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The M23 Crisis – An Opportunity to Bring Sustainable Peace to the Great Lakes Region?

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Abstract

The resurgence in late 2021 of the M23 rebel movement has plunged the volatile eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) into even more turmoil, displacing an additional 600 000 people in 18 months. Tensions between the DRC and Rwanda, which is supporting the M23, are at an all-time high. Regional efforts by Luanda to reconcile the two countries have so far failed. The East African Community has taken the bold step of sending in a regional military force, but its composition is problematic and it is already coming up against domestic opposition. Meanwhile, the region is putting political pressure on DRC President Felix Tshisekedi to negotiate directly with the M23, a difficult prospect given intense domestic hostility to this idea. Tshisekedi has rejected this option and instead has been canvassing international and regional actors in the hopes that they will take punitive actions against Rwanda for its support to the rebel group. The EU, France, the US, Germany and Belgium have issued demands that Rwanda ends its support to the rebel group, but have stopped short of direct action. Despite a flurry of regional initiatives, the crisis is becoming entrenched, with ever greater humanitarian consequences and the prospect of long-term tensions in the region. This paper analyses the different initiatives currently underway and makes recommendations for coordinated action to bring long-term, sustainable peace to the Great Lakes region.



Introduction

Regional relations

Since the start of his presidential mandate in 2019, Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi has placed significant emphasis on improving relations with key neighbours in the Great Lakes, notably Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.

Throughout 2019, 2020 and much of 2021, it appeared as though the DRC's relationship with Uganda and Rwanda had grown stronger. Exchanges between senior government officials grew more frequent, and cooperation in key areas such as economic development and trade – and some aspects of security and intelligence sharing – were formalised.

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In 2023 Nicolas Kazadi, the Congolese finance minister, and Fortunat Biselele, Tshisekedi's former special advisor, explained that enhancing economic exchanges and building on economic opportunities were pillars of the president's attempts to improve relations with Uganda and Rwanda.¹ This included the resumption of flights by Rwanda Air to Kinshasa and the conclusion of several economic agreements – with Rwanda on energy and with Uganda on infrastructure construction.

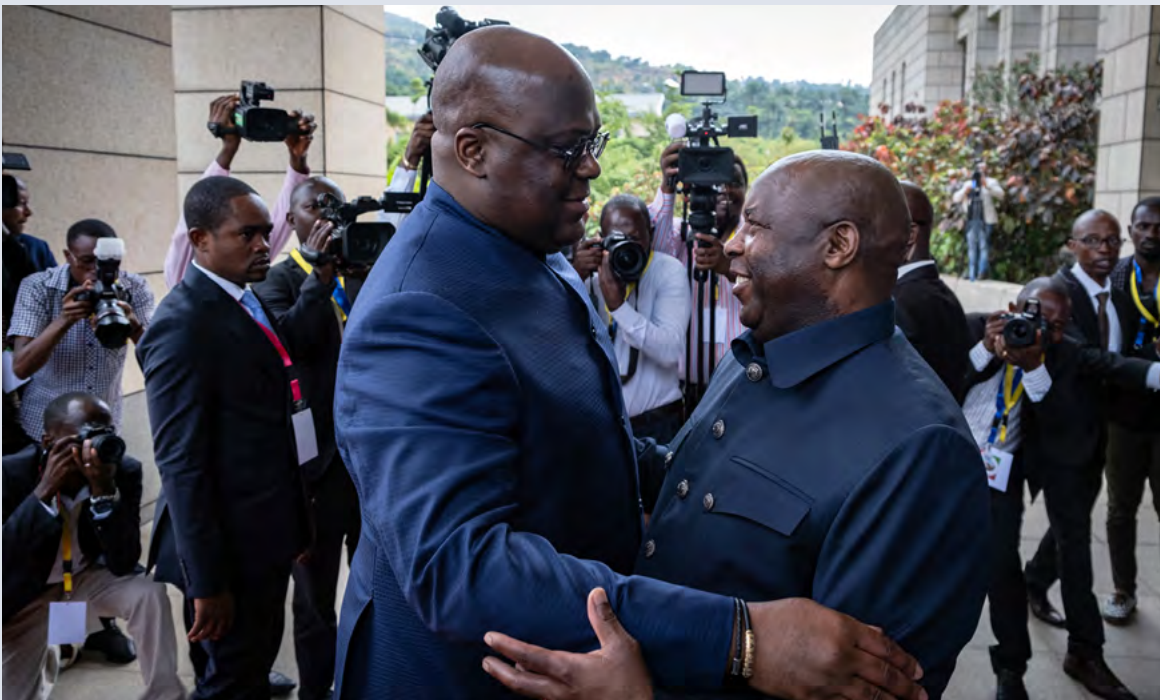
On a more symbolic level, Rwandan President Paul Kagame travelled to Kinshasa to attend the funeral of the veteran opposition leader and Tshisekedi's father, Etienne Tshisekedi, in June 2019. It was the first such visit in over 20 years and an unimaginable event during the years of former Congolese president Joseph Kabila's administration. But while 2019 and 2020 were dominated by high-profile visits and declarations of a new era in regional relations, by 2021 cracks started to appear in the relationship between the DRC and Rwanda, with even Tshisekedi starting to doubt how much he could really trust Kigali.

