The South Sudan Defence Force: patriots, collaborators or spoilers?

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ABSTRACT

Despite stipulations in the Sudan’s 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that all ‘other armed groups’ be demobilised by January 2006, the South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF) continued to maintain a significant armed presence in South Sudan. This paper analyses the dynamics of the organisation, the impact of its ongoing presence on the security situation and reconstruction efforts, and attempts by the government of South Sudan to counteract the SSDF from January to August 2006. It argues that the strategies implemented by the government to counter the SSDF were fairly successful in that there was no major return to conflict. However, it concludes that the SSDF’s continued presence, while hindered, has the potential to spark a return to civil war.

INTRODUCTION

Sudan has endured civil war in its south for most of its post-independence history. After 21 years of nearly unbroken fighting, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the Khartoum government and the rebels of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), and came into effect in January 2005. The demilitarisation of the south, as envisioned by the CPA, was to be primarily through the application of Demobilisation, Disarmament, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) programmes, and the separation or semi-integration of the opposition military forces, specifically the SPLA and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF).

However, this focus obscures both the prominent role played by ‘other armed groups’ in the civil war in the south, and their continued presence

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there during the transition to peace. The most significant ‘other armed group’ in the south is an amalgamation of militias loosely aligned under the umbrella of the South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF). Ethically inspired factionalism, coupled to an overlay of political disputes and personal ambitions, fuelled the divisions amongst the southern rebels which inspired the formation of the SSDF. These ongoing disputes have been actively exploited by the government in Khartoum in pursuit of its own agenda. In fact, with the signing of the Khartoum Agreement in 1997, the SSDF militias became government allies and, in this capacity, were supported by Khartoum against fellow southern rebels, the SPLA. Significantly, the SSDF was not a partner to the CPA, which stipulated that all of the other armed groups in South Sudan were to be subsumed within the SPLA or SAF within one year of its signing.

The purpose of this article is to provide an empirical mapping of the SSDF through an analysis of its operational mode, motivations and interests, as well as its relationship to external actors. In particular, it seeks to understand what role and effect this apparently loose alliance of militias has had (and may have) on prospects for demilitarisation and sustainable peace in South Sudan. Given the complexities of research into militias, the article narrows its focus to a specific time period and SSDF units for consideration in order to draw out these dynamics and trends from the post-CPA experience of South Sudan, concentrating on the SSDF units in two states, Upper Nile and Jonglei, during the period from January to August 2006.¹

**THE ORIGINS OF THE SSDF**

The progression of the civil wars in Sudan and the relations of the armed groups that have fought them have been complicated and fractured. Sudan’s second civil war² began in the late 1970s and was initiated by what was known as ‘Anyanya II’, a movement of veterans of the first civil war who were dissatisfied with Khartoum’s abrogation of the 1972 peace agreement and its guarantees of southern autonomy. By 1983, Anyanya II was joined in revolt against the central government in Khartoum by the SPLA, which was led by a defecting SAF officer named John Garang. During the 1980s, relations between these two groups soured, and ultimately competition between them led to the defeat of Anyanya II by the SPLA, and either the incorporation of its forces into the latter or their splintering into militias supported by the Khartoum government.

In 1991, the SPLA itself underwent a major change when two of its senior commanders, Lam Akol and Riek Machar, defected from the
leadership of John Garang over ideological differences concerning southern independence (O’Ballance 2000: 172). The two defecting leaders themselves separated in 1992, with Akol forming the SPLA-United and Machar eventually founding the South Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM). Additionally, the early and mid-1990s saw a proliferation of new armed groups in the south, as smaller factions broke away from these larger organisations or formed in their own right. As the 1990s progressed, most of these non-SPLA armed groups sought and received support from the Government of Sudan (GoS), so that they might be better able to protect their tribal homelands and/or pursue their own grievances with Garang’s forces.

The relationship between these varied forces and the GoS was consolidated in 1997, through the signing of a peace agreement known as the Khartoum Agreement, and an addendum to it known as the Fashoda Agreement. Overall, the Khartoum Agreement agreed that after an interim period of unspecified length, the south would be provided with a vote on self-determination, the long-held aspiration of those southerners in disagreement with Garang over the SPLA’s insistence on a united Sudan. The Khartoum Agreement also formalised the amalgamation of non-SPLA militias into an umbrella organisation, the SSDF, led by Riek Machar. For their part, the Khartoum Agreement left the GoS with the new opportunity to exploit the oil fields of the northern part of South Sudan, namely those in Unity State, since they were under the control of the SSDF.

Even with its official standing as a partner in the Khartoum Agreement, the SSDF never had much internal coherence. The SSDF had little unity as its various component militias were largely autonomous from one another. This was primarily encouraged by the fact that SAF Military Intelligence supported individual commanders directly, which prevented the SSDF from forming a coherent, unified organisation (ISS 2004: 5). Furthermore, the fractured nature of the organisation also resulted from the often-conflicting individual aspirations of the leaders of its component militias, and the strong tribal and clan loyalties of the southern Sudanese (ISS 2004: 13). By 2002, Riek Machar had left the organisation, which then came under the political leadership of Gatluak Deng and the military command of Major General Paulino Matip. It is notable that even as ‘Chief of Staff’, Matip served ‘largely as a figurehead beyond the area of his immediate control’ in his home area in Unity State (ISS 2004: 6).

Under the stipulations of the CPA, the SSDF was supposed to be subsumed within the SPLA or SAF by January 2006. The CPA mandated that there could be no ‘third army’ in South Sudan after this deadline, yet
the exact mechanisms for ensuring this were left decidedly ambiguous in the text. On 8 January 2006, an agreement was reached between the president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, and Paulino Matip of the SSDF, entitled the Juba Declaration. Through the declaration, the majority of SSDF forces would come to join the SPLA, with Matip becoming the SPLA’s deputy commander in chief. This was a major blow to the GoS, as the SSDF forces that had been securing the country’s major oil fields in Unity State on its behalf, under the command of Matip, were now a part of the SPLA.

Nevertheless, following the Juba Declaration there was a reorganisation of the SSDF, which reformed under the leadership of Major General Gordon Kong. Although the SSDF lost its strongest position in the south, namely in Unity State, and the majority of its troop strength to the SPLA, the organisation maintained an armed presence in South Sudan, primarily in Jonglei and Upper Nile states but in other states as well. This was in contradiction to the dictates of the CPA.

The usage by the GoS of allies, or what might be termed southerner ‘proxies’, has been a common tactic. As Emeric Rogier (2005: 12) has noted, ‘a fundamental principle of Sudanese politics [has been] that northerners … seek allies from “the other side” to fight their own-brother enemies, hence the formation of “cross-border” alliances’. The first such case in the second Sudanese civil war began in 1983, when some Anyanya II units aligned themselves as pro-government militias. Furthermore, within months of Garang’s defection from SAF, it had supplied local tribal militias to fight the nascent SPLA. For instance, Murle militias were provided with weaponry to attack Dinka and Nuer communities from which the SPLA was drawing support (Johnson 2004: 68–9).

Overall, ‘Khartoum’s strategy of supplying southern militias and waging war by proxy’ began under the Nimeiri government and was continued ‘by all successive governments’ (Rogier 2005: 19). Considering that, the sad truth of the second Sudanese civil war in the south is that the war was largely fought between southerners. Thus, the war has often been described as ‘civil wars within a civil war’, something that Khartoum governments have been adept at playing to their advantage. Khartoum’s ability to manipulate actors in the country’s periphery is proving a consistent trend. In the present conflict in Darfur, Alex De Waal (2004) notes that Khartoum is once again resorting to ‘counterinsurgency on the cheap’ through its support for so-called ‘Janjawid’ militias. According to De Waal, this tactic, tried and tested in the south, was used when Khartoum ‘sought out a local militia, provided it with supplies and armaments, and declared the area of operations an ethics-free zone’. As
the conflict continues to rage in Darfur, it is no surprise to southerners that
the roles of militias acting in tandem with Khartoum are at the centre of
the country’s present civil war.

SSDF’S OPERATIONAL MODE

‘Nobody can disarm us, we’re another army.’ – SSDF soldier (24.7.2006 int.)

