

*Unraveling the Peacekeeping Paradox in the UN Mission in South Sudan:
A Path Toward Inclusive Multilateral Governance*

Abstract

This paper investigates the nature of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping, asking: *Why, after over a decade of peacekeeping, is South Sudan still in crisis? Who are the international and local stakeholders? What are their goals and interests toward sustainable peace?* Existing literature on “new wars” and third-generation peacekeeping highlights the complexities of modern conflicts, emphasizing a need for adaptable mandates and expanded responsibilities for peacekeepers. While these perspectives acknowledge the evolution of peacekeeping strategies, they often fail to account for how conflicting strategic interests among stakeholders undermine peacekeeping efficiency—generating a peacekeeping paradox. This paper argues that the peacekeeping paradox stems from a fundamental mismatch between the goals of external actors and the realities on the ground. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, analyzing in-depth, semi-structured interviews with UN stakeholders and quantitative quality-of-life indicators. Through a case study of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the paper examines how competing interests and the exclusion of local perspectives hinder mission success. In South Sudan, the competition between China and the United States manifests on the ground, presenting significant challenges for the mission and human development. Findings reveal that misaligned mandates and insufficient integration of local communities perpetuate instability and suffering and prolong conflicts. This study concludes that adopting an inclusive multilateral peace model, which incorporates the perspectives of developing nations and regional organizations, can begin to resolve the paradox, improve mission outcomes, and enhance global peacekeeping frameworks.

Keywords: peacekeeping paradox, UNMISS, third-generation peacekeeping, multilateral governance, China, United States, humanitarianism

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“At the root of the peacekeeping crisis in Africa is a paradox.”¹

Introduction

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) began in 2011, immediately following South Sudan’s secession from Sudan. While the mission sought to prevent a recurrence of conflict between Khartoum and Juba, its primary mandate focused on building the capacity of the newly formed state—“literally building a country,” as the first head of mission described it.² After South Sudan’s independence, President Salva Kiir echoed this vision, emphasizing the need to “build a strong foundation for our new nation.”³ The initial objectives were clear: consolidate peace and security, create the conditions for development, strengthen the government’s capacity to govern effectively and democratically, and foster good relations with neighboring countries.⁴ However, a "liberation curse"—the result of a post-civil war society, a weak central government, and prolonged mismanagement—triggered the violent resurgence of conflict in December 2013. In response, the 2013 mandate radically shifted, halting state-building and development initiatives. The mission redirected 7,000 personnel and 900 police officers to focus on humanitarian protection activities. This mid-mission shift was a radical yet necessary choice, never tried before in the history of peacekeeping.⁵

The fallout was just as radical. Since 2013, multiple reports have shared the same failure to protect civilians and provide humanitarianism by United Nations (UN) peacekeeping personnel. Indeed, there has been a challenge for the UN. Over 200,000 internally displaced persons have fled to UN bases for protection. This is among the 2.3 million displaced persons within the country and 2.5 million who fled to neighboring countries.⁶ However, the UN

¹Adebajo, Adekeye. 2023. “The Crisis of African Peacekeeping.” *Project Syndicate*.

²Hilde F. Johnson. 2016. “South Sudan: The Untold Story from Independence to Civil War” *London: L.B. Tauris*. p 98.

³Johnson, “South Sudan: The Untold Story” p 2.

⁴UN Security Council. 2011. “Resolution 1996” *United Nations*.

⁵Hunt, Charles. 2020. “Waiting for Peace: A Review of UNMISS’ Political Strategy in South Sudan.” *United Nations University Centre For Policy Research*. p 65.

⁶Hunt, Charles, “Waiting for Peace: A Review of UNMISS’ Political Strategy in South Sudan.”

Secretariat commended the hard work of peacekeepers and UN police.⁷ In instances of reluctance, where Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites were looted of thousands of tons of food and resources, women and girls became victims of rape and sexual assault in those same camps, the status quo remained.⁸ Yet this is not entirely the fault of the UN Peacekeepers and police.

UN Peacekeeping, trickling down from the UN Secretariat and Fifth Committee, has found itself in a paradox. With all intentions of keeping the peace, isolation from on-the-ground actors has created an alternative cycle of *conflict-keeping*. More precisely, the oversaturation of powerful stakeholders, international organizations, and on-the-ground actors has made *the peacekeeping paradox*. This paradox results from conflicting interests and goals among stakeholders, subsequently hindering peacekeeping efficiency. While the mission in South Sudan is a telling example, this paradox has delayed, if not worsened, long-term peace development in other cases, such as Somalia, Rwanda, Mali, and Congo.⁹

While mandating a peacekeeping mission is exceptionally multifaceted, the bureaucracy of humanitarian intervention has allowed for areas of ingenuine grounds for intervention. These moving pieces are extremely top-down, from the required payment of UN Peacekeeping, the competition among UN departments and member states, the budgeting decisions within the fifth committee, and the intolerant collaboration of authoring the mandate. Such a process leaves the most vulnerable communities, those needing protection, at the very end of the mandate-making process. Failures of fulfillment, strict mandate guidelines, and unclear end goals result from top-down mandates that need to be aligned and more informed with realities on the ground.¹⁰

Through a thorough case study of the UN mission in South Sudan, this paper evaluates the interests and myriads of stakeholders, mandate choices, and outcome indicators. In doing so, this

⁷United Nations Security Council. 2013. "Resolution 2132 (2013)." *UN Missions*.

⁸Interview 1, December 2024

⁹Paddon Rhoads, Emily. 2016. "Taking Sides in Peacekeeping: Impartiality and the Future of the United Nations" *Oxford University Press*.

¹⁰Paddon Rhoads, Emily. "Taking Sides in Peacekeeping: Impartiality and the Future of the United Nations"

paper finds that UN peacekeeping efforts are hindered by internal challenges and international stakeholders' conflicting goals and interests without accounting for local imperatives. There must be a shift toward inclusive, multilateral governance that includes the most at-risk and vulnerable groups. UN decision-makers can achieve more precise outcomes, shorter mission durations, and sustainable peace by involving these groups.

The identity of a paradox emerged out of these initial research questions:

1. Why, after 13 years of a mission, is South Sudan still in a place of crisis?
2. Who are the international and local stakeholders?
3. What are their goals and interests toward sustainable peace?

In what follows, the paper demonstrates that the peacekeeping paradox in South Sudan is driven by the conflicting strategic interests of external actors intervening in the country. These interests perpetuate a mismatch between the goals outlined in peacekeeping mandates and the outcomes. By analyzing these dynamics, the paper demonstrates how the failure to align external interventions with local realities undermines the effectiveness of peacekeeping efforts and perpetuates the instability in South Sudan. This paper will further examine how alternative peacekeeping strategies—like an inclusive multilateral peace model—could provide more effective pathways for conflict resolution in fragile post-conflict environments.

Evolution of Peacekeeping

Origins of Peacekeeping

Originally designed to address interstate conflicts through ceasefire monitoring and observer missions, the scope of peacekeeping has expanded in response to the changing nature of global conflicts. Early missions, such as the Suez Crisis of 1956, reflected a limited mandate

focused on preventing hostilities between states.¹¹ Even initial missions, like the UN Mission in Cyprus, prioritized preventing the escalation of conflict, protecting civilians, and surveillance of the ceasefire line.¹² These operations were characterized by neutrality, minimal engagement with local populations, and a focus on maintaining peace agreements.

However, as intra-state conflicts and civil wars became more prominent in the post-Cold War era, modern peacekeeping models face increasing criticism for their inability to address the underlying drivers of violence. This same criticism holds weight today. Scholars like Brownell and Jett highlight key failures in peacekeeping operations as they have progressed, particularly their limited capacity to enforce peace or protect civilians. Brownell, a former foreign service officer, notes that while early peacekeeping saw much more success due to its simple nature, “modern conflicts...have been much less successful, and [peacekeepers] have been asked to expand their roles from traditional peacekeeping to multidimensional peacekeeping efforts involving democracy building and other lofty objectives.”¹³

Such critiques on the nature of peacekeeping are not completely new, nor have they been veiled from the public. Former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt once described the UN as "the sandbox for the Third World."¹⁴ This metaphor emphasizes the playful nature of the relationship between the UN, a primarily Western-built and operated force, and developing nations. While the sandbox metaphor may encourage the Global South to engage in diplomatic relations within the UN, it highlights how engagement seems limited or controlled by the dominant stakeholders in the international system. As such, the former German chancellor called it the sandbox for the third world, not the third world's sandbox.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc marks the beginning of an

¹¹Adebajo, Adekeye. 2011. “UN Peacekeeping in Africa: From the Suez Crisis to the Sudan Conflicts.” *Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers.*

¹²Interview 2, Former UN British Peacekeeper in Cyprus

¹³Brownell, J. 2003. “Why Peacekeeping Fails.” *African Studies Quarterly*, 7(2-3).

¹⁴Brownell, “Why Peacekeeping Fails.”

era of “new wars.” The term, adopted by Mary Kaldor, emphasizes the latest type of conflict within the changing world order. This conflict is civil and regional, making it difficult to directly point out civilians and combatants. Generally, new wars reshaped the approach to security in international relations, forcing a more human-centered approach to security studies.¹⁵ Such a shift in the world order naturally shaped the response to conflict. The 1994 Human Development Report presented the new idea of human security, which centers security around the human and community most impacted.¹⁶ Human security has become a central aspect of the rationale for Western Intervention, prioritizing human life and liberty. Unfortunately, this has led to an oversaturation of NGOs and international organizations and complex relationships between UN member states in the shaping of modern peacekeeping.

