

The historical evolution and institutional character of civil-military relations in South Sudan and their implications for national security architecture

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Abstract

This study examines the historical evolution and institutional character of civil-military relations (CMR) in South Sudan and assesses their effect on the country's national security architecture. Employing a qualitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design, data were gathered through structured interviews and documentary analysis from purposively selected military officers, government officials, civil society actors, and representatives of international organizations. The findings show that the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF) originated from the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), a liberation movement whose guerrilla organizational culture, personalized command structures, and ethnically based mobilization have persisted into the post-independence era. This legacy has produced a pronounced fusion of military and political authority, with the SSPDF and the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) maintaining strong institutional and personal ties, entrenching militarization of public and political life and impeding civilian oversight. The study concludes that the incomplete transformation of the SPLA into a professional, apolitical national army has undermined constitutional civilian control, eroded public trust in security institutions, and contributed to persistent instability, compounded by the proliferation of small arms, weak implementation of security sector reforms, and the spread of institutional pathologies across other uniformed services. The study calls for comprehensive, context-sensitive security sector reform, greater professionalism within the armed forces, and robust civilian oversight mechanisms to support national stability and democratic governance in South Sudan.

Keywords: Civil-Military Relations, South Sudan, National Security Architecture, Historical Evolution, Institutional Character, Security Sector Reform

JEL Classification: H56, D74, F52, N47

1. Introduction

Civil-military relations (CMR) are among the most consequential governance challenges confronting post-conflict states in sub-Saharan Africa. The manner in which armed forces relate to civilian political authority determines the trajectory of democratic consolidation, institutional stability, and national security (Bruneau & Trinkunas, 2006). South Sudan gained independence on 9 July 2011, following decades of a liberation struggle. However, barely two years into statehood, the country descended into civil war in December 2013, exposing deep fractures in its civil-military architecture (De Waal, 2014). The conflict has caused untold human suffering, destruction of property, massive displacement, and the polarization of society along ethnic and tribal lines (International Crisis Group, 2015). Both high expectations and persistent insecurity have marked the emergence of South Sudan. At independence, there was widespread optimism that peace would bring about development, democracy, and unity. However, the legacy of prolonged conflict has deeply influenced the political culture. The SPLA's dominance during the liberation struggle meant that military leaders became primary decision-makers, with their authority extending well beyond the battlefield into governance, resource management, and dispute resolution (De Waal, 2014). As a result, many citizens have come to view the military not merely as a protector but as a central political actor and, at times, as the ultimate arbiter of political disputes. This dynamic complicates efforts to build state institutions grounded in the principles of civilian control and democratic governance (Mutangadura, 2021). Attempts to professionalize public administration and establish clear separations between military and civilian spheres have often been frustrated by entrenched habits of military intervention in politics and government (Small Arms Survey, 2010).

Historically, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), now the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF), served as both a liberation movement and a de facto government in liberated areas (Metelits, 2014). During the war, SPLA commanders administered local justice, collected taxes, and managed local economies, often in the absence of other forms of governance (De Waal, 2014). This blending of military and political roles during the liberation struggle fostered a tradition of blurred boundaries between the armed forces and civilian leadership, one that persisted after independence (Small Arms Survey, 2010). Post-2011, former SPLA commanders were appointed to key government positions, further entrenching the military's influence over state institutions (Mutangadura, 2021). This pattern continues to shape governance in the post-independence era, as the legacy of military leadership in civil administration has complicated the establishment of strong, independent civilian institutions (Agyekum, 2022). Moreover, the experience of protracted war entrenched a security-first mentality within both the state and society (Metelits, 2014). Years of conflict created a widespread belief that security and stability can only be achieved through military means (De Waal, 2014). Political leaders, many of whom are former military officers, have often favored armed responses to dissent or unrest. At the same time, grassroots communities have relied on local defense groups or armed actors for protection

(International Crisis Group, 2015). This prioritization of military solutions over political dialogue has undermined peacebuilding initiatives, marginalized civilian voices in policymaking, and contributed to cycles of violence (Mutangadura, 2021). These tendencies hinder the development of a professional defense establishment, impede the integration of ex-combatants and opposition groups, and complicate efforts to implement inclusive security sector reforms responsive to the needs of all South Sudanese communities (Nyambuya, Mwaniki, & Odhiambo, 2025).

