

Canadian  
Forces  
College

Collège  
des  
Forces  
Canadiennes



## SOUTH SUDAN : THE REALIST PARADIGM PREVAILS

Lieutenant-Colonel David Roberge

**JCSP 44**

***Exercice Solo Flight***

**Disclaimer**

Opinions expressed remain those of the author and do not represent Department of National Defence or Canadian Forces policy. This paper may not be used without written permission.

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of National Defence, 2019.

**PCEMI 44**

***Exercice Solo Flight***

**Avertissement**

Les opinions exprimées n'engagent que leurs auteurs et ne reflètent aucunement des politiques du Ministère de la Défense nationale ou des Forces canadiennes. Ce papier ne peut être reproduit sans autorisation écrite.

© Sa Majesté la Reine du Chef du Canada, représentée par le ministre de la Défense nationale, 2019.

## CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 44 – PCEMI 44  
2017 – 2019EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT***SOUTH SUDAN: THE REALIST PARADIGM PREVAILS**

By Lieutenant-Colonel David Roberge

*“This paper was written by a candidate attending the Canadian Forces College in fulfilment of one of the requirements of the Course of Studies. The paper is a scholastic document, and thus contains facts and opinions, which the author alone considered appropriate and correct for the subject. It does not necessarily reflect the policy or the opinion of any agency, including the Government of Canada and the Canadian Department of National Defence. This paper may not be released, quoted or copied, except with the express permission of the Canadian Department of National Defence.”*

*« La présente étude a été rédigée par un stagiaire du Collège des Forces canadiennes pour satisfaire à l'une des exigences du cours. L'étude est un document qui se rapporte au cours et contient donc des faits et des opinions que seul l'auteur considère appropriés et convenables au sujet. Elle ne reflète pas nécessairement la politique ou l'opinion d'un organisme quelconque, y compris le gouvernement du Canada et le ministère de la Défense nationale du Canada. Il est défendu de diffuser, de citer ou de reproduire cette étude sans la permission expresse du ministère de la Défense nationale. »*

## **SOUTH SUDAN: THE REALIST PARADIGM PREVAILS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

With an overwhelming referendum victory of 98.83 %, the Republic of South Sudan became the world's newest country with its independence from the Republic of the Sudan in July 2011. This historic vote followed decades of internal war with the Arabic-controlled Sudanese government and hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese deaths. Yet the promise of stability, good governance and wealth based on huge oil resources has not turned out well. Less than two years after independence, internal conflicts have ravaged South Sudan. Examining the situation through the lens of the Realism theory indicates that this should be no surprise.

This paper will demonstrate that although the theory originated during the inter-war period of 1919-1939, realism's essence remains valid for most countries. My arguments apply the classical realism and neo-realism theories to topics such as power, security and sovereignty. A key assumption is that South Sudanese tribes can be considered as states<sup>1</sup> in that they share similarities and were the governing entities in Africa before "countries" were established by imperial powers.

*Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

-- Lord Acton

### **POWER**

For many, the referendum indisputable win was the beginning of a long awaiting new chapter for people of South Sudan. Expectations and hope were very high with the popular acknowledgement that the worst was behind them and that the leaders would automatically rally and work together to

---

<sup>1</sup> Britannica Encyclopedia definition of State: The state is a form of human association distinguished from other social groups by its purpose, the establishment of order and security; its methods, the laws and their enforcement; its territory, the area of jurisdiction or geographic boundaries; and finally by its sovereignty.

make to most out of this new freedom. For realist, this rosy phase of *building up a Nation* was the beginning of a realm of internal conflicts among tribes. Neo-realism identifies that the most stable context is the balance between two powers. If we look back at the Cold War when the world was focused on the power struggle between Russia and the United States, there was no other major conflicts surfacing. However, since the end of that War, many states have and are still experiencing conflicts. The breakup of Czechoslovakia into Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993 or that of Yugoslavia into six (6) countries in 1992 could be compared to some extent to that of Sudan and South Sudan less than a decade ago, albeit the resulting internal conflicts. It could be argued that in these two examples, the unipolar or multipolar system created the instability. In the Sudan case, the division into two states sought to reinstate the balance of power and increase stability in both Sudan and South Sudan. Unfortunately, other factors played significant roles in defining the outcome in the Sudan case.

