

# Applying Robinson’s Nine Types of National Interest to South Sudan’s State-Building Process

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<p><i>This article uses Robinson’s nine types of national interest to analyse the state-building process of South Sudan since independence in 2011 comprehensively. The paper documents the number of substantial challenges the young state has met: widespread governance deficits; internal conflict; weak institutions; and entrenched ethnic and regional divisions have continuously impeded its move to long-term stability and development. The framework used by Robinson is also useful in this approach as it is systematic and distinguishes between primary (state survival, national unity), secondary (regional influence and alliances), permanent (sovereignty, territorial integrity, national identity), and variable (economic and political priorities) interests. This typology provides an apt frame of reference for South Sudan, emphasizing how competing and usually conflicting interests and external pressures influence state behaviour in a precarious post-conflict landscape. Its application demonstrates that unresolved contrasting interests, particularly those stoked by tribalism and ethno-nationalism, irrevocably disempower the state, thereby reinforcing its continued fragility. Tribal allegiances play a vital role in distorting national interest composition, prioritising ethnic loyalty at the expense of a unified national identity, generating factionalism at the expense of good governance and leading to an uneven sharing of resources. The paper emphasizes the significance of establishing durable and inclusive institutions that transcend ethnic boundaries when it comes to preventing social divisions and conflicts in perpetuity. What remains to be seen is whether the basic questions of sovereignty, ethnic identity, and controlling resources will be addressed through inclusive governance, systemic reform, or by developing shared national and regional goals in order for South Sudan to lift out of cycles of fragility and attain sustainable state-building.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> National Interest Theory; State-Building; Post-Conflict Governance; Sovereignty; National Unity; Ethno-Nationalism; Tribalism; Institutional Development; Political Stability; Regional Influence; South Sudan; Independence (2011).</p>
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<p>Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.</p> <p><b>Citation:</b> Dr. Angok Achuil, PhD, &amp; Mr. William Oyet Omoro. (2026). Applying Robinson’s nine types of national interest to South Sudan’s state-building process. UKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (UKRJAHS), Volume 2(2). 122-136.</p>	

## 1. Introduction

### Brief recap of South Sudan’s challenges

South Sudan has been challenged substantially since it became independent in 2011 and this has hindered its ability to navigate a stable path and develop the country. Belloni (2011) points out that the fledgling state faced difficulties in building up good governance structures, which has been important in promoting the

reinforcement of sovereignty and internal stability. Dagne (2011) finds similar opportunities for economic development and regional integration; but there are serious hindrances to realizing these prospects in the form of internal disputes and weak institutions.

As Awolich (2018) notes, governance deficits (corruption, lack of accountability, and poor service

quality) exacerbated fragility and a lack of state legitimacy. Bilali (2020) extends the idea of the link between state fragility and human security concerns, explaining that ongoing conflict, food deprivation and displacement are still compromising social cohesion. Knopf (year) also adds that deeply rooted social fault lines, notably ethnic and regional differences, have played a major role in instigated violence, further isolating the state from an attempt to create inclusive institutions and reinforcing its weakness.

### **Why Robinson's framework is applied**

Multiple grounds justify the applicability of Robinson's nine types of national interest to South Sudan's state-building process, grounded in comparative insights from recent literature on regional and global geopolitics, internal cohesion, and state stability. In a fragile post-conflict setting such as South Sudan, Robinson's framework offers an overview of the many forms of interests shaping the nature, content, or forms of state behaviour in the contemporary world. For the purposes of this study it is important to use Robinson's typology because it provides a systematic approach for differentiating between five categories of interests which include primary, secondary, permanent, variable, and other types.

As an example, Mishra (2016) stresses that changing preferences among partners and diminishing confidence in regional relationships, like those in the Asia-Pacific, can shake up current strategic paradigms. Tow (2020) similarly discusses the decline of traditional U.S. alliances in Asia, noting in turn, that changing regional dynamics require a detailed exploration of the various interests at stake. Robinson's typology makes it possible for such fluid interests—regional influence, alliances, and diplomatic posture—to be carefully analysed in South Sudan. For all that, it is the framework that allows for the integration of dimensions of long-term sovereignty, territorial integrity and national identity which are fundamental to post-conflict state-building (e.g., Ivic & Troitiño, 2022; Karazin Kharkov, 2020; Fukuyama, 2018). All of these interests are directly relevant for South Sudan's ongoing struggle with internal divisions and external pressures.

As Bebbington et al. (2018) and Kabachnik (2012) argue, territorial disputes and the requirement to forge a common national identity is fundamental for stability. Robinson's focus on permanent interests allows for systematic examination of these persistent challenges. The framework is also appropriate for analyzing the relationship between variable and

dynamic interests as for example economic priorities, resource management and internal social cohesion on the stability and development of fragile states (Haque, 2018; Addison et al., 2015).

