Institutional Processes in the Integration of Militia Groups into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces

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ABSTRACT

This study examines institutional processes involved in the integration of militia groups into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF), with particular focus on screening, training, deployment, and command harmonization. The study is grounded in Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Post-Conflict Reconstruction (PCR) frameworks, which emphasize the transformation of fragmented armed actors into professional national forces through structured institutional reform.

A mixed-methods research design was adopted, involving 383 respondents drawn from integrated ex-combatants, SSPDF officers, and policy implementers. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and key informant interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined thematically to capture experiential and contextual insights.

Findings indicate that institutional processes of integration exist within the SSPDF but are unevenly implemented. Screening procedures were generally perceived as adequate (56%) or very thorough (25%), although gaps allowed individuals with unresolved factional affiliations to be integrated. Training processes were partially implemented, with only 37.5% of respondents reporting full military training, while others received refresher or orientation-only instruction. Policy communication was inconsistent, with 18.7% of respondents indicating unclear or absent communication of integration directives. Deployment and command harmonization were moderately effective but constrained by weak coordination and residual loyalty structures.

The study concludes that while institutional mechanisms for militia integration are established within the SSPDF, their inconsistent application limits full operational cohesion and professionalization. It recommends standardized screening procedures, uniform training programs, improved policy communication, and strengthened command harmonization to enhance integration outcomes and institutional effectiveness.

Keywords: Militia Integration, SSPDF, Security Sector Reform, Institutional Processes, Post-Conflict Reconstruction

INTRODUCTION

Military integration remains one of the most critical instruments of Security Sector Reform (SSR) in post-conflict environments where fragmented armed groups are consolidated into unified national forces. In such settings, the state's monopoly over legitimate force is not automatically achieved through formal institutional redesign but through a gradual process of transforming armed actors into disciplined, professional, and cohesive military structures (Berdal, 2003; Weber, 1946). This transformation requires not only structural incorporation but also deep institutional and normative change that aligns personnel behavior with national defense doctrines and command authority (Bryden & Hänggi, 2005; Sedra, 2010).

In many post-conflict states, military integration is embedded within broader Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) frameworks aimed at stabilizing fragile political orders and preventing relapse into violence. However, evidence suggests that the outcomes of such integration processes are often uneven due to differences in institutional capacity, resource availability, and the degree of procedural consistency in implementation (Knight & Özerdem, 2004). While formal policies may outline clear integration pathways, the

practical realization of these processes frequently varies across units and contexts, leading to partial integration where structural inclusion does not necessarily translate into functional cohesion.

In South Sudan, the integration of former militia groups into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) has been a central component of state-building and national security consolidation efforts. Despite sustained policy emphasis on integration, operational realities continue to reflect challenges associated with fragmented command structures, uneven training exposure, and inconsistencies in screening and deployment processes. These dynamics suggest that integration in the SSPDF is not merely an administrative exercise but a complex institutional process shaped by how consistently and effectively core integration mechanisms are implemented across different levels of the military structure.

Existing SSR and DDR literature has extensively examined the strategic importance of military integration in stabilizing post-conflict states and reducing armed fragmentation (Sedra, 2010; Bryden & Hänggi, 2005). However, much of this scholarship tends to emphasize macro-level outcomes such as peace consolidation and national stability, with comparatively less attention to the internal procedural mechanisms through which integration is operationalized within military institutions. As a result, there remains limited empirical clarity on how specific integration processes such as screening and verification, training and policy communication, deployment alignment, and command harmonization collectively influence the effectiveness of integrated forces.

This gap is significant because integration outcomes are ultimately shaped at the procedural level where policy is translated into practice.

Where screening processes are inconsistent, training uneven, deployment misaligned, and command structures poorly harmonized, integration may reproduce existing divisions rather than resolve them. Conversely, where these mechanisms are implemented systematically and coherently, they can foster professionalism, cohesion, and operational effectiveness within integrated forces (Robinson & Matisek, 2021).

Against this background, this study examines the processes involved in integrating militia groups into the SSPDF, focusing specifically on screening and registration procedures, training and policy communication, deployment practices, and command harmonization. It seeks to understand how these processes shape institutional cohesion, professional discipline, and operational functionality within integrated military structures. The emphasis is placed on procedural dynamics rather than broad policy outcomes in order to provide a more granular understanding of how integration functions in practice.