The key question during this initial three-year period was whether Kigali's interests in the DRC and its approach to pursuing those interests had changed fundamentally, or whether Kagame was simply being his shrewd self and keeping the new Congolese president close. Likewise for Kinshasa – had Tshisekedi taken the full measure of Kigali's historical influence and role, and of what was at stake for Kagame in the DRC, or did he mistake the superficial niceties for a wholesale change in the relationship?

¹ Alain Foka, "La Chronique: Qui pour sauver la RDC?" [The Chronicle: Who to save the DRC?], YouTube, January 6, 2023.

The DRC and Uganda had on-off alliances over the years... [b]ut Uganda also played a destabilising role in the eastern DRC for decades

Similar questions need to be asked about the relationship between Kinshasa and Kampala. Never as tense as the one between the DRC and Rwanda, the DRC and Uganda had on-off alliances over the years, cooperating on military operations such as the AU-led force against the Lord's Resistance Army. But Uganda also played a destabilising role in the eastern DRC for decades – starting in 1996 with its support to the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo's military campaign to overthrow then Zairean president Mobutu Sese Seko. In addition, Uganda helped created the Movement for the Liberation of Congo led by Jean-Pierre Bemba and played a destabilising role in Ituri by stoking ethnic violence between the Hema and Lendu. It also supported the March 23 Movement (M23) in 2012–2013. In that time, Uganda was looting the DRC, establishing significant long-term economic interests in gold, timber and diamonds that remain in place today.²



President of the DRC Felix Tshisekedi (L) is greeted by Burundi's President Evariste Ndayishimiye (R) as he arrives for the extraordinary Summit of East African Community Heads of State in Bujumbura, Burundi, on February 4, 2023 (Tchandrou Nitanga/AFP via Getty Images)

² "UN's Top Court Orders Uganda to Pay \$325 Million to DR Congo", *UN News*, February 9, 2022. In February 2022 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Uganda had to pay the DRC reparations of \$325 million for damages to property and persons during the 1998–2003 war in the DRC, during which Ugandan troops occupied large areas of the country. "The Court notes that the reparation awarded to the DRC for damage to persons and to property reflects the harm suffered by individuals and communities as a result of Uganda's breach of its international obligations," said Judge Joan Donoghue, the ICJ president.

In addition, while Uganda has had opportunistic alliances with the DRC, it has more historically rooted and existentially important ties with Rwanda.

As the resurgence in late-2021 of the M23 rebel group demonstrates, the thaw in regional relations that followed Tshisekedi's arrival in power was momentary. The prevailing logic in Uganda and Rwanda is still that they can intervene and interfere in the DRC with impunity whenever either perceives that its strategic interests are being threatened or undermined. It is clear from the current critical situation – with the war between the M23 and the Congolese army in its second year – that there is still a long way to go in resolving long-standing patterns of behaviour, teasing out and addressing formal and informal interests, and putting the countries on equal footing.

This is particularly so when it comes to questions of the DRC's sovereignty, its neighbours' respect for its territorial integrity and the welfare of the Congolese population. Many of the dynamics of the past three decades persist, notably Rwanda and Uganda's interests in sustaining instability in the eastern DRC for their own benefit. Similarly, as it has for the past 30 years, the burden of regional tensions and interests continues to fall disproportionately on the eastern DRC. Here, the Congolese population experiences daily the consequences of the ongoing violence generated by regional tensions and proxy warfare.

This paper looks at the current situation in the DRC, the acute military crisis with the M23 rebel movement, and the heightened tensions between Rwanda and the DRC. It also analyses the numerous interventions – regional, bilateral and international – that have sprung up in response to the crisis. As much as the current situation is an emergency, it has also turned the international community's attention back to the Great Lakes region as a whole for the first time in over a decade. This crisis – and the attention it has attracted – has the potential to spark a much larger discussion and process that addresses the long-standing tensions and interests that have undermined the region for close to 30 years. It is an opportunity that should not be missed.

The M23 resurgence

Today the eastern DRC is once again in the grips of an acute security crisis. There is ongoing fighting with the M23, which has succeeded in establishing control over key towns and areas. Neither the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) nor the UN Organization Stabilization

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Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) or SADC's Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) has succeeded in stopping its advance. At the time of writing, the M23 controlled the FARDC military camp in Rumangabo, the strategic border town of Bunagana on the DRC-Ugandan border, and other strategic towns and roads. By the end of 2022, the M23 had managed to expand its control over Congolese territory in North Kivu to an area six times larger than what it controlled in March 2022.³ The FARDC and MONUSCO were unable to halt this military expansion. The UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General in the DRC and Head of MONUSCO, Bintou Keita, told the UN Security Council that 'in the most recent clashes, the M23 has behaved more like a conventional army rather than like an armed group'.⁴

The M23's resurgence is the result of several different factors that, together, threaten the Rwandan government's controlling role in the eastern DRC. In October 2021 the Ugandan People's Defence Forces (UPDF) and the FARDC launched joint military operations against the Allied Defence Forces (ADF) rebel group based in the far north of North Kivu province. Although the DRC and Ugandan governments claim that they informed Kigali of these joint operations, Kagame said that he was neither consulted nor informed. Either way, the presence of UPDF troops in the eastern DRC, and the exclusion of Kigali from the decision-making process, provoked Kagame.

