

THE PULL AND PUSH FACTORS INFORMING AND INFLUENCING SOUTH SUDAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

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"We have no eternal allies, and we have no eternal enemies. Our interests are eternal, and those interests it is our duty to follow." - Palmerston (1848:142).

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A country's foreign policy is an indicator of its interests, character, and direction. How a nation behaves or is represented 'abroad' is primarily an extension of its domestic beliefs and behaviours. Of course, the actions and interests of other countries are factors in foreign policy considerations. But a nation's values, morals and national interest should be reflected in its foreign policy, since the foreign policy of a country is its first line of defence.

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A nation's foreign policy is a toolbox that should promote, project, and protect that country's integrity and interests. To serve such a function, a country's foreign policy should be based on and driven by a clear set of principles, defined goals of national interest and concrete course of actions to secure such goals.¹ In the absence of thought-through national interest and its goals, other countries, institutions and individuals are likely to fill the vacuum with their interests and objectives and hijack state infrastructure and national power to serve and secure their interests and goals.

This paper examines three interrelated questions: What is South Sudan's national interest and what are its foreign goals? What are the pull and push factors informing and influencing the Government of South Sudan's approach to its foreign policy? How best can South Sudan serve and secure its national interest? The paper makes two assumptions.

1. Alden, Chris, and Amnon Aran. *Foreign policy analysis: new approaches*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.

First, South Sudan has not clearly identified or communicated compellingly its national interest. If it has, then the country does not have the will or the means to secure the national interest. Secondly, rather than being driven by clear principles and national values, the driving force behind South Sudan's international relations seems to be the fear of a regime change agenda by Western countries.

2.0 BACKGROUND

South Sudan is a country born out of a regime change policy. Before the breakup of Sudan into Sudan and South Sudan, the then regime governing Sudan was characterised by the politics of exclusion, betrayal of trust, and religious chauvinism. According to the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM), "the central problem of Sudan [is that it is] essentially an artificial state, based on a political system and an institutional framework of ethnic and religious chauvinism... and Islamic Fundamentalism. It is a state that excludes the vast majority of its citizens."²

South Sudanese took up arms to change a governance system and a regime that was "characterised by racism and religious bigotry as the main parameters governing national politics, economic opportunities and social interaction"³ into a "united, democratic and secular Sudan."⁴ When this objective failed, the SPLM/SPLA convinced and mobilised the international community to secure the country's right to self-determination. Through the exercise of a referendum, Southern Sudan became the Republic of South Sudan in 2011.

Two years after independence, South Sudan descended into a brutal civil war which resulted into the split of the SPLM into two factions, rendering the party incapable of governing. Untold atrocities have been committed during this period: December 2013 and now. The country is, as a result, characterised by widespread conflicts, dire economic and humanitarian situation, military and political stalemate and mounting international pressure on the country to change course. The signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan in 2018 has not been able to resolve the security, political, economic and socio-cultural challenges that have faced the country since independence.

2. SPLM Manifesto http://theirwords.org/media/transfer/doc/1_sd_splm_spla_2008_43-6de1f0c-9e1cd573f4e71b8acf4af0b55.pdf

3. *Ibid*

4. *Ibid*

The failure by numerous groups to change the Government of South Sudan through armed struggles and or negotiated settlements has given rise to calls for international interventions to midwife a transition to a better governed country.⁵

Some members of the international community have taken actions to redefine their relations with South Sudan, including the imposition of targeted sanctions and trade restrictions to incentivise a change of behaviour by the leaders of South Sudan. These calls and actions taken by some members of the international community have been seen and interpreted by South Sudan leaders as calls for 'regime change'.⁶ This perception and belief that Western countries have a plan and are working towards changing the regime in South Sudan are the factors informing and influencing South Sudan's international relations with other countries, rather than the traditional concept of national interest.