The transformation of peacekeeping into a more collaborative, human security-focused framework is a double-edged sword. While these expanded perspectives address modern conflicts' complex realities, they expose peacekeeping operations to more significant risks and scrutiny. As Jett observes, the ambitious expectations placed on peacekeepers since 1994 often exceed their resources, leading to questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of these missions. This ongoing mismatch of resources and demands reflects the changing nature of warfare and the UN's struggle to balance modernity with the demands of humanitarian engagement. The struggle is, unfortunately, detrimental, significantly undermining the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention in the 21st century.

Third Generation Peacekeeping

There have been several distinct phases of UN peacekeeping since its inception in the 1950s. The first wave, rooted in the original concept of peacekeeping, spanned from the 1950s to

¹⁵Kaldor, Mary. 2013. "In Defence of New Wars." *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2 (1).

¹⁶UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 1994. "Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security." *United Nations New York*.

the end of the Cold War, focusing primarily on maintaining ceasefires and observing borders. The second wave, emerging post-Cold War, shifted to address “new wars” and prioritized human security, often involving intervention in civil conflicts. A distinct characteristic of second-generation peacekeeping is the timeliness of withdrawal. Troops can go home when “a determination is made as to who has the political power and the right to govern,” allowing for the subsequent peacebuilding to be in the hands of the country itself. The impossibility of withdrawal characterizes the present phase.

In 2011, peacekeeping entered a so-called third generation characterized by increased complexity and critique. As Jett argues, this phase “requires...forces to become warfighters, something they will never be able to do effectively.”¹⁷ While this third wave resembles second-generation peacekeeping in addressing intra-state conflicts, it is distinguished by the influence of powerful stakeholders who may benefit from the perpetuation of conflict. Prominent examples include Mali, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁸ These conflicts involve deeply entrenched ethnic tensions, which peacekeeping forces alone cannot resolve. Local communities frequently perceive these interventions as foreign, ineffective, and driven by external agendas because of the lack of cultural competence and community engagement. Also, the use of force is now used “in defense of the mandate,” further perpetuating an ideology that the mandate does not fit in the best interests of the host country's needs.¹⁹

Furthermore, the top-down structure of UN peacekeeping hampers the implementation of its often "impossible and deadly" mandates.²⁰ Deaths of peacekeeping officers have increased

¹⁷Jett, “Why Peacekeeping Does Not Promote Peace.” p. 122

¹⁸Jett, “Why Peacekeeping Does Not Promote Peace.” p. 122

¹⁹Jett, “Why Peacekeeping Does Not Promote Peace.” p. 122

²⁰Jett, “Why Peacekeeping Does Not Promote Peace.” p. 122

from an average of 5.3 deaths in 1948 to 115 deaths in March of 2023. The missions are no longer missions of peace, and if the intervention is no longer in the best interest of all actors, there must be a switch to realign the new intervention goals. If long-term development is to become a priority for UN peacekeeping, they must adopt localized approaches that emphasize reconciliation and retributive justice to address root causes and rebuild trust. Unfortunately, a fundamental misalignment exists between the traditional role of peacekeeping forces—primarily focused on maintaining peace—and the complex demands of modern intervention goals. Critical decisions remain in the hands of distant stakeholders who rarely, if ever, engage directly with the realities on the ground. Therefore, the third-generation approach has become inherently inefficient.

Competing Decision-Makers: China, the U.S., and the UN Security Council

Criticisms of the complexity of the third wave are only perpetuated by the isolationist work of the most powerful member states. Critical opinions support the idea of perpetuating conflict for political gain. Speaking of powerful member states, Jett argues that “there is no cost to their allowing the conflict to go unresolved, but there is significant risk in agreeing to settle...the presence of peacekeepers only makes that choice even easier.”²¹ This sheds light on the interests of powerful member states, which may not always be in the best interests of the host country. To dismiss this assumption outright is naive, as the P5—the five members of the UN Security Council—contribute approximately 50% of the peacekeeping budget. This accounts for a disproportionate stake in the budget compared to 123 member states. When matched with international relations theory, this stake sets the stage for Jett’s argument.

Given the competitive nature of international politics—despite the advancement of second-generation human rights—countries continue to approach international relations with

²¹Jett, “Why Peacekeeping Does Not Promote Peace.” p. 123

realist pragmatism. This theory emphasizes that states act out of self-interest to maximize their security.²² This theory is particularly evident in the actions of the P5 nations (United States, China, Russia, United Kingdom, and France), whose behaviors outside international collaborations underscore their competitive and self-interested nature. Realist theory emphasizes that states act primarily to maximize their security and power, often prioritizing national interests over collective goals. In this context, peacekeeping operations, even when designed with the best of intentions, frequently reflect these underlying self-interests. For this reason, the nature of peacekeeping, while authored with the best intentions, consciously or unconsciously acts out of self-interest. Given the challenges of third-generation peacekeeping and the relatively simple initiatives recommended to navigate these challenges best, scholars alike believe in the idea of the peacekeeping paradox.

The idea of pursuing self-interest is explicitly demonstrated in budgetary meetings as well. As a group of the most powerful nations, the P5 is rather opinionated in ensuring that every dollar the UN spends has the greatest impact on the ground.²³ Conversely, every dollar spent is where they have a comparative advantage.²⁴ However, the P5, never on the ground in the capacity of other member states, prefers quick results for their budget rather than sustainable interventions.²⁵ This leads to the “NGO scramble” and similar competition among UN departments that operate in peacekeeping missions. In the 2023 budget hearing, the UK, a member of the P5, asserted that they “contributed to a more results-orientated UN” and that “Member States expect the ACABQ to provide clear, technical and evidence-based advice to inform our decision-making.”²⁶ This leads to increased competition in the on-the-ground

²² rowland

²³Interview 1, December 2024

²⁴Maddens, Peter, Jan De Preter, and Katrien Meuwissen. 2023. "Negotiating UN Finances: The Functioning of the Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly." *VVN Wereldbeeld*.

²⁵Interview 1, December 2024

²⁶"Ensuring that Every Dollar the UN Spends has the Greatest Impact on the Ground: UK Statement at UN Fifth Committee." 2022. *M2 Presswire*.

response, enforcing a scramble for funding from all involved parties. Peacekeeping results are dictated by producing the most appealing results to the highest donors.

Political Dynamics of Financing Peacekeeping

In a complex generation of conflict, establishing results for conflict resolution, peace, and development requires time and community engagement. Unfortunately, the funding requirements of powerful stakeholders continue to mandate the goals of member states rather than the people in which they are serving. In addition, the US, the largest financial contributor to the UN, “disposes of significant leverage, the so-called ‘power of the purse,’ during Fifth Committee negotiations.”²⁷ As a contributor of over 30% of the peacekeeping budget, the US plays a withholding game to achieve some of its budgeting goals.²⁸ Figure 1.1 provides a side-by-side comparison of a mismatch, where troop-contributing countries (TCC) fulfill the objectives defined by debate among the highest financial contributors. In analyzing the figure, an apparent mismatch raises suspicion about the efficiency of operations given the different parties involved, from ideation to completion. One would believe the trickle-down from the fifth commission to the mission in practice would be communication and collaboration to put the host country first. However, the dynamic between the two parties is not one of cooperation and respect but rather one of power.

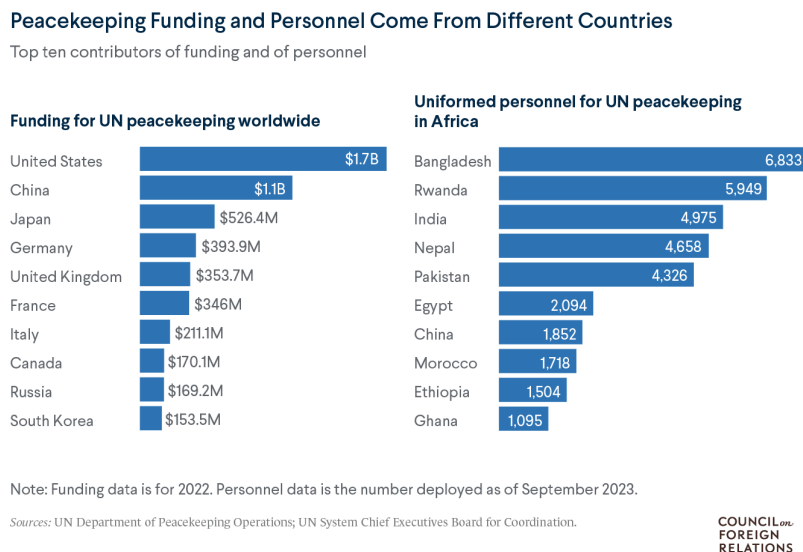
The work of troops and personnel is much more influential and recognizable when the world thinks of peacekeeping. Yet, despite the TCC's contributions and knowledge of the work done on the ground, they exercise a different amount of power than powerful stakeholders like the USA and China. In budgetary hearings, Western countries belittle “the rest” with an argument that “the level of training, equipment, and capabilities of many troops is substandard to

²⁷ Maddens, Peter, Jan De Preter, and Katrien Meuwissen. 2023. "Negotiating UN Finances: The Functioning of the Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly." *VVN Wereldbeeld*. Accessed December 7, 2024.