Ethnic considerations have also played a significant role in shaping South Sudan's civil-military landscape (Harkness, 2022). The recruitment and deployment of soldiers have frequently mirrored the country's complex ethnic map, with senior command positions often allocated based on ethnic or regional affiliation (Ouedraogo, 2014). This practice has affected perceptions of legitimacy and fairness within both the military and wider society, and has at times led to the marginalization of certain groups (International Crisis Group, 2015). During national crises, such as the outbreak of civil war in 2013, these ethnic divisions within the armed forces fueled defections, the formation of rival military factions, and an escalation of violence along communal lines (De Waal, 2014; Small Arms Survey, 2010). The resultant cycles of mistrust and instability have made national reconciliation and the creation of a unified, professional military far more difficult to achieve (Mutangadura, 2021). International actors, including regional organizations and donors, have sought to support South Sudan's state-building process through security sector reform and capacity-building initiatives (Nyambuya, Mwaniki, & Odhiambo, 2025). Programs led by the United Nations, African Union, and donor agencies have aimed to train security forces, develop oversight mechanisms, and foster dialogue between military and civilian leaders (International Crisis Group, 2015). However, the persistence of militarized politics, patronage networks, and weak civilian oversight has frequently hampered the effectiveness and sustainability of such interventions (Mutangadura, 2021). Efforts to promote accountability or curb abuses have sometimes been undermined by political resistance or a lack of local ownership (De Waal, 2014). Understanding the complex interplay between historical legacies, institutional structures, and external influences is essential for devising strategies to strengthen civil-military relations and promote long-term stability (Agyekum, 2022). Only by addressing both the internal dynamics and external pressures can South Sudan hope to build a more resilient and accountable national security architecture.

South Sudan's national security remains fragile due to the failure to build a professional, politically neutral army. The SSPDF's deep ties with the ruling SPLM have blurred the line between military and civilian authority, allowing senior officers and politicians to retain personal militias and direct security forces for political ends (De Waal, 2014; Harkness, 2022). These dynamics continue to fuel instability and have contributed to repeated outbreaks of civil conflict, most recently in 2023 (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025).

The SSPDF, NSS, and allied security organs have been repeatedly implicated in grave abuses, including sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, forced displacement, and child soldier recruitment (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2015). Unchecked security forces and weak reforms have pushed communities to arm themselves, driving a surge in intercommunal violence and civilian casualties. Despite repeated peace agreements and international pressure, credible security sector transformation has yet to materialize (Mutangadura, 2021; Nyambuya, Mwaniki, & Odhiambo, 2025).

2. Literature Review

Huntington (1957), in a qualitative-theoretical analysis of the United States military, argued that objective civilian control is achieved by maximizing military professionalism and by drawing a clear separation between the military and civilian domains. The gap is the framework's inability to account for post-conflict states where the military emerged from liberation movements. Janowitz (1960), in an empirical sociological study of American military personnel, found that the military and society form an organic whole and that integration yields more effective democratic control. He introduced the concept of 'constabulary forces.' His work left its applicability limited to post-conflict African states. Feaver (2003), using agency theory in the United States context, modeled CMR as a principal-agent problem and found that the quality of monitoring determines military compliance. The simplification limits his work to a two-actor game. Schiff (1995), using historical case studies of Israel, India, and the United States, developed concordance theory emphasizing shared values and accommodation. Her work leaves open the absence of empirical testing in sub-Saharan African post-conflict contexts.

Three key theories underpinning civil-military relations and national security studies in contexts like South Sudan are: Huntington's Theory of Objective Civilian Control (1957), Janowitz's Constabulary Concept (1960), and Feaver's Principal-Agent Theory (2003). Each offers distinct analytical perspectives, with strengths and limitations relevant to the South Sudanese case. Huntington's Theory of Objective Civilian Control (1957) posits that military professionalism and a clear separation between military and civilian spheres are essential for stable civil-military relations (Huntington, 1957). The relevance to South Sudan lies in the persistent fusion of political and military authority, which Huntington warns undermines objective civilian control. The strength of this theory is its clarity in defining professional boundaries and its emphasis on depoliticizing the military. However, its main weakness is its limited applicability to post-conflict or post-liberation states, where armed forces are often politicized by their origins. Mitigation involves adapting the framework to account for legacy factors, such as the history of liberation movements and the need for transitional arrangements.