The study is theoretically grounded in Security Sector Reform and Post-Conflict Reconstruction perspectives. SSR theory emphasizes the importance of professionalization, accountability, and unified command structures as essential conditions for effective and legitimate security institutions (Sedra, 2010; Bryden & Hänggi, 2005).

Post-Conflict Reconstruction perspectives complement this by highlighting that successful reintegration requires both institutional restructuring and the internalization of new norms and identities by former combatants (Knight & Özerdem, 2004). Within this framework, integration is understood as a multidimensional institutional process involving structural design, operational implementation, and behavioral adaptation.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by providing a process-oriented analysis of military integration within a fragile state context. It moves beyond general assessments of integration outcomes to focus on the internal mechanisms that determine whether integration produces cohesion or reproduces fragmentation. In doing so, it offers empirical insights that may inform both policy design and implementation strategies in similar post-conflict environments where military integration remains a central pillar of state-building.

Ultimately, the study argues that the effectiveness of militia integration depends less on the existence of formal integration frameworks and more on the consistency and coherence with which core integration processes are implemented. Where these processes are systematically applied, integration strengthens institutional professionalism and cohesion; where they are inconsistently executed, it risks reinforcing fragmentation within formal military structures.

Problem Statement

Despite the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018, South Sudan continues to experience persistent insecurity characterized by localized violence, fragmented command structures, and weak state control over armed actors. These challenges continue to undermine post-conflict stabilization, institutional cohesion, and the consolidation of sustainable peace. The persistence of such security vulnerabilities suggests that efforts toward establishing a unified and professional national defence force remain incomplete.

The integration of former militia groups into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) has been adopted as a major component of post-conflict security sector reform intended to strengthen military cohesion, restore state authority, and reduce armed fragmentation. However, evidence from conflict-affected regions such as Upper Nile, Jonglei, and Unity States indicates that integrated forces continue to face operational challenges, including weak command coordination, divided loyalties, inconsistent deployment structures, and uneven territorial control. These conditions raise concerns regarding the effectiveness of the integration processes implemented within the SSPDF.

Existing studies on militia integration in South Sudan have largely focused on political settlements, peace agreements, and legal dimensions of security reform, with limited empirical attention given to the operational processes through which integration influences security outcomes. In particular, inadequate scholarly focus has been directed toward the role of screening, training, deployment, and command harmonization in shaping military cohesion and operational effectiveness within integrated forces. Consequently, the relationship between militia integration processes and national security outcomes in South Sudan remains insufficiently understood.

This study therefore sought to assess the processes involved in integrating militia groups into the SSPDF and examine how these processes influence operational cohesion, command effectiveness, and security stabilization in post-conflict South Sudan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Security Sector Reform Theory

Security Sector Reform (SSR) Theory explains how post-conflict states can rebuild professional, accountable, and effective security institutions capable of maintaining stability and enforcing legitimate state authority (Sedra, 2010). The theory emphasizes institutional restructuring, professionalization, operational accountability, and unified command systems as necessary components of effective security governance. SSR theory argues that fragmented armed structures and politicized security institutions undermine national stability and weaken state legitimacy.

Within militia integration processes, SSR theory highlights the importance of standardized screening, professional training, command harmonization, and institutional discipline in transforming former combatants into professional members of national armed forces. The theory further argues that successful integration requires politically neutral recruitment and promotion systems capable of strengthening institutional cohesion and operational effectiveness. In the context of South Sudan, SSR theory helps explain how weaknesses in command structures, divided loyalties, and political interference can undermine the effectiveness of integrating militia groups into the SSPDF.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction Theory

Post-Conflict Reconstruction (PCR) Theory focuses on rebuilding political, social, and institutional structures following violent conflict to promote sustainable peace and state stability (Mazurana, 2000). The theory emphasizes reintegration, reconciliation, trust-building, and institutional recovery as central pillars of post-

conflict stabilization. PCR theory argues that long-term peace depends not only on ending armed violence but also on rebuilding legitimate institutions capable of restoring public confidence and national cohesion.

The theory is relevant to militia integration because the incorporation of former combatants into national defence structures requires more than physical deployment. Successful integration also demands institutional orientation, behavioral transformation, and the gradual replacement of factional loyalties with loyalty to national command systems. PCR theory, therefore helps explain the relationship between militia integration, operational cohesion, and state legitimacy within post-conflict South Sudan.