²⁸ Maddens, et al, "Negotiating UN Finances: The Functioning of the Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly."

what they claim.”²⁹ The UN Secretariat has the final say in how the mandate is authored, yet the mismatch beginning in the fifth committee trickles down. Many scholars critique this mismatch, as it confines middle and developing economy countries to the role of providing personnel to gain more geopolitical gain with the UN.³⁰ Furthermore, the interactions of these two groups hinder peacekeeping efficiency, as on-the-ground actors (many of whom have valuable information) have no say in mandate creation.

Figure 1.1³¹



United States & China Dynamics: 2024 Tensions

In political dynamics, two important stakeholders are the United States and China. As seen in 2016 in Figure 1, the peacekeeping funding gap between the USA and China is closing smaller, slowly decreasing the U.S. 's lead. Still, “only 35 countries pay 92% of the UN

²⁹Maddens, et al, "Negotiating UN Finances: The Functioning of the Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly."
³⁰Maddens, et al, "Negotiating UN Finances: The Functioning of the Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly."; Brownell, “Why Peacekeeping Fails.”
³¹Klobucista, Claire and Mariel Ferragamo. 2023. “The Role of Peacekeeping Missions in Africa” *Council on Foreign Relations*.

contributions.”³² However, the fact that this balance is changing has a certain effect on the overall power game of the UN. Today, China is drawing an extremely close gap in financial contributions from the USA. This change has proved China to be a key player in peacekeeping, often influencing the alternative view of the USA. The UN Mission in South Sudan is a clear case of these dynamics in the air playing out on the ground. For instance, when the US calls for more human rights posts, China calls for fewer, etc.³³ To reiterate, this competition in the air trickles down to the on-the-ground response.

These two players are now coming to an equal point in financial influence. On the one hand, China’s increased influence in peacekeeping lies in its ability to “expand diplomacy throughout the developing world,” but there are also considerable economic interests at play.³⁴ For example, China’s Belt and Road Initiative, representing more than \$1 trillion in funding and partnerships with more than sixty countries inside and outside the Asia-Pacific region, is a significant diplomatic initiative driving an increase in peacekeeping contribution.³⁵ China’s specific interests are arguably based in South Sudan’s oil sector, which China has been involved in since South Sudanese 2011. Interestingly enough, China has also contributed many troop personnel and police. In 2023, China was the second-highest financial contributor and 7th highest troop contributor to UN Peacekeeping; arguably, this spread of contribution allows China to have more geopolitical influence than the Americans.

The U.S. strategic influence is not a singular factor. Scholars point to multiple strategic interests for contributing well above the rest of the world in general UN funding and peacekeeping. Some point to the US’s attempts to hold onto its international hegemony. However, in 2024, this interest is slowly running short. The rise of new regional hegemon,

³²Maddens, et al, "Negotiating UN Finances: The Functioning of the Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly."

³³Interview 1 December 2024

³⁴Lanteigne, M. 2018. "The Role of UN Peacekeeping in China’s Expanding Strategic Interests." *US Institute of Peace*.

³⁵Lanteigne, "The Role of UN Peacekeeping in China’s Expanding Strategic Interests."

mistrust in government from a domestic standpoint, illegitimate elections, and leadership all contributed to the gradual decrease of hegemony for the United States. Yet, by occupying Africa, the US is keeping its interests stationed in different parts of the world, attempting to maintain any regional competition. This is Zimmerman's idea that there is no competition without presence.³⁶ However, this method is dying with modernity. The outright disregard for international law is coming to the forefront, and frankly, the United States is losing any legitimate power that isn't distinctly financial and social. Some also point to promoting democracy, especially in a time of great power competition with China, Russia, and emerging economies.

However, the competition for these strategic interests manifests within the UNMISS case study. While comparing strategic interests is interesting within the context of mandate creation, the actual discrepancy is the effect this competition has on the ground for civilians and organizations genuinely interested in conflict resolution. If peacekeeping were indeed the priority, structural incentives would “make it easier for [actors] on the ground to cooperate rather than to compete.”³⁷ This applies not only to interactions on the ground but also to those in the air. The notion of structural incentives originates from an article written 22 years ago, and the current peacekeeping paradigm still serves the needs of the funding parties much more than those of the struggling communities. The future of peacekeeping looks rather pessimistic without structural change, and the failures of third-generation peacekeeping call for it more than ever. The implications of this peacekeeping paradox on conflict-ridden communities are even more devastating. The West built the sandbox, and they coordinated how to play in the sand, too.

The UN Mission in South Sudan

³⁶Zimmerman, K. 2020. No Competition Without Presence: Should the U.S. Leave Africa? *PRISM*, 9(1), 68–87.

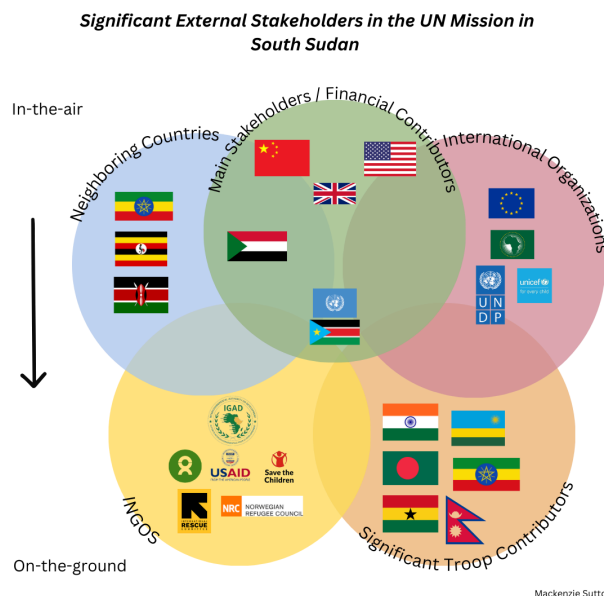
³⁷Cooley, A., & Ron, J. 2002. “The NGO Scramble: Organizational Insecurity and the Political Economy of Transnational Action.” *International Security*, 27(1), 5–39.

Methodology: Intersection Map

To substantiate the presence of a peacekeeping paradox in South Sudan, this section reveals the findings of a thematic analysis of the key actors involved in UNMISS. As previously discussed, the evolving nature of modern conflicts, often called new wars, has expanded the scope of peacekeeping, involving diverse actors beyond traditional state-based military forces. In the case of South Sudan, the intricate interplay of local, national, and international stakeholders with varying motivations complicates the peace process, revealing inherent contradictions in the strategies employed by peacekeeping missions. By examining the individual interests and relationships between various actors, we can uncover more about the mechanisms and agents of power—enabling us to better advocate for the transformation of unjust structures. Furthermore, in an analysis of the oversaturation of involved actors, the peacekeeping paradox presents itself as two-fold:

1. A multitude of different strategic interests with the host country that perpetuate
2. A mismatch between mandate goals and outcomes

Figure 2



Main Stakeholders: The Financial Contributors

Powerful stakeholders, notably the USA and China, contribute primarily through annual member contributions. However, China, the USA, and the UK are the most vocal about their expected outcomes from UN peacekeeping. Within the context of UNMISS, these two countries have held millions in the mission, as the country offers specific strategic interests for both countries. While these two have been mentioned previously, this thematic analysis provides space for a more in-depth understanding of the in-the-air political dynamics between the USA and China manifested within the UNMISS.

China

At the turn of the century, China significantly expanded its role in UN peacekeeping, challenging its traditional stance of non-intervention in foreign affairs. This shift is particularly evident in its involvement in South Sudan, where China's engagement is often framed more in terms of trade and investment than traditional diplomatic peacebuilding. China's influence in South Sudan far exceeds that of the United States or the United Nations. As one of the first countries to establish diplomatic ties with South Sudan, China has long had an interest in the country, particularly its fragile economy.³⁸ China has heavily invested in South Sudan's infrastructure and development, positioning itself as a key economic partner.

Consequently, the Chinese presence in South Sudan—visits, investments, and diplomacy—is met with skepticism. Scholars point to the location of Chinese peacekeeping troops as evidence of strategic motives. These troops, stationed at the oil fields in Unity and Upper Nile states, are widely seen as being deployed to safeguard Chinese economic interests, particularly in the oil sector.³⁹ China is the largest investor in South Sudan's oil, with its

³⁸Chinese Embassy in South Sudan. 2024. "Chinese Ambassador to South Sudan Ma Qiang Publishes Article to Celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China*.

³⁹Micheni, Ian M. 2017. "Revisiting the Role of International and Regional Actors in the South Sudan Conflict." *HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies*.

state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) holding a 40 percent stake in the country's oil fields.⁴⁰ Proving Chinese strategic interests to be one of strategy rather than humanitarianism is not exactly abstract and difficult. Since the 1990s, China's economic and political priorities have been centered on leveraging techno-security and developmentalism—not international relations per say.⁴¹ The strategic relationship between China and South Sudan only emphasizes this further.

Much of the West is monitoring the corruption underlying this relationship. The oil exchange between South Sudan and China is defined by “weak institutional guardrails and limited oversight facilitating fraud and embezzlement, including “ghost worker” payrolls and collusive contract schemes, which... account for billions of dollars in missing funds.”⁴² The 13-year “foreign policy experiment” has asked China to act more than it originally bargained for with increased international affairs, like with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).⁴³ However, China prefers to work through regional actors rather than directly with the West, another aspect of their involvement in South Sudan. This geopolitical competition between China and the West is starkly illustrated in South Sudan, where strategic interests precede humanitarian concerns. The prioritization of economic gain over peacebuilding is putting countless lives at risk as the country continues to suffer under a corrupt system.⁴⁴ South Sudan's government, driven by greed, is misusing millions of dollars meant to support its people, while China pushes for deals that further its economic agenda. This exploitative relationship compounds the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan, as the lives of many are sacrificed in the pursuit of power and profit.