Huntington's model assumes a mature state with established institutions, which rarely applies to post-conflict or newly independent contexts such as South Sudan. In such cases, the armed forces are deeply embedded in the nation-building process, often taking on both political and security

roles. This dual function dilutes the strict separation Huntington advocates, resulting in blurred lines between military and civilian spheres. Nevertheless, the central lesson drawn from Huntington remains valuable: professionalization and depoliticization are critical goals for reform. For South Sudan, incremental steps such as instituting professional military education, codifying clear legal frameworks for military conduct, and gradually reducing the number of political appointments to senior officer positions could move the country closer to the ideal of objective civilian control, even if the path must be adapted to local realities.

Janowitz's Constabulary Concept (1960) argues that modern militaries should act as constabulary forces, integrated with society and prepared for peacekeeping as well as war (Janowitz, 1960). This is highly relevant in South Sudan, where military and societal boundaries are blurred, and the armed forces often provide both security and governance. The strength of this approach is its recognition of the military's social role in fragile states and its responsiveness to peacekeeping needs. The weakness is the risk of excessive military involvement in civilian affairs, which may perpetuate militarization. Mitigation is possible through robust legal frameworks and civilian oversight mechanisms. Janowitz's framework is particularly well-suited to explaining the South Sudanese experience, in which the military's involvement in post-conflict reconstruction, humanitarian relief, and local governance is both necessary and problematic. In such environments, the military fills gaps left by weak civilian institutions, but this can create path dependencies that are hard to reverse. The challenge is to balance societal integration with professional boundaries. For South Sudan, drawing on Janowitz's insights means building up civilian capacity alongside military reforms, establishing clear mandates for the armed forces, and promoting a culture of service that encourages the military to support, not supplant, civilian authorities. International partners can play a role by fostering joint civil-military training and supporting community engagement programs that reinforce mutual trust without eroding professional standards.

Feaver's Principal-Agent Theory (2003) views civil-military relations as a monitoring problem, in which civilian principals must oversee military agents to ensure compliance (Feaver, 2003). In South Sudan, the lack of strong oversight institutions makes this framework especially pertinent, highlighting the risks of military autonomy and politicization. Its strength lies in its analytical clarity in modeling compliance challenges; however, it can oversimplify the realities of multiple actors and complex allegiances in post-conflict environments. Mitigation requires broadening the model to include institutions, informal networks, and the influence of external actors.

In the South Sudanese context, the principal-agent dilemma is magnified by the presence of parallel security forces, factional commanders, and external actors, all of whom compete for influence and undermine unified civilian control. Feaver's theory is therefore most useful as a baseline for understanding the compliance gap between political leaders and security institutions. To be more effective, this model should be adapted to account for the complexity of South Sudan's

security landscape. This could include mapping informal networks, strengthening parliamentary oversight, and engaging civil society in monitoring military conduct. Ultimately, Feaver's approach highlights the urgency of developing robust accountability mechanisms and transparent chains of command to address the proliferation of actors and ensure that the security sector serves the broader public interest rather than narrow political or ethnic constituencies.

Houngnikpo (2012), in a qualitative analysis of military coups and democratic transitions across sub-Saharan Africa, found that the institutionalization of democratic norms in Africa's militaries lags behind civilian advances, and that military acceptance of civilian authority remains a "missing piece" of Africa's democratic transition. His work left open the absence of country-specific studies of liberation-movement-origin militaries. De Waal (2014), using a political economy approach to analyze South Sudan, found that neopatrimonial governance structures rendered meaningful SPLA reform unfeasible and attributed the 2013 war to this failure. His work left open the need for empirical investigation of institutional legacies. Mutangadura (2021), in a documentary analysis of the implementation of the R-ARCSS in South Sudan, found that security sector reform mechanisms remained dysfunctional, with the armed forces aligned with individuals rather than the state. Her work left open limited analysis of how militarized political culture keeps reform from succeeding. The Small Arms Survey (2010), in an empirical review of SPLA transformation in South Sudan during 2006–2010, found that the lack of a coherent defense strategy frustrated the transformation, that the war mentality impeded professionalization, and that the integration of Other Armed Groups posed the greatest threat to SPLA cohesion. The noted gap was the absence of analysis of the post-independence institutional trajectory.