Empirical Review

Militia integration has become a central component of post-conflict security sector reform in fragile and conflict-affected states. The process is generally intended to transform fragmented armed groups into unified national security institutions capable of maintaining territorial control, enhancing operational cohesion, and strengthening state legitimacy. In post-conflict societies, integration is frequently linked with broader Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) frameworks aimed at stabilizing political and security institutions (Berdal, 2003; Sedra, 2010). However, empirical evidence suggests that the effectiveness of militia integration depends largely on the quality of implementation, institutional capacity, and political commitment.

Existing scholarship demonstrates that poorly managed integration processes often undermine military professionalism and operational effectiveness. According to Robinson and Matisek (2021), post-conflict military integration in fragile states is frequently weakened by factional loyalties, weak command systems, and inconsistent institutional oversight. Their study on Somalia shows that although integration may formally unify armed groups, the persistence of informal loyalties and fragmented command structures often limits operational cohesion. Similarly, Lunde (2024) argues that the absence of standardized training and command harmonization reduces the effectiveness of integrated forces and weakens military coordination during joint operations.

Screening and verification procedures have also been identified as critical determinants of successful integration. Korotayev et al. (2024) observe that inadequate vetting processes permit the incorporation of individuals with unresolved factional affiliations and incompatible command backgrounds, thereby undermining discipline and institutional trust. Effective screening mechanisms are therefore essential in ensuring compatibility, professionalism, and accountability within integrated security institutions. In many post-conflict settings, however, political pressure and weak administrative systems limit the consistency and credibility of screening procedures.

Training and institutional orientation equally play an important role in transforming former combatants into professional security personnel. Knight and Ozerdem (2004) emphasize that reintegration should extend beyond physical incorporation and include normative socialization, discipline, and institutional identity formation. Inadequate training and weak policy communication often produce partially integrated units characterized by divided loyalties and inconsistent adherence to command structures. Nweke (2022) further notes that ineffective orientation programs contribute to operational inefficiency and slow adaptation to formal military systems.

Political interference has also emerged as a persistent challenge affecting militia integration in post-conflict states. Lipton (2024) argues that politically influenced appointments, promotions, and deployments undermine meritocracy and weaken institutional legitimacy within integrated armed forces. In similar contexts, Sibanda (2025) found that political favoritism contributes to unequal treatment among integrated personnel, thereby affecting morale, trust, and cohesion within military units. These findings suggest that successful integration requires politically neutral and institutionally driven processes capable of promoting professionalism and accountability.

Institutional capacity and resource availability further influence the effectiveness of militia integration. According to Sedra (2010), integration processes cannot succeed without adequate logistical support, administrative coordination, and operational resources. Shortages in funding, equipment, and training infrastructure weaken the ability of integrated units to function effectively and maintain operational readiness.

Robinson and Matisek (2021) similarly observe that resource limitations in post-conflict militaries often create implementation gaps that compromise long-term security outcomes and organizational cohesion.

Empirical studies further indicate that successful militia integration can positively influence territorial security and state legitimacy when effectively implemented. Anyeko et al. (2021), in a study on Uganda, found that integrated forces contributed to improved local perceptions of state authority when supported by cohesive command structures and community engagement. Likewise, UNMISS (2023) reports that integrated security units in South Sudan demonstrated improved territorial coverage in regions where operational coordination, leadership consistency, and logistical support were adequately maintained. Nevertheless, areas characterized by unresolved factional loyalties and weak command harmonization continued to experience instability and insecurity.

Although existing literature provides important insights into post-conflict military integration, limited empirical attention has been given to the operational processes through which militia integration influences security outcomes within the SSPDF. Most previous studies focus primarily on political settlements, DDR implementation, and peace agreement frameworks, while insufficient emphasis has been placed on practical integration mechanisms such as screening, training, deployment, and command harmonization. This study, therefore contributes to the existing body of knowledge by examining how these integration processes influence operational cohesion and security outcomes in post-conflict South Sudan.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional research design using a mixed-methods approach to examine institutional processes involved in the integration of militia groups into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF). The design enabled the collection and integration of both quantitative and qualitative data at a single point in time, providing a comprehensive understanding of screening, training, deployment, and command harmonization processes within integrated military structures.