For example, Durnev et al. (2014) illustrate how instability shapes international investment flows and this is particularly relevant South Sudan relying on resource revenues and subject to external shocks. Finally, to explain the internal tensions in South Sudan in the context of divergent and convergent interests, Robinson's typology is able to facilitate a nuanced understanding of these conflicting and commensurate interests (e.g., Waring, 2012; Warlord politics). Zartman (2019) asserts that resilient institutions that transcend ethnic allegiances are critical. Robinson's method offers a pragmatic way to diagnose how clashing interests pose a threat — or a possibility — to national cohesion. Robinson, then, argues his nine types of interests provide a robust analytical framework capable of capturing the complex, diverse, and often conflicting interests that animate South Sudan's state-building context. Application is useful for systematically organizing complicated circumstances into a coherent framework and hence generating policy recommendations that are based on an integrated understanding of internal and external context.

## **2. Analytical Framework**

### **Short summary of Robinson's typology**

Robinson's framework identifies nine different strands of national interests that shape a state's foreign policy and strategic action. These interests fall into four categories: primary, secondary, permanent, and variable interests, each of which has particular characteristics along with their consequences on what can be done by state action.

Primary Interests are foundational for state survival and sovereignty. They include key goals such as national unity, internal equilibrium, and territory, and these are the primary needs that the state relies on to survive and thrive in its ongoing operation. Wu (2017) stresses that the protection of sovereignty and internal cohesiveness is very important, especially in fragile states such as South Sudan, where infighting undermines statehood. These interests are listed as non-negotiable interests in that compromise between them risks the stability and even the decay of the state.

Secondary interests concern regional influence, diplomatic alliances, and external power relations. They involve shaping a state's strategic position in the international system with regional partnership and

diplomacy. Regional interest, such as India's regional diplomacy, has been underscored by Pankaj Kumar (2023) as a key driver of strategic leverage and national security.

Permanent Interests concern the long-term concept of sovereignty, nationhood, and territorial integrity. They emerged out of an eternal wish to maintain national unity, and self-determination. Fukuyama (2018) explains that a strong sense of national identity supports the durability of sovereignty and enables it to resist external pressures and internal divisions over time. These interests underpin long-term stability and are frequently associated with topics like settling territorial disputes, and developing a shared national identity.

Variable Interests have changed for various reasons -- political and economic changes. These involve immediate goals including economic reforms, development and dealing with post-conflict insecurity. According to Haque's (2018) account, these interests shift according to the political situation and are often undermined by emergencies, which makes it the case that quick fixes to stabilize the crises take precedence over longer term planning. In effect, Robinson's typology is a holistic assessment of how states manage competing interests in a post-war, post-conflict environment, reconciling immediate survival and long-term sovereignty and regional strategies. This typology is especially relevant in states with fragile or post-conflict populations, such as South Sudan with internal/external interests and how they interact with one another leading to state-building.

### **Justification for case application**

As a result, Robinson's typology of national interests will be particularly appropriate for South Sudan's state-building process. Given this country's complex and fragile political landscape, this is unsurprising. South Sudan is an example of the kind of place where competing goals—from internal sovereignty and territorial integrity to regional influence and short-term economic priorities—have been sharply delineated and often fought over. First, South Sudan's difficulties in ensuring internal stability and national unity bring to light the relevance of Robinson's primary interests. The enduring ethnic tensions, tribal loyalties, and internal rivalries endanger state existence itself—which is consistent with Robinson's emphasis on interests that are based on sovereignty and internal coherence. As Wu (2017) observes, sovereignty and internal order must be protected in fragile post-conflict landscapes such as South Sudan, which renders Robinson's primary interests

perspective a particularly useful framework. Secondly, the country's regional and international diplomacy, and the alliances and influence it has in the East African region, are also aspects of Robinson's secondary interests. The extent of South Sudan's dependence and regional political ties, that are dependent on external powers, as well as external assistance are vital to the strategic stability and sovereignty, this is consistent with Robinson. Thirdly, South Sudan's enduring territorial disputes, especially over its borders and resource-rich territories, highlight the significance of permanent interests—namely, territorial integrity and national identity. The concern about the need to secure national borders and promote a collective identity for long-term sovereignty is well in line with Robinson's interest focus that Fukuyama (2018) and others describe in the chapter. Finally, within this volatile post-conflict context, the changing economic and political priorities of South Sudan, in terms of resource wealth management, reconstruction, and economic stabilization, indicate variable interests are relevant. These are subject to internal and external forces and usually trade off between what it is to achieve short-term stability and long-term development goals (Haque, 2018). Robinson's typology is a good general point of orientation to view different competing and changing interests involved in South Sudan during its nation-building. Its application clarifies at which stages of state development various interests take precedence and offers insight into whether strategic priorities align or clash, which is relevant for policy formulation and conflict resolution in fragile states.

