces the world over: strategic and tactical. Strategic airlift is the ability to project power through the transport of military materiel and personnel over long distances, which could also be across continents. Tactical airlift, on the other hand, alludes to the ability to deploy resources and materiel with high precision into specific locations, which could be theaters of action.² Load capacity (cargo and passengers) is the one factor that differentiates between the aircraft designed for strategic and tactical airlift purposes. Typically, strategic airlift planes are larger and can fly longer distances than tactical lifters.³ At the present, the SSPDF does not have strategic airlift capacity. The four Mi-24 helicopters that the SSPDF owns, provide a nascent base for tactical airlift. But their limited payload capacity of 8-16 personnel per aircraft is insufficient to meet the overall airlift requirements of the army. Given that the SSPDF does not own a fixed wing transport aircraft, the capacity gap on strategic airlift is particularly acute and policymakers should pay attention to it.

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of South Sudan, poor infrastructure, and widely dispersed threats, requires the establishment of a strategic transport force, consisting of the riverine, road and air transport components of the army to enhance the movement of combat troops and logistic supplies, to operational theaters.⁴ Subsequently, the SPLA's **Transformation Strategy 2017**, hinted at the purchase of fixed wing aircraft by 2017.⁵ But unlike **Objective Force 2017**, which gives a broad outline of policy, the **Transformation Strategy 2017** drills down to the technicalities of what needs to be done. A close reading of the strategy reveals that it does not prioritize strategic airlift. Rather, it envisages enhanced air surveillance and defense capabilities.⁶ It must be noted that the context for these policy papers was the acrimonious relationship between Khartoum and Juba during the interim period following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. Policymakers in Juba identified Sudan as a threat to the security of South Sudan. Policies were therefore oriented toward countering this threat from the north.

But South Sudan is now an independent country and requires a clear strategy for strategic airlift to address its security needs. Policymakers in South Sudan often pay scant attention to implementing stipulations outlined in strategic policy documents. But this indifference needs to change if the country is to adequately address its problems. Furthermore,

² Ibid, 37.

³ Cezar Vasilescu, "Strategic Airlift Capacity: From Theory to Practice," *Journal of Defense Resources Management* Vol 2, No. 2 (2011): 68.

⁴ Sudan People's Liberation Army, "Objective Force 2017 Concept," (May 2011): 13.

⁵ Brian Adeba, "Beyond Force Transformation: Rethinking South Sudan's Defence Policy," *The RUSI Journal* Vol. 163, No. 6 (2018): 63

⁶ Sudan People's Liberation Army, "Transformation Strategy 2017: Part 2, Transformation Programme, 2012-2017."

considering the dearth of information on the implementation of the *Transformation Strategy 2017*, it is safe to assume that its stated objectives have not been achieved. Since 2017, there is no evidence to suggest that the SSPDF has purchased fixed wing aircraft as stated in the strategy.

The absence of a clear strategy on strategic airlift is particularly concerning for several reasons. Geopolitically, South Sudan is in a volatile security environment and faces myriad security risks as a result. The dispute over the Illemi Triangle, for example, illustrates the risk that neighbouring countries pose for the territorial integrity of South Sudan.⁷ Further north on the border with Sudan, the frequent incursions of the nomadic Arab Misseriya tribe into contested border areas magnifies the risk of escalation with Khartoum. Additionally, South Sudan's weak institutional capacity means it does not have the resources to monitor its vast border. Porous borders are susceptible to infiltration by rogue elements such as insurgents from neighboring countries and nomadic Sahel peoples like the Ambororo.⁸ Domestically, the increasing frequency of devastating floods demonstrates the dangers that natural disasters pose for national security.⁹ In addition, in the absence of coherent mitigation strategies, traditional blood feuds, armed banditry, and cattle-rustling are on the rise and show no sign of abating.¹⁰

These external and internal threats suggest that in the next few years, the SSPDF will face increasing pressure to provide security for the people of South Sudan. Floods, for instance, may require the army to participate in humanitarian missions in remote corners of the country. Some of these missions will require airlift capabilities. Militarized cattle-raiding and armed banditry are threats that may involve coercive response measures. Foreign military incursions into contested border areas, like Abyei and Mile 14, cannot be ruled out in the future. To present a credible deterrent to hostile forces, the quick mobilization of military assets and personnel will be of utmost importance. Rapid response involves the transport of troops and force multipliers to the theaters of action quickly. The poor state of roads in South Sudan means that effective response can only be possible by air.

As the preceding discussion shows, core strategic airlift capacity will provide the SSPDF crucial mobility for deterring and defeating aggression. More than ever, deploying time-critical forces and military hardware to boost security is going to be a game-changer now and in the future.

7 Radio Tamazuj, "South Sudan and Kenya Begin Meetings on Border Issues," July 14, 2019, available at <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/south-sudan-and-kenya-begin-meetings-on-border-issues>

8 The Ambororo are transnational Fulani cattle keepers who roam the Sahel for pasture.

9 Reliefweb, "South Sudan: Thousands of Suffering the Impact of Flooding," August 6, 2021, available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-thousands-people-suffering-impact-flooding>

10 Daniel Mareng Wek, "Dozens Dead in South Sudan Intercommunal Fighting," Voice of America, October 5, 2021, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-sudan-intercommunal-fighting/6257839.html>

BRIEF BACKGROUND

The concept of airlift is not entirely new to the SSPDF. During the liberation war, the SSPDF’s forerunner, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), utilized the airlift capabilities of allies in the region for both strategic and tactical objectives. For the former, troops for the New Sudan Brigade in Central Equatoria, were airlifted to the Eritrea-Sudan border by a friendly ally.¹¹ For the latter, in the 1980s, an Ethiopian air force plane attempted an air drop of supplies for beleaguered SPLA forces stranded in the Tingili desert in Eastern Equatoria.¹²

Nevertheless, the security structure in South Sudan has historically been overwhelmingly land-centric. The decisive combat operations of the war were all on land, with air support playing a minimal role, even for the more resourced Sudanese Armed Forces. The Sudanese air force, using strategic long-range bombing raids conducted by Antonov carriers, was instrumental in inflicting terror in the liberated areas. But these sorties did not result in decisive outcomes. In the end, victory, be it for the Sudanese army or the SPLA, depended on ground troops throughout the war.