The study was conducted in Juba, Bentiu, and Malakal, as well as selected areas in Upper Nile, Jonglei, and Unity States. These locations were purposively selected due to their relevance as key integration centres and regions affected by persistent insecurity and militia-related activities. The inclusion of both operational and conflict-affected areas allowed for a balanced assessment of integration processes across different institutional and field environments.

The target population comprised integrated ex-combatants, SSPDF officers, and policy implementers involved in defence and peacebuilding processes. The total population was estimated at 25,080 respondents. A sample size of 384 respondents was selected to ensure adequate representation and statistical reliability. Stratified random sampling was used to select ex-combatants based on integration locations and background characteristics, while purposive sampling was applied to SSPDF officers and policy implementers due to their technical knowledge and direct involvement in integration processes.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires were administered to ex-combatants and SSPDF officers to obtain quantitative data on screening, training, deployment, and command structures. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with policy implementers to capture in-depth qualitative insights on institutional capacity, policy implementation, and operational challenges affecting integration.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to summarize respondents' perceptions of integration processes. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically through systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of emerging patterns and themes. The integration of both datasets facilitated triangulation and enhanced the validity of findings.

Reliability of the research instruments was ensured through pre-testing in a non-study area, while validity was strengthened through expert review and methodological triangulation across respondent categories. Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, participation was

voluntary, confidentiality was maintained, and approval was secured from relevant institutional authorities before data collection.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings on how screening, training, deployment, and command harmonization influence militia integration within the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF). Quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated and interpreted within the frameworks of Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Post-Conflict Reconstruction (PCR) theories.

Response Rate

This section presents the response rate achieved during data collection, comparing the number of questionnaires distributed with those completed and returned. The response rate is important in assessing the adequacy and reliability of the data used in the study.

Table 1: Distribution of Questionnaires

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Questionnaires Distributed	450	100
Questionnaires Returned	383	85

Source: Field Data, 2025

The study achieved a response rate of 85%, with 383 valid questionnaires returned out of 450 distributed. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate above 70% is considered acceptable for social science research, while rates above 80% are regarded as very good. On this basis, the achieved response rate was adequate for robust analysis and enhances the reliability of the findings.

The high response rate was attributed to effective coordination during fieldwork and the willingness of respondents to participate in the study on militia integration processes in South Sudan.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of respondents were analyzed to determine the representativeness of the sample and to provide contextual understanding of the findings on militia integration within the SSPDF. The variables considered include gender, age, marital status, education level, role in the integration process, and deployment location.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 384)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	370	97
	Female	13	3
Age (Years)	18–25	77	20
	26–35	153	40
	36–45	115	30
	46+	38	10

Marital Status	Single	115	30
	Married	210	55
	Widowed	38	10
	Divorced	20	5
Education Level	No formal education	46	12
	Primary	77	20
	Secondary	145	38
	Tertiary/College	115	30
	University and above	0	0
Role in Integration	Ex-combatants	322	84
	SSPDF Officers	44	12
	Policy Implementers	17	4
Deployment Location	Juba	172	45
	Bentiu	115	30
	Malakal	77	20
	Other	19	5

Source: Field Data, 2025

The demographic profile indicates that the study sample was largely composed of male respondents (97%), reflecting the gender structure of military and security institutions involved in militia integration processes. Female representation was minimal (3%), which is consistent with the low participation of women in operational military roles and the dominance of men in SSPDF structures.In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents were concentrated in the 26–35 years category (40%), followed by those aged 36–45 years (30%). This indicates that the study captured respondents within active service and productive age groups, who are likely to have direct exposure to integration processes and operational realities. The relatively smaller proportion of respondents aged 46 years and above suggests limited representation of senior personnel within the sample.

Regarding marital status, most respondents were married (55%), followed by single respondents (30%). This distribution suggests that a significant proportion of participants had family responsibilities, which may influence perceptions of stability, security, and institutional cohesion within the integration process. Educational attainment shows that the majority of respondents had secondary education (38%), followed by tertiary education (30%). A smaller proportion had only primary education (20%), while 12% had no formal education. This indicates a moderately educated sample, capable of engaging with institutional procedures, training structures, and operational dynamics associated with militia integration.