⁴⁰Mutasa, C., & Virk, K. 2017. ‘The Role of External Actors in South Sudan.’ *Building Peace In South Sudan: Progress, Problems, And Prospects* (pp. 30–33). *Centre for Conflict Resolution*.

⁴¹Hsueh, Roselyn. 2022. “Micro-Institutional Foundations of Capitalism” *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*.

⁴²International Crisis Group. 2017. “China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan” *Africa (288)*.

⁴³International Crisis Group. 2017. “China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan” *Africa (288)*.

⁴⁴Hsueh, Roselyn. 2022. “Micro-Institutional Foundations of Capitalism”

United States

The United States is not exactly harmless, either. The United States is the largest financial contributor to the United Nations, annually contributing a third of the UN budget and approximately 25% of the peacekeeping budget; the USA has a significant stake in the choices of the United Nations.⁴⁵ For this reason, coupled with withholding funds for results, the USA has been found to have more influence in the outcomes of Fifth Committee budget hearings.⁴⁶ However, that is not their only sphere of influence. In addition to its contributions to the peacekeeping force, the USA also contributed \$1.2 billion to South Sudan in 2014 alone.⁴⁷ Always in competition with China, and given the Chinese interest in South Sudanese oil reserves, it would only be correct to believe that the USA's strategic interest also falls into the trade and investment category. However, the primary US motivations in South Sudan are one of hegemony and regional geopolitical influence. An International Development specialist at Harvard University spoke to this, saying that South Sudan is "now at a new geopolitical competition between the US and China, with ethnicity fanning the flames of a political fire created by the volatile mix of religion and oil."⁴⁸

This statement is almost 10 years old, yet we see the same diplomatic competition in South Sudan today. It is consistent with US foreign policy to have a say in all conflict-ridden world regions. The US primarily sees intervention in South Sudan as two things, both of which are not in the interest of South Sudan. First, the country represents oil and China, two things the US wants to control. Secondly, if the US leaves South Sudan, it loses its competition in that region—to China. From “counterterrorism to democracy promotion to global health initiatives,” the United States has always found a reason to be involved in other countries for their own

⁴⁵Figure 1.1; Interview 1, December 2024

⁴⁶Interview 1, December 2024

⁴⁷Allen, K. 2015. “Why Does South Sudan matter so much to the US?” *BBC News*.

⁴⁸Allen, “Why Does South Sudan matter so much to the US?”

gain.⁴⁹ Interestingly, the USA doesn't need to do as much as China to ensure its geopolitical hegemony. The US can leverage its economic and social power for its best interests rather than the host countries through investments in INGOs and power amongst other allied nations.

Neighboring Countries

Neighboring Countries have significant motivations for their involvement in UNMISS, sometimes voluntary and sometimes not. First and foremost, neighboring countries risk their regional stability without contributing to the conflict at hand. For Sudan, South Sudan's stability is critical to minimizing cross-border insecurity, managing refugee flows, and preventing the spillover of conflict. The same largely goes for Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya. Ethiopia accepts the largest number of migrants and has over 8,300 uniformed personnel serving in UNMISS currently.⁵⁰ Additionally, Sudan has significant economic stakes in South Sudan's oil production, as its economy relies on shared infrastructure (e.g., oil pipelines). The unresolved issues from the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) also create a vested interest in South Sudan's political stability.⁵¹

Similarly, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya are motivated by the need to prevent South Sudan's conflict from destabilizing the region, especially given the pressures of refugee influxes and cross-border violence. 2.2 million people have fled South Sudan to neighboring countries.⁵² Their economic ties, such as trade routes and development projects, further emphasize the importance of maintaining peace. These countries also share security concerns, as armed groups operating in South Sudan often pose threats across borders. The collaboration of these neighboring countries is often composed of an international organization (IO). In the context of

⁴⁹Zimmerman, K. 2020. No Competition Without Presence: Should the U.S. Leave Africa?'. *PRISM*, 9(1), 68–87.

⁵⁰Mutasa, C., & Virk, K. 2017. 'The Role of External Actors in South Sudan.' *Building Peace In South Sudan: Progress, Problems, And Prospects* (pp. 30–33). *Centre for Conflict*.

⁵¹Johnson, "South Sudan: The Untold Story"

⁵²International Rescue Committee. 2024. "South Sudan" *International Rescue Committee*.

UNMISS, the African Union (AU) plays a vital role in facilitating the peaceful relationship between South Sudan and its neighbors.

International Organizations

The direct motivations of international organizations (IOs) typically do not have one strategic interest. However, because of the nature of their work as a liaison or peacemaker, their stakeholders easily take advantage of them. The United Nations works as an international organization, and in its bureaucratic system, there are clear ways in which member states can cultivate support for their motives or interests. Within the United Nations itself, there is immense competition among different departments like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), etc. All these organizations are bound by the funding distribution of the UN body itself. Therefore, to continue running, these UN organizations must produce results that appeal to the interests of UN member states, specifically those within the UN Security Council. As these independent departments get involved in UN peacekeeping missions, they typically look to address goals that produce the fastest, most impactful results rather than the most meaningful for lasting peace.⁵³

Other IO Stakeholders in UNMISS are the EU and the AU. These two organizations work as the governing bodies for continents but act similarly to the UN. Therefore, while they may experience similar competition between their member states, the bodies are better culturally informed of their particular region. In addition, they promote ideals similar to those of their member states. The EU notably supports initiatives for development, stability, and peace, which are indicative of foreign policy and the development of many of its member states. Although European economies are overall developed or ‘very’ developed, the EU works as a way for

⁵³Interview 1, December 2024

European nations to leverage their influence on a scale they couldn't do independently. In South Sudan, the EU “is one of the biggest donors to South Sudan and had by 2021 invested in the population of South Sudan over 1 billion Euro since the independence of the country.”⁵⁴ Their interest in being there could leverage more geopolitical influence in Africa. However, the EU is not outwardly opinionated in comparison to other IOs.

The involvement of the AU in UNMISS is quite apparent, as the AU is motivated by its commitment to African solutions for African problems, aiming to foster peace and stability within the continent. To be expanded upon later, many scholars point to the prioritization of a regional leader in peacekeeping missions, notably the AU in Africa. African peacekeeping in third-generation peacekeeping has been highly flawed. Characterized by unfulfilled goals, violence, corruption, and illegitimate governments, the AU works to hope for a better way to achieve African development. However, they lack significant funding and resources, as their members are among the poorest in the world.⁵⁵

International Non-Governmental Organizations

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and regional bodies such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development IGAD play essential roles in South Sudan through their involvement in UNMISS and broader peacebuilding efforts. INGOs like the International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Rescue Committee, Save the Children, USAID, and Oxfam are driven by humanitarian imperatives to alleviate suffering, provide critical services, and support long-term development. These organizations address immediate needs such as food security, healthcare, education, and protection for displaced populations while promoting resilience and sustainable recovery in conflict-affected communities. However, INGOs are often criticized for

⁵⁴Radio Tamazuj. 2021. "The EU Urges Parties to Advance Peace Agreement Implementation." *Radio Tamazuj*.

⁵⁵Adebajo, Adekeye. 2023. "The Crisis of African Peacekeeping." *Project Syndicate*.

being narrow-minded and offering short-term solutions to long-term problems. This coincides with the idea of the NGO scramble, in which NGOs scramble to find the best evidence of being a successful organization to receive more funding.⁵⁶ Lastly, INGOs may give the appearance of a community-first, bottom-up approach to intervention when that is not the case in reality.⁵⁷

IGAD, as a regional bloc, has a vested interest in stabilizing South Sudan to promote regional integration and prevent conflict spillover into neighboring countries. It has been central to mediation efforts, such as brokering the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), and remains committed to supporting the peace process.⁵⁸

INGOs and IGAD work closely with local and international actors to ensure that humanitarian aid and peacebuilding initiatives align with the broader goal of fostering lasting stability in South Sudan.⁵⁹

Troop Contributing Countries (TCC)

Troop-contributing countries (TCC) in UNMISS, such as Rwanda, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Ethiopia, and Ghana, are motivated by a combination of strategic, humanitarian, and independent strategic interests.⁶⁰ Rwanda, shaped by its own experience with genocide, is deeply committed to preventing mass atrocities and promoting regional peace. For countries like India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, peacekeeping is integral to their foreign policy, reflecting their commitment to global stability while enhancing their international diplomatic standing. The latter gives this region more stake in the international arena than their independent contributions alone. These nations also view peacekeeping missions as an opportunity for their armed forces to

⁵⁶Cooley, "The NGO Scramble: Organizational Insecurity and the Political Economy of Transnational Action."

⁵⁷Walton, Oliver Edward, Thomas Davies, Erla Thrandardottir, and Vincent Charles Keating. 2016. "Understanding Contemporary Challenges to INGO Legitimacy: Integrating Top-Down and Bottom-Up Perspectives." *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*. 27, no. 6: 2764–86.

⁵⁸Johnson, "South Sudan: The Untold Story"

⁵⁹Council on Foreign Relations. 2024. "Humanitarian Intervention in South Sudan, 2014: Educator Overview." *Council on Foreign Relations Education*.

⁶⁰United Nations Peacekeeping. 2024. "UNMISS Fact Sheet" *United Nations Mission in South Sudan*

gain valuable operational experience and build their reputations as reliable contributors to international peace and security.