The operational mode of the SSDF after the Juba Declaration has been
severely constricted by the implementation of the CPA. This has been
for several reasons. First, the SAF, the SSDF’s near exclusive supplier of
material support,\(^5\) has itself seen its access limited in the south, as SAF
forces have had to concentrate in CPA defined assembly points, and have
also been required to begin to redeploy to the north. Second, the SPLA
for its part has been able to strengthen its presence in areas where the
SSDF was previously able to maintain a consistent presence. Third, and
most important, the Juba Declaration did see the majority of SSDF forces
join the SPLA, notably some of the largest SSDF units that had been
concentrated in Unity State under the command of Matip. The end result
was to isolate the SSDF in pockets of Jonglei and Upper Nile states, with
each commander controlling a small area of land surrounding one or two
militia camps in their home districts. The UN (UNMIS briefing 9.8.2006)
estimated that in early and mid-2006, the major concentrations of SSDF
forces in Upper Nile and Jonglei states were:

1. Gordon Kong in Nasir, commanding the ‘Al Nasir Forces’ with about
   85 men and in Adar with 300 to 400 men;
2. Gabriel Tang in Pam Al Zaraf, commanding the ‘Pangak Peace
   Forces’ with about 1,000 men;
3. Ismail Konyi in Pibor, commanding the ‘Pibor Defence Force’ with
   about 2,000 men; and
4. Thomas Mabior in Dolieb Hill, commanding the ‘Peace Forces Dolieb
   Hill’ with about 250 men.

In addition to these pockets of SSDF forces, there were also concentrations
in the Upper Nile’s capital city of Malakal. These forces were a miscellany
from the other units. For instance, there was a camp of at least 100 SSDF
soldiers who resided near the town’s airport, while others lived in the
compounds of their commanders.\(^6\) It is notable that many of the com-
manders of the SSDF forces found outside Malakal tended to reside
themselves in Malakal, while most of the top commanders, such as Gordon
Kong, resided near permanently in Khartoum (Nyawelo 11.8.2006 int.).
In general, despite tensions between these pockets of SSDF forces and SPLA forces, there were relatively few violent clashes between them from January to August 2006. Fighting between SSDF forces and SPLA troops did take place in Longochuk County in north-eastern Upper Nile State on 16 April 2006, when the local SPLA attacked the local SSDF forces in retaliation for an assassination attempt the week before on a county commissioner who belonged to the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) (Kun 11.8.2006 int.). This attack killed a number of SSDF soldiers and forced the SSDF to retreat. Moreover, it was the first time that SPLA troops had attacked an SSDF force in Upper Nile State since the signing of the CPA. The only other significant confrontation was in mid-August in the Fangak area of western Upper Nile State, over disagreements surrounding the county commissioner’s post allotment for Fangak County. The tensions eventually led to fighting between SSDF forces commanded by Gabriel Tang and the local SPLA forces.

A pressing concern of SPLA authorities was the fear that the SSDF was recruiting additional forces. They believed that this was being done for two main reasons (SPLA officer 3.8.2006 int.). First there was the pragmatic need for individual commanders to acquire and maintain sufficiently large forces to achieve what one SPLA general termed ‘big man power’ (Lam 24.7.2006 int.). In order to be recognised by the GoS and SAF, militia commanders needed to have enough armed men backing them. Second, SSDF commanders, it was argued by the SPLA, were recruiting so that they could try to acquire new areas of control, or at least be in the position to do so in the future. This was primarily so that they might influence future elections and increase their political sway. However, it was not evident to the author that the SSDF was actively trying to acquire new territories up to August 2006, despite SPLA allegations, and it was a consistent argument of the SSDF that it merely wanted to maintain the areas already under its control.

Even with recruitment allegedly taking place, the overall size of SSDF forces was in any case significantly smaller than that of the SPLA in the area, which numbered in the tens of thousands. In addition to raw numbers of troops, the SPLA also maintained a significant advantage in firepower, as it had tanks, artillery, and other heavy weaponry whereas the SSDF was largely confined to small arms and a limited number of mortars and heavy machineguns. However, the SSDF remained a significant threat to the SPLA and government of South Sudan (GoSS), not because of its present number of ‘active duty’ members but rather because of its ability to rapidly recruit afresh, as well as call up ‘reservists’ should conflict resume in the south (Nyawelo 11.8.2006 int.). Furthermore, while
there were relatively few pockets of armed SSDF, its soldiers were very experienced veterans who were fairly well armed for infantrymen, even if they lacked heavier weapons. This level of experience and possession of suitable weaponry meant that the SSDF could not be dismissed as a fighting force (SSDF officers and soldiers 30.7.2006 int.).

One issue of crucial importance to the dynamics of post-CPA South Sudan is the continued presence and movement of arms and ammunition. While the SSDF found itself increasingly isolated in pockets, it allegedly still received arms and ammunition from SAF, as it had for years (Nyawelo 14.8.2006 int.). If proven true (even SSDF commanders have admitted that SAF was their major source of supplies), it would be a serious violation of the CPA by the GoS (SSDF officer 23.7.2006 int.). In addition, SSDF members also noted that they had significant stockpiles acquired from past battles, and that in both the past and present it had been possible to buy ammunition from soldiers and officers in the SPLA sympathetic to them or just plain corrupt (SSDF officers 29.7.2006 int.). The primary means of transporting arms and ammunition was through the major SAF base in Malakal. Malakal was a convenient transshipment centre because of the SAF base, the presence of many SSDF militiamen (notably commanders), river transport along the Nile and Sobat rivers, and access to roads to the more rural areas of Upper Nile State (SPLM official 3.8.2006 int.). There were also consistent reports of SAF using a white helicopter to deliver supplies to the SSDF pockets.10

SSDF MOTIVATIONS

The SSDF demanded four major concessions when it was negotiating the Juba Declaration (Gatkouth 23.7.2006 int.). The primary political demand was that the SSDF be assured ‘full political participation’ in the GoSS as well as in the Government of National Unity, which consists of a union of the SPLM and the ruling party in Khartoum, the National Congress Party (NCP), as per CPA stipulations. This demand practically meant that SSDF leaders would be accorded key positions at all levels of governance. The remaining three demands all concerned military concessions. First, it was requested that all SSDF soldiers and officers be allowed to join the SPLA at the same rank as they held within the SSDF. Second, the post-Juba Declaration’s ‘new SPLA’ had to be non-partisan and not controlled by the SPLM political party. This meant that it must be under the civilian control of the GoSS itself. Third, after the referendum authorised by the CPA for 2011 and assuming it to be for independence, the SPLA must then change its name to the ‘South Sudan Army’.
While the SSDF has long been dismissed by its opponents in the SPLA as mercenaries for the GoS, there are actually a number of thoughtful political objectives that are consistently adhered to by its members. Central to this is the long-held demand for southern self-determination, specifically leading to independence for the south, which goes back to the SSDF’s origins in Anyanya II. It has often bewildered foreign observers of Sudanese politics that the SPLA was officially fighting against the GoS even though it advocated a unified Sudan, while the Khartoum-allied SSDF was the southern military force conversely fighting for complete independence. This conundrum has long defined tensions between the SSDF and the SPLA, and continues to provoke a contentious political atmosphere before the CPA referendum on self-determination is held in 2011.

At the Juba Declaration negotiations, an understanding was reached on the issue of self-determination, because the SPLM/A assured the SSDF negotiators that the referendum would take place no matter what obstacles were faced. Many ex-SSDF members who came over after the Juba Declaration note that the CPA is in most ways very similar to the Khartoum Agreement of 1997, most significantly in that it guarantees the south a vote on self-determination. Crucially, the CPA both sets a timeframe for the referendum and is recognised by the international community, attributes that the Khartoum Agreement lacked and which ultimately made the CPA the more viable of the two.