With regard to roles in the integration process, the majority of respondents were integrated ex-combatants (84%), followed by SSPDF officers (12%) and policy implementers (4%). This distribution ensures that the study captures primarily the experiences of individuals directly undergoing integration, while still incorporating supervisory and policy-level perspectives. Finally, deployment location shows that respondents were drawn mainly from key integration and operational centers, with Juba (45%), Bentiu (30%), and Malakal (20%) forming the core sites. This geographical spread enhances the representativeness of the findings across major SSPDF integration environments. Overall, the demographic structure demonstrates adequate representation across key

categories relevant to militia integration. It provides a balanced foundation for interpreting perceptions of screening, training, deployment, and command harmonization within the SSPDF.

Screening and Registration Procedures

Respondents were asked to evaluate the thoroughness of the screening process and the findings are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Perceived Thoroughness of Screening

Screening Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very Thorough	96	25
Adequate	215	56
Incomplete	46	12
No Screening	26	7
Total	**383**	**100**

Source: Field Data, 2025

Screening and verification form an important part of the process of integrating militia groups in the national army since they help assess whether the individuals being integrated into the army satisfy the requirements professionally, institutionally, and personally. The findings of the questionnaire administered to respondents suggest that there was general positivity regarding screening. However, the results reveal that 81% felt that screening was either extremely rigorous or adequate, implying that there was an institutional structure in place during screening. The other 19%, however, felt that screening was either not rigorous enough or completely lacking. This implies that while institutions play an important role in screening, their mere presence does not necessarily ensure success in the process.

Indeed, the impact of this discrepancy in screening was further illustrated in the qualitative information provided by SSPDF officers, as one of the officers indicated: "Some of the combatants did not undergo proper vetting during the process, and hence, they posed challenges during the integration phase" (Policy Implementer 1, personal communication).

This indicates a deficiency in the evaluation of competencies and rank compatibility. Within military organizations, the power of command is built not only on rank but on expertise as well, and when the commanding officers have low qualifications, other soldiers may doubt their authority, affecting overall discipline and coordination.

Another participant elaborated: “In some units, there was still divided loyalty toward the national chain of command and the former leaders of the militia due to the inability of screening procedures to identify past connections" (SSPDF Officer 3, personal communication).

It shows that some loyalties based on personal relations could not be identified properly. The division of loyalty remains one of the structural risks of military integration in the aftermath of the conflict, which means that the network preceding integration remains active within the national military organization.

The findings correspond to the literature review conducted in Chapter Two. For example, Robinson and Matisek (2021) claim that factionalism, clan rivalries, and the absence of strong governance undermined successful integration in Somalia. At the same time, Korotayev et al. (2024) highlight that leadership conflict and poor verification procedures affect cohesion within the post-conflict militaries.

In general, the analysis shows that screening and registration were institutionalized practices, although with varying degrees of strictness according to the situation. What is vital in establishing the impact of integration is not whether screening procedures have been applied but how extensively and deeply these processes have been carried out. Whenever the integration process was done through an extensive and comprehensive screening procedure, the integration process helped build professionalism and credibility in the organization. But wherever the screening procedure was not extensively carried out, the integration process resulted in leadership conflicts, divided loyalties, and operational stress. These results prove that screening is vital because it is the major cause behind the link between integration and national security outcomes.

Training and Policy Communication

Training and effective communication of integration policies are central mechanisms through which former militia members are transformed into professional personnel within a national defense force. Respondents were asked to report on the type of training they received and the clarity with which integration policies were communicated. The findings are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Training Received and Policy Clarity

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Training Received	Full military training	144	37.5
	Basic refresher	120	31.2
	Orientation only	72	18.8
Total respondents	–	**384**	**100**
Policy Clarity	Very clear	168	43.8
	Somewhat clear	144	37.5
	Not clear	48	12.5
	Not communicated	24	6.2
Total respondents	–	384	100

Source: Field Data, 2025

A combined 68.7 percent of respondents received full or refresher training, indicating that formal training frameworks were present and operational across many integration contexts. Nonetheless, 18.8 percent only had orientation training, which is little preparation that normally does not provide enough training in military doctrine, discipline, and command procedures. This difference indicates that although there were institutional structures, the level of implementation was different among the units or places.