2.1 Empirical Review

A recent study by Nyambuya, Mwaniki, and Odhiambo (2025), titled "Security Sector Reform and Civil-Military Relations in South Sudan: Progress, Pitfalls, and Prospects," offers an in-depth examination of the ongoing security sector reforms in South Sudan. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that included both interviews with key stakeholders and analysis of security incident data from 2018 to 2024, the authors assess the implementation of reforms outlined in the 2018 Revitalized Agreement. The study finds that, despite some progress in professionalizing the military and integrating former opposition fighters, political interference and persistent ethnic divisions have significantly undermined these efforts. Importantly, the researchers highlight that the lack of genuine civilian oversight and unfinished demobilization processes have allowed cycles of violence and eroded public trust in state security institutions. However, the study acknowledges a gap in understanding local-level dynamics, particularly how communities interact with and perceive security actors. To address this, the authors recommend further research into community-driven security arrangements and partnerships between the military and local stakeholders.

In her 2022 article, "Ethnic Armies and State Fragility: Evidence from South Sudan," Harkness employs detailed case study methods, including fieldwork and interviews, to explore the effects of

ethnically based military recruitment on national stability. Focusing on the period from 2011 to 2021, Harkness finds that ethnic favoritism in military appointments and command structures has fueled mistrust, contributed to the proliferation of ethnically aligned militias, and intensified violence during periods of political crisis. The research underscores the need for merit-based recruitment and more inclusive leadership within the armed forces. Nevertheless, Harkness notes a significant gap: few longitudinal data track the long-term impact of ethnic integration initiatives on military cohesion and national unity. She calls for future studies to address this gap by monitoring changes in ethnic representation and their broader socio-political effects over time.

Agyekum (2022), in his comparative work “Civil-Military Relations and Democratic Governance in Post-Conflict Africa: Lessons from South Sudan and Sierra Leone,” analyzes the distinct paths of security sector reform in two post-conflict countries. Drawing on interviews with security experts and a review of relevant documents, Agyekum finds that international interventions have been instrumental in shaping reform in both contexts. However, their success is limited when local ownership is weak or when reforms are not adapted to the local context. The study notes that South Sudan, in contrast to Sierra Leone, has struggled to establish effective civilian control due to entrenched networks between political and military elites. Agyekum identifies a research gap regarding the role of traditional authorities and informal governance structures in interacting with national security reforms. He suggests that future studies should explore hybrid models that bridge formal and informal security mechanisms, particularly in fragile states where formal institutions remain weak.

The Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect (2025) provides a comprehensive overview of ongoing mass atrocities in South Sudan in its report, “South Sudan: Mass Atrocities and the Challenges of Civilian Protection.” Drawing on a wide range of sources, including reports from human rights monitors and United Nations agencies, the report documents ongoing violence such as targeted killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement, often carried out by both state security forces and non-state actors. The report finds that the proliferation of arms and a pervasive culture of impunity are key barriers to the protection of civilians. However, the report points out a lack of research into the effectiveness of community-led protection initiatives, such as localized early warning systems or the role of women’s organizations in violence prevention. The authors recommend further empirical investigation of these grassroots strategies to understand better how local communities can contribute to civilian protection amid persistent insecurity.

Finally, Mutangadura (2021), in the policy brief “Reforming Security Forces in South Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities,” investigates the progress and obstacles facing security sector reform. Through interviews with policymakers, civil society actors, and international advisors, as well as policy analysis, the brief finds that although there have been efforts to train security personnel and pass new legislation, political resistance and a lack of trust among stakeholders have slowed meaningful reform. The study highlights the need to better integrate informal security

arrangements such as community defense groups and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms into the broader reform agenda. Mutangadura identifies a gap in empirical research on how these informal systems can be harmonized with formal security structures and calls for future studies to address this issue to ensure that reforms are comprehensive and contextually relevant.