Apart from ideological issues surrounding self-determination, the demand for a replacement of the ‘SPLA’ with a ‘South Sudan Army’ was perhaps the most divisive one. At previous rounds of ‘south-south’ reconciliation meetings it had proved the stumbling block, and it is notable that Garang had consistently refused to compromise on this issue (SSDF officer 4.7.2006 int.). As a result of Garang’s intransigence, SSDF leaders saw his untimely death as an opportunity to begin reconciliation efforts anew (Gatkouth 23.7.2006 int.). And indeed, through the Juba Declaration a compromise was reached that satisfied the CPA requirements placed upon the SPLM/A, which stipulated that the SPLA be the army of the autonomous South Sudan in the interim period before the 2011 referendum, while also assuring the SSDF that if independence were to be selected in the referendum, the SPLA would cease to exist and would be replaced by a new entity known as the ‘South Sudan Army’.

The political part of the Juba Declaration was considered a success by the SSDF members, who agreed to it because they got a significant degree of political participation in the GoSS (Gatkouth 23.7.2006 int.). The military part seems more problematic. The successes, as far as the SSDF
negotiators were concerned, were that its members did officially transfer to the SPLA with the same ranks; the SPLA is no longer solely under the control of the SPLM political party but rather under the organs of the GoSS (though the degree of actual control is still ambiguous); and there was a formal integration procedure for incorporating the SSDF forces into the SPLA (Gatkouth 23.7.2006 int.).

The integration procedure was coordinated by an ‘old SPLA’ general and an ex-SSDF general (who could be considered ‘new SPLA’), who respectively chaired and co-chaired a Military Technical Committee. This committee submitted an integration report in late July 2006, reporting that formal integration had occurred but that challenges had been faced. The chair of the committee told the press at the time of the report’s submission that the primary obstacles to SSDF-SPLA integration had been ‘tribal clashes … including a lot of man-made destruction organised by the Sudan Armed Forces who sent southern traitors’ to sabotage efforts by the SPLA to disarm armed civilians in Upper Nile and Jonglei states (Juba Post 20-27.7.2006). The so-called ‘southern traitors’ were SSDF forces who did not follow the Juba Declaration, a topic to be covered later in this paper. As part of the integration efforts, ex-SSDF soldiers were given US$300, five months worth of food, and free accommodation during the integration procedure. With the submission of the final integration report, ex-SSDF soldiers receive a regular salary as normal SPLA soldiers.

Post-Juba Declaration motivations of ‘hold out’ SSDF

‘Disarmament is not a solution. Anybody who tries to disarm us will destroy the peace.’ SSDF soldier (27.7.2006 int.)

One of the most oft stated rationales of SSDF members for not following Matip after the Juba Declaration was paranoia either that the referendum would not occur, or that it would be corrupted by the SPLM/A, which it was feared really would take the ‘making unity attractive’ clause of the CPA very literally and push for a no vote in the 2011 referendum. One SSDF officer interviewed explained that it was necessary to maintain a military relationship with SAF, despite what reservations were held about continuing to ally with Khartoum, because it was felt an ‘insurance policy’ was required (SSDF officer 6.7.2006 int.). This meant keeping the SSDF as a standing armed force until the 2011 referendum’s outcomes were known. How much of this was rhetoric, defending their continued existence in violation of the CPA and after the Juba Declaration, rather than sincere ideological belief, is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, SSDF
members consistently argued that maintaining the SSDF as a fighting force would be necessary until independence was assured, preferably through the 2011 referendum but in the longer term if necessary (SSDF officer 6.7.2006 int.). In this regard, it was argued that if the 2011 referendum were indeed for southern independence, then the SSDF would gladly cease to exist as it would have achieved its primary objective.

Another common argument articulated against agreeing to the Juba Declaration was the more pragmatic one that there were simply not enough GoSS positions to share amongst SSDF leaders, so they simply did not feel impelled to join (SSDF officer 18.7.2006 int.). The Juba Declaration agreed on the precise number of positions to be provided to SSDF members in the GoSS. This in itself caused much resentment amongst older SPLM/A members, as it obviously meant that they would be losing out on positions to make way for the concessions to the SSDF. There was likely also much tension created within the SSDF at the time over who would be given which positions and who would be left out. A demand frequently cited by the SSDF hold-outs was that if further reconciliation were to occur between the SSDF and SPLM/A, then additional positions would need to be shared in the GoSS by the SPLM/A. If this were to happen, then it would show that the ‘SPLA wants to share power, [and] then everything would be okay’ (SSDF officer 18.7.2006 int.). Furthermore, the availability of governmental positions probably played a key role in the individual rationales of SSDF leaders at the time, with those holding out weighing their options of acquiring a GoSS position in future rounds of south-south reconciliation talks.

The SSDF leaders who decided not to follow Matip into the SPLA after the Juba Declaration cited their unwillingness to concede on the issue of forming a ‘South Sudan Army’ to replace the SPLA as a primary motivation. They continued to demand that for the SSDF to reach a final reconciliation with the SPLA, a new southern army must be created, incorporating both the SPLA and SSDF forces, even before the 2011 referendum (SSDF officer 4.7.2006 int.). The GoSS cannot concede this because it would be a violation of the CPA, which stipulates that the SPLA is the army of the autonomous state of South Sudan prior to the referendum.

Additionally, the unwillingness of hold-out SSDF members to join the SPLA was driven by the reality that the SSDF was still in physical control of certain parts of South Sudan and maintained armed forces. In relation to this, many SSDF members still regarded the Khartoum Agreement as a legitimate agreement, recognising the SSDF as the armed forces of the south, i.e. they were in fact a government power of sorts (SSDF officer
23.7.2006 int.). This was considered to be true at least by SSDF members for the areas under their control and hence, the rhetorical question was asked concerning its subsuming into the SPLA: ‘So how can it give up its guns to another government?’ (SSDF officer 18.7.2006 int.). In parallel to its continued political hopes that it indeed be treated as ‘another government’ in the south, the SSDF was intent to keep the areas that it had under its control when the CPA was signed. Qualifying this intent was the expressed desire not to go on the offensive before the 2011 referendum, but still to resist any encroachment into its areas by the SPLA (SSDF officer 18.7.2006 int.).

Given the SSDF’s insistence both to maintain itself as an armed group in control of the land it occupied at the time of the CPA’s signing, and not to be an offensive organisation, there were two main causes its members believed could provoke a return to war in the south (SSDF officer 4.7.2006 int.). The first potential cause would be if the SPLA tried to forcefully disarm the SSDF. A speech by GoSS President Salva Kiir in July 2006 vowed to disarm the militias in an unspecified timeframe if they did not join the SPLA or SAF as stipulated by the CPA (Southern Eye 16–21.7.2006). There appeared to be genuine belief amongst SSDF rank-and-file soldiers that the CPA entitled the SSDF to continue to exist as an armed organisation. One SSDF soldier, speaking on behalf of a group of his comrades, explained this sentiment: ‘The CPA says the SSDF and SPLA should stay in their own areas and not attack anybody until the referendum, but now the SPLA is expanding everywhere’ (SSDF soldier 31.7.2006 int.).

Another SSDF soldier expanded on the general theme, and argued that while they have some sense of being part of one country (i.e. ‘southerners’), they felt that the SPLA mistreated some southerners, namely that it unfairly targeted the SSDF. In his words, ‘the children of the one house are supposed to sit together’ (SSDF soldier 19.7.2006 int.). The sincerity behind this belief of normal SSDF soldiers was quite plausible, considering there had been no broad, public campaign by the GoSS or the UN to disperse copies of the CPA to the general population, or to target SSDF soldiers with public awareness campaigns (UNMIS official 17.7.2006 int.). Thus, it is likely that SSDF officers, who could be expected to understand the CPA, misinformed their soldiers of the CPA’s provisions, namely that the SSDF was recognised and allowed to remain armed and in control of territory.

The second primary concern of the SSDF that would provoke them to war is if the SPLA tried to relocate SSDF forces to the north. The issue is complicated by the fact that many SSDF officers hold formal commissions
in SAF. The primary benefit of joining SAF was to receive a steady salary. While official commissions may have been provided, these SSDF officers still considered themselves to be SSDF rather than SAF, and were fearful of being re-deployed to the north since the CPA stipulates the SAF must do so by around 2008. Given that, SSDF members who are part of SAF sought to be part of the Joint Integrated Units (JIU) stipulated by the CPA, which allows them to both stay in the south and still receive a SAF salary.