The same trend was observed in policy communication. Although 43.8 percent of interviewees said that integration policies were very clear and 37.5 percent were somewhat clear, 18.7 percent (including not clear and not communicated) said that the policies were unclear or not communicated. Policy clarity has a direct impact on compliance and discipline and unity of command in military organizations. Uneven distribution of information enables staff to use unofficial interpretations or previous group standards, which compromises standard practices.

Qualitative data support these results. According to one of the SSPDF officers, “there were policies and they were not always articulated to the former militia members, which led to confusion in terms of duties and rank”

(SSPF Officer 1, personal communication). An ex-combatant also reported that "they were not told how to obey the chain of command in the right way, though they were taught on physical training" (Ex-combatant 2, personal communication). One of the policy implementers also emphasized that "instructions to be followed on integration duties were given orally and not uniformly across units and therefore confusion was spreading" (Policy Implementer 1, personal communication). These descriptions indicate three main issues; lack of institutional orientation, disproportionate technical training versus socialization in an organization, and decentralized communication practices. These gaps may undermine command coherence, create mixed loyalties and constrain the transformative effects of the training programs.

These findings correspond closely with SSR theory, which emphasizes that standardized training, clear institutional doctrine and consistent communication are essential for professionalization and cohesive national forces. Lacks of training or vague policy directives deter discipline, authority and institutional legitimacy. Likewise, PCR theory emphasizes that reintegration should be done beyond the physical incorporation and should also entail cognitive and institutional change. Lack of consistency in training and communication of policy is a good example of one form of partial integration as PCR theory recognizes as a threat to long-term stability.

In comparison to the empirical literature, the findings are consistent with Sibanda (2025), who highlights that the reintegration programs, which are not supported by established institutions, usually lead to uneven findings, and Robinson and Matisek (2021) who demonstrate that the insufficient institutional integration only enables the preexisting divisions to persist. These trends are reflected in the South Sudan experience: a lack of evenness in training and absence of consistency in policy communication create uneven forces on a structural level. This cross-context similarity enhances the analytical validity of the findings as it places them in a wider comparative context in post-conflict integration issues.

In general, the analysis shows that the training and policy communication mechanisms existed and were not universal and evenly applied. Full and uniform application fosters unity and professionalism and partial or patchy application among service personnel creates divided loyalties, lack of discipline and divided command cultures. Training and policy communication is therefore one of the important causal processes that interrelate the processes of integration and institutional stability.

Deployment and Command Harmonization

Deployment and harmonized command structures are fundamental to operational effectiveness and ensuring that the state maintains control over the legitimate use of force within the SSPDF. The quantitative findings of this study as presented in Table 3 reveal that seventy percent of the respondents believed that their deployment accorded their abilities, and sixty-one percent stated that command structures were in accord. Nevertheless, effective coordination in mixed units was only reported by fifty-five percent. These numbers indicate that despite the presence of formal structures, there is still an unequal representation in terms of practical implementation, especially the coordination of diverse personnel. There are two neutral and dissenting answers, where twenty-five percent are neutral and twenty percent disagree on the issue of coordination, highlighting the unresolved operational and relationship problems.

These findings are further supplemented with qualitative evidence. One former combatant said that "the former militia leaders occasionally used powers over SSPDF officers, which created conflicts and hierarchical overlaps" (Ex-combatant 1, personal communication). According to an SSPDF officer, "some of the units still reported to previous factional commanders instead of the assigned chain of command" (SSPF Officer 1, personal communication). One policy implementer stressed that "competing loyalties made the joint operations to take longer durations and in most cases it necessitated mediation" (Policy Implementer 1, personal communication). One more ex-combatant "remarked that written hierarchies could not work without trust because the unit would oppose to the new procedures until the trust was built" (Ex-combatant 2, personal communication). Together, these descriptions suggest that harmonization issues are not procedural in nature, but are instead rooted in the relationship processes in which authority, loyalty, and trust affect the functionality of formal command structures in a practical manner.