## **3. Application of Robinson's Nine Types**

### **3.1 Primary Interests**

#### **State survival, national unity, and internal stability**

State survival, national unity and internal stability are essential priorities for a state's strategic aims in fragile or post-conflict contexts as in South Sudan. These objectives are essential to the provision of sovereignty and coherent rule, which are compromised by internal divisions and external pressures. As Wu (2017) notes, such knowledge about the institutional architecture of the national interest is important for planning interventions that would strengthen state capacity, including the promotion of security and territorial integrity as a means to promote sovereignty. Similarly, Jablonský (2002) writes that stable states are naturally linked to maintaining internal order and protecting their borders, thereby facilitating national stability. Kulnazarova (2020) notes that foreign policies of developing countries tend to focus on consolidating

sovereignty and social cohesion—both key to preventing fragmentation. Meanwhile, Irfan and Shahad (2021) argue that creating internal cohesion through political coherence and coordinated policies is key in achieving a more comprehensive foreign policy goal—if there is internal disharmony then any external power is compromised. Suny (2011) notes that identity and politics of recognition can enhance or undermine state stability and that the management of internal diversity is central to the maintenance of unity. Lastly, Stremlau (2019) observes that within developing countries, the negotiation of conflicting interests – whether ethnic, regional, or ideological – is vital for maintaining state stability and progressing along development lanes that coincide with national aspirations.

### **How tribalism threatens core state functions**

Tribalism represents a direct and real threat to fundamental state functions, and may well erode the authority, effectiveness, and stability of governing systems. Azamat Temirkoulov (2005) notes that tribal loyalties and social conflict due to tribal identity can undermine state institutions because they tend to favour ethnic or tribal loyalties and dislocate them in the direction of allegiance not held to a universalist or national identity that compromises centralized authority and administrative consistency.

Asongu and Kodila-Tedika (2016) also emphasise that tribalism undermines government productivity by creating factionalism and undermining the capacities of state institutions to provide public services fairly, especially when allegiance is based on ethnicity (or tribal) rather than on a larger national interest.

Idahosa and Shenton (2006) stress that social capital that is essential to governance, stability and overall social cohesion is eroded, due to tribal divisions that foster mistrust and lack of cooperation among different social groups, therefore undermining the social network indispensable for state institutions to be able to work. For example, P. James (2006) elaborates on the influence of globalism and nationalism on tribalism, proposing that tribal allegiances might impede national cohesion and policies that promote integrated state formation. Freeman (2020) is particularly illuminating in showing how ethnicity and tribalism, if left unattended, can give rise to fragmented political systems and interlocking social conflicts as being in danger to state integrity.

Khadija Rashid (2003) stresses that ethnicity-based politics driven by tribalism lead to conflict on tribal

basis in the form of ethnic identity over national identity resulting in violence, political instability and to some degree, challenges in effective government and management. K. Christie (2020) further emphasizes how tribal politics leads to patronage and favoritism which hinder the development of fair institutions and decrease the ability of the state to provide adequate services to all. These scholars together have emphasized on the direct harm that tribalism, when unmitigated, does to the fundamental tasks of government, including maintaining order, maintaining justice and maintaining national security.

### **3.2 Secondary Interests**

#### **Regional influence, alliances, and diplomatic posture**

It is only through its strategic approach through regional influence, alliances, and diplomatic posture that a state can become important. Pankaj Kumar (2023) underscores that India is trying to establish power through partnerships and regional diplomacy in its power play to strengthen its geopolitics. Harpreet Singh & Sirjan Paul Singh (2022) characterize the Russia-China partnership as a strategic alliance amplifying economic and political leverage, restructuring global power systems. Mishra (2016) observes that America's influence is diminishing in the Asia-Pacific due to a declining 'alliance mutuality' relationship because partners seek their own interests. Tow (2020) also maintains that America's Asian alliances are in disarray, and that elastic coalitions are more attractive. David Shambaugh (2005) illustrated China's regionalized strategy—the use of economic investment, diplomacy and military modernization in order to impose hegemony. Ullah (2024) demonstrates Qatar's diplomacy, demonstrating how smaller states employ soft and strategic diplomacy to influence the region's policies and actions, suggesting influence does not simply involve military and economic forces. All these together exemplify that building alliances is a difficult endeavor, shifting over time in response to adaptable partnerships reflective of evolving power struggles.