Similarly, the planned construction of several roads running south along the Ugandan-DRC border all the way to the important trade centre of Bunagana, represented another element of encroachment on territory that Rwanda has made huge efforts to control directly and indirectly for the past 25 years. In January 2021 Ugandan activities along this stretch so antagonised Rwanda that the two armies nearly came to blows. This rapprochement between Uganda and the DRC was also happening at a time of great tension between Uganda and Rwanda.⁵

In addition, the admission of the DRC into the East African Community (EAC) in March 2022 – championed by Kenya and opposed by Rwanda – means that Rwanda will have to accommodate Congolese views and influence in this strong regional economic body that is a key vehicle for economic integration across East Africa.

Finally, secret talks between Kinshasa and Kigali to allow Rwandan troops to maintain a permanent presence in the eastern DRC failed, with Tshisekedi – who had quietly allowed Rwandan troops into the DRC in 2019 – ultimately refusing. Together, these factors appear to have added up to too many moving parts; too many elements that Kagame and the

3 UN Security Council, Council, *S/2022/967: Midterm Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo*, December 16, 2022, 9-10.

4 UNSC, *S/2022/967: Midterm Report*.

5 Tensions between Rwanda and Uganda started to build in 2018, with Uganda accusing Rwanda of meddling with Ugandan security services and pursuing Rwandan political opponents on its territory, and Rwanda countering that the Ugandan government was harbouring and supporting members of the Rwandan National Congress. The situation led to the closing of the border between the two countries for three years, from 2019-2022, blocking vital trade routes supplying the entire EAC. The relationship has since recovered.

Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF) could not control, in an area of strategic importance to Rwanda – the eastern DRC.

Both Uganda and Rwanda have supported the M23 and the movement from which it emerged, the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), in the past.⁶ A peace deal between the Congolese government and the CNDP in 2009 put an end to years of violence, and CNDP troops were integrated into the FARDC. However, the integration process was unlike previous rebel integration processes, where command structures were dismantled and combatants dispersed into the FARDC. This process – negotiated as Kinshasa faced losing control of Goma to the CNDP – allowed CNDP units to remain in place in North and South Kivu, and the senior CNDP leadership to lead military operations against the FDLR.⁷ The group re-emerged in 2012–2013 when Kinshasa sought to re-assert military control over parts of North Kivu. Among other things, it attempted to move former M23 commanders to new positions in other parts of the DRC and replace them with commanders more loyal to Kinshasa.

The M23's strength, according to the December 2022 UN Panel of Experts Report on the DRC Arms Embargo, indicates a 'high degree of organisation, improved tactics, recruitment, troop surge and substantial resupply of military equipment'.⁸ This includes new high-tech military equipment not used by the group in past military campaigns. In addition to expanding the territory under its control, the M23 has begun imposing taxes, establishing parallel administrations and security services, and conducting recruitment drives and training. According to the UN, new recruits were promised employment. When combatants tried to flee, they were executed or detained and tortured.

Using aerial footage, RDF troops were spotted throughout the area under the M23's control and were seen participating in operations targeting positions of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) rebel group. Rwanda has rejected evidence of its support to the M23, saying that RDF forces never crossed the border into the DRC and that the accusations are 'aimed at scapegoating Rwanda for the Democratic Republic of Congo's internal failures'.⁹

A June 2022 UN Experts report had already flagged Rwandan support to the M23, but had done so in a confidential annexe that was later leaked. In that report, the UN Panel of Experts found¹⁰

solid evidence of the presence of, and military operations conducted by, members of the Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF) in Rutshuru territory, where RDF members attacked the positions of the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) and provided support to M23/ARC operations.

6 UN Security Council, *S/2012/843: Final Report of the UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo*, November 15, 2012, 3.

7 Jason Stearns, *The War that Doesn't Say its Name* (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, April 2022), 139–142.

8 UNSC, *S/2022/967: Midterm Report*, 9–11.

9 UNSC, *S/2022/967: Midterm Report*, 12.

10 Group of Experts on the DRC, Confidential Update, July 2022, 1.

Despite this and other evidence presented by other organisations such as Human Rights Watch, only the US spoke out. On 26 October 2022 Ambassador Robert Wood, the Alternative Representative for Special Political Affairs, told a UN Security Council briefing on the Great Lakes Region,¹¹

This violence is unacceptable, and the United States calls on armed groups to discontinue their assaults on the DRC's most vulnerable populations. We also call on state actors to stop their support for these groups, including the Rwandan Defense Forces' assistance to M23.