Given its proximity to South Sudan, Ethiopia has a direct stake in regional stability and preventing conflict spillover into its borders. With a long-standing tradition of contributing to UN peacekeeping missions, Ghana views its participation as part of its commitment to Africa's peace and security. Yet, these countries also contribute troops for their regional hegemony in the African continent alone. It is crucial to have troop contributions that are not singularly Western. While different, having a more well-rounded understanding of Africa's culture, society, and traditions is instrumental to the success of peacekeeping missions.

South Sudanese Civil Society

While concrete evidence to fully substantiate the motives of South Sudan's civil society may be limited, the available evidence suggests their priorities are rooted in a genuine desire for peace, accountability, and community resilience. In over a decade of failed intervention initiatives dictating the continued suffering of the South Sudanese people, the voices of civil society have become more prominent. In a paper doing in-depth research on the role of civil society in South Sudan, Virk and Nganje found that “according to local actors, the tendency of external actors...to impose their governance and development templates on South Sudan has, at times, constrained the implementation of local peacebuilding models and priorities,” proving the presence of the paradox from the top-down.⁶¹ General opinions say that such poor intervention has “contributed to narrowing the space for South Sudanese civil society to effect change in their country through their own Indigenous solutions.”⁶² With increased contributors and stakeholders on the ground, that space has become even more narrow.

⁶¹Virk, Kudrat, And Fritz Nganje. 2016. “The Role of Civil Society in South Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities.” *The Peacebuilding Role Of Civil Society In South Sudan*. Centre for Conflict Resolution

⁶²Virk, Kudrat, And Fritz Nganje, “The Role of Civil Society in South Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities.”

The NGO Forum, established in 1996 in South Sudan, coordinated the efforts of organizations operating in South Sudan and initially sought to mitigate these challenges. However, by 2016, it became entangled in its version of a paradox. The forum was now composed of “104 national and 129 international NGOs.”⁶³ As an already neglected peacekeeping sector, NGOs now had to compete with over 230 competitors within the forum. From an international perspective, the conflation of NGOs with local campaigns further obscured the specific needs of South Sudan’s civil society. This misrepresentation led significant stakeholders, including the UN, to overlook existing institutions such as local chiefs and forms of traditional authority, undermining the potential of local mechanisms to drive sustainable peace.

Civil society in South Sudan—whether represented by grassroots campaigns or the voices of civilians in Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites—remains unified around a central goal: active involvement in the peace-building process of their own country. Local leaders, particularly those in traditional authority roles, emphasize the importance of community-driven solutions. When direct control over intervention efforts is not possible, civil society and local organizations instead call for funding to support projects that reflect the needs and priorities of their communities. If all of these requests are denied or ignored, civil society mainly asks for an opportunity to explain what is essential for successful peacebuilding and development in their nation. Many activists identify “internal mistrust as a major obstacle for local civil society to overcome to play a more effective peacemaking and peacebuilding role in South Sudan.”⁶⁴ Only after three instances of recurrence of conflict and a finalized peace agreement was this call for reconciliation addressed (in 2018). However, as mentioned before, this agreement has its areas for improvement.

⁶³Virk, Kudrat, And Fritz Nganje, “The Role of Civil Society in South Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities.”

⁶⁴Virk, Kudrat, And Fritz Nganje, “The Role of Civil Society in South Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities.”

By including civil society and its knowledge, the UN can better center its missions around issues only identifiable from the bottom up. Where would South Sudan be if calls for reconciliation of mistrust between communities were addressed early in 2013 or even 2011? The ignorance of community drivers in UNMISS and other missions perpetuates fragmentation in UN peacekeeping efficiency.

Intersections and Fragmentation

By analyzing reports, statistics, and independent actions of each actor in UNMISS, various international actors are involved in South Sudan, and they are each driven by distinct motivations that prolong the conflict. Governments like China and the USA have competing economic and strategic interests—China focuses on securing oil resources as South Sudan’s largest trade partner. At the same time, the USA prioritizes geopolitical influence and security through its substantial contributions to UN peacekeeping operations. Neighboring countries like Ethiopia and Kenya, concerned with regional stability and managing refugee flows, sometimes have conflicting agendas with South Sudan's government or each other. International organizations, including the UN and the African Union, aim for peace and humanitarian relief, but the political complexities of powerful member states often hinder their efforts. NGOs like UNICEF and Oxfam are primarily concerned with immediate humanitarian needs, which can sometimes clash with long-term development goals pursued by entities like the European Union or bilateral donors. TCCs are concerned with their appearance; while representing the blue helmets, they also represent their country and their country's ability to protect. While fulfilling the goals of the mandate, they are also there to establish conditions for their countries' diplomatic interests, whether explicit or implicit. Lastly, civil society—the people—simply want to reconcile their nation, using their knowledge of community relations to improve their lives. The mission is

failing the people by prioritizing the highest donors and result producers. These differing motivations and priorities create a fragmented approach to peacekeeping, leading to uncoordinated efforts that inadvertently extend the conflict rather than resolve it.⁶⁵

Mismatched Implementation

A Brief History of UNMISS Mandates

Resolution 1996 in 2011 began the 13 years in South Sudan. This mission highlighted a call for development, democracy, deliverance of aid, and human rights monitoring. However, as mentioned, UNMISS had significant challenges implementing its initial 2011 mandate goals. This was the result of an era of naiveness or a *liberation curse*.⁶⁶ In the years between South Sudanese independence and a recurrence of conflict in 2013, 2016, and 2018, there has been significant tension in the government, as well as between the government and civil society.⁶⁷ In 2011, President Salva Kiir was ethnically Dinka, whereas Vice President Riek Machar was an ethnic Nuer. A mandate ensuring development, rather than reconciliation and humanitarianism, was the first mistake and ultimately led to the recurrence of conflict in 2013, 2016, and 2018.

Briefly, conflict resolution, whether it is on civil, ethnic, racial, or international grounds, must begin with the establishment of a strong social fabric. In the case of Sierra Leone, for example, restorative initiatives targeted all sides of the social fabric while delivering humanitarian aid and establishing conditions for development. While there were gaps in the international intervention in Sierra Leone, and the country operates on a much smaller scale, the approach was much more targeted at rebuilding the social fabric immediately. There were no significant reconciliation initiatives in UNMISS. In the case of South Sudan, there was a limbo, a

⁶⁵Tull, Denis M. 2017. "The Limits and Unintended Consequences of UN Peace Enforcement: The Force Intervention Brigade in the DR Congo." *International Peacekeeping* 25 (2): 167–90.

⁶⁶Naive refers to the description by Interviewee 1, *Liberator Curse* refers to the description by Hilde Johnson, Head of Mission 2011.

⁶⁷Interview 1, December 2024.

so-called liberation curse.⁶⁸ There was a false narrative of hope, resilience, happiness, rejoice. When, in reality, communities were suffering physically and mentally, tensions between communities continued tense. With the implementation of a new government representing both Dinka and Nuer, the international community viewed this initial liberation as a success, equally representing all ethnic groups in South Sudan. Yet, the need for a local perspective in the mandate process put South Sudan back years of development.

The 2011 mandate directly reflected what the international community believed was best for South Sudanese people following their independence. Even President Kiir was utterly out of touch with the dire conditions of the people after the succession. The social fabric of civilians was extremely poor and was followed by a depressive state of disillusionment and poverty. While still a part of Sudan proper, South Sudan was recognized as the poorest part of Sudan. The Human Development Index trends from 1990 - 2019 show Sudan consistently ranking below 0.5, ranking 170 out of 189, and after becoming its nation, South Sudan ranking 185 out of 189, consistently ranking in the ~0.3 range.⁶⁹ As of 2024, South Sudan ranks 191 of 193.⁷⁰ This results from many things, notably multidimensional poverty, poor and nonexistent infrastructure, lack of education, inaccessibility, or inability to pay for food and water. Notably, this is the result of insufficient peacekeeping. With such conditions, it is crucial to understand why development was and is vital to the long-term survival of South Sudanese people.

While development is critical for South Sudan's survival, lacking necessities like clean water, food, and security renders the development goals unattainable. The international community's decision to prioritize development over social needs, aid, and reconciliation reflects a misunderstanding of local realities. Since 2013, over 300,000 people have died, and 2 million

⁶⁸Johnson, "The Untold Story"

⁶⁹International Rescue Committee. 2024. "South Sudan" *International Rescue Committee*.

⁷⁰International Rescue Committee. 2024. "South Sudan" *International Rescue Committee*.

are internally displaced. 2.2 million have fled to neighboring countries.⁷¹ This mismatch between on-the-ground needs and the pursuit of the mandate is central to the peacekeeping paradox. Something is not working. A failure to address ethnic tensions between the Dinka and Nuer people represents an oversight of the authors of the mandate. In an interview with a former consultant to the UN specializing in peacekeeper training, our conversation highlighted this inconsistency. When asked: To what extent are local communities involved in shaping the mandates of peacekeeping missions? They responded with a firm, “Not at all.”⁷²

The Need to Address the Local Perspective

The authoring of South Sudanese mandates has demonstrated a need to address the community. However, it is essential to acknowledge that South Sudanese politics are far more complex than this paper can fully capture. This paper highlights the paradoxical nature of third-generation peacekeeping approaches, using the South Sudanese case study to explore these challenges. South Sudan faces not only a humanitarian crisis but also struggles with a fragile economy reliant on oil and foreign aid, deep-seated corruption and power struggles, widespread displacement, social fragmentation, erosion of trust, and the enduring consequences of post-colonial legacies. These interconnected crises go far beyond the singular scope of UN peacekeeping. That said, emerging scholarship and evidence point to a significant mismatch between the goals set by peacekeeping mandates and the realities on the ground, hindering efforts to genuinely improve and stabilize South Sudan. While peacekeeping cannot be held accountable for addressing the nation’s deeply rooted challenges, it bears the responsibility to adapt its strategies in ways that genuinely serve the host nation within its scope. Unfortunately, this responsibility has often been disregarded in favor of the interests of the most wealthy and

⁷¹International Rescue Committee, “South Sudan”

⁷²Interview 1, December 2024

powerful actors. Through this broader context, we can better understand how peacekeeping operates within the intricate framework of South Sudan's crises. This framework extends beyond the scope of this paper but demands deeper analysis for meaningful reform.