#### **Balancing domestic cohesion with external engagement**

It is a balancing act between domestic cohesion and external engagement that states must negotiate as competing pressures arise within and outside the borders of the country. Therese O'Toole, Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, and T. Modood (2012) argue that external security agendas, such as the UK's 'Prevent' agenda, isolate minority communities, preventing their peaceful integration. R. Andrews (2014) highlights the need for effective coordination and

integrated policies to align domestic diversity with external diplomacy to build trust and enhance a nation's external legitimacy and state capacity. H. Mayer (2016) shows how domestic politics shape foreign policy because domestic divisions make coherent actions overseas an uphill battle. Consensus in the country on foreign policy objectives helps for credible foreign participation. G. Blake et al. (2008) emphasise the importance of mass mobilization and collective community solidarity as a stimulus for strengthening national unity, leading to generation of social capital for better relationships both internally and externally. According to Erik Jones (2021), domestic unity is deeply linked to external aspirations; domestic divisions restrict foreign policy options, whereas a harmonious internal climate enhances potential soft power projection and good relations for the country. Together they demonstrate that an integrated domestic cohesion and external engagement strategy is based on coherent policies of trust, inclusion and internal stability, on which external diplomacy rests credible.

### **3.3 Permanent Interests**

#### **Long-term sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national identity**

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integrated domestic cohesion and external engagement strategy is based on coherent policies of trust, inclusion and internal stability, on which external diplomacy rests credible.

### **Building durable institutions beyond ethnic loyalties**

Building durable institutions beyond ethnic identities is the primary way to ensure long-term stability and democratization in fragile states in the face of ethnic patronage, which often causes divisions and conflicts. T. Durant and M. Weintraub (2014) contend that structural reforms based on merit-based governance, transparency, and accountability are needed to counter ethnic bias and establish neutral institutional bases for political competition and resource distribution. I. Zartman (2019) emphasizes a holistic approach in post-conflict states designed to create resilient, legitimate mechanisms to develop institutional infrastructure, promoting inclusiveness across ethnic groups. He supports creating common cultural norms of working together and trust, not cosmetic measures, as the one antidote to conflicting ethnic identities. In so doing, strong institutions (through autonomy of the judiciary, electoral propriety, civic engagement) can contribute to increasing public trust in institutions because they contribute to transparent and equitable governance, thereby diminishing the influence and support for patronage and fostering social bonding (Sam Whitt 2010). In the end, the building of solid institutions necessitates that we have the kind of reforms that advance justice, openness, transparency, and fairness which are neutral channels for countering ethnic patronage politics, and enabling the creation of long-term security and peace.

### **3.4 General Interests**

#### **Common public goods: peace, development, justice, and welfare**

Essential public goods, such as peace, development, justice, and welfare are the bedrock of all stable, effective societies. These common public benefits—also known as common public goods—cross national frontiers and transcend personal concerns; requiring collective action and coordinated financing mechanisms. Yilmaz (2010) underlines that peace and security are key public goods around the globe, and their continued existence is crucial not just for individual states, but also for the global community. Effective financing mechanisms are critical to guarantee the sustainability of these goods, particularly in fragile environments where instability threatens growth and social cohesion.

Maximilian Jaede (2017) builds on the common good, stressing its shared nature and moral significance. It is also based on the development of shared human values and the values of development as well as mutual obligation; as a common good. These goods are the bedrock of social order and solidarity, allowing for proportionate resource allocation and ensuring the safety of vulnerable sections of society. This is not enough: the pursuit of such public goods requires political will — but also meaningful institutional frameworks through which we can mobilize resources to provide and maintain those resources along the way.

Moreover, Besley and Persson (2011) explain that economic development is rooted in robust institutions of the public good (such as justice and welfare) and constitutes the foundations of sustainable prosperity. Their study highlights the importance of development clusters—structures of related policies and institutions—to the creation of an environment conducive to the implementation of public goods. They contend that political and economic institutions – which are important if we are ever to have a stable and sustainable future – have to be invested in to effectively provision and finance the very goods we provide to citizens. In sum, it is also noted that the general public goods (peace, development, justice, welfare) are interconnected and mutually reinforcing in terms of their contribution to social and economic stability. The mechanism of their effective provision rests on coordinated mechanisms and strong institutions inspired by our collective responsibility, and in doing so also affirms that justice and prosperity are possible only through sustained international and domestic cooperation.

### **Tribal favouritism versus inclusive governance**

Tribal favouritism is a major obstacle to inclusive governance in ethno-cultural diversity. Traditionally, in American Indian societies, kinship and traditional social structures have been important as networks of kinship relationships have been seen as powerful predictors of social harmony and moral decision-making mechanisms (Sachs, 2011). But as leaders, in current tribal governments, such kinship-based loyalties may sometimes interfere with fair administration and uphold favoritism and undercut attempts at greater inclusivity (Sachs, 2011).

Research in particular in Odisha, India shows electoral rhetoric that includes inclusion has little impact in governance practices which tend to be skewed towards certain ethnic or tribal groups, sustaining divisions amongst groups (Tripathy, 2025). Such a gap between rhetoric and practice reflects how complicated it is to

make ideals of inclusivity work in practice when those ideals are not enshrined within the structure of statecraft, but rather reflected in heterodox ideologies about governance, especially within ethnically fractious societies.