Following the publication of the December 2022 report of the UN Group of Experts, which included evidence of Rwandan support to the M23 in its main body, several more countries have called on Rwanda to desist. These include France, Belgium, Germany, and the EU, along with the US.

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The Rwandan government has countered these claims with its own accusations – that the Congolese government has links to the FDLR, and that the FDLR militia's presence in the eastern DRC is a threat to Rwanda. This is a well-known tactic that the Rwandan government has successfully employed over the past 30 years to reorient attention to what it argues are its own legitimate security concerns vis-à-vis its neighbour.

However, while this argument was valid at the end of the 1998–2003 war, the FDLR has been significantly weakened since then by FARDC and MONUSCO military operations. It has not carried out an attack on Rwandan territory since 2001. In addition to its being weakened by the joint military operations, over 10 000 FDLR fighters and their dependents have voluntarily returned to Rwanda under a MONUSCO-led disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration programme. Rather than representing an existential threat to Rwanda, the FDLR – now estimated to number fewer than 500–1 000 combatants¹² – represents a far greater threat to the Congolese people among whom its fighters have been living for over 30 years. Since fighting flared up in late 2021, over 602 000 Congolese civilians have been displaced in North Kivu alone.¹³ Both Human Rights

11 US Mission to the UN, "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Great Lakes Region", October 26, 2022.

12 Kivu Security Tracker, "Armed Groups", <https://kivusecurity.org/about/armedGroups>

13 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *DR Congo: Humanitarian Situation in Rutshuru, Nyiragongo and Lubero Territories*, Situation Report [translated from French] (New York: OCHA, 2023).

Watch and Amnesty International have also documented significant human rights abuses committed by the M23 in territories under its control, including summary executions, torture and forced recruitment of child soldiers.¹⁴

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Another important dynamic that is often misrepresented in Rwandan propaganda is that the M23 launches operations in response to the alliance between the FARDC and the FDLR. In fact, it is usually the other way around:¹⁵

It is almost always the threat of a Rwandan-backed insurgency that leads the Congolese army to ally with and arm Rwandan rebels, as it has probably done again in recent months. This does not justify the alliance; but it is disingenuous for Rwanda – and diplomats – to suggest that the rise of the M23 was a response to an FARDC-FDLR coalition.

More recently, the M23 has justified the resumption of its military campaign on the grounds that the Congolese government has failed to implement the 2013 Kampala accords. Indeed, there are aspects of those accords that were never implemented; notably the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of M23 combatants, but that failure does not explain either the timing of the M23's re-emergence or the strength of its reconstitution. Neither does the M23's stated intention of protecting Congolese Tutsi and Banyamulenge from armed groups. There is no evidence suggesting that prior to the M23 resurgence there was an increase in violence against either community. A more plausible trigger is that Rwanda felt that its position and influence in the eastern DRC was threatened.

Regional efforts to address the crisis

Regional efforts to address the current crisis are following three tracks:

- The EAC Regional Force – the deployment of a regional military force composed of EAC member states to the eastern DRC;

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "DR Congo: Atrocities by Rwanda-Backed M23 Rebels", February 6, 2023.

¹⁵ Jason Stearns, "Should We Talk About the FDLR Every Time We Talk About the M23?", Congo Research Group, August 18, 2022.

- the Nairobi Process – political talks between Congolese armed groups in Nairobi, Kenya, under the auspices of the EAC, facilitated by former Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta; and
- the Luanda Process – bilateral talks between the Congolese and Rwandan presidents – mediated by Angolan President João Lourenço in his capacity as the current chair of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR).

The EAC Regional Force

The DRC became a member of the EAC in March 2022. In April, following an appeal from Tshisekedi to the EAC to help resolve ongoing violence in the country, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, the DRC and Kenya held two regional conclaves on the DRC. The conclaves resolved to initiate a political process between the Congolese government and Congolese armed groups under the mediation of Kenyatta, and to establish a regional force.¹⁶ All armed groups that adhere to the Congolese Demobilisation, Disarmament, Community Recovery and Stabilisation Programme (P-DDRCS) were invited to attend the Nairobi talks, while foreign armed groups were told to disarm and return home.

The Nairobi Process

Under the leadership of Kenya, which holds the rotating presidency of the EAC and was a key player in bringing the DRC into the EAC, political talks between Congolese armed groups were launched in Nairobi in June 2022. This followed a two-month consultative process led by a team of DRC and Kenyan government officials in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri provinces.