In this context, the role of local communities and the necessity of their input is crucial for even a touch of stability. With the combination of member states, neighboring countries, IOs, INGOs, and TCCs also contributing to pursuing interests and the goals of the mandate, the host nation gets left out. This is apparent in academia and the UN itself. In UN discourse, there are talks to improve their approaches and include the bottom-up approach. Yet, their efforts thus far have involved a community perception survey and "flexibility in the mandate" for mission heads to better address community needs.⁷³ However, the top-down mission is still a priority regardless of the surveying. A conversation with a former UN peacekeeper in Cyprus reinforces this point. The peacekeeper emphasized that the primary focus is not on the community's needs but on the mandate's success.⁷⁴ In a narrative account, the peacekeeper described how, when reporting the perceived needs of civilians along the ceasefire line, their head of mission dismissed these requests. The head of mission argued that addressing the people's needs in this case would contradict the mandate's mission and goals, even though it was a direct, on-the-ground request from the affected population. In South Sudan, the 2013 mandate:

*"Demands that all parties cooperate fully with UNMISS as it implements its mandate, in particular the protection of civilians,"*⁷⁵

presenting a case where the mandate prioritizes the safety of civilians as a central goal. At face value, this is unquestionably in the best interest of the South Sudanese people, as the protection

⁷³Interview 1, December 2024

⁷⁴Interview 2, December 2024

⁷⁵United Nations Security Council. 2013. "Resolution 2132 (2013)." *UN Missions*.

of civilians is an essential and urgent need in the context of violent conflict. However, the mandate's lack of direct collaboration with the affected population in its formulation raises critical concerns. The current bureaucracy assumes external actors can fully understand and address local needs without meaningful engagement. We learn this to be false. While civilian protection is undeniably vital, the absence of measures within the mandate that are informed by or directly address the perspectives of those on the ground undermines its legitimacy and effectiveness. This disconnect highlights a recurring issue in peacekeeping operations: the failure to integrate local voices into decision-making processes that fundamentally affect their lives.

Consequences of Top-Down Mandate Production

The case of South Sudan echoes the instances of so many other African peacekeeping missions in the 21st century: their governments are “among the most inept, corrupt, and repressive in the world.”⁷⁶ This issue is not unique to South Sudan but repeats in contexts like Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and others. The fundamental flaw in third-generation peacekeeping lies in the fact that the consultants and framers of these mandates often come from the very governments that are complicit in the corruption and misuse of billions of dollars in international aid. Take, for instance, President Kiir's "big tent" policy, where state funds were used to secure political loyalty through a system of licensed corruption.⁷⁷ The United Nations could pursue clear alternative paths if true peace and stability were the goal. However, the question remains: if you were a representative of your country at the United Nations, would you prioritize the strategic interests of your nation in a place like South Sudan—where the President's actions undermine peacebuilding—or would you look to exert influence elsewhere? This dynamic reveals a core contradiction within peacekeeping efforts, where the interests of

⁷⁶Jett, “Why Peacekeeping Does Not Promote Peace.” p. 122

⁷⁷Noel, Katerine. 2016. *Understanding the Roots of Conflict in South Sudan*. Council on Foreign Relations.

powerful nations often overshadow the needs of the populations they are supposed to serve.

By not addressing the direct tensions among different communities and inter-communal relationships, like the government and Dinka, military, and Nuer, the UN mandate is not addressing the direct needs to prevent a recurrence of conflict that best addresses all sides. There was a step in the right direction with a peace agreement in 2018, but on the ground, actors argue that the agreement “remains fragile and even if it holds, the localized conflict will continue.”⁷⁸ The agreement remains fragile, and the continued intervention remains illegitimate. Some say that without peacekeepers present, South Sudan could have been another Rwanda situation.⁷⁹ While the presence of peacekeepers undoubtedly curbs some violence, the duration of a mission and no improvement in human development are just as harmful to the communities that still last. Thirteen years after the initial mandate, UNMISS still has no explicit end goal. Yes, 5 years following the peace agreement is still new. However, the idea of an end goal is crucial to the legitimacy of the mission, a critique by a former UN peacekeeper himself.⁸⁰

With no clear end goal, the troops' effectiveness is undermined as they attempt to follow Western-model mandates without understanding the foundational steps needed to achieve the desired outcome. Many home countries to TCCs have similar corruption, violence, and development challenges. The inability to establish a clear end goal prolongs the conflict, as peacekeepers lack a unified understanding of their mission in protecting civilians. Frankly, I don't believe there is an end goal that genuinely prioritizes the people of South Sudan. This is because of the presence of a peacekeeping paradox.

Lastly, by not including the local perspective, peacekeepers, however lovely they may be,

⁷⁸International Rescue Committee, “South Sudan”

⁷⁹Interview 1, December 2024

⁸⁰Interview 2, December 2024.

are perceived as foreign and even sometimes arrogant.⁸¹ As reported by Rebecca Sutton, “As one UNMISS peacekeeper confides, ‘We feel dismissed as arrogant.’ Ultimately, he proposes, the fact is that humanitarian actors still need military actors – even if they do not like them.”⁸² While these narratives repeat a common theme, they are essential and transparent throughout the implementation and outcomes of the UNMISS mandate. Without including bottom-up voices, peacekeepers may reinforce existing power structures or fail to challenge corrupt practices, ultimately perpetuating the cycle of conflict. The combination of actors involved in UNMISS is too saturated, allowing for this risk in multiple instances. While inclusivity would not simply resolve this issue, it would ideally reevaluate the existing structures and practices to better use the money, time, and life spent on the ground in South Sudan.

Alternative Perspectives on Peacekeeping

A claim that modern peacekeeping operations are structurally flawed welcomes countless counterarguments. This paper offers a critique and policy solution with no first-hand, on-the-ground, or community-informed perspective. However, thematic analysis can reveal certain structural inconsistencies, flaws, and poor realities for the host country. Significant counterarguments for my paper are as follows:

- i. The construction of a mandate is multifaceted; every case is different, so a paradox is not universal.
- ii. Peacekeeping reduces civilian harm and prevents further escalation
- iii. Host countries welcome and appreciate the work of peacekeepers

⁸¹Sutton, Rebecca. 2024. “Operationalising Distinction in South Sudan: Humanitarian Decision-Making about Military Asset Use.” In *Civility, Barbarism and the Evolution of International Humanitarian Law: Who do the Laws of War Protect?* 135–155. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸²Sutton, ““Operationalising Distinction in South Sudan”

The first statement is correct. The construction of a mandate is exceptionally multifaceted, and every case does serve individual challenges. However, in third-generation case studies, there are continuous failures to complete even the simplest tasks, like protecting civilians. Mandate crafting is a diplomatic exercise that reflects political compromises rather than the realities on the ground. This results in vague or unachievable mandates, forcing peacekeepers to act inconsistently or avoid violent action altogether.

For example, there is notably an “absence of a viable political or peace process...without such a process in place, peace operations cannot be realistically expected to end the conflict in these countries on their own...peace cannot be imposed.”⁸³ While there are many moving factors, like humanitarianism, development, reconciliation, and protection of civilians, there is a consistent failure to do a single one. As they are so multifaceted and so aligned with ulterior interests, the peacekeeping process as a whole has become inefficient.

Secondly, the positive effects of the presence of UN troops are not the problem. The issue is that the structure in which peacekeepers operate is inherently flawed and hinders the ability to reduce civilian harm and the recurrence of conflict. The protection of civilians is typically a significant challenge in third-generation peacekeeping. For example, in many scenarios, the protection of civilians can only happen if “the civilians are standing near a peacekeeper.” This is relevant in UNMISS, amid the instances of rape and sexual assault happening to women and girls inside of PoC camps.⁸⁴ This reality has now come to light after 10 years of calls for help within the community. The presence of UN troops may deflate conflict on a more grandiose scale, but there is still significant harm under the presence of peacekeeping forces.

There are independent case studies in which this is represented as well. In Lebanon, for

⁸³Coning. 2023. “How to Not do Peacekeeping” International Peace Institute

⁸⁴Mold, F. 2024. ““By us, for us””: South Sudan launches first ever national taskforce to combat gender-based and conflict-related sexual violence” *United Nations Mission in South Sudan*.

example, on more than one occasion, “the peacekeepers have had to call in the Lebanese Armed Forces to save them from the local population the peacekeepers are supposedly protecting.”⁸⁵ The hallmark of their intervention was not the reduction in civilian harm and preventing escalation, but rather the ability for “10,000 UN personnel...organizing group yoga sessions.”⁸⁶In Mali, peacekeepers were forced to leave the host country after an escalation of conflict in which 500 civilians died. The leader of the country thought they would be better off without the “foreign security personnel” and “demanded all peacekeepers leave the country.”⁸⁷In popular cases like Srebrenica and Rwanda, the reduction of civilian harm and prevention of further conflict is harshly rebuked.