Likewise, federal character and power-sharing systems used within Nigeria seem to have tried to include representation from various ethnic groups, but the actual effectiveness of such systems to create true (inclusive) power is in disagreement, giving a particular advantage to some groups with more political power (Toyin & Aminur, 2013). But it seems even these measures have limited success in building broad political base (Toyin & Aminur, 2013), and in reality the policies and practices in practice remain fragmented, marginalizing minority groups through poor representation or absence of equal participation (Hussain et al., 2019).

According to Sachs (2011) overcoming favouritism would require reconsidering the conventional roles of kinship in order to engage stakeholders beyond familial or ethnic categories. Asongu and Kodila-Tedika (2016) also support this perspective, reporting an undermining of overall government effectiveness and ability to generate inclusive institutions owing to tribalism. They claim that ethnic loyalties lead to favouritism and that is eroding the quality of governance and that policies promoting meritocratic participation and the distribution of resources should be pursued. Also such a study as that of Beiser-McGrath et al. (2020) show that local ethnic demography exerts a strong influence on favoritism in politics, often advantageously benefiting dominant groups and at the expense of others. Such dynamics disincentivize inclusive participation and reinforce social divisions. Thus, in order to promote a future where all societies move towards inclusive governance, the need to overcome tribal discrimination must be accompanied by the need for a political culture based on fair, merit-based, and national-shared norms rather than having traditional kinship lines that maintain favouritism and exclusive relationships, as in the case of most African countries from the past. Accordingly, in order to reconcile respect for traditional kinship systems with the need for inclusive governance means that reforms must be more fine-grained and contextual, that takes account local socio-cultural facts, and ensures fairness of, and wider inclusion of all of the societies.

### **3.5 Specific Interests**

#### **Sectoral interests such as oil, land, water, and infrastructure**

Sectoral interests — namely oil, land, water and infrastructure considerations — greatly impact resource management and conflict in poorer countries.

The potential impact of large-scale land and water acquisitions especially on food security and local livelihoods has been problematic, especially if significant. Anseeuw et al. (2019) note large-scale land and water acquisitions that displace local communities and disrupt traditional agricultural practices, threatening food security. It is often done in an attempt to benefit commercial interests rather than community needs, which often increases social tension and enlists the environmental costs of these acquisitions. Likewise, resource extraction, both for oil and infrastructure development, often endangers both forest cover and the rights of communities.

Bebbington et al. (2018) say that infrastructure development projects and natural resource extraction activities tend to encroach upon forested areas which in turn detracts from the rights of the community and conservation. And when the 'villagers' are excluded from any decision-making processes, community and environment can be affected by these projects resulting in environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, and social conflict. Intrinsic drivers of conflict in infrastructure are well evidenced with the studies by Boudet et al. (2011); water and pipeline projects tend to become sources of conflict among communities because of competition for resources, poor consultation with communities affected by impacts of the projects and concerns about environmental issues.

These interests tend to conflict with broader aspects of sustainable development so that the balance of sectoral interests is also one of the crucial factors for promoting of peace and fair sharing of resources, and that a smooth division of development projects is achieved in line with these interests. Hence, sectoral interests – when not managed in an inclusive manner – may fuel conflict and derail sustainable development targets. Policies to reconcile these sectoral interests with national development objectives require the integration of environmental conservation, community participation and fair allocation of resources.

#### **Risks of localized ethnic capture of national resources**

However, the localized ethnic appropriation of national resources raises major risks to fair development and stability in societies with resource-based systems that can cause conflicts when these resources are under the influence of particular ethnicities. Girard, Berman, and Couttenier (2020) explain that ethnic identity is a key factor in how natural resources will be allocated and governance. Such monopoly over resource-use, whether for oil, minerals or territory by specific ethnic communities,

does much to exclude other ethnic groups from resource distribution or resource extraction, increasing tensions. This process is capable of solidifying ethnic divisions and creating conflict where political exclusion intensifies the competition for control of resources.

Similarly, Asal et al. (2016) claim that political exclusion of marginalized ethnic groups and their access to resource-rich regions enhance the probability of ethnic armed conflict. When some groups feel that resources are being unjustly allocated, or captured by rival factions, it exacerbates grievances and, in some cases, can incite violence or insurgency. Berman and Couttenier (2023) explain that mineral resources, for the most part, serve to strengthen ethnic identities, which means that resource control becomes the central arena for ethnic groups with similar interests in economic gain and political control. Not only does this dynamic inflame domestic disputes, but it also weakens national cohesion.

Further developing this understanding, Lessmann and Steinkraus (2017) study how ethnic disparities in resource distribution affect higher order development. When the availability of resources is geographically aggregated within specific ethnic populations, and when it is politically managed without inclusive representation, development is uneven and social discord is intensified. These papers taken together show the hazards of resource capture prompted by ethnic identities in reinforcing the division and destabilizing fragile states.

country's development path.