Talks have spluttered along, with little tangible progress

Since then, these talks have spluttered along, with little tangible progress. Although prompted by the M23's resurgence, the M23 itself was excluded from the forum early on after the Congolese government said it could only participate if it retreated to positions held in March 2022, which it has not done. In early April, as the M23 began to slowly retreat from some of its positions, Kenyatta indicated that the group might be invited to

¹⁶ Office of the Kenyan President, "Communiqué of the Second Heads of State Conclave on the Democratic Republic of Congo", Press Release, April 21, 2022: "To FACILITATE the implementation of the political and military/security enforcement tracks the leaders also directed the following; THAT all armed groups in the DRC participate unconditionally in the political process to resolve their grievances. That failure to do so, All Congolese Armed groups would be considered as negative forces and handled militarily by the region. THAT all foreign armed groups in the DRC must disarm and return unconditionally and immediately to their respective countries of origin. That failure to do so these groups would be considered as negative forces and handled militarily by the region."

participate in the next round of talks. However, it remains to be seen how the Congolese authorities would respond to such a proposition.

One of the problems with the Nairobi Process is that its objectives are poorly defined. From the outset it was made clear that integration into the Congolese army and amnesty were off the table as these are the terms of the P-DDRCS. In the absence of these options, what then is being discussed? Organisers argue that the focus is the process and logistics of the P-DDRCS. But why this is necessary and how it will link into the P-DDRCS is as yet unclear. Another issue is that the Nairobi Process is not inclusive, as numerous Congolese armed groups are not represented. In addition, the M23's military strength and repeated offensives have galvanised armed groups in the eastern DRC, sparking opportunistic alliances and cooperation.¹⁷ The momentum for the P-DDRCS has been negatively affected by this dynamic.



Former Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta (L) and Serge Tshibangu Nzenza, special envoy and advisor to the President of Democratic Republic of Congo, shake hands during the East African Community-led Nairobi Process, the third peace talk on the eastern region of DRC, in Nairobi on December 6, 2022 (Yasuyochi Chiba/AFP via Getty Images)

17 UNSC, S/2022/967: Midterm Report, 14-15.

The EAC Regional Force

The EAC held two regional heads of state conclaves focused on the DRC between March and June 2022. At the second conclave,¹⁸

in order to promote peace, stability and development in the eastern DRC and the greater East African region, the leaders agreed on the establishment and urgent deployment of a regional force to help contain and, where necessary, fight the negative forces.

The initial mandate of the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) is six months. It is meant to conduct joint operations with the FARDC to defeat local and foreign armed groups in the eastern DRC, as well as support the rule of law, assist in the provision of humanitarian relief and support the P-DDRCS process.¹⁹

The EACRF is composed of troops from South Sudan, Kenya, Burundi and Uganda. When the force was first mooted, Rwanda proposed that it deploy two battalions to North Kivu,²⁰ but the DRC made it clear that it would not accept the deployment of Rwandan troops on its territory owing to concerns over its neutrality. This was accepted by the EAC, and aside from several officers stationed at the EAC headquarters in Goma – expelled in early February 2023 – there are no Rwandan troops in the EACRF.

The question of neutrality applies just as much to Burundi and Uganda, even if they are currently ‘allies’ of the DRC government. Burundi and Uganda have been actors in the conflict in the eastern DRC for several decades and cannot be considered neutral. Among other things, Uganda has supported the M23 in the past. There are indications that some elements of the Ugandan army leadership have done so in the recent crisis as well.

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Meanwhile, Burundi has its own relationships with various armed groups in the eastern DRC, some of which have been engaged in proxy wars with Bujumbura’s enemies. Both countries could easily decide to escalate support to militias while fighting the M23, or even simply pursue their own enemies at the expense of fighting against the M23. While Burundi

18 East African Community, “Concept of Operations (CONOPS) for the Deployment of the East African Community Regional Force in the Democratic Republic of Congo (EACRF-DRC)”, EAC Confidential, June 19, 2022, 4–5.

19 EAC, “Concept of Operations”, 16–17.

20 EAC, “Concept of Operations”, 16.

and Uganda may be on good terms with the DRC, for both countries the relationship with Rwanda is of existential importance. With Rwanda standing firm on its position that it is not supporting the M23, will Burundi and Uganda really risk that relationship and attack the group? And in a region in which alliances between countries and armed groups change overnight, what assurance is there that all components of the EACRF are acting in the interests of the Congolese population? As seen in recent protests, the neutrality and efficacy of the EACRF is already being questioned by the people of North Kivu.

A related concern is the fact that EAC countries participating in the force are also involved in political discussions to resolve the crisis: this further complicates the relationship between the Congolese government and countries with troops in the eastern DRC. Uganda and, to a lesser extent, Burundi are pushing hard for the Congolese government to engage in talks with the M23, a proposal to which Kinshasa is completely opposed. The Congolese government, on the other hand, wants regional actors to condemn Rwanda for its support to the M23 and to act more aggressively against the group. Inevitably, this difference of opinions on a key matter will have an impact on the relationship between the DRC and these countries – at a time when these very same countries have troops on Congolese territory. There is also the issue of the mandate that the troops will have; Uganda has reiterated repeatedly that its troops are not in the DRC to fight against the M23, and that that they prefer the crisis be resolved through dialogue.²¹ This is not a position that is shared by the authorities in Kinshasa.