A last major motivation for SSDF members was their strong personal dislike of the SPLA’s long-time leader, John Garang. Two issues seem to have especially incensed SSDF opinions about Garang. First, many SSDF members cited the origins of their armed resistance to the Khartoum governments as going back to the Anyanya II movement in the mid-1970s, and thus considered themselves to be originators of the southerners’ armed struggle of the second civil war. Accordingly, it was all the more galling to them that Garang, who was originally an officer in SAF, formed the SPLA to fight both SAF and ‘secessionists’ from the south, namely Anyanya II. This led to a feeling that Garang personally corrupted the spirit of the original rebellion through his insistence that the SPLA seek a unified Sudan. Second, many SSDF members still bore grudges over the infighting that occurred both within the SPLA and between the SPLA and Anyanya II in the 1980s. During this time many of their friends and relatives were allegedly killed by Garang for opposing his iron grip over the SPLA (Murle SSDF officer 19.7.2006 int.).

The forceful, divisive control that Garang allegedly exercised over the SPLA in the 1980s until it split in 1991, left SSDF members – many of whom were in the SPLA at the time – bitter towards him on a personal level and subsequently for the organisation he was so influential in shaping.

The SSDF’s commercial and financial interests

The commercial and financial interests of the post-Juba Declaration SSDF can be considered on three levels: first, as commercial motivations for the entire organisation, and second and third in the personal financial rationales of soldiers and officers. It is necessary to consider these motivations on separate levels as there are substantive differences between them.

The principal commercial interests of the SSDF as an organisation lie in the exploitation of the oil development opportunities in Upper Nile and Jonglei states. With the Juba Declaration, the SSDF lost control of Unity State, where the major oil fields of South Sudan are located. However, with SSDF forces still spread around parts of Upper Nile and Jonglei
states, the SSDF continued to maintain a presence in the second largest oil producing area of the south, known as the Melut Basin.

In June 2006, the SSDF petitioned the GoS to recognise the contracts that the SSDF authorities had signed with a foreign oil exploration and management company, Jarch Management Group (SSDF officer 23.7.2006 int.). The GoS did not accept this petition, as to do so would have been a major violation of the CPA. However, the intention behind it was quite clear regarding some of the broader commercial motivations of the SSDF. Namely, it wanted the ability to sign contracts and exploit oil resources for the areas under its control. Clause 1 of the petition stated:

The Government of Sudan hereby recognizes the right of self-determination by South Sudan Defence Forces. As such, the GoS will recognize any and all contracts and agreements signed and executed by the appropriate authorities of the SSDF for the areas of Southern Sudan that the SSDF exercises control.

The second clause further explains the SSDF’s purported legal basis: ‘These rights of the SSDF are expressly stated in the peace agreements signed between the GoS and SSDF, namely the Khartoum and Fashoda Peace Agreements of 1997.’

This attempt by the SSDF to induce the GoS to renew its commitment to the 1997 agreements built upon earlier threats to oil companies, specifically White Nile Oil and Total, barring them from exploring and drilling for oil in a concession area known as Block B1. A SSDF press release dated 5 March 2006 encouraged oil companies to voluntarily leave Block B1 as ‘failure to comply with this notice could have serious consequences similar to the current situation in the oil rich Delta region of Nigeria’ (SSDF 5.3.2006). This represents both an actual threat – in the Nigerian case, disruption of the oil industry by militias came to threaten the country’s whole economy – and an interesting case of ‘learning’ from other militias. The same SSDF press release also argued that Jarch Management Group and the SSDF had signed contracts guaranteeing that the SSDF would ‘secure the territories to allow the company to operate in a safe and secure environment’. This would include ‘protecting the area from outside forces, including the SPLA and GoS forces, and other foreign companies that do not have agreements with the SSDF’.

The SSDF’s aggressive public attempts to assert some ‘sovereign rights’ over territories that it ostensibly controlled, and its relationships with foreign oil interests, indicate its broader two-pronged strategy which combined commercial interests with political ones. The first part of this strategy was that as a military force it claimed the right to exclude the GoS
and the GoSS from encroaching onto its territories. The second prong of
the strategy, political in nature, was to continue to publicly claim the
sanctity of the Khartoum Agreement as legitimising its continued exist-
ence as a political and governmental entity in South Sudan with the legal
right to sign and manage oil contracts, despite the provisions of the CPA
which forbid such third parties from doing so.

Financial interests

It was common for SSDF members to assert that their support from SAF
was not monetary in form. This seems, publicly at least, to be a matter of
pride, since to accept cash would imply that they were mercenaries for
SAF (SSDF officer 19.7.2006 int.). Nonetheless, it was widely known that
SSDF officers, notably commanders, did receive cash payments from SAF
(Gatkouth 23.7.2006 int.). Ex-SSDF officers have explained that they
consistently received cash payments while allied with SAF. It was up to
them to use this money to support the soldiers under their command. In
addition to cash, other forms of payment for continued support were
maintained for officers, notably the provision of houses and cars to senior
SSDF commanders in Khartoum, and to a lesser extent in the major
towns in the south such as Malakal.

That SSDF commanders received financial payments directly from
SAF also seems to have helped convince some of the hold-out SSDF
officers to remain behind after the Juba Declaration (SPLM official
2.8.2006 int.). When the Juba Declaration was announced, there was some
mutinying amongst SSDF forces as parts of units refused to join the SPLA,
and rallied behind previously secondary commanders to remain as SSDF
units (UNMIS official 9.8.2006 int.). The rationale of these secondary
officers, newly promoted to commanders after their predecessors joined
the SPLA, was that they would then be in the position to directly receive
payments from SAF.

Overall, those SSDF commanders who have been able to maintain
consistent relations with SAF, and hence receive a steady cash income of
their own, have achieved the most prominence because of it (Aduok
16.7.2006 int.). A good example of this was the Murle SSDF commander
Ismail Konyi, who has had a very long-term relationship with SAF going
back to the 1980s. Konyi had a very loyal following among his soldiers,
mainly because he was consistently able to support them (UNMIS official
17.7.2006 int.; Murle civilians 23.8.2006 int.). However, the Murle soldiers
of the SSDF appear to be the exception, and while other SSDF
commanders do receive cash payments from SAF, their soldiers do not
appear to have received regular cash payments themselves (SSDF officers 23–24.7.2006 int.; SPLA officer 3.8.2006 int.).

South Sudan has a very diverse population dominated by the two largest tribes, the Nuer and the Dinka. These are followed in size by a range of other tribes including the Fertit, Murle, Anuak, Maban, Shilluk, and a large number of even smaller tribes loosely grouped together as ‘Equatorians’. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the role that ethnicity has played in national and regional politics, but it is important to note a few crucial aspects of identity politics as they specifically relate to the SSDF.

The first dynamic of note is the perception held by members of the SSDF of the alleged Dinka bias within the SPLA. There has long been tension between the Dinka and Nuer, whose historical relationships were largely defined by each raiding the other’s cattle. The tension between them has translated into the post-independence politics of the south. The SPLA has been led largely by Dinkas, while the SSDF has had mostly Nuer leadership. The perception exists, despite the fact that Dinka and Nuer are present in significant numbers in both organisations, that each has its ethnic base in either one of the tribes. One of the most common sentiments heard from SSDF members was that they objected to the ‘Dinkanisation’ of the south, and believed the SPLA to be a partisan ‘tribal militia’ serving the purposes of the Dinka (SSDF officer 3.7.2006 int.).

The strong ethnic divide between the SPLA, which does have a predominantly Dinka senior officer corps, and the SSDF, which has a primarily Nuer base, was widely known. This ethnic rivalry between the two organisations also carried political overtones as to which tribe should ‘naturally’ lead the south. Many Nuer SSDF members claimed that the notion that the Dinka are the largest tribe in the south, and hence have a claim to southern leadership, is a conspiratorial lie. This insistence on the Nuer being sidelined by a Dinka conspiracy was a common, and seemingly increasing, refrain of the SSDF’s many Nuer members. This can be seen in the SSDF’s press releases claiming that the ‘Nuer nation’ was being exploited, especially since its territory is where the oil fields are located, yet it arguably doesn’t share in the oil revenues sufficiently (SSDF 16.4.2006).

The second identity dynamic that is crucial for the SSDF relates to the notion of being ‘southerners’. It was very upsetting to SSDF members that
they are considered ‘southern sell-outs’ by the SPLA. The argument that they are simple proxy militias for the GoS is especially offensive because of its connotations that they are subservient to the GoS and hence working towards its goals. Despite their partnership with the GoS through the Khartoum Agreement, the SSDF members saw themselves as being ‘true southerners’, as they were seeking full independence for the south, while conversely arguing that the SPLA was the actual ‘sell-out’ to southerners because it had long fought for a unified Sudan. Especially embittering to many SSDF was to be called ‘Arabs’ by their southern opponents. As one SSDF soldier remarked: ‘the SPLA tries to discredit us by calling us “Arabs”’ (SSDF soldier 31.7.2006 int.). The question of who was more of a ‘southerner’ versus an ‘Arab’ was one of heartfelt emotion and subsequently of strong political value.

In addition to the driving nature of the Dinka–Nuer relationship, due to their relative populations in South Sudan, there are other important issues of identity politics. Other smaller tribes have felt the need to protect themselves from the dominance and aggression of the more numerous Dinka and Nuer. An example of this was the formation of the Equatorian Defence Force (EDF) in 1995, which was largely to protect Equatorians against abuses committed by the SPLA. Furthermore, the Murle have long sought to isolate and protect themselves from their larger neighbours. Their tribal militia, the Pibor Defence Force (PDF) of Ismail Konyi, had a strong identity centred on notions of defending the Murle people. It is interesting to note that while members of the PDF consider Ismail Konyi to be a SSDF general (as well as in SAF), he was most importantly a commander of the Murle (Murle SSDF officers 19.7.2006 int.). Overall, identity politics plays a very significant role in the internal relations of the SSDF, as well as in its relations with other actors in South Sudan’s complex politics.39

SSDF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL ACTORS

This section details the relationships of the SSDF with external actors, by which are meant those that come from or functionally operate outside South Sudan.

Government of Sudan (GoS)

The GoS has a long history of ‘divide and rule’ tactics for fighting its civil war in the south through allied militias. Even prior to the Khartoum Agreement, the GoS reached out to non-SPLA armed forces, such as the
individual tribal militias before they united under the SSDF umbrella, by supplying them with arms, ammunition, and other logistical needs. With the signing of the CPA, and even with the subsequent defection of the majority of the SSDF to the SPLA after the Juba Declaration, the GoS was still widely accused of continuing its support for the SSDF (UNMIS Mediation Notes). For instance, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, Jan Pronk, in reference to SAF support for the SSDF, said: ‘Nobody has the freedom to continue as a third army. If they continue fighting then they are just warlords … I understand some forces are still giving them assistance and I made an appeal to them not to do so anymore’ (Sudan Mirror 14–27.8.2006).

The post-CPA support from the GoS to the SSDF came in the form of cash payments to individual commanders, transfers of arms and ammunition, and provision of transportation resources and basic foodstuffs. SAF also maintained a barracks for the SSDF in Khartoum called Lokondo, for which it paid the rent and provided food (SSDF officer 30.7.2006 int.). The GoS, through SAF Military Intelligence (MI), had never wanted the SSDF to coalesce into a cohesive organisation where it might more easily turn into a threat to the GoS, and thus purposefully kept it as a loose umbrella organisation with little real command and control over its component militias (ISS 2004: 5). For example, while the SSDF ostensibly had a unified command, Khartoum always bypassed this to liaise and interact with individual SSDF commanders and units in the south, and hence fragmented the SSDF by maintaining individual logistical and financial arrangements (SSDF officer 4.7.2006 int.).

As the SSDF’s militias are largely scattered in pockets around South Sudan, supplying their logistical needs was much harder to accomplish after the signing of the CPA, because of the increased SPLA presence. SAF never entirely denied that it maintained logistical support for SSDF militias (UNMIS official 6.8.2006 int.). However, it did deny that it provided arms and ammunition, and insisted instead that it only provided foodstuffs because it was in the process of integrating SSDF forces into the SAF or waiting for them to be demobilised by the GoSS.

To some extent this was plausible, given that there were multiple pockets of SSDF forces maintaining individual relations with SAF MI. For instance, SSDF forces interviewed in Ketbek, Upper Nile State noted, somewhat bitterly, that SAF was not presently providing them with arms and ammunition (SSDF officers and soldiers 30.7.2006 int.). However, other SSDF units, such as those of Gabriel Tang in Fangak, Thomas Mabior in Dolieb Hill, or the SSDF units in Adar likely did still receive significant arms and ammunition supplies from SAF. As mentioned
previously, the SSDF unit best supported by SAF was the Pibor Defence Force (PDF) of Ismail Konyi (Murle leaders 23.8.2006 int.). Frequent official complaints were made by the SPLA to this effect, and SAF officially and consistently denied the allegations but did concede that Ismail Konyi, the PDF commander, received orders and maintained an intensive relationship with SAF commanders based in Juba (UNMIS Mediation Briefs).

That the SSDF had no significant source of support other than through SAF was widely acknowledged. The SSDF admitted as much itself (SSDF officer 23.7.2006 int.). Compared with armed groups in some other African countries, the SSDF had no access to natural resources – such as diamonds, lumber or gold – that could be sold to raise money. Sometimes individual soldiers sold cattle to buy arms or ammunition, but this was not enough to sustain the SSDF more broadly. The SSDF had a longer-term interest in oil production, but as of August 2006 no actual source of income from oil exploitation. As one local political commentator noted, the pockets of SSDF units truly were ‘satellites of SAF … [and] would collapse without SAF support’ (Aduok 16.7.2006 int.).

The rationale for the GoS, through SAF, to support the SSDF was twofold. First, it wanted to create general instability in the south, so there was little to no development to use as a political argument and leverage against the SPLM. Second, the GoS wanted to create instability so that it could argue to delay the redeployment of SAF forces out of the south. And indeed, SAF, as of 9 July 2006, was supposed to have withdrawn half of its forces to the north, but had only withdrawn 35% (UNMIS official 9.8.2006 int.). It officially explained that it was behind schedule because it was worried about the continued presence of ‘other armed groups’, namely SSDF units, in the south, and felt its presence was needed (conveniently) for security reasons. It is notable that amongst some SSDF troops there was a feeling that SAF was giving them barely enough support to maintain themselves, essentially at a subsistence level, in the belief that if a war were to start again in the south, the remnant SSDF forces could quickly be expanded to fight the SPLA. In the meantime, the political and financial costs of this support would be mitigated.

Oil companies

As mentioned previously, the SSDF had already signed a contract with one foreign company in 2004 to explore for and manage oil in SSDF-controlled areas. Through its press releases the SSDF notified concerned parties that it would permit only SSDF approved companies to develop oil
resources in SSDF-controlled areas. A lot of this can be dismissed as pure rhetoric, since the SSDF controlled only small isolated pockets of territory, not areas comprising entire ‘blocks’ of oil concessions. Exceptionally, however, there was a significant presence of SSDF forces around the major oil producing town of Adar, which pumps out of the Melut Basin of northern Upper Nile State.45

GoSS officials there accused the resident oil company, Petrodar, of being supported by the local SSDF forces surrounding Adar (SPLM official 11.8.2006 int.). There was no formal relationship between the SSDF and Petrodar, such as it had with Jarch Management Group (apparently only an informal, local ‘understanding’), but the mere presence of the SSDF forces prevented the SPLM county commissioner from maintaining a GoSS presence. Officials of the ruling party in Khartoum, the NCP, liaised directly with the oil company, bypassing the GoSS/SPLM officials completely. The overall significance of the Adar SSDF was that it was still in control of an actual oil processing area, compared with other pockets of SSDF that did not directly control major oil pumping areas. Adar was also a CPA-sanctified assembly point for SAF, so it was easy for them to re-supply and maintain SSDF forces there. SAF could also easily send SSDF forces that had previously been based in Khartoum to Adar, since it is near the north–south border.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER DOMESTIC ACTORS

Intra-SSDF relations

Even with official consolidation through the Khartoum Agreement, the SSDF never had much internal coherence, because of SAF manipulation and the fractured nature of southern politics. As a result, SSDF units had little day-to-day contact with one another. This was especially the case after the signing of the CPA and the conclusion of the Juba Declaration, as the leftover SSDF units had been isolated into pockets of localised control. What interaction did occur between units was mostly between very senior officers in the larger cities, notably Malakal and Khartoum. The exception to this was the SSDF soldiers within Malakal. Many units from around Upper Nile and Jonglei states had sent groups of troops to Malakal periodically in the past, since Malakal was an SAF garrison town during the civil war. After the war, and with subsequent new arrivals from the field, there were a good number of soldiers from the various SSDF militias in the town. Even in Malakal, however, the relationship was largely fraternal and friendly rather than regimented. Individual soldiers were under the direct control of their respective commanders and did not
respond to an overarching ‘SSDF chain of command’ or interact with other units in a notably coordinated manner.

*White Army vis-à-vis SSDF units*

The relationship between the SSDF and White Army militias, which are village-level militias formed in Upper Nile and Jonglei states during the course of the war, can be considered to have been informal and largely tactical. Both White Army militiamen and SSDF members interviewed noted that there were some kinship affiliations, but that the SSDF and White Army militias have never had any systematic, regimented relationship (ex-White Army militiamen 22.8.2006 int.; SSDF soldier 29.7.2006 int.).

However, during the confrontations between the SPLA and White Army militias in early to mid-2006, when the SPLA undertook disarmament exercises for civilians, there was a limited presence of SSDF commanders agitating the armed youth who form the bulk of White Army militias to resist disarmament (UNMIS official 19.7.2006 int.). Although the SSDF did not participate as organised units with the White Army militias, the presence of smaller groups of experienced SSDF soldiers led by a few notable SSDF commanders seems to have had a major impact on the level of resistance (UNMAC Brief). Of crucial importance was the role that these SSDF commanders played in briefly uniting the disparate militias of the White Army to fight what was perceived as their common enemy, the SPLA (SSDF soldier 29.7.2006 int.).

*The SPLA*

The SPLA and SSDF have long been adversaries, with the SPLA accusing the SSDF of being simple proxies of SAF. This overarching viewpoint of the SPLA concerning the SSDF was articulated in an internal SPLA communiqué from early 2006, which noted that the GoS’s ruling party, the NCP, had changed from ‘confronting us directly into [confronting us through] a proxy war’ (SPLA 4.2.2006). The communiqué further stated:

> Our partners are still holding the other armed groups and using them to fight the Government of South Sudan (GoSS). And the main aim in this is to make the South ungovernable … Their hopes and whims are to make the Government of South Sudan failed in administering the Southerners, so that at the end of the day, the CPA get destroyed before the six years interim period.

Given the SPLA’s concern over the NCP’s intention to foster instability in the south through its continued support of the SSDF, it implemented a
three-pronged strategy for dealing with instability relating to the SSDF. The emphasis of this strategy was on isolating and minimising the SSDF’s presence in the south.

The first facet of the SPLA’s post-CPA security strategy was to begin to rationalise the SPLA and broaden its inclusiveness. The most important aspect of this was the Juba Declaration, which brought the bulk of the SSDF into the SPLA starting in January 2006. It is the foundation of the GoSS’s overall security strategy to absorb as much of the SSDF as possible into the SPLA, and then rationalise the entire force into a modern, professional army, rather than as a force composed of what are still essentially localised, segregated militias employing guerrilla tactics.

The second facet of the SPLA’s post-CPA strategy was to isolate the SSDF into small pockets but otherwise to avoid direct military confrontations. It is notable that up to August 2006, there were relatively few open battles between the SPLA and the SSDF.\textsuperscript{50} The SPLA maintained that it did not have the authority or mandate to forcefully disarm the SSDF, which it claimed should be done peacefully by the GoSS’s DDRR Commission, which had been very slow to form (Lam 24.7.2006 int.).\textsuperscript{51} Given this, the SPLA apparently had no plans to forcefully disarm the SSDF (\textit{Southern Eye} 16–21.7.2006).\textsuperscript{52}

Overall, the SPLA seemed to be resisting the temptation to militarily engage the SSDF pockets, because it was not worth the tensions it would provoke within the SPLA with ex-SSDF members (namely Matip) and subsequent frictions with Khartoum over the CPA’s implementation. Most importantly, there were options other than military force available to the SPLA for confronting the continued presence of the SSDF. The rhetoric of the SPLA did, however, come with the caveat that it might eventually act with force if the SSDF continued to resist joining the SPLA or SAF, or refused the GoSS DDRR Commission’s programming once it was established and running (\textit{Sudan Mirror} 31.7–13.8.2006).

Rather than confront them militarily, the SPLA strategy was to induce individual SSDF commanders to defect. The SPLA had been active in reaching out to specific commanders in order to ‘poach’ them for the SPLA. An example of this was the SPLA’s attempts to recruit the PDF commander Ismail Konyi, who was offered a seat in the GoSS parliament on an SPLM ticket, but by August 2006 had yet to decide whether to join the SPLM (\textit{Sudan Mirror} 31.7–13.8.2006). While there were some successes, mostly more junior officers, the vast bulk of SSDF soldiers resisted SPLA overtures after the Juba Declaration. Furthermore, the SPLA also sought to avoid direct military confrontations but still hinder the SSDF by
attempting to close down their supply lines from SAF. One of the major hopes of the SPLA was that when SAF is forced through the CPA provisions to withdraw its forces to the north (other than its share of the JIUs), the SSDF units would disappear because they are so dependent on SAF. This was a key reason why the SPLA avoided direct military confrontations with SSDF units.

The third facet of the SPLA’s post-CPA strategy was to disarm major concentrations of heavily armed civilians in the south, notably the village militias of the so-called White Army in Upper Nile and Jonglei states, and major disarmament exercises were undertaken in early and mid-2006 (Arnold et al. 2007). The goal of this effort was to prevent the SSDF from agitating more broadly against the GoSS, for instance by using the White Army militias as proxies. A major worry of the SPLA during the disarmament exercises was the ability of White Army militias to acquire ammunition, either from their informal, fraternal relationships with individual SSDF commanders supplied by SAF, or by going to Ethiopia to buy ammunition from Ethiopian rebels or well-armed communities (SPLM official 22.8.2006 int.). As mentioned previously, another major challenge was the catalysing role that some SSDF members played in encouraging White Army militias to resist the SPLA’s disarmament exercises.

The empirical mapping of the SSDF from January to August 2006 has highlighted key traits and dynamics of a militia outside the formal peace process in Sudan. Following the CPA, and catalysed by the Juba Declaration, the SSDF was left isolated in small pockets in the south, notably in Jonglei and Upper Nile states. Despite this, it remained a significant armed group and consistently maintained its intent to stay as a fighting force until southern independence was assured, preferably through the 2011 referendum but in the longer term if necessary. The unwillingness of hold-out SSDF members to join the SPLA was driven largely by the reality that the SSDF was still in physical control of certain parts of South Sudan, albeit small and isolated, centred on individual commanders with strong, long-felt animosities towards the SPLA.

With SAF’s continued military and logistical support, the SSDF retained a belligerent attitude towards the SPLA and the GoSS more broadly. In response, the SPLA implemented a multifaceted approach to counter the SSDF. The initial focus had been to reach out to the SSDF to integrate it into the SPLA, as stipulated by the CPA. This was done successfully to a large extent through the Juba Declaration. Second was
the attempt to further isolate the SSDF into small pockets, but otherwise to try to avoid direct military confrontations. The SPLA attempted to do this by blocking supplies to the pockets as well as trying to induce individual commanders to defect, thereby gradually eroding the SSDF controlled areas in the south.

These demilitarisation strategies employed by the GoSS proved to be reasonably successful in the initial post-CPA era. However, as the implementation of the CPA continues, the SSDF has the potential, still largely unrealised, to play the role of major ‘spoiler’ to peace and reconstruction in the south. The most outstanding threat posed by the SSDF is that if relations were to deteriorate between the SPLA and SAF, the remnant SSDF forces could be quickly expanded to agitate against or even fight the SPLA. Considering that, a major challenge in the future will be whether the disparate units of the SSDF can be incorporated into the political and economic normalisation of the south. Unless SSDF forces can be mainstreamed into either the SPLA forces or those of SAF, or completely dissolved through demobilisation programmes, the potential for infighting within post-CPA South Sudan continues to be a real possibility.

NOTES

1. This period is important in any case as it considers the ‘post-Juba Declaration’ evolution of the SSDF. Furthermore, a focus on Upper Nile and Jonglei states is appropriate since this is where most SSDF forces remained after the signing of the Juba Declaration. This limitation of the material covered is necessary given the difficulty of conducting field research and the constant flux of the political situation in a still volatile South Sudan.
2. Sudan’s ‘first civil war’ is generally considered to have run from the Torit Mutiny of August 1955 until the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972.
3. Kiir was newly installed as president of South Sudan after the untimely death of John Garang in July 2005 in a helicopter crash.
4. By contrast, the first civil war was largely between the SAF and the southern rebels of Anyanya I.
5. It is widely accepted that SAF provides the SSDF with the vast amount of resources that it uses. However, the SSDF does have other limited sources, such as battlefield spoils, as well as what can be garnered through selling cattle, for instance.
6. Note that the numbers provided for militia are very tentative. In general, all sides grossly exaggerate their force strengths, and through general visits to the areas it is impossible to accurately calculate numbers of personnel.
7. Under the CPA, the SPLM (which had been the political wing of the SPLA) was allowed to form the autonomous government of South Sudan until interim elections could be held prior to the referendum on independence.
8. The militia units of the SSDF are for the most part, though certainly not universally, ethnically segregated and loyal to individual commanders. Considering this, it is also important to note that there are still many armed civilians in South Sudan, and the possibility of them being recruited quickly into the SSDF, or acting as allies, should a new war arise in the south is a daunting one.
9. This allegation was also made unofficially and informally by UNMIS sources.
10. This allegation was made by UN sources, SPLM/A officials and villagers in western Jonglei. According to a UN source the SAF even admitted to having a white helicopter, but not to shipping arms with it, and said it was painted white (like the UN’s) not to confuse people but because it was new
and awaiting repainting. Reports of a white helicopter seen flying from Malakal to locations in Upper Nile and Jonglei states were especially prominent during the disarmament exercises of White Army militias in early and mid-2006. During those conflicts, it was alleged that a white helicopter was re-supplying the White Army militias, which were being coordinated by small numbers of SSDF members, in the Ayod and Waat areas of central Jonglei State. ‘White Army’ militias are local, village-level militias, formed during the course of the war, some of which resisted disarmament exercises by the SPLA in early and mid-2006.

11. In field interviews with SPLA soldiers and officers, it is common to hear SSDF forces derided as being hired by the SAF to fight their war in the south, and as ‘Arabs’.

12. A unified, democratic Sudan was a major personal philosophical goal of John Garang. Within the ranks of the SPLA, however, anecdotal conversations with soldiers and officers indicate that they are near universally in favour of southern independence. Furthermore, with Garang’s death, there appears to be a growing divide within the SPLM/A leadership between ‘making unity attractive’, as the CPA calls for, and hoping that the 2011 referendum will result in independence. It is noteworthy that, as evidenced through the January 2006 Juba Declaration, the SSDF had a great deal more goodwill towards negotiating with Salva Kiir after Garang’s death in July 2005. This was because they believed him to be inclined towards independence, as against the vision of the ‘Garang faction’ of the SPLM/A, led by Garang’s widow Rebecca Garang, for a unified, democratic Sudan initiated through the CPA and solidified through the 2011 referendum.

13. Some SSDF leaders have even gone so far as to say that the Juba Declaration would have been impossible with Garang’s presence. The personal animosities between Garang and Matip were such that compromise was impossible, especially the prospect of elevating Matip into a senior position within the SPLA, while Garang was alive.

14. This took the form of government positions totalling six ministers (one in GoSS and five in southern states), six county commissioners, and 25 + members of assemblies.

15. It is worth noting that one issue of concern raised in the discussions over the Juba Declaration, though not highlighted as a primary demand, was the seemingly banal issue of pensions. This was important as SSDF leaders feared that they would be ‘pensioned off’ after joining the SPLA. John Garang was widely known to have pensioned off senior staff as a political weapon to remove opponents, an outcome that was doubly bitter as there was no money to pay the actual pension in any case. Through the Juba Declaration, assurances were sought that would guarantee that SSDF personnel would not be forced out through pensioning. This demand was especially pressing for the SSDF leadership since they had insisted on joining the SPLA at the same ranks as they held in the SSDF, but knowing that the SPLA was already direly top-heavy with senior officers, and hence that they could face the first round of pensioning. In any case, assurances were provided that pensioning would be fair and gradual, and allow for the wishes of most soldiers and officers to remain in uniform until the 2011 referendum.

16. These ‘tribal clashes’ refer to fighting between White Army militias from Lou Nuer communities and the SPLA. The Lou Nuer have long had an especially tense, often combative, relationship with the SPLA.

17. This is in theory at least. The SPLA has gained notoriety for its inability to pay salaries regularly.

18. Related to this is the noteworthy argument of SSDF members that the primary threat to the future independence of the south is not the GoSS or the SPLA/M in general, but very much the ‘Garang faction’ of the SPLA/M. Within this strain of thought is the conspiratorial viewpoint that the CPA was fundamentally a personal agreement reached between Garang and GoS Vice-President Taha, the lead negotiator from Khartoum, whereby ‘making unity attractive’ was meant to eventually depose Bashir as GoS president, to be replaced by Garang or Taha.

19. One SSDF officer explained this quite bluntly: ‘There were not enough positions for everybody.’

20. One SSDF soldier in Ketbek explained that his superiors in Khartoum had told them to stay in their area because they were continuing to adhere to the 1997 Khartoum Agreement, but the problem was that Riek Machar (who had originally signed the agreement on behalf of the SSDF) no longer accepted it. Furthermore, a SSDF press release of 19 March 2006 argued that the SSDF’s 1997 Khartoum Agreement, in comparison to the CPA, ‘remains the mother of all agreements in Sudan’.

21. A SSDF officer explained a common belief of the SSDF that the 1997 Khartoum Agreement preceded that of the CPA in 2005 and was not officially disavowed by the GoS, and hence could not simply be abrogated by the SPLA/M through the CPA.

22. This SSDF claim contrasts with SPLA fears that the SSDF is recruiting anew, so that it can expand its control or at least political influence in South Sudan.
23. This speech was especially upsetting to SSDF members interviewed, who articulated their grievances over the issue: ‘We had thought we should all wait for the referendum but the leader [Kiir] is trying to destroy the peace by attacking us. Our leader [emphasis added by author] is creating the problem … [We] just need to wait for the referendum.’

24. A UN source noted that in their many encounters with SSDF soldiers, there was a consistent misunderstanding or complete obliviousness of the CPA, other than what their commanders had told them. Many SSDF soldiers are illiterate and can’t read the CPA, and copies of it are hard to find in the rural areas in any case.

25. Many officer commissions were given out in 2004 by SAF, in the hope of solidifying relationships between SSDF commanders and SAF when it became apparent that the CPA would be signed. Other SSDF officers, fewer in number, had been commissioned earlier.

26. JIUs were agreed to in the CPA, whereby SAF and SPLA forces will form three units in the south consisting of joint forces with a rotating command. The purpose of the JIUs is to inculcate a sense of camaraderie between the GoS and GoSS armies and form, at least to some extent, a ‘national army’ in the interim period before the 2011 referendum. Many southern soldiers who are part of SAF and stationed in the south, but who are not SSDF members, also seem to be unwilling to be moved to the north. There are consistent reports that southern SAF soldiers are refusing orders to move, and demanding to be part of the JIUs as well. The short-term rationale behind this hesitance is the natural desire to be closer to homes and families, while the longer-term fear is that to be sent north might mean to be stuck permanently there if the 2011 referendum is for independence.

27. For instance, the Murle members of the SSDF hold Garang personally responsible for the killing of Lakunyon Nyal Imat, who was one of the Murle’s first educated citizens and a compatriot of Garang’s in the 1980s until he was killed in a power struggle. Other SSDF officers cite Garang’s complicity in the killing of Anyanya II members, such as Benson Kuan Dok Jor, in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

28. A hard copy of the petition was acquired during an interview with a senior SSDF officer.

29. This area is the eastern side of Upper Nile and Jonglei states. Much of the SSDF’s animosity over White Nile Oil in particular derives from the belief that many SPLM GoSS ministers have stakes in the company, so that it is merely a front for the SPLA/M rather than a legitimate commercial concern.

30. Attacks on pipelines and other oil infrastructure as well as the kidnapping of oil workers have proved effective tactics in Nigeria, and have not required significant numbers of militiamen to carry out.

31. SSDF forces routinely claimed that they only received ‘sorghum and bullets’.

32. It is understandable that SSDF officers who hold SAF commissions should be paid regularly. It is noteworthy, however, that many SSDF officers without SAF commissions also received salaries fairly regularly.

33. One of the most blatant examples of SSDF members receiving cash payments from SAF was during the retribution attacks that were undertaken by SSDF forces against Shilluk areas in Upper Nile State after Lam Akol defected from the SSDF back to the SPLM/A in late 2003. Many of the predominantly Nuer SSDF militiamen who participated in attacks in Shilluk areas in early 2004 were paid in Sudanese Dinar notes by SAF. This was especially apparent because 2000 Dinar notes were used and as they were a brand new issue, had never been seen in South Sudan before. The only people who had them initially were the Nuer militiamen spending their newly acquired notes in Malakal after being paid by the resident SAF Military Intelligence officers. The notes hence acquired the nickname of ‘Nuer money’.

34. Furthermore, while the decisions of then junior officers had some financial motivation, it was also likely that this was compounded at times by personal differences with their former commanding officers.

35. This viewpoint was explained in greater detail by SSDF members in Ketbek, Upper Nile State, under the command of the SSDF chief of staff, Maj. General Gordon Kong, who had never been paid a regular salary. Under the 1997 Khartoum Agreement, it had been expected by SSDF members that they would receive a regular salary. Indeed, it was the ‘lack of pay, which is our major problem’ that the SSDF members routinely highlighted as their most pressing issue. However, there were still hopes of cash trickling down from officers and some SSDF recruitment, for instance, was possible because new recruits felt that they had at least some possibility of getting cash incomes, since they believed that SSDF commanders were getting regular cash payments from SAF. There was also the likelihood that SAF was providing cash to help with the recruitment process itself, but the consistency of this flow is impossible to ascertain in detail.
36. The SPLA was led by John Garang, who was succeeded by Salva Kiir, both Dinkas. The SSDF has always had a Nuer leader and a deputy from the Equatorians.

37. This fear of the ‘Dinkanisation’ of the south through the SPLA and GoSS was an oft-repeated term by Nuer SSDF members.

38. That particular SSDF press release, for instance, stated that the SPLA intended a ‘final solution’ against ‘the Nuer nation, one of the largest, strongest and potentially rich in oil and natural gas, including other strategically critical minerals’.

39. These dynamics of identity politics play out in several ways, and are used by both sides for their political manoeuvrings and overtures to the southern public. For instance, a frequent complaint during the SPLA’s disarmament exercise in Upper Nile and Jonglei states in the first half of 2006 was that Nuer civilians were being unfairly targeted for disarmament while other tribes, such as the Murle and Dinka, were being left armed and remained aggressive towards their newly defenceless Nuer neighbours. For their part, the SPLA argued in rebuttal that it had significant numbers of Nuer troops, and that in terms of senior leadership, the vice-president of South Sudan, Riek Machar, and the deputy commander in chief of the SPLA, Paulino Matip, are both Nuer.

40. The SPLA, amongst others, has consistently complained of SAF forces re-supplying the SSDF. UNMIS has investigated these allegations but has never been able to find ‘material proof’ and hence ‘the matter was dropped’. Finding ‘material proof’ is quite a challenge, since it is near impossible to track arms and ammunition origins in the still volatile south, and membership in whichever organisation is very difficult to verify on the ground.

41. The SSDF soldiers in Ketbek also complained they had to grow their own food since they received so little support from SAF. One soldier explained that because of the lack of a salary, ‘we are an army, but now we are also just farmers’, since the lack of money meant they needed to grow their own food to survive.

42. This was a general viewpoint amongst UNMIS sources, and likely given the strong relationships that both Tang and Konyi have consistently maintained with SAF for years.

43. The county commissioner for Pibor, through the SPLA representatives of the UNMIS Joint Military Committee (JMC) called for SAF, specifically the SAF 4th Division based in Juba, to desist from supplying the PDF as well as order it to evacuate Pibor for a CPA mandated SAF assembly point. Furthermore, allegations of the PDF being supplied by SAF were also made by Murle chiefs interviewed, who said it was commonly known in Murle areas that the PDF received supplies from SAF through helicopter deliveries and by trucks during the dry season.

44. One SSDF officer in Nasir bluntly noted: ‘We have no other support than SAF.’

45. There were reportedly 300-400 SSDF members in Adar formed into two units – ‘Brigade 20’ and ‘Brigade 21’ – under the command of Duit Yich Tuiny and Gordon Kong (Nyawelo 11.8.2006 int.). SAF support came from the major SAF base in Kosti in South Kordofan, but secondarily from the SAF base in Adar. In July 2006, the SSDF forces in Adar received four busloads of SSDF forces who had been based in Khartoum. Previously there had been SSDF in Guelguk (west of Adar). However, those forces had ambushed the commissioner of Longechuk County on 13 April 2006. The commissioner survived and the SPLA counter-attacked on 16 April, forcing the SSDF unit to retreat to its larger base at Adar.

46. The two major SSDF commanders on the ground influencing the White Army militias were Thomas Mabior and Samuel Wijiong. Wijiong is the more interesting of the two for the fact that he had joined the SPLA in March 2006 with Simon Gatwic, who had been his commander in the SSDF prior to the Juba Declaration. When fighting started in Yuai, Wijiong’s home area, he defected from the SPLA and fought against those undertaking the disarmament exercise. Many also suspected Simon Gatwic of instigating much of the violence in January 2006, when the SPLA disarmament contingent had initially been ambushed, at the same time that he was in the process of officially joining the SPLA.

47. The UNMAC brief stated: ‘SPLA assesses that SAF continues support to former SSDF of Yuai under the command of Simon Weijang Reth, deputy of Cdr. Simon Gatwic and is able to reorganize the scattered White Armies.’

48. It was noted by Nuer SSDF soldiers that there is frequent ‘in-fighting’ between the various Nuer groups, but they can at times form loose federations. It seems that the confrontations of White Army militias with the SPLA in 2006 were an example of this, which was largely a result of the rallying role of the SSDF commanders.

49. ‘Partners’ in this sense means the NCP. Under the CPA, the NCP and the SPLM form a Government of National Unity.
50. The only notable clashes to occur were between the SSDF and SPLA in north-central Upper Nile State after an assassination attempt by the SSDF on a county commissioner, and a fight between the forces of SSDF commander Gabriel Tang and the local SPLA in the Old Fangak area of north-western Jonglei State in August 2006. There was serious fighting in November 2006 in Malakal, but this was more a result of local personal animosities between a few resident SSDF and SPLA officers, rather than a strategically planned escalation by either the SSDF or SPLA.

51. This position was first articulated by SPLA Brig. General Charles Lam, and shared by other SPLA and GoSS officials generally. There were some exclamations that the SPLA ‘ought to’ disarm the remaining SSDF but this was tempered by the above-mentioned explanations for resisting direct military confrontations.

52. Pagan Amum, secretary-general of SPLM, articulated this point: ‘According to the CPA, they should be disarmed by force [now since they missed the January 2006 deadline], but that is not our intention at this stage.’ This view was echoed by GoSS President Kiir, who said force might be used to disarm SSDF units if they did not voluntarily join SAF or the SPLA, or resisted DDRR efforts by the GoSS DDRR Commission.

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