### **3.6 Conflicting Interests**

#### **Tensions between ethnic group demands and national priorities**

Ethnic group calls and national demands are a serious concern in maintaining stability and unity as a state, often in multi-ethnic societies. Guelke (2010) elaborates on this concept: As ethno-nationalism is a tendency to privilege ethnic over national forms of identity, it generates conflicts and undermines unity when it comes to the state. Ethno-nationalist movements that subscribe to these values have often stressed the principles of ethnic self-determination and independence from the state in conflict with the state's efforts to sustain the territorial integrity of the state and the consistency of the enforcement of their policies.

In a similar vein, Semenenko (2016) notes that identity politics based on ethnic differentiation may inhibit the

emergence of a unified national identity, as interethnic perspectives prioritize unique loyalties among groups that frequently clash with broad national objectives. It generates a dynamic of ethnic groups competing for recognition and resources, often at the expense of common interests at a national level, which can further polarize groups.

Rothchild and Olorunsola (2019) add to the above by showing how in African countries policies are at loggerheads in terms of the insistence of the ethnic groups on autonomy or the need for central authority to ensure national unity. These policy dilemmas often result in a "legible equilibrium" of compromises that simply result in the upholding of ethnic cleavages as opposed to undermining the legitimacy of the state that reflects the intricate tension needed to reconcile ethno-national claims and to prevent an erosion of the state without destroying it.

These sources, taken together, combine to convey the message that addressing the conflict between national values and ethnic demands is a trade-off between managing tension, in favour of policies that are informed by a multi-lateral approach that can accommodate pluralism but is also not so narrowly selective, as an ethnic one, because diversity exists and that at the same time there is a commonality in the sense of a common national identity. Finding that balance is a vital component of avoidable conflict and sustainable peace building.

#### **Managing elite competition through institutional mechanisms**

Using institutional mechanisms to manage elite competition is a vital step in order to achieve the balance of power at the higher levels of power and the goals of national development. Ma and Kurscheidt (2019) argue that the institutional frameworks at the top of Chinese elite sports institutions function as governance instruments that allow for competition among elites to ensure the transparency and accountability of the sports system with the purpose of controlling competition between elites. Such devices serve to protect against elitist hegemony undermining higher-level policy goals, thus allowing for collective mobilization of national sports development.

For instance, the well-designed elite sport policies mentioned and emphasized by Shibli, Westerbeek, and Bottenburg (2016) must include institutional supervision of these conflicts which allow governance and competition between elites from within and between countries among a variety of countries to be regulated. These are vital for the

continuity/sustainability of elite sport systems, they drive collaboration, rational allocation of resources, and competition that is not arbitrary. Their comparative perspective highlights how institutional provisions assist in governing elite sport, which is in line with national priorities and not with private or factional interests.

In the context of this discussion, Vogler, Spruill, Tellez and Wibbels (2021) illustrate how elite competition for power in political systems is addressed under constitutional design and institutional checks and balances similar to what sports players do in political systems. Efficient governance structures — balanced power-sharing arrangements, for instance — diminish elite competition and instil stability, an insight that can be generalized with elite sports governance as well. Such institutional mechanisms help to prevent competitive overconsolidation and align competing elites in a manner that strengthens national objectives.

Ramos et al. (2023) add that contextually tailored institutional mechanisms are essential for elite competition in sports systems. They emphasize that the establishment of successful elite sports programs hinges on institutions that are able to mediate disputes among elites, manage resource relations and inspire a common goal. Such mechanisms are crucial for achieving long-term success and national integration in a fiercely competitive atmosphere. All told, institutional mechanisms to manage elite competition — from governance systems in sports to constitutional structures in politics — can help to keep conflicts manageable, promote cooperation and bring elite interests in line with national goals, eventually leading to stability and sustainable development.

## **4. Discussion**

### **What the application reveals about state failure**

The use of Robinson's nine types of national interests in South Sudan state-building process has substantial implications for state decline, because competing interests erode the capacity of a state. The core interests—state survival, national unity, and internal stability—are vital for state functioning (Wu, 2017; Jablonský, 2002; Kulnazarova, 2020). Ethnic divisions and tribal loyalties that undermine sovereignty and internal order threaten these in South Sudan. Temirkoulov (2005) and Asongu and Kodila-Tedika (2016) illustrate how tribalism and ethnic allegiances weaken state institutions, breed factionalism, and erode governance—characteristics that characterise many of South Sudan's conflicts.

Secondary interests, including regional forces and outside alliances, can reinforce or destabilize weak states (Kumar, 2023; Singh & Singh, 2022). Robinson's interest in diplomatic interests aligns with how South Sudan's dependence on regional and international partners and changing geopolitical allegiances muddle its sovereignty and internal stability. This external dependence is a source of vulnerabilities, especially when regional assistance diverges from stability objectives.