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It is just as unclear how Rwanda will react to having Ugandan and Burundian troops deployed in North Kivu along its own border with the DRC. This is precisely the area that Kigali has always worked so hard to control, and it is in part Uganda's encroachment on it that prompted the reconstitution of the M23.

Under the EAC Concept of Operations (CONOPS), Uganda is supposed to deploy two additional battalions to the DRC, for a total of three battalions – one UPDF battalion is already deployed in the joint operation against the ADF. The two additional ones will be deployed to Ituri and the Grand Nord to participate in joint operations with the FARDC in the ongoing Sukola 1 military operation. Burundi has pledged two battalions and a naval

21 "In DRC the East African Force announces that it is now fully deployed in North Kivu" [translated from the French] *Radio France Internationale*, April 4, 2023.

squadron, to be deployed to South Kivu and participate in the Sukola 2 military operations with the FARDC.

By February 2023 the EACRF had started to come under pressure from the Congolese population and senior Congolese politicians, who accused it of acting as a de facto buffer force between the M23 and the FARDC. This essentially allowed the M23 to establish zones under its control without having to worry about being attacked by the FARDC. In response to this pressure, and the fact that a general ceasefire and a deadline for the retreat of the M23 set in November 2022 had not been respected, the EAC held an emergency summit at heads-of-state level on 4 February 2023. This was followed by a meeting of army heads five days later, on 9 February. The new plan proposes the gradual retreat of the M23 from positions in North Kivu and deployment to those zones of the EACRF, including troops from Burundi and Uganda. This is a change from the previous plan under which only Kenyan troops were to be deployed into liberated areas. Now Burundian troops are due to be deployed to Masisi, the South Sudanese are to support Kenyan troops on the Goma-Rutshuru axis, and the Ugandans are to deploy to eastern North Kivu along their mutual border.²² By the time of writing (March 2023), Ugandan troops had completed their deployment in the area around Rutshuru, in North Kivu, while Burundian troops had deployed in the Masisi region.

Meanwhile, Kenyan troops began their deployment in November 2022 and are now based in the area around Goma with 900 troops, while an estimated 750 South Sudanese troops were deployed to Goma in early April. Heavy fighting between the FARDC and the M23 continued throughout January and February 2023 despite successive ceasefire agreements and the retreat of M23 troops to March 2022 positions. By early April, as the deployment of the EACRF was reaching completion, the M23 began to withdraw from several towns north of Goma. EACRF troops are due to occupy the liberated towns.

Although the EAC CONOPS has placed a Kenyan general in charge of the whole force, it is unclear to what extent Ugandan, Burundian and South Sudanese troops are subject to a centralised EAC command structure. It is also unclear how these four units will coordinate with the FARDC, MONUSCO and the FIB.

There is also the unresolved question of who will finance the EACRF's operations

There is also the unresolved question of who will finance the EACRF's operations. So far, there has been no large-scale support offered to troop-contributing countries, and costs

22 "DRC: East African Force Wants to Reorganize in North Kivu with M23 Withdrawal in March" [translated from the French], *Radio France Internationale*, February 13, 2023.

are being borne by individual contributors. This is not sustainable financially, especially for South Sudan and Burundi. Kenya will also have to answer questions regarding its investment in the DRC. International financial support is vital if the force is to remain deployed. However, this should be offered only if important operational aspects are resolved, such as the question of centralised command, and cooperation and coordination mechanisms between the EACRF and its counterparts from the FARDC, MONUSCO and the FIB. Equally, international support should only follow on a firm commitment from Kinshasa to support the EACRF – provided the force sticks to its mandate and does not bow to domestic pressure to turn its back on the intervention.

The Luanda Process

Angola's Lourenço currently holds the presidency of the ICGLR and was designated by the AU to assist in de-escalating tensions between the DRC and Rwanda in the context of the M23 rebellion. In July 2022 Angola hosted the tripartite summit with the Congolese and Rwandan heads of state in Luanda. At that summit, the Luanda Roadmap for Peace was adopted, with all three presidents signing.

The main tenets of the Luanda roadmap are:²³

- establishing a climate of confidence between states of the Great Lakes region;
- creating conditions for dialogue and political consultation;
- normalising political and diplomatic relations between Rwanda and the DRC;
- ceasing hostilities immediately;
- creating a mechanism headed by an Angolan general to evaluate compliance with the roadmap; and
- M23 retreating to positions held in March 2022.

The Luanda roadmap has now become the primary reference point in terms of the steps towards de-escalating tensions. There have been several subsequent meetings between various parties and Lourenço. In late November 2022 Lourenço held a mini-summit on the crisis, attended by the EAC facilitator Kenyatta, Burundian president and presiding EAC chairperson Evariste Ndayishimiye, Tshisekedi and Rwandan Foreign Minister Vincent Biruta. The summit resolved the start of a ceasefire within 48 hours, the retreat of the M23 to its original positions and its disarmament and cantonment by 30 November 2022. It also said: 'If M23 does not withdraw, the EAC Heads of States shall authorise use of force to compel the group to comply.'²⁴

23 "Angola and DRC Analyse Implementation of Luanda Roadmap", *Angola Press Agency*, January 1, 2023.