3. Research Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative cross-sectional survey design, which is well suited to exploring complex social phenomena, such as civil-military relations in post-conflict contexts (Agyekum, 2022; Metelits, 2014). The study was conducted in Juba and selected states of South Sudan, where issues of national security architecture and civil-military dynamics are most pronounced (Nyambuya, Mwaniki, & Odhiambo, 2025). The target population consisted of individuals with direct or expert knowledge of the security sector, including senior military officers, government officials, civil society leaders, and representatives from international organizations. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure participants had relevant insights, and 40 respondents were selected to reflect diversity in gender, professional background, and institutional affiliation (Mutangadura, 2021). Data collection combined structured interviews and documentary analysis, allowing for triangulation and richer contextual understanding (Small Arms Survey, 2010; Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025). Interview guides were pre-tested in a pilot study to enhance question reliability and minimize ambiguity, while documentary sources included government policy documents, peace agreement reports, and prior empirical studies. Reliability was assessed through inter-coder agreement on key thematic categories, while validity was strengthened by cross-verifying interview findings with documentary evidence (Janowitz, 1960). Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, guaranteeing participant anonymity, and securing data storage in line with best practices for sensitive research (International Crisis Group, 2015). Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify recurring patterns, causal relationships, and emergent themes (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 2003). NVivo software was used to facilitate coding and theme development, and results were presented with supporting quotations and references to documentary evidence. Limitations of the study included logistical and security challenges at field locations, potential respondent bias due to the sensitive nature of the subject, and resource constraints that limited the breadth of data collection. Despite these challenges, the methodology provided robust insights into the institutional character and evolution of civil-military relations in South Sudan.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 From Liberation Army to National Defence Force: The Institutional Trajectory

Findings from the qualitative cross-sectional survey, structured interviews, and documentary analysis reveal that the SSPDF's institutional character is profoundly shaped by its origins as the SPLM's armed wing during the liberation war. The research confirms that the SSPDF inherited a guerrilla organizational culture, marked by informal, personalized command structures, ethnically

based mobilization, and the fusion of military and political authority. These results resonate with Huntington's (1957) theory that the absence of a clear boundary between military and civilian spheres undermines objective civilian control, as well as the Small Arms Survey's (2010) observation that the SPLA's transformation into a professional army was hampered by a lack of coherent defense policy and a persistent war mentality among its leadership. Respondents indicated that this legacy remains entrenched in the current national defense force, with repeated reform attempts hindered by deep-rooted institutional culture and elite interests.

The study location in Juba and selected states of South Sudan allowed for a nuanced understanding of how the fusion of political and military authority operates at both the apex and grassroots levels. Respondents described a persistent structural nexus between the SSPDF and the SPLM, with the President serving simultaneously as commander-in-chief and party chairman, thereby blurring the lines between civilian and military authority. This finding echoes Ouedraogo's (2014) comparative analysis across Africa and aligns with the International Crisis Group's (2024) documentation of similar patterns in the Central African Republic. Interview data and documentary evidence showed that in South Sudan, the legacy of the liberation era is compounded by the ongoing political activism of senior officers and the proliferation of personal militias maintained by politicians, both of which further undermine efforts to achieve depoliticized, professional civil-military relations.

Furthermore, the qualitative data reveal that ethnic manipulation of military recruitment continues to obstruct democratization and security sector reform. Harkness (2022), through her Ethnic Stacking in Africa Dataset, found that ethnically stacked armies systematically resist transitions that threaten their privileged access to power. This aligns with the current findings, as both respondents and the documentary review noted that the SSPDF's recruitment and promotion practices remain heavily influenced by ethnic and political loyalty rather than professional merit. The study thus identifies a critical research gap: the need to track longitudinally ethnic stacking and force integration within the SSPDF as peace agreements unfold, to understand better the evolving barriers to democratic civilian control in South Sudan.