5. Tiitmamer, Nhial. *Flaws in Kate Almquist Knopf's Call for Trusteeship in South Sudan*. Sudd Institute, 2016.

6. De Waal, Alex. "When kleptocracy becomes insolvent: Brute causes of the civil war in South Sudan." *African Affairs* 113.452 (2014): 347-369.

3.0 THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL INTEREST.

Different people have different perceptions of what is and ought to be in the best interest of a country, a society or a nation. But there is some agreement among scholars that a society ought to exist for a purpose, the so-called *raison d'état*. This purpose has been variously described as a 'vision of a good life,' the 'general will' of a society, or what is in the best interest of a people.⁷ It is this best interest that provides "the general and continuing ends for which a nation acts."⁸ This is the basis upon which a state may or may not be willing to make concessions and is prepared, if necessary, to use force, to impose trade restrictions, to take part in bilateral or multilateral platforms to defend and to secure this interest.

Some scholars have reduced the concept of national interest to three core components: "the security and physical survival of the state, its independence and liberty, and the economic prosperity of the populace."⁹ Others prefer to refer to the national interest as 'irreducible national values.'¹⁰ These values or interests relate to how a country develops a cohesive national society, the strengthening of the form and function of a state, the fostering of a strong national identity and a global order that is stable, just and rules-based and that respects the rights and opportunity of every state to exist and to prosper.¹¹

I find the following definition of national interest compelling and measurable: National interest is:

Promoting the welfare of our citizens, through the advancement of six strategic aims: 1) a free and democratic society, properly protected from its enemies; 2) a strong, sustainable and growing economy; 3) a healthy, active, secure, socially cohesive, socially mobile, socially responsible and well-educated population; 4) a fair deal for those who are poor or vulnerable; 5) a vibrant culture; and 6) a beautiful and sustainable built and natural environment.¹²

7 Nye Jr, Joseph S. "Redefining the national interest." *Foreign Affairs* (1999): 22-35.

8 Brookings Institution as cited in <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/international-politics/national-interest-meaning-components-and-methods/48487>

9 George, Alexander L. *On foreign policy: unfinished business*. Routledge, 2006 cited in Edmunds, Timothy, Jamie Gaskarth, and Robin Porter, eds. *British foreign policy and the national interest: identity, strategy and security*. Springer, 2014, page 42.

10 George, Alexander L. *On foreign policy: unfinished business*. Routledge, 2006, page 10.

11 Nye Jr, Joseph S. "Redefining the national interest." *Foreign Affairs* (1999): 22-35.

12 Cited in Edmunds, Timothy, Jamie Gaskarth, and Robin Porter, eds. *British foreign policy and the national interest: identity, strategy and security*. Springer, 2014, page 88.

This definition places citizens at the centre of foreign policy and provides some framework for assessing a foreign policy's appropriateness.

Irrespective of which definition is preferred, several countries consider securing the physical, political, economic and cultural identity and wellbeing of a country as vital national interests.¹³ Vital national interests are interests that are impervious to ideological or changes in governments because they are core to the security, survival and wellbeing of a country and its people.

¹³ Nye Jr, Joseph S. "Redefining the national interest." *Foreign Affairs* (1999): 22-35

A nation's foreign policy pursues that country's national interests outside its borders and should be shaped and constrained by those interests. That is one reason countries must have clear national interest goals.

The goals of the national interest of a country are not only the signposts for other countries to calibrate or recalibrate their beliefs about and behaviours towards that country; they also provide the framework that a country uses to propose, examine rigorously, justify, denounce or evaluate the adequacy of a nation's foreign policy or action.

To be a helpful framework, national interest should be a sum of the wide range of citizens' interests and beliefs and not a mere smokescreen for a governing elite's self-interest. For governments to act in the international arena on behalf of an entire society, their understanding and pursuit of national interests cannot be whatever the most powerful say it is. Neither should it be based only on the impulse or the preference of the 'gun class'. While there are no fireproof methods for ensuring a whole society approach to defining national interest, the expectation is that those entrusted with the powers to decide on foreign policy would be loyal to their country and allow their actions and omissions to be conditioned and governed by values and principles that advance the wellbeing of their people and which puts the safety and economic prosperity of their country at least as high as that of other countries.