24 Mini-Summit on Peace and Security in the Eastern Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Luanda, Final Communiqué, November 23, 2022, 3-4.

The November 2022 meeting was the first to bring together actors from the EAC and the Luanda Process. While none of the November resolutions has been implemented and the situation has evolved since the summit, it was an important step in aligning and coordinating regional efforts between the EAC and the AU/ICGLR. This was reinforced at the two meetings held on the sidelines of the February 2023 AU summit. Lourenço convened a joint ICGLR/EAC mini-summit to review the state of peace and security in the eastern DRC, which was mediated with the help of Ndayishimiye. The mini-summit reiterated the commitments made at the 7 February 2023 EAC summit, including the need for political talks between the Congolese government and the M23. Tshisekedi had hoped to wrestle some concessions out of the meeting, notably a condemnation of Rwanda's support to the M23, but this did not happen. The plan is to have the EAC and the ICGLR work together more closely in the future, notably with Kenyatta and Angola tasked with communicating the recent decisions of the EAC summit to the M23.

The November 2022 meeting was the first to bring together actors from the EAC and the Luanda Process

As the tone and length of the mini-summit indicate, there is still a long way to go in bringing Kigali and Kinshasa closer, with neither willing to make any of the concessions necessary for a rapprochement. In January both countries accused one another of backtracking on their agreements. Kinshasa accused Kigali of failing to respect a January 2023 ceasefire and violating the Luanda Process by continuing to support the M23, while Kigali said that Kinshasa was arming rebel groups and selectively applying the Luanda roadmap.²⁵ At the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) meeting on the DRC held just after the mini-summit on 17 February 2023, Tshisekedi lambasted the AU and African heads of state. He accused them of inaction on the DRC dossier and of failing to support the DRC despite evidence that Rwanda is supporting the M23. For his part, Kagame reiterated the argument that the FDLR was cooperating with the FARDC, and again denied that Rwanda was supporting the M23.²⁶

There is significant international pressure on Lourenço to get Kinshasa and Kigali to cooperate, notably on implementing the November 2022 roadmap. However, while Lourenço has the stature and Angola the regional relevance as a member of SADC and the ICGLR, it is impossible for him to resolve the situation on his own. Other bilateral and international actors must support his efforts and exert their own leverage on Kigali and Kinshasa if the dialogue Lourenço presides over is to be one of substance.

25 "Kigali Accuses Kinshasa of Withdrawing From Peace Processes. Congolese Authorities Strongly Deny" [translated from the French], *Radio France Internationale*, January 20, 2023.

26 "M23: Behind the Scenes of the Tense Peace and Security Council of the African Union" [translated from the French], *Africa Intelligence*, February 23, 2023.

Responses

The Congolese popular and political response

Increasingly, it appears as though the EAC is pushing Tshisekedi to engage in talks with the M23.²⁷ The communiqué issued by the EAC after the 4 February 2023 emergency summit on the DRC mentions the need for political talks, and the fact that all parties must be included in negotiations. The fact that the EAC is pushing the talks can only stem from two elements. First, member states may have realised that they had underestimated the task in the eastern DRC and that they are about to get bogged down in the conflict, with a military approach on its own unable to resolve the situation. Second, most EAC member states are choosing to side with Rwanda or are too afraid to take on Kagame. Burundi, Uganda and Tanzania appear to be in the latter camp, according to officials with insights into the meeting.²⁸

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For the Congolese government this is a non-starter. Much like the stance of late Congolese president Laurent Desire Kabila in the early days of the 1998–2003 war, Tshisekedi's position is that the government has nothing to say to the M23 because its leaders are not the ones who control the movement. In November last year the Congolese National Assembly even passed a resolution barring the president from negotiating with the M23, while officially designating the M23 a terrorist movement. Talks with the M23 are a political hot potato at any time, but in an election year they are strictly off-limits, especially given the alarming rise in vocal anti-Rwandan sentiment.²⁹ They nonetheless have to be part of the solution.

Talks with the M23 are a political hot potato at any time, but in an election year they are strictly off-limits

27 EAC, "Communiqué of the 20th Extra-ordinary Summit of the East African Community Heads of State", February 4, 2023, 2: "Summit observed that the security situation in eastern DRC is a regional matter than can only be sustainably resolved through a political process and emphasised the need for enhanced dialogue among all the parties. The heads of state directed that the political process should be strengthened and escalated to involve all stateholders [sic]."