South Sudan has numerous diverse tribes with the Dinka (36%), the Nuer (16%), and 18 other ethnic groups<sup>2</sup>. These two major groups make up more than 50% of the population which makes this internal “unbalanced multipolarity<sup>3</sup>” an unstable structure for peace in the country thereby an excellent source of internal conflicts and power struggles. Before the creation of South Sudan, the tribes focused their attention fighting salvation and drought, and fighting against the ruling Arabs in Khartoum. After the referendum, the uniting factor of a single enemy disappeared for the southern based tribes, and inter-tribal thirst for power took centre stage in South Sudan politics.

The newly acquired control of the territory oil resources and associated revenues demonstrated the application one of the Realism theory belief that leaders should not sacrifice their own self-interests to

---

<sup>2</sup> CIA World Fact Book on South Sudan

<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Stephen M. Walt “Realism and Security.” In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, p6

adhere to some notion of ethical conduct<sup>4</sup>. In other words, tribal leaders focused on their tribal interests over the collective interest of the State. With a mix of nomadic and sedentary cultures, tribal interests differ and are expressed in different ways. For example, some of the tribes prioritized the expansion of their territory to provide for their cattle while others favoured agriculture and access to the Nile River. With the majority of the population nomads, it's easy to understand the power struggle sedentary tribes face.

The fact that million of dollars in oil resources revenues were made available for the new country provided the means for leaders to clench their thirst of power, which is a key aspect of Realism. The Dinka being the predominant tribe in South Sudan have the advantage and occupy the strongest political positions to influence and direct the country's aspirations. Despite the former united front against a common enemy in Khartoum, cooperation evaporated since secession from Sudan. Consequently, the Dinka enjoy an almost absolute power, quite predictably considering the omnipresence of realism in Africa. In this specific case, the dual moral standard or *raison d'être* as described by Dunne and Brian would be defined as a moral standard for individuals living in a tribe and the moral standard of a tribe in relation to external tribes or states. To that effect, tribes in search of increased power must ensure a culturally accepted moral standard within their tribal structure. This justifies the leader's legitimacy and acts as a deterrence to external players.

Syria and its borders were formed by colonial powers following the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. Syria aligned with USSR and the Warsaw Pact in the Cold War, and then with Russia post-Cold War. Similarities could be drawn with South Sudan, highlighting the dominance of Realism in current world politics. In the Syrian example, Russia is promoting its own objectives regardless of international agreements concerning armed conflict, and in South Sudan the main tribes are trying to

---

4

Tim Dunne and Brian C. Schmidt. "Realism." In *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 5th ed, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p86

achieve their objectives while disregarding any collective benefits from their actions. Based on these examples, the realist definition of anarchy is reinforced by the lack of central authority on the international stage, or within the state in the case of South Sudan when we consider tribes as the mini-states. Until such *anarchy* is resolved, the Realist theory will always prove that Nations, entities and/or tribes will value self-interest before collective prosperity.

*States can maximize security by cooperating with others in mutually beneficial ways.*

-- Kenneth Waltz

## **SECURITY**

In order for a State to be sovereign, security has to be established. For the realist, many factors influence security such as polarity, the balance of power, the population's acceptance of the provided security, but also domestic politics which include establishment of institutions. Central to the realist theory, security is a responsibility of the state (or entity) because no one else can be counted on to provide internal or external security. With the main tribes all vying for power and security, Walt's explanation of the security problem for states such as South Sudan is apropos: "The presence of multiple states in anarchy renders the security of each of them problematic and encourages them to compete with each other for power and/or security"<sup>5</sup> It's in the interest of tribal leaders to protect and provide security to their people, and at the same time, protect their place within the tribal hierarchy. Dinka leader for example, although powerful, must always be ahead of other tribes to maintain their standing while the Nuer leader has to keep fighting for power in order to stay ahead of the smaller tribe and not lose ground with the Dinka. Another example is the fact that the Dinka and Nuer are nomadic tribes who value cattle, which are used to show power and status within their respective tribe.

---

5

<sup>5</sup> Stephen M. Walt "Realism and Security." In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, p3

Therefore, security of the country's natural resource of between 10-20 million head of cattle is almost as important as the security of people. These tribal realities influence policy making and South Sudan institutions and create frictions with tribes not sharing the same heritage or culture.