But undoing the land-centric precedent, requires that policymakers gain a deeper understanding of the importance of airlift capacity in amplifying abilities such as the quick transport of ground troops to remote areas, rescue operations in hostile environments,

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and resupplying troops in operational theaters. When ground troops have insufficient airlift support, their deployment is slow and their ability to respond robustly to threats is limited. Airlift capacity is expensive, but it is important because

it enables a military with limited resources to expand the breadth of its operations and project power over a vast area and for longer periods.

¹¹ Interview with a former operational commander of the SPLA.

¹² Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Strategic airlift capacity is not cheap. Aircraft need runways, constant maintenance, and skilled personnel to operate. But with deliberate planning and political will, it is possible to enhance airlift capacities in South Sudan for national security reasons. Ideally, the purchase of strategic military assets should be tethered to a comprehensive national security and defense policy framework. In other words, such purchases should be based on requirements identified in a national security policy or a defense strategy.¹³ Given the general poor state of airlift capacity in South Sudan, any defense policy review will ultimately point to improving such capacity. But in the meantime, as the country awaits the drafting of a national security and defense policy, there is need to lay the groundwork for short-term and long-term defense acquisition of strategic air lifters. More importantly, implementing the peace agreement to the letter and ending all wars in South Sudan through negotiation is crucial for creating an enabling environment for mobilizing the financial resources needed to improve airlift capacity.

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hours to tilt advantages in favor of the SSPDF. When required, lifters should be able to fly round the clock to any corner of South Sudan for a variety of purposes: to resupply troops, to evacuate personnel or civilians in times of disaster, and to air drop tactical combat units. But in the short term, at least one aircraft would

be sufficient, with the hope that the number will be scaled up later. The ideal aircraft that will meet the strategic airlift needs of the SSDF include the C-130 Hercules or the Antonov An-124. For tactical airlift, small or medium-sized helicopter brands like the Mi-17, UH-60 Black Hawk, and the SA 330 Puma are ideal.¹⁴ Overall, this policy brief estimates that the exigencies of terrain, army size, climate conditions, and security threats, demand that South Sudan should aim to have six aircraft for strategic airlift within the next 10-15 years.

¹³ Currently, South Sudan does not have a National Security Policy. A draft was presented to cabinet in October 2013, but further movement on it was stymied. The *SPLA White Paper on Defence* is old and needs updating to meet the requirements of the evolved security environment.

¹⁴ This list is by no means comprehensive.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the steps that should immediately be undertaken by defense policymakers.

1-FOR THE STRATEGIC DEFENSE AND SECURITY REVIEW BOARD

Concept development: Defense policymakers should incorporate the issue of improving strategic airlift capacity into the current discussions of the Revitalized Strategic Defense Review Board with the aim of producing a blueprint that should be marketed to defense stakeholders in the executive branch of government and the legislature.

2-FOR THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Conduct a needs assessment: Working in concert with the Revitalized Strategic Defense Review Board, the minister should conduct the research to identify the type of aircraft required for the terrain in South Sudan, operational facilities, personnel, and training requirements. A needs assessment should also identify initial purchase cost and should involve a variety of stakeholders within government.

Initiate resource planning: This will identify where the resources for the purchase will come from.

3-FOR THE CHIEF OF DEFENSE FORCES

Form an army research committee: On its own accord and not subject to interference from political office holders, the army must independently research and identify the airlift needs of the SSPDF as well as aircraft specifications. This will feed into the Minister of Defense's research on the issue.

4-FOR THE SECURITY COMMITTEE IN THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Sponsor a resolution on airlift Capacity: The chair of the Security Committee should work in tandem with colleagues in the Assembly to mobilize legislative endorsement of this critical national defense objective by passing a formal resolution in the assembly that obligates the executive to prioritize airlift capacity for the SSPDF.

Provide regular oversight: The Security Committee, together with relevant committees on public accounts and procurement, should demand regular updates from the executive and the Revitalized Strategic Defense Security Review Board on progress on the acquisition process. Such scrutiny should ensure that officials adhere to the budgetary allocation for acquisition, that the process is corruption-free, that timelines are met, and that quality specifications are achieved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Security Studies Network (SSN) is a volunteer organization that brings together academics, researchers, practitioners, and students to exchange knowledge on best practices, explore collaborative research projects, link members to research resources, contribute to scholarship, and widen the scope of understanding security policy in South Sudan.

In general, scholarship on South Sudanese defense and security issues is in its nascent stages, marked by a considerable scantiness in literature, whether produced by South Sudanese or foreign scholars. Founded in 2019, the SSN aims to inspire research to fill the gaps in literature. The SSN membership includes anyone interested in defense and security scholarship on South Sudan, be they South Sudanese or otherwise. The aim of this network is pure scholarship.

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Phone:

+211 (0) 920 310 415
+211 (0) 915 652 847

Web:

<https://cspss.org.ss>

Address:

P.O. BOX 619, Hai Jebrona, Adjacent to Martyrs School,
Opposite Simba Playground, Juba, South Sudan.