It is not only what a country says what its vital interests are that elicits respect from other countries, but also what that country is willing and able to do in order to defend and secure those interests. The alignment of national interest with actual foreign policies and the deployment of resources to secure, protect and project this or these national interests either through diplomacy, propaganda, economic instruments of power, bilateral or multilateral or coercive means, are what show how a country is serious about ensuring its paramount right and duty to survive and thrive as a country.

4.0 WHAT OUGHT TO BE THE NATIONAL INTEREST (S) OF SOUTH SUDAN

Article 43 of the Transitional Constitution of South Sudan provides that the “Foreign Policy of the Republic of South Sudan shall serve the national interest...”¹⁴ While the Constitution does not define or outline the ‘national interest’, it outlines the country’s foundational values and foreign policy goals. The Constitution provides that the foundational values of South Sudan are “justice, equality and respect for human dignity, and advancement of human rights and fundamental freedoms.”¹⁵

¹⁴ *The Transitional Constitution of South Sudan, 2011.*

¹⁵ *See article 1 (5) of The Transitional Constitution of South Sudan, 2011.*

Values are the foundations of a country’s political, cultural and physical identities and “identities are the basis of interests.”¹⁶ Justice, equality, dignity, human rights, and freedoms are essential parts of South Sudan’s political, economic, and cultural heritage and, thus, necessary for South Sudan’s survival as a country and a state. Any action within or outside South Sudan’s borders that threatens these values poses grave danger to the country’s survival and integrity. It is, therefore, in the national interest of South Sudan to use all means necessary to secure and defend these foundational values.

South Sudan’s Foreign Policy should promote, protect, and project the national prestige of the country in both words and actions.

In the provision that South Sudan’s Foreign Policy “shall serve the national interest”¹⁷ of the country and its peoples, the Constitution presupposes that there is one overriding interest of the country. While it is debatable whether it is possible or even desirable for a country to have one overall national interest, it must be faithful to the Constitution’s text as a lawyer. The one potentially overriding national interest one could think of is that of the life of the nation. Understood that way, ensuring the continued survival of South Sudan as one united, peaceful and prosperous country is the end to which foreign policy should be driving. Along that road are other interests of national importance, but these “national interests are several narrower goals, which serve the overriding purpose.”¹⁸

Therefore, if South Sudan’s “foreign policy is to serve the national interest” of the country, it must serve the course of justice, strive to ensure the country’s relative political, economic and military equilibrium or balance of power. It must also strive to safeguard the security and dignified life of South Sudanese.

¹⁶ *Wendt, Alexander. “Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics.” International organization 46.2 (1992): 391-425.*

¹⁷ *See article 43 of The Transitional Constitution of South Sudan, 2011 and emphasis is mine.*

¹⁸ *Nincic, Miroslav. “The national interest and its interpretation.” The review of Politics (1999): 29-55.*

The Constitution expects that the Foreign Policy of South Sudan should do these while simultaneously promoting international cooperation, African integration, respect for human rights, peaceful resolution of conflicts, respect for international law and good neighbourliness.

5.0 WHAT IS THE NATIONAL INTEREST OF SOUTH SUDAN?

The national interest of South Sudan appears to be the survival in perpetuity of the regime governing the country and presidency for life for the current President of the Republic of South Sudan. Since it appears that defending the regime and preserving the President's survival have become the major thrust of the country's foreign policy, it is unlikely that such foreign policy goals are sufficient enough to serve the people's common good. Such a narrow focus of foreign policy is perhaps one reason why South Sudan's Foreign Policy can best be described as a 'flirtation with pragmatic or survival foreign policy' that is often punctuated by 'rhetorical radicalism.'

In 2014, there was an attempt to rationalise a foreign policy that projects and protects vital national interests. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of South Sudan proposed a Draft Policy Foreign Policy Document for the country, which outlined some foreign policy goals, principles and approaches to securing these goals and the resources required to implement the policy. However, this process

appeared to have stalled, and the Draft Foreign Policy Document may still be in a draft form.