28 Senior diplomat, telephonic conversation with Stephanie Wolters, February 2023.

29 UNSC, S/2022/967: *Midterm Report*, 15–16.

The M23 resurgence in the eastern DRC has contributed substantially to a worrisome upsurge in anti-Rwandan sentiment. Since Rwanda attempted to overthrow Laurent Kabila in 1998, anti-Rwandan sentiment has been a recurring issue in the DRC. Subsequent rebellions fought by Rwandan proxy groups – the Congolese Rally for Democracy, 1998–2003; the CNDP, 2004–2009 and the M23, 2009–present – and the violence and human suffering they have caused, have only deepened resentment. Since 2021 this sentiment has been stoked, manipulated and exaggerated by politicians and echoed by senior government officials, military officials and civil society figures. Social media has whipped it into even greater frenzy. Mixed with frustration and misery, this has become an explosive cocktail that too often turns into violent protests, incitement to violence and attacks on members of the Congolese Tutsi and Banyamulenge communities.

More recently, this anger and frustration has been turned against the EACF. Inhabitants of the eastern DRC claim it is standing by and doing nothing to defeat the M23. In January and February 2023 there were large-scale protests in Goma and Bukavu against the force. Participants accused it of inaction and ineffectiveness, and denounced ‘lies’ around the deployment of EACRF troops.³⁰ In a poll conducted in early 2023 by the Congo Research Group, Ebuteli, and the Bureau des études de recherche et de consulting internationale (BERCI) 69% of those surveyed said they do not believe that the regional force will succeed in defeating all the armed groups.³¹ The Congolese government has been publicly critical of the protests and appealed for calm, but there are signs that Kinshasa is pulling back from the EAC. In February the head of the National Assembly, Christophe Mboso, said, ‘If within a reasonable time the EAC Force fails to support us against the aggressor, we will ask the Supreme Commander to take the necessary decision.’³² At the same time, a widely circulated video captured Tshisekedi speaking with the Kenyan commander of the EACRF on the side-lines of the emergency EAC summit on the eastern DRC and almost pleading with him not to antagonise the population. Following the EAC’s new troop deployment plan and timeline for an M23 retreat, Congolese Minister of Foreign Affairs Christophe Lutundula said:³³

Anything that is not in the sense of allowing the Republic to fully exercise its sovereignty, to safeguard its territorial authority, to safeguard the independence of our country, we will not accept that, that’s for sure. We will decipher more the content, not only the writing, but [also] the spirit of what has been proposed. We are following this very closely.

This is a significant turnaround by Tshisekedi. Although he was initially opposed to the idea of the EACRF, preferring the option of political talks over a military intervention, ultimately,

30 “DRC: Protest in Bukavu Against the Regional EAC Force” [translated from the French], *Radio France Internationale*, February 1, 2023, 4.

31 “A Majority of Congolese Reject East African Community Force”, *Ebuteli*, February 23, 2023.

32 “DRC-M23: If Within a Reasonable Time the EAC Force Fails to Support Us Against the Aggressor, We Will Ask the Supreme Commander to Take the Necessary Decision” [translated from the French], *Actualite.cd*, February 9, 2022.

33 “The Congolese Government Continues to Evaluate the Proposals of the East African Community” [translated from the French], *Radio France Internationale*, February 14, 2022.

he accepted the EAC proposal. He has had high praise for the EAC's efforts in the past. Given that the EAC is making a substantial investment in the DRC less than a year after it had joined, it is surprising to see Tshisekedi distance himself from the regional body so quickly and so publicly. It is also dangerous. Tshisekedi needs to show leadership and back the EACRF with strong public statements of support, even if doing that is politically costly. By not doing so it looks as though he is turning his back on a situation that he helped orchestrate. It risks alienating other EAC member states and creating a rift between Kinshasa and the EACRF at a time when coordination and cooperation against the M23 should be the priority. In a worst-case scenario, the EACRF becomes another enemy, with angry armed groups and their FARDC allies targeting the East African troops. This is an unimaginable evolution. It is likely that one of the main reasons why Tshisekedi is cooling to the EAC initiative is because EAC leaders are increasingly vocal about the need for him to negotiate with the M23. While it is understandable that Tshisekedi would be averse to such a suggestion, that cannot be allowed to lead to a deterioration in the relationship between the DRC and the EAC. This is why the political blow of making such a concession must be tempered by a significant concession from Rwanda.

Meanwhile, the M23's military successes are also changing the dynamics between armed groups on the ground in the eastern DRC

Meanwhile, the M23's military successes are also changing the dynamics between armed groups on the ground in the eastern DRC. The UN Panel of Experts documented numerous rival armed groups joining forces, including with the FARDC, to fight the M23. This includes the Nduma Defence of Congo-Renovated, the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo faction led by Janvier Buringo, and several branches of the FDLR. According to the UN report, armed groups have agreed to a truce and created a coalition against the M23. Tshisekedi attempted to break up the alliance by re-organising the military command in the east in early July 2022 and ordering the retreat of armed groups from the frontline. This prompted renewed hostilities between the groups. However, once the M23 launched its latest offensive in October 2022, the alliance became de facto active again. This is also a threat to the P-DDRCS.³⁴