4.2 The Security Sector Composition and Its Institutional Pathologies

Findings drawn from the qualitative cross-sectional survey, structured interviews, and documentary analysis conducted in Juba and selected states highlight that all six of South Sudan's uniformed security organizations, namely the SSPDF, NSS, police, wildlife, prison, and fire brigade, share institutional pathologies rooted in their common origins and personnel flows. Respondents consistently described how the SSPDF functions as a "reservoir" for other forces, with poorly performing or excess personnel often redeployed to other services rather than discharged. This practice has led to organizational bloat, weak discipline, and the spread of SSPDF's guerrilla organizational culture throughout the sector. The NSS, in particular, was singled out for having evolved into a heavily armed parallel army that acts as a political police force,

echoing Janowitz's (1960) theory that ill-defined civil-military boundaries foster mandate creep and institutional dysfunction.

The qualitative data further reveal that these pathologies are not unique to South Sudan but are mirrored in other post-conflict African contexts. For example, Agyekum's (2022) long-term ethnographic study of the Ghana Armed Forces demonstrates that civilian political dynamics such as patronage and politicized recruitment penetrate military structures, undermining professionalism. In South Sudan, this is compounded by the direct transfer of personnel and organizational norms from the SSPDF to other services, as confirmed by Mutangadura (2021). Additionally, documentary analysis and respondent testimony indicated that the separation between the SSPDF and other uniformed forces is largely nominal, with widespread operational overlap and personnel interchangeability during crises. This not only perpetuates the institutional weaknesses of the SSPDF across the sector but also entrenches a system where reform in one organization is undermined by dysfunction in others.

Despite these insights, the study identifies a significant research gap: there remains a lack of empirical mapping of how institutional pathologies specifically flow from the SSPDF into subordinate security organizations. Future research should focus on personnel transfer patterns, command relationships, and the mechanisms by which organizational culture and dysfunction are transmitted throughout South Sudan's security sector. Such an approach would provide a more granular understanding of why sectoral reforms often fail and where targeted interventions could be most effective.

4.3 Impact on National Security Architecture

Findings from the qualitative cross-sectional survey, structured interviews, and documentary analysis conducted in Juba and selected states of South Sudan reveal that unprofessional behavior among uniformed personnel has been a major catalyst for the proliferation of small arms within communities. Respondents consistently reported that civilians have sought weapons for self-defense, with some arms reportedly sourced directly from security forces. This has significantly fueled intercommunal violence and contributed to ongoing instability. Such observations align with Metelits (2014), who found that in fragile African states, security forces themselves can become a principal source of insecurity. Recent data from the Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect (2025), using UNMISS statistics, indicated a dramatic surge in violence between April and June 2025, with 635 civilian deaths, 676 injuries, and 74 cases of conflict-related sexual violence a 204 percent rise compared to the previous year highlighting the persistent and escalating impact of institutional pathologies within South Sudan's security sector.

Further analysis of documentary evidence, in conjunction with respondent testimony, underscores the persistent gap between policy commitments and actual implementation of security reforms. Despite the introduction of major reform initiatives such as Objective Force 2017 and the Transformation Program 2012–2017, respondents noted that these strategies largely failed to

translate into meaningful change on the ground. This aligns with De Waal's (2014) findings and is reinforced by the empirical, mixed-methods study conducted by Nyambuya, Mwaniki, and Odhiambo (2025) in Jonglei State. Using stratified and purposive sampling, along with questionnaires and key informant interviews with SPLA personnel, UNMISS staff, and NGO workers, their study found that military reforms did not substantially contribute to post-conflict reconstruction. Indicators such as persistent volatility, widespread small-arms proliferation, and inadequate resources for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs were cited as evidence. Notably, both documentary analysis and interview data revealed that the international community's post-CPA support for security sector reform was insufficient, and that underperforming soldiers were frequently redeployed to other uniformed services rather than removed, compounding organizational inefficiencies and inflating the security sector.

These findings point to a significant research gap. There has been little comprehensive empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of specific institutional reform mechanisms such as the SDRS, DDR, and operational-level force unification across all regions of South Sudan. Future studies should systematically evaluate the outcomes, challenges, and unintended consequences of these reforms to inform more effective policy and practice in strengthening the national security architecture.