The absence of a national interest, anchored on our values and identities, from South Sudan's foreign policy has severe implications for the country's survival and security. When Foreign Policy serves the baser motive of people in power, it means, for example, that the criteria for who are the friends or enemies of the country are mainly determined by whether they support or do not support the President's desire to be in power for life. Any critique of the actions or inactions of the country's leaders is seen and treated as threats to the regime's survival and its leaders. Such a threat is treated as a national security threat, and national assets are quickly and heavily deployed to address it. Of course, a threat to a people's right to decide who should govern them and for how long is a severe threat and should be treated as such. However, not every critique of a government's policies amounts to dubious desires for regime change.

6.0 REGIME CHANGE AS THE ORGANISING CONCEPT OF SOUTH SUDAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

One of the primary impulses that can be said to determine South Sudan's Foreign Policy is fear - the fear of a regime change agenda held by several, mainly Western countries. These countries, ironically, stood by South Sudanese during the years of the liberation war and who appear to be genuinely disappointed by what South Sudan has become.

This fear of a plan to change the regime may not be entirely unfounded. Some of these countries' public utterances could be interpreted to convey a desire for leadership change in South Sudan. The government of South Sudan has also interpreted the imposition of sanctions on some key individuals in the government as part of that regime change agenda.

The concept of a regime refers to a government or a system of governance. In this paper, it is used to refer to a government or a system of governance. So, in its primary sense, regime change is replacing a government or a governance system with another. Historically, regime change as a goal of foreign policy was used by powerful countries who were motivated by desires to exploit natural resources or imperialistic impulses. They would remove unfriendly or uncooperative regimes perceived to be standing in their way of controlling and 'capturing' a given foreign state. They use regime change as a tool to advance their national interests.¹⁹ They may engineer a coup d'état, rebellion, uprising, prop up opposition groups. They may further sanction or use political surrogacy.²⁰ In extreme cases, direct military interventions under any guise have been tools used in the past to change regimes in Africa with limited success.²¹ Even then, regime change politics were a woeful failure that resulted in entrenching dictatorial regimes, collapsed economies, failed, collapsed or criminal states.²²

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a multipolar world, increased calls and a clamour for a rules-based international order, rarely have overt resort to regime change as a foreign policy goal been undertaken.²³ Governments that used to depose other regimes to secure their interests, now get economic and other non-tangible benefits that accrue from supporting autocratic regimes. While these powerful nations condemn these authoritarian regimes in public, they court and support these same autocrats in private.

¹⁹ Schraeder, Peter J. *United States foreign policy toward Africa: Incrementalism, crisis and change*. Vol. 31. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ McCorley, Ciara. "Structure, agency and regime change: a comparative analysis of social actors and regime change in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31.2 (2013): 265-282.

²² Nye Jr, Joseph S. "The decline of America's soft power-Why Washington should worry." *Foreign Aff.* 83 (2004): 16.

²³ Gorjão, Paulo. "Regime change and foreign policy: Portugal, Indonesia and the self-determination of East Timor." *Democratization* 9.4 (2002): 142-158.

It is, therefore, arguable that the narrative of regime change agendas are shields or smokescreens and powerful tools that autocrats use to delegitimise credible internal opposition, blackmail and gaslight genuine concerns and criticism from allies and justify their failures and oppressive policies. In the past, allegations of regime change referred to actual policies of foreign governments bent on changing regimes they do not like and replace it with ones that are friendlier to their national interests. Today, however, it is used more as a weapon by kleptocratic and oppressive regimes bent on killing their people, looting public resources and destroying their countries, to tell foreign countries to desist from interfering with their killing and stealing sprees.

Whether the fear of a regime change plan is genuine, imagined or invented, it remains an ever-present force in South Sudan's decisions to engage or not to engage with other countries.