Theoretic perspective, these findings can be compared with Security Sector Reform theory which underlines that the post-conflict integration is effective when the formal restructuring is accompanied by the professionalization, accountability and normative alignment of the personnel (Berdal, 2003; Sedra, 2010). Applying SSR principles to South Sudan, it implies that structural harmonization alone may not unify power, without the concomitant restructuring of loyalties and instilling trust into units. Empirically, the findings correspond with the literature reviewed at the beginning of this study. As Osei (2024) emphasized, group polarization and divided loyalties among ex-militia soldiers hinder unified command and functioning. The findings in this study support the findings of Osei, and qualitative stories help to understand the mechanisms, i.e., interpersonal trust and the observation of the formal procedures, where coordination is effective or not, in more detail. This pattern is consistent with findings from Sibanda (2025) and Robinson and Matisek (2021), who emphasized that unresolved factional loyalties and ethnic divisions compromise the effectiveness of military integration in post-conflict settings.

Overall, the experience of former militias to SSPDF is that despite the need to introduce formal deployment and harmonization structures, these cannot work independently but ensure the operation cohesion. Quantitative and qualitative data show that the mediating effect of coordination is through interpersonal trust, clear communication and redirection of loyalties. This, coupled with the theoretical understanding of Security Sector Reform and state-building models, reveals that institutional designs, relationship management, incessant supervision and professionalization of the military force are key to the success of militia integration to the benefit of military performance and deliverables on national security.

Table 3: Deployment and Command Harmonization

Variable	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Deployment matches skills	70	18	12
Command structures harmonized	61	22	17

Source: Field Data, 2025

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that militia integration into the SSPDF is primarily shaped by the quality and consistency of core operational processes, particularly screening, training, deployment, and command harmonization. While these mechanisms are formally established within the institutional framework, their effectiveness varies significantly across units, leading to uneven levels of cohesion and operational performance. Where these processes are rigorously implemented, integration contributes to improved professionalism and coordination. However, where implementation is partial or inconsistent, integration tends to reproduce existing factional divisions within the security structure.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce the assumptions of Security Sector Reform and Post-Conflict Reconstruction frameworks, which emphasize that institutional restructuring alone is insufficient without parallel transformation of norms, loyalties, and operational discipline. The persistence of divided loyalties and uneven institutional application demonstrates that integration is not a purely administrative process, but a deeply relational and organizational transformation.

Overall, the study demonstrates that militia integration in post-conflict settings such as South Sudan produces mixed outcomes, shaped less by formal policy design and more by implementation depth, institutional capacity, and the management of loyalty networks within security forces.

Conclusion

This study examined militia integration into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF), focusing on screening and registration, training and policy communication, deployment, and command harmonization, and

their implications for operational cohesion and security outcomes. The findings show that while integration frameworks are formally established, their effectiveness remains uneven due to variations in implementation across units and operational contexts.

Screening processes are generally in place but inconsistently applied, allowing remnants of factional affiliations to persist. Training and policy communication are similarly uneven, resulting in a differentiated understanding of institutional procedures. Although deployment and command structures are formally aligned, their effectiveness is constrained by trust deficits, competing loyalties, and residual informal command networks.

Overall, the study finds that militia integration in the SSPDF is characterized by partial cohesion, where formal institutional arrangements coexist with persistent relational and organizational fragmentation. The study contributes to SSR and PCR literature by showing that integration outcomes depend less on formal structural design and more on implementation depth and the reconfiguration of loyalty structures within security institutions. In conclusion, militia integration in South Sudan reflects a process of incomplete institutional transformation shaped by uneven implementation, relational dynamics, and constrained organizational adaptation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, it is evident that the effectiveness of militia integration within the SSPDF is strongly influenced by the consistency of screening, training, deployment, and command harmonization processes. In line with these findings, the study offers the following recommendations to strengthen institutional cohesion and operational effectiveness.

Strengthen screening and verification systems: The Ministry of Defence and SSPDF leadership should institutionalize a standardized and transparent vetting framework to ensure that all integrated personnel are thoroughly assessed for competence, background, and command compatibility before deployment. This will enhance institutional trust, discipline, and operational cohesion.

Standardize training and institutional orientation: The SSPDF Training Directorate should develop and implement uniform training modules that integrate technical military instruction with structured institutional orientation. This will strengthen professionalism, discipline, cohesion, and adherence to the chain of command among integrated personnel.

Improve command communication systems: The SSPDF should establish clear, centralized, and consistent communication channels for operational directives to minimize ambiguity in orders and reduce reliance on informal or faction-based interpretations of authority.

Enhance monitoring of integrated units: Continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be institutionalized to assess cohesion levels within integrated units and to identify early signs of divided loyalty, coordination challenges, or operational fragmentation.

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