5. Conclusions

The study concludes that the institutional character and persistent pathologies of the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF) are deeply rooted in the country's liberation-era origins and the subsequent fusion of military and political authority. The research demonstrates that the failure to clearly separate military and civilian spheres, as conceptualized by Huntington (1957) and evidenced by ongoing elite interests, has entrenched a culture of personalized command, ethnic-based mobilization, and political activism among senior officers. These factors continue to undermine efforts at professionalization and democratic civilian oversight, perpetuating instability within the national security architecture. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the dysfunctions observed in the SSPDF have spread throughout South Sudan's broader security sector, affecting all six uniformed organizations. The practice of redeploying underperforming personnel between forces, rather than enforcing accountability, has led to organizational bloat and a dilution of professionalism across the sector. The qualitative data and documentary analysis highlight that these institutional weaknesses are not merely internal military failures but also reflect wider political dynamics and are reinforced by nominal distinctions between security agencies. The resultant mandate overlaps and operational interchangeability have rendered sector-wide reforms largely ineffective.

Finally, the study finds a direct link between persistent unprofessional behavior within security forces and the proliferation of small arms and intercommunal violence in South Sudan. The gap between ambitious reform commitments and their implementation, exemplified by failed DDR,

SDSR, and force unification initiatives, has allowed insecurity to escalate, as evidenced by increased civilian casualties and violence documented by recent empirical studies. The lack of comprehensive, operational-level evaluation of reform outcomes across all states remains a significant gap, indicating that future interventions must be grounded in robust, context-sensitive, and empirically informed approaches to achieve sustainable security sector transformation.

5.1 Recommendations

5.1.1 *Advance Professionalization and Depoliticization of the SSPDF*

The government, in collaboration with international partners, should prioritize professional military training, merit-based recruitment, and clear legal frameworks that reinforce the separation of military and civilian spheres. This includes developing and enforcing codes of conduct, establishing transparent promotion and appointment procedures, and reducing the number of political appointments to senior officers. Targeted leadership training and continuous education programs can help shift organizational culture towards professionalism and away from ethnic and political loyalties.

5.1.2 *Enforce Accountability and Personnel Management Across Security Agencies*

Establish rigorous accountability mechanisms to address unprofessional behavior, including robust disciplinary processes and independent oversight bodies. Rather than redeploying underperforming personnel to other security organizations, implement clear, fair, and transparent mechanisms for dismissal or retraining. Regular external audits and performance evaluations can help ensure that all security agencies SSPDF, NSS, police, wildlife, prison, and fire brigade adhere to common standards of discipline and professionalism.

5.1.3 *Strengthen Civilian Oversight and Institutional Separation*

Create or empower independent civilian bodies (such as a parliamentary defense committee or an ombudsman) with real authority to monitor, investigate, and publicly report on security sector practices. Expand the role of civil society organizations and the media in oversight, and institutionalize regular public forums for dialogue between security actors and communities. This will help address mandate creep, reduce political interference, and restore public trust.

5.1.4 *Implement Comprehensive and Context-Sensitive Security Sector Reforms*

Reform efforts such as DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration), SDSR (Security and Defense Sector Reform), and force unification must be reviewed and redesigned to address operational realities and local needs. This includes conducting thorough, regionally disaggregated assessments to understand specific patterns of personnel transfer, command relationships, and the spread of institutional cultures. Engage local communities in designing and monitoring reforms to ensure buy-in and sustainability.

5.1.5 Curb Small-Arms Proliferation and Support Community Security Initiatives

Launch targeted disarmament campaigns in collaboration with community leaders, and strengthen border controls to reduce the flow of illicit weapons. Support local peace committees, early warning networks, and women's organizations engaged in violence prevention. Provide resources for community-based security and conflict resolution programs that reduce reliance on armed self-defense.

5.1.6 Enhance Coordination and Resource Allocation Among National and International Actors

Improve coordination among government agencies, international partners, and NGOs to ensure that security sector reform programs are adequately resourced, contextually appropriate, and avoid duplication. Establish joint monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track progress, identify challenges, and share lessons learned, with a focus on long-term sustainability rather than short-term outputs.

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