This fear is so powerful and blinding that countries that invested money and blood to prevent South Sudan from ever becoming a country and South Sudanese from ever attaining freedom, dignity and justice have become allies and darling of the crop of leaders in Juba. In contrast, those countries that spent sleepless nights, money and blood to support South Sudanese in their yearning for a homeland and a dignified life have overnight become the arch enemies.

It is often said that there are no permanent friends but interests in politics and international relations. It is, therefore, normal for countries to see and treat former enemies as friends or former friends as enemies should the national interest of a country so demand. However, when Sudan - with the blood of millions of South Sudanese on its hands - or Egypt and United Arab Emirates that reportedly bankrolled these massacres and not the Kingdom of Norway are friends and allies, it is tough to fathom how such amnesia, such lack of respect for the dead and our history of subjugation, such ungratefulness can be said to be in our collective good. It should be even more concerning when some of these so-called new friendly countries are only using South Sudan to inflict psychological or strategic harm against our neighbours, some of whom laid down their lives so that we might be free.

7.0 FROM THE FEAR OF REGIME CHANGE TO STATE CAPTURE

In running away from its traditional friends and allies, South Sudan has found friends in some unfriendly places. When the political leaders of South Sudan turned on each other and turned the country into an instrument of death, destruction and despair, many countries and individuals who cared deeply about South Sudan and made enormous sacrifice for South Sudanese were forced to walk away, disappointed and heartbroken. Some of them walked away hoping that that will prick South Sudanese leaders' conscience and force them to change their behaviours in the interests of their country and people.

Unfortunately, the support vacuum that was created by the true friends of South Sudan when they 'walked away' was immediately filled by political and security operatives of the National Congress Party, influential financiers and business entities whose singular preoccupation was the manipulation, domination and use of state policymaking and fashioning the rules of the game to serve their business interests.

In exchange for purchased loyalty from public officials, these business entities and individuals made illicit and direct payments to public officials.²⁴ So, rather than serving the collective interests of the people of South Sudan, the country's policies, including foreign policy, are serving particularistic interests of those who have captured the state and bought some public officials.

South Sudan's 'political marketplace'²⁵ is costly. The number of political and military actors that require purchase had to rely heavily on the support of maligned state actors. These state captors sold their franchise - the loyalty of political and military leaders in South Sudan, to rich and powerful maligned state actors interested in the rich natural resources of the country or the strategic geolocation of South Sudan in the furtherance of their national interests.

It is, therefore, paradoxically tragic that as the leaders of South Sudan run away from countries they fear want to take away power from them, they fell into the hands of those who quickly bought the power they cherish so much for peanuts. Now, in South Sudan, the ability to decide the political, economic and foreign policy direction of the country is held by influential individuals, business and state actors whose sole interest is to extract political and economic advantages and use state infrastructure for personal and sometimes illicit gains. Thus, if South Sudan is to work for all, all South Sudanese must engage in taking back their country and in resetting the foreign policy priorities.

8.0 THE NEED FOR A RESET IN SOUTH SUDAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

The regime's Foreign Policy has made the country to squander its enormous international goodwill, respect and prestige that came with the years of struggle, independence and statehood. Rather than serve South Sudan's national interest, the government's Foreign Policy has made enemies out of our friends, made our enemies our friends, destroyed the economy, made our people to become destitute.' It further allowed for fertile grounds for spreading and sustaining rebellion in the country. The so-called friends we have now come at the cost of mortgaging our children's future, crashing debts and wanton exploitation of our national resources. In exchanges for using South Sudan to serve their political, economic and security interests, they give us arms to kill our own, votes in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to shield our leaders from accountability and safeguards used to buy few more days for the President. This should not only stop but must change.

²⁴ wrecked tank near Juba, A. "The Nexus of Corruption and Conflict in South Sudan. July 2015." *Nexus 1* (2015).

²⁵ De Waal, Alex. "Mission without end? Peacekeeping in the African political marketplace." *International Affairs* 85:1 (2009): 99-113.