Without institutions, there is limited security, it had to be expected than the tribal dynamic would negatively affect the new Nations. The only recognize and somewhat respected institution is the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), founded as a guerrilla movement and now the Republic of South Sudan Army. Since there is no other legitimate institutions governing the country and consequently the military, neo-classical realists argue that "militarized polities are prone to exaggerate security threats and adopt overly aggressive response to them"<sup>6</sup> Because they are seen as the *liberators*, SPLA placed themselves above the internal law of the land. Armies exist to protect the state from external enemies while police forces exist to enforce a widely accepted system of laws and cultural norms; having one institution do both is a slipper slope for South Sudan leadership. The risk of compromise of standards and ethics is huge. Smaller tribes will seek alternatives to the oppression of a foreign" central authority. And you may end up with the original Republic of Sudan situation. This definitely can partly explain the reason why a faction planned and executed a failed coup in September 2013 to bring down the government. As argued by (offensive) realism, the outcome demonstrates that entity should aim to maximize power to have a better chance of survival in an anarchic system, rather than to divide it.

Another principle governing realists is that a prominent goal is survival. After all the years of suffering for the tribes under Khartoum and its Sharia law, tribes would do anything to survive and maintain their customs, religions and languages. Institutions, laws and military actions are passed and implemented in order to allow a state to survive. In a situation where many different tribes are

---

6

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p8

involved, this is definitely a challenge as individual tribe requirements/demands can often be in contradictory to another tribe's. The dual moral standard has a big influence on South Sudanese leaders. Based on the realist, this situation was to be expected, the more players, more are the chance of conflict in regards to national interests, rules and laws. As examples, road conditions in South Sudan are bad to non-existent, partly due to rainy seasons and numerous years of wars. There is a requirement to connect towns to local centres to increase commerce. There is also an urgent need to develop water holes and reservoir to encourage settlement and reduce migration. These infrastructure developments are required by the country but would not serve the nomad tribes. Since these tribes are the most numerous and holding the key leadership positions in the country, these projects might take forever to materialized, therefore, not taking care of the country future but of the tribe immediate needs. This is the attitude one would expect in a realist context.

A peace agreement between the South Sudanese President and rebel leader Riek Machar signed in August 2018 was supposed to stabilize the country politics. Unfortunately, the agreement was a power sharing deal similar to the 2005 agreement between Sudan and the South Sudan region. The international community denounced that not enough South Sudanese groups were invited to participate in the negotiations leading to the agreement. The agreement served the purpose of the main tribes and not that of the country.

*Accept the fact that in twenty years the map of Africa is unlikely to look like that of today*

-- Marina Ottaway, Jeffrey Herbst and Greg Mills

## **SOVEREIGNTY**

A root source of problems for Africa is that countries were mapped by colonials disregarding tribal territories and ethnic population distribution. Many of these created *countries* that have subsequently gained their independence have found it impossible to establish enduring institutions and



sustainable rule of law to properly govern their populations. Internal conflicts have undermined all attempts at establishing true national sovereignty. One of the definitions of sovereignty is that State has the supreme power or authority to make and enforce laws; the authority to govern itself. However, to gain that authority, institutions have to be legitimate and supported by the majority of the population; which is not the case for South Sudan. For realists, state sovereignty is the featured realist trait, and for the realist, internal & inter-tribal clashes are to be expected. Sovereignty is an essential component of Nation building and in order for it to be attained, legitimate institutions must be established. To establish enduring institutions, security within the state has to be granted and maintained, and for security to be maintained, power must be appropriately acquired and equitably distributed. It can be easily argued that South Sudan has yet to achieve its sovereignty. According to the realist theory, they were not yet ready to succeed in implementing their independence when the population was called to vote in the referendum.

While operating under the Khartoum reign, South Sudanese politicians had minimal interaction and limited experience with foreign policies and international commerce. A realist assumption for effective international relationships requires that the potential problem of order and security is solved domestically, which South Sudan has yet to achieve. This reality coupled with limited international diplomacy experience exposes South Sudan's leadership to being seriously disadvantaged by other Nations, especially China who is South Sudan's major international partners. Returning to the aspect of realist theory on States favouring self-interest before cooperative benefits; China is widely acknowledged as strongly nationalistic and will use its political and economic power to impose conditions, and influence South Sudan politics to their advantage. Prior to the 2011 referendum, the United Nations (UN) mission was unable to ensure proper disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programme, and nation pre-building between the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 and the scheduled 2011 referendum. China always expressed to the

UN Security Council that if there was anything affecting their *oil* business in South Sudan, they would veto any actions the UN would take. That reaction from China is a major confirmation of the continued existence of the Realist nature of the most powerful States. Such attitude could create delays for nations such as South Sudan for their readiness for Nation building.