Lastly, the work of peacekeepers is some of the bravest work in the world. In the case of South Sudan, however, the idea that most host countries request or consent to peacekeeping missions fails to acknowledge the system from which it comes. Missions are oversaturated, politicized, and fuelled with self-interest, but have an impact with their presence.⁸⁸ Given the top-down nature of peacekeeping, there is still leeway to do good on the ground. However, the peacekeeping paradox highlights the improvements the UN and member states should make for peacekeeping to better support host countries.

In the case of South Sudan, an overwhelming majority support the mission itself, with good reason. In 2023, after 12 years, around nine in ten South Sudanese agreed that UNMISS’s presence promotes peace and stability.⁸⁹ This reveals that local populations appreciate peacekeepers’ protection and humanitarian assistance, even amid challenges. Naturally, in such absolute misery and poverty, any effective or ineffective assistance is appreciated. However, with

⁸⁵Jett, “Why Peacekeeping Does Not Promote Peace.” p. 125

⁸⁶Jett, “Why Peacekeeping Does Not Promote Peace.”

⁸⁷Jett, “Why Peacekeeping Does Not Promote Peace.” p. 123

⁸⁸Paddon Rhoads, Emily. “Taking Sides in Peacekeeping: Impartiality and the Future of the United Nations”

⁸⁹Trithart, Albert. 2023. “Local Perceptions of UN Peacekeeping: A Look at the Data.” International Peace Institute.

more inclusivity and cultural competence from the UN, stakeholders and contributors can convert this appreciation into sustainable action. Through a model of inclusive multilateral governance, peacekeeping efforts become more effective by integrating the global resources and expertise of the UN, the regional intelligence and operational capabilities of regional organizations, and the cultural knowledge and priorities of the affected communities.

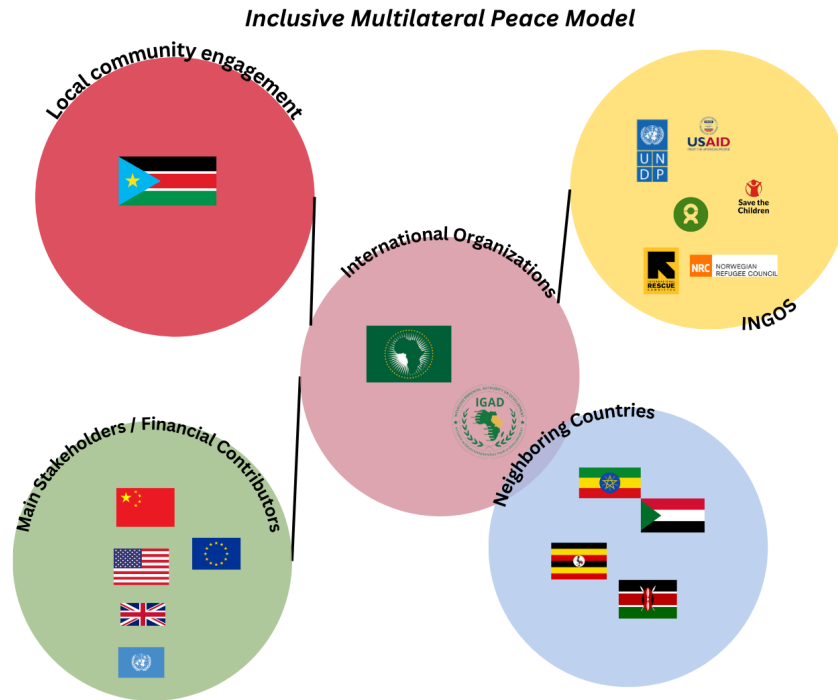
Toward a Multilateral Peace Model

The Inclusive Multilateral Peace Model offers a comprehensive framework for fostering sustainable peace in post-conflict regions by coordinating the efforts of all stakeholders. The model prioritizes inclusivity and collaboration by integrating local communities, international organizations, neighboring countries, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and financial contributors. Each stakeholder group plays a unique and equal role, addressing different facets of peacebuilding to create a holistic and durable solution.

At its core, this proposed model positions the African Union (AU) as a liaison and coordinator, serving as the critical intermediary between local communities and significant international stakeholders such as the United Nations, powerful states, and major financial contributors.⁹⁰ This central role allows the AU to harmonize the priorities and capabilities of external actors with the lived realities of conflict-affected populations, creating a dynamic and adaptable peacekeeping framework.

⁹⁰Figure 3

Figure 3



This model acknowledges and seeks to manage the diverse and multiple interests of powerful international stakeholders, regional organizations, and civil society groups. Powerful states and entities like the United States, China, the European Union, and the United Nations often bring essential resources to peacekeeping efforts. Still, they can also impose agendas driven by political or economic motives. The Inclusive Multilateral Peace Model advocates for greater accountability and transparency in these contributions, ensuring that financial and political support aligns with the needs of conflict-affected populations rather than donor priorities. Also, it takes a burden off of the UN to adapt to all the different competitive interests on the ground and stick to the successful implementation of peacekeeping that was seen traditionally.

A Decentralized Decision Maker

Ideally, the model would emphasize a checks and balances system in a humanitarian intervention without increasing bureaucracy. The model emphasizes decentralized

decision-making, where responsibility is equally distributed across three core agents: local stakeholders, the regional organization (e.g., the African Union), and global actors (e.g., UN agencies, donor countries, INGOs). This structure ensures that no single entity dominates the intervention process. Each body would have distinct roles and responsibilities. For example, local actors would have three main responsibilities: provide context-specific insights into community needs. This means that local communities and actors, as identified by the AU, would provide context on what they need, and that context is shared with the body of the UN. Next, act as primary implementers for community-based programs. With sufficient funding, increased humanitarian aid, and work on reconciliation, local communities would have full control over the implementation of programs in which they can control. For example, the Fambul Tok of Sierra Leone, in which local communities created small truth and reconciliation committees in each neighborhood, proves a community-based program that communities can lead and be effective in reconciliation efforts. Lastly, local communities can evaluate the social and cultural appropriateness of international recommendations and call on primary contacts established throughout the intervention.

Regional organizations like the AU serve as the bridge between these global actors and local communities. They act as the mediator under this model. This organization is uniquely positioned to mediate competing interests and to ensure that peacekeeping initiatives reflect the realities on the ground. Local civil society groups, including grassroots organizations, traditional leaders, and community representatives, provide vital insights into the root causes of conflict and the pathways to sustainable peace. Regional organizations have a better cultural understanding of finding local communities' leaders and grassroots organizations. Ensuring that the local community has as much stake as other contributors ensures that peacebuilding initiatives are

inclusive and deeply rooted in the social fabric of affected societies. In addition, a body like the AU could better coordinate a regional response to conflict, ensuring the peace of surrounding countries is supported regardless of a conflict just over the border.

International Stakeholder Roles

International actors would primarily work on the following: supply financial and logistical resources. If peacemaking is truly in the interest of the UN, there would be available funding and resources regardless of the restructuring of involvement of member states. This would probably be a significant change for member states like the P5, which are regularly entitled to securing a return on investment. The UN could also provide expertise for implementation and report on international laws and human rights violations.

In all of these responsibilities, there would ideally be a committee of representatives, all of which rightfully represent their part of the triad. A council, composed of equal representation from each group, would hold regular sessions to assess the mission's progress, ensure communication, and mediate disagreements. This way, there could be benchmark progress reports, and peacekeeping initiatives would not pass without considering all perspectives. In an era of third-generation peacekeeping, this optimal balance between top-down and bottom-up processes would work to alleviate many of the failures regarding modern peacekeeping.

Ultimately, the Inclusive Multilateral Peace Model advocates for a shift from fragmented or externally dominated peacekeeping initiatives. It calls for a framework that places the regional organization at the center of decision-making, supported by international stakeholders and informed by the perspectives of local communities. This reimagined model of peacekeeping addresses the limitations of existing approaches and conflicting interests, and also provides a path toward sustainable peace by fostering collaboration, inclusivity, and shared responsibility at

all levels of governance. It would leave the country with the ability for local communities to continue building after the withdrawal of intervention. This balance aims to create a system that bridges global oversight with localized agency, empowering communities and organizations to build an inclusive foundation for peacebuilding and development.

Challenges

This model depends completely on people's willingness and trust in institutions. However, the model is also constrained to different case-specific challenges. By no means is this model a one-size-fits-all type of structure. Whether it is time, geographical location, the severity of the conflict, world order, or regional breakdown, different challenges call for different peacekeeping initiatives. As for the model, as it exists, many civilians view the AU as a group of elitist policymakers who studied outside of Africa and returned with a Western mindset. This means that, when coupled with the financial support of prominent stakeholders, there is a high risk for corruption and continued pursuit of United States and China interests from within the AU. The model does not ensure no corruption, and there is no way to prevent an integral part of human nature and greed. However, this model demonstrates what inclusivity could look like in an era of new wars and increased power competition. This model would ideally gradually address the consequences of a strictly top-down model, not eliminate them immediately.

It is important to acknowledge that powerful stakeholders, driven by self-interest, will continue to prioritize their strategic agendas, regardless of who takes the lead in peacekeeping efforts. A paradigm shift like this will not transform states into constructivists from realists, but that is not the objective of this model. By selecting regional actors—despite their flaws and susceptibility to external influence—their stronger connections with communities on the ground make them more effective in addressing the needs of suffering populations. This localized

approach can provide a more meaningful foundation for reconciliation and development. While obstacles of greed from powerful states cannot be entirely eliminated, the model's emphasis on inclusivity and checks and balances provides a pathway for mitigating that obstacle, better prioritizing those in need.