Many of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement / Army (SPLM/A) leaders are foreign policy experts. They have had a long history of crafting foreign policy strategies during the liberation war that served the collective aspiration of South Sudanese.

For instance, when the Eastern Block was willing and able to back liberation rhetoric with resources, the SPLM pundits were 'comrades' and used the East's goodwill to further the course of liberations. When the West realised that it wasted its time fighting a losing battle with propping up dictators in Africa, it started supporting some liberation struggles like the one in Sudan: the SPLM made allies of the West. Perhaps that change of allies was instrumental to South Sudan's Independence Referendum. So, the resources and expertise required to reset our foreign policy are available in Juba.

Any reset of the Foreign Policy of South Sudan should include:

- **A clearly defined national interest:** South Sudan needs to identify and communicate to its citizens and the world what makes up its vital national interest. It is the right and duty of South Sudan and South Sudanese to determine what amounts to the core interests of the country. It is crucial, though, that such national interests should include protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, putting safety, political, economic and cultural wellbeing of the nation and its people above every other consideration and ensuring that South Sudanese live safe and dignified lives in and out of the country. South Sudan's national interest should be value-based and principle-driven and should include the Republic's foundational values and principles as outlined in the Constitution. While determining national interest is a political process and usually undertaken by the political class, to ensure that the identified national interest reflects the desires and aspirations of South Sudan in its entirety, the citizens should take part in that determination.
- **Clear and Consistent Foreign Policy:** South Sudan needs to plan desired outcomes it expects from its bilateral and multilateral engagements. These end-states should be translated into policies and adequate human and financial resources to realise these foreign policy goals. These will require crafting foreign policy strategies, mechanisms, tools and instruments in line with the national interest and appropriate to the foreign policy goals. These could include diplomacy, propaganda, economic and financial tools and incentives, strategic bilateral or multilateral engagements and alliances to pursue the realisation of identical or complementary interests and moderate conflicting interests in the international arena. While the constitution mandates the Government to work towards African integration, international cooperation and global peace, mere memberships of the African Union, the East African Community or any other multilateral platform without clarity on how these memberships would help South Sudan to realise its national interest amounts to a waste of time and resources.
- **Good neighbourliness:** The constitution provides that South Sudan, in its foreign policy, should ensure amicable and balanced relations with all its neighbours. A neighbouring country is any country that South Sudan enjoys a sufficiently proximate relationship with irrespective of that country's physical distance. Ensuring good neighbourliness is a mutual undertaking.

- A country whose strategic national interest relies on undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of South Sudan or the perpetual instability of South Sudan is not a neighbour and should be treated in kind.

The constitution also expects “balanced relations with other countries” as a goal of South Sudan’s foreign policy. Therefore, South Sudan’s foreign policy should strive to reduce security, political, economic and socio-cultural disequilibria relative to countries it engages with to as much a minimum as possible.

- **Nationalism:** South Sudan became a country where globalisation, neoliberalism, integration plan and technology are dismantling borders. In Africa, the East African Community is forging towards a political union. The AU, through its flagship programs of free movements of people, goods and services, single market through the Continental Free Trade Area, Open Sky and African Passport, is speeding up its efforts to transform borders into bridges. These changes and transformations bring positive and negative political, economic, socio-cultural and security outcomes for countries, especially developing countries such as South Sudan. There is a need for South Sudan to reflect deeply on how and when it wants to take part in these games proposed by older countries. At the global level, the rivalry over control and competition for influence between the West and the East in Africa will only intensify with time. While it is easy to say ‘give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God’, in terms of a foreign policy approach, it becomes messy when there are many Caesars and many Gods to satisfy. With a highly fragile state, weak or nonfunctional government, poor or nonexistent infrastructure, very few or no manufacturing capacity or goods, South Sudan has to ask what the country brings to the table of global cooperation and African integration. If, after such a reflection, the country realises that it needs a timeout to enable it to put its house in order, South Sudan should not be afraid to say so.

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