Permanent interests, including sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national identity remain key pillars of state survival (Fukuyama, 2018; Ivic & Troitiño, 2022; Karazin Kharkov National University, 2020). South Sudan's continuing border disputes, resource disputes, and problems in articulating a cohesive national identity demonstrate shortfalls of those long-term interests. Boudet et al. (2011) and Girard et al. (2020) argue that resource-based conflicts, especially ethnic conflicts, bring greater tensions and undermine sovereignty — a powerful dynamic in South Sudan's resource-rich territories.

The literature identifies durable institutions beyond ethnicity as key (Durant & Weintraub, 2014; Zartman, 2019; Whitt, 2010). South Sudan's struggle to establish inclusive and transparent institutions is a case in point of the dangers of ethnic patronage and fragile governance. Both can perpetuate conflict and hinder post-conflict reconstruction (Zartman, 2019; Whitt, 2010). This pattern of institutional incapacity has become a recurrent theme in analytical works on fragile states, explaining the persistent instability of South Sudan today.

Short-term economic and political priorities, or variable interests, are also major sources of state failure (Haque, 2018; Addison et al., 2015). Focus on survival and immediate stabilization in the aftermath of conflict can undermine long-term development (Brown et al., 2011; Durnev et al., 2014). In South Sudan at large, resource extraction and military security have become the priority, a response to pressure from within and without, leading to a country based on military security with little emphasis on nation-building and economic weaknesses which lead to instability.

The literature on the contradictory interests in South Sudan, particularly for its ethno-nationalist commitments versus national consolidation, is robust and highly relevant. Guelke (2010) and Semenenko (2016) emphasize the detrimental impact of ethno-nationalism on national integration, elucidating the ongoing ethnic struggle South Sudan experiences

which is deeply restrictive to state capacity (Rothchild & Olorunsola, 2019). Wars over resources and recognition can frequently generate cycles of violence, political instability, and reduced state power.

It shows how all of these overlapping core interests lead to the fragility and failure of South Sudan and other such states. Robinson's typology makes clear that state failure arises from unresolved questions of sovereignty, ethnic identity, and resource control, as research from Temirkoulov (2005), Fukuyama (2018), Durant & Weintraub (2014), and Guelke (2010) have noted too. Addressing those competing forces with inclusive governance and durable institutions is critical to breaking fragility cycles and attaining sustainable state-building.

### **How tribalism distorts national interest formulation**

Tribalism profoundly degrades national interest formulation, hampering state stabilization and development. Deep ethnic loyalties and divisions undermine sovereignty, stability, and effective governance. Temirkoulov (2005) demonstrates that tribal loyalties undermine state capacity and legitimacy by privileging ethnic loyalty over national identity. According to Asongu and Kodila-Tedika (2016), tribalism hampers the productivity of the government with its factionalism and ethnic favouritism, which undermines people's belief and delivery of services necessary for state internal order. These results provide support for Robinson's contention that internal tribal differences have a major adverse impact on state integrity.

Khadija Rashid (2003) and Freeman (2020, p.2) claim that ethnicity politics leads to violent conflict and political instability, which in turn have an adverse effect on a state's capacity to improve internal peace and territorial integrity, two core purposes of Robinson's policy. Neglected ethnicity results in disorganized polities that are a hindrance to national unity. The distortion extends even to institutional formation as Durant and Weintraub (2014), Zartman (2019), and Whitt (2010) observe how ethnic patronage networks, and their tribal connections, limit the establishment of neutral, meritocratic institutions that will be necessary for peace. They call for systemic changes that ensure fairness, transparency, and inclusion, all important for Robinson's secondary priorities, such as diplomatic positionality. Tribalism also affects the allocation of resources: Girard, Berman and Couttenier (2020) and Asal et al. (2016) argue that ethnically driven resource grabs also drive inter-ethnic conflict and undermine national

sovereignty and territorial integrity, in line with Robinson's long-term and permanent interests.

Resource concentration by ethnicity exacerbates social cleavages and distorts national imperatives, with ethnic exceptionalism placed at the expense of collective development. As Guelke (2010) and Semenenko (2016) describe, ethno-nationalist movements frequently dispute state territorial integrity and sovereignty, which causes violence and disrupts national aims towards collective regional efforts. This tribalism poisons Robinson's conception of public goods on the basis that it channels resources and political power shifts away from social advancement and toward ethnic protection. Furthermore, the literature shows how tribalist tendencies hinder mutual regional goals in the region. It also impedes regional alignment and cooperation over shared social, economic, and political interests by fostering inter-ethnic friction and conflict (Joseph, 2024; Birhan, 2024).