Toward Peace

A structural shift within the UN and regional organizations will not change the world overnight. Still, it can begin to ensure success in the current pessimistic trajectory of peacekeeping and conflict resolution. Despite over a decade of intervention, the ongoing crisis in South Sudan exposes the disheartening misalignment between the goals of external actors and the stark realities faced by local communities. The pursuit of financial and hegemonic interests at the expense of people's livelihoods has resulted in prolonged suffering and instability. However, the true catalyst for change lies in reshaping the global order to prioritize human dignity over power. This shift is not only possible but necessary.

This paper demonstrates how these dynamics have hindered mission success by analyzing the competing interests of international stakeholders in South Sudan—particularly the United States and China—and the exclusion of local voices. The findings emphasize that peacekeeping efficiency would significantly improve by transitioning to a more inclusive, multilateral governance model. Such a model would prioritize integrating perspectives from developing nations, regional organizations, and local communities into decision-making processes. By realigning mandates and fostering greater collaboration among stakeholders, peacekeeping missions like UNMISS can evolve to address the complexities of modern conflict more effectively.

While the situation in South Sudan remains grim—marked by widespread poverty, lack of

access to basic resources, and ongoing struggles for the population—there is still hope for an improved international response. If the most powerful stakeholders, the United States and China, approached peacekeeping with a commitment to inclusivity and collaboration, the rest of the international community would follow. However, with enough protest from the collective of other member states and UN stakeholders, this change could be enforced by the rest of the international community. The key to breaking the cycle of instability lies in the choice of stakeholders to deny complacency and embrace a more balanced and community-based approach to peacekeeping, one that focuses on raising the bottom up. Building trust, empowering local communities, and aligning global interventions with local needs are central to the development of South Sudan. Adopting a model centralizing the regions before the stakeholders would not only work as a resolution to the peacekeeping paradox but also ensure that conflict resolution serves the people it aims to protect. Once a secure social, economic, and political foundation is established, there must be a timely withdrawal from all actors.

For too long, powerful stakeholders have prioritized their self-interests and greed, leaving those in conflict zones to bear the burden of their decisions. This must change. The UN does not need to reinvent the wheel; it must clearly define modern peacekeeping's function. A rigorous system of checks and balances must be established to hold actors accountable, ensuring that the pursuit of power no longer overpowers the pursuit of peace.

Through thoughtful reforms and redefining peacekeeping frameworks, the UN has the potential to fulfill the noble vision it was founded upon—a world where peacekeeping is not a tool of gain but a force that truly serves the people it is meant to protect. The time has come to build a future where those caught in the devastation of conflict are not ignored, where their voices are heard, and where peacekeeping is their aid for change, not the force of their suffering.

Appendix
Figure 1

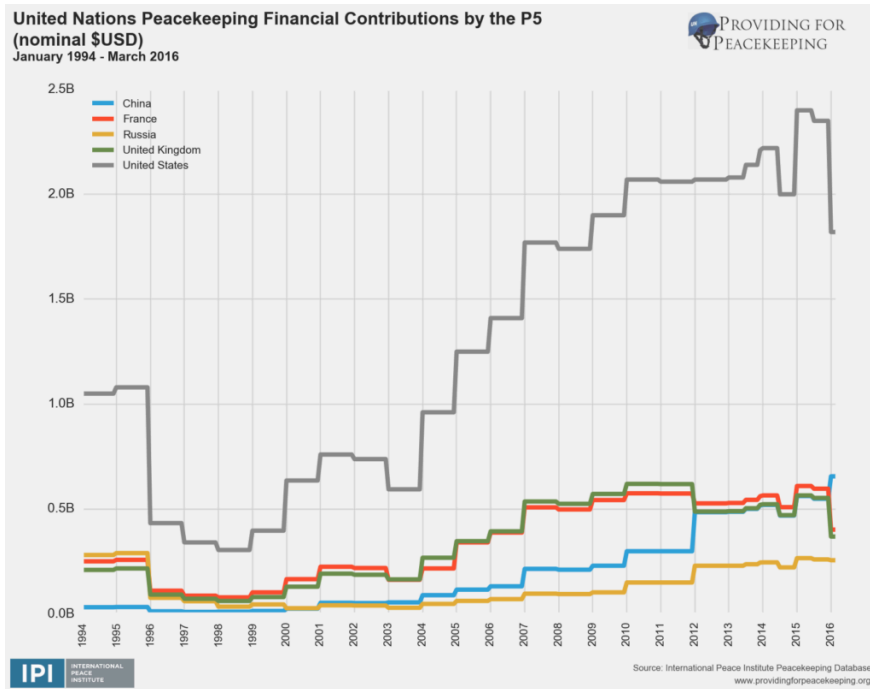


Figure 1.1

Peacekeeping Funding and Personnel Come From Different Countries

Top ten contributors of funding and of personnel

Funding for UN peacekeeping worldwide

| | |
|----------------|----------|
| United States | \$1.7B |
| China | \$1.1B |
| Japan | \$526.4M |
| Germany | \$393.9M |
| United Kingdom | \$353.7M |
| France | \$346M |
| Italy | \$211.1M |
| Canada | \$170.1M |
| Russia | \$169.2M |
| South Korea | \$153.5M |

Uniformed personnel for UN peacekeeping in Africa

| | |
|------------|-------|
| Bangladesh | 6,833 |
| Rwanda | 5,949 |
| India | 4,975 |
| Nepal | 4,658 |
| Pakistan | 4,326 |
| Egypt | 2,094 |
| China | 1,852 |
| Morocco | 1,718 |
| Ethiopia | 1,504 |
| Ghana | 1,095 |

Note: Funding data is for 2022. Personnel data is the number deployed as of September 2023.

Sources: UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations; UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination.

Figure 2

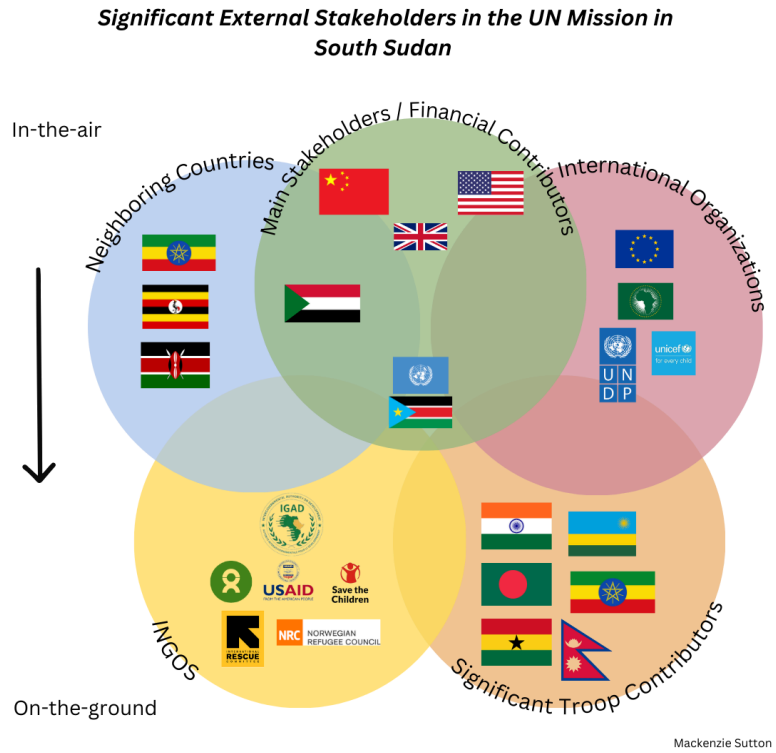
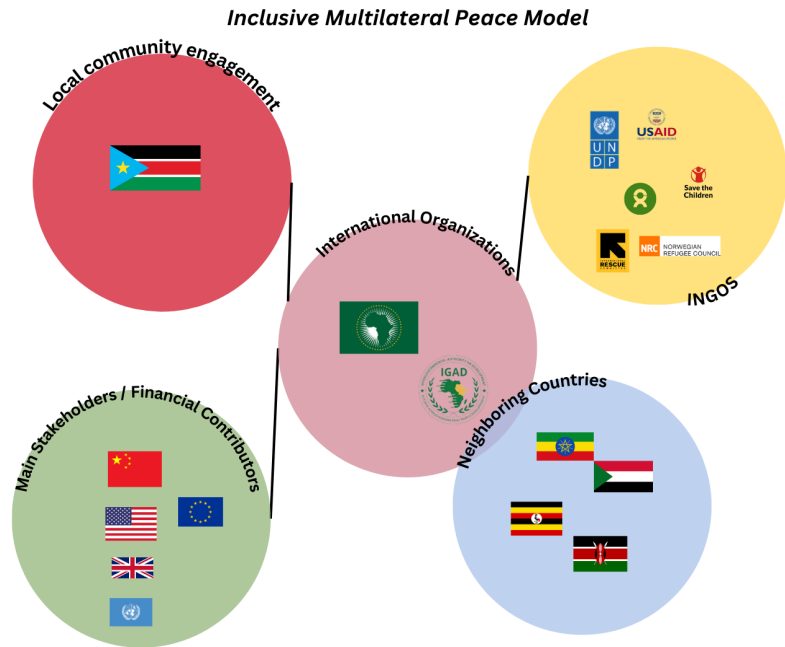


Figure 3



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