Notwithstanding China's self-interest actions in the pre-South Sudan era, it remains that security and sovereignty requires some element of foreign help/aid to support the country's new institutions. A weakness of the realist viewpoint is that it sees power through Nation-states whereas other significant influences and entities such as the transnational corporations and international organizations are also major players. Given that the only legitimate institution in South Sudan is the SPLA, other major players are mostly foreign and therefore, do not have South Sudan interests as their priorities. Based on this, it would be a valid argument to stipulate that not only States but also other national agencies could help bring stability in the country.

South Sudan's Information Minister once said: "We will first bring peace and thereafter make people accountable"<sup>7</sup> when asked if former politicians and SPLA leaders should be judged for what they have done in the past. This quote demonstrates that the Government is focused on establishing sovereignty and security before any rule of law can be applied. The challenge for foreign states is to enable the conditions for South Sudan's to acquire legitimacy and sovereignty.

*The Chinese don't influence our politics, they don't comment on it, and what they want, they pay for.*

-- Emmanuel Jal

## **INTERNATIONAL**

---

7

<sup>7</sup> Nick Turse. *Next Time They'll Come to Count the Dead: War and Survival in South Sudan*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016. p73

Almost 98% of South Sudan revenue comes from oil export through Sudan. Their survival and hope for a secure, peaceful and sovereign country requires this income. It is therefore in the national interest of South Sudan and also the main tribes, to maintain the required international relation with the former ruling country. The inability of the South Sudan central authority to control China's self-interest in oil exploitation demonstrates the realist definition of anarchy. This anarchy environment allows South Sudan politicians and international players to legitimize their own self-interested actions. Juba, South Sudan capital city, is now looking at financing a pipeline to carry their oil without the need to go through Sudan, with the hope of increasing their sovereignty by focusing on their interest as opposed to those of others in the region.

The United States shielding of South Sudan from an arms embargo, despite SPLA implication in mass rape, execution, pillaging and destruction of property, is yet another instance of realism overshadowing justice. It also highlights the dual morality concept described earlier in this paper. The British government's successful attempt to attenuate the anti-Saudi resolutions in the Human Rights Council for its conduct in Yemen also demonstrated that keeping the relationship with the Saudi was more important than justice. Along with the example from Russia described earlier, they are examples of the Realist theory application by powerful countries, the notion that it only affects Third World countries is wrong. To the contrary, such actions negatively affect countries in their *nation building* phase as it sets a bad example. Unfortunately for a country like South Sudan, support and sometime foreign influence/interference are required in order to advice and/or finance the establishment of institutions and programs.

## **CONCLUSION**

As opposed to Liberals who believe that states can work together to maximize prosperity and minimize conflict, realists recognizes the primary focus of state leaders on self-interest. Although

Marxism is a structural theory similar to neo-realism, it considers the economic sector before the military-political one, and blames capitalism as the source of structural defects, vice anarchy. Based on these definitions, it is clear that South Sudan's current situation should have been expected if one adopts the realist approach. Unenlightened observers might only see the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan and not consider the tribal heritage of the South Sudanese. This does not acknowledge that the major tribes are organized and structured like small nations with their inherent rules and customs. This reality has greatly affected the capacity of the world's newest country to leverage power, establish security and embrace sovereignty as a Nation of tribes. Sadly, South Sudan's leaders have focused on their tribal self-interest over those of the Nation.

Acknowledging the changes in international trade, commerce and social media, it is undeniable that politics has changed. Nonetheless, the Realist theory is still valid to democratic, dictatorship and tribal countries as it is based on human basic behaviours: thirst for power, requirement for security and need to belong to an entity; which are the foundation of the realist theory. South Sudan past, current and future situation can be somewhat predicted using that theory. At the same time, using the theory, the country can be geared toward solutions for a better future.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Coghlan, Nicholas. *Collapse of A Country: A Diplomat's Memoir of South Sudan*. Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017
- Dunne, Tim, and Brian C. Schmidt. "Realism." In *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations, 5th ed*, edited by John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011
- Johnson, Hilde F. *South Sudan the Untold Story: From Independence to Civil War*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016
- Nepstad, Sharon Erickson. "How Civil Resistance Works." In *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011
- Nye, Joseph S. "Smart Power." In *The Future of Power*, edited by Joseph S. Nye. New York: Public Affairs, 2011
- Ottaway, Marina, Jeffrey Herbst, and Greg Mills. "Africa's Big States: Toward a New Realism". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Washington, DC, 2004
- Turse, Nick. *Next Time They'll Come to Count the Dead: War and Survival in South Sudan*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016
- Walt, Stephen M. "Realism and Security." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press