This fragmentation undermines regional cohesion and the potential for stability and renewal central to Robinson's agenda of shared interests. All this data together shows us that tribalism fatally restricts what Robinson called the construction and cultivation of coherent national interests in social cleavages, patronage, and resource disputes. It misdirects priorities, obstructs the development of durable, inclusive institutions and allows ethnic groups the opportunity to exploit the wealth and power to subvert state survival, sovereignty, and long-term stability. Sensitivity to these distortions is crucial for a consideration of how vulnerabilities can appear in national post-conflict state building, and this is especially evident in Africa, where ethnic identity is often the basis for political discourse. Systemic reform, institutional upgrading, and inclusion to combat tribalism are the main way forward for the consistent internal social dynamics that can lead to sustainable national development.

## 5. Conclusion

### Analytical insights

Based on analysis, the utilization of Robinson's Nine Types of National Interest vis-a-vis South Sudan's state development brings up some important implications. Tribalism is an existential threat, undermining the power, effectiveness, and stability of the state by elevating ethnic belonging above national identity, fostering factionalism, and promoting distrust. That turns the national interest into parochial concerns. States also have to walk a thin rope between

internal cohesion and external engagement and need to work towards a measure of domestic consensus in order to mitigate discord and make diplomacy credible. Attaining durable, ethnically transcendent institutions is a prerequisite for durable security and for democracy, for patronage politics actively undermines inclusive governance in the long term. Systemic reforms in merit, openness, and accountability are needed to develop fair and non-discriminatory systems, as well as to instil a sense of trust in them. Furthermore, a focus on short-term political gains or social advantages in post-conflict settings undermines long-term stability and sustainable institutional development. Instability deters emphasis from strategy, focusing instead on responding to crises - and, in doing so, stagnating progress and reducing investment where it is necessary.

Long-term state sovereignty and territorial integrity are both inseparable from a strong national identity. Unresolved territorial conflicts and lack of shared identity may weaken the coherence of the state, so that it needs persistent, ethnically transcendent institutions to build a common national identity and counteract internal and external pressures. Inclusive governance and fair allocation of resources are the basic building blocks to provide public goods, peace, and development. To avoid the stealing of resources by ethnic groups, it is vital to avoid the kind of political system which would threaten stability and rightful development, requiring widespread distribution in all policies to prevent exclusion and grievance in favour of others. National and regional unity needs to be a function of common interests like trade, peace, and economic development. Cross-ethnic collaboration and inclusive power sharing are critical for national unity and sustainability of development. Conflicting interests emerge from ethnic group interests, and the pull of interests from ethnic and national, producing ethno-nationalism and division. Strong institutions and constitutional arrangements are essential to control elite competition and guard against group domination and promote political stability. Therein lies the state-building as the battle against tribalism, inclusive state institutions, national identity to balance immediate and strategic need and fairness of resource distribution; an effort to cooperate, to avert fragility and conflict.

### Implications for post-conflict states

Robinson's Nine Types of National Interest offer key lessons for post-conflict states that seek stability. The first reason is that nations should always prioritize

national identity and unity over ethnic loyalties, and that states must actively attack tribalism. Nation-building is vital to establishing stable institutions and promoting internal stability and a coherent external image that prevents future conflicts. 2) Building sustainable, inclusive and meritocratic institutions is imperative. Such institutions, which are based on transparency, accountability and merit rather than ethnic patronage, are important for fair provision of public services and management of public assets. They are neutral space for political competition and wealth distribution reducing ethnic bias and increasing trust between a variety of groups. Third, the post-conflict state must manage short-term relief with long-term strategic development. Although the most immediate humanitarian and stabilization measures are vital, governments should refrain from seeking expedited gains on the political scales. A vision of institutional reform, growth that is sustainable over time, and structural change, one that not only will build resilience but will also prevent a return to conflict, is then absolutely necessary.

The management of resources, namely oil and land, must be fair and transparent for post-conflict states to attain stable governance. However, inclusive allocation mechanisms and community participation are key to avoiding resource-driven conflicts and creating equity. Domestic cohesion is one core component of meaningful foreign engagement and a credible foreign policy. The external strategies should be crafted, being careful not to marginalize minorities, but to bring about internal consensus and trust. Common national and regional interests (for trade or security) cultivate inclusion and working together among ethnic groups to promote shared investment in a future including pooled development and power-sharing. States need to institutionalize the governance mechanisms necessary to control elite competition through inclusive representation, balanced power-sharing, and conflict resolution as part of their governance systems for political stability. Moreover, sovereignty must evolve to provide for current global and digital challenges, with the integrity of territory being vital to the nation-state when it comes to having a strong national identity among multiple nationalities. State-building is not a simple proposition; successful state-building requires addressing the very conditions that lead to conflict—one that prioritizes inclusive governance and national unity—and that enables meritocracy to produce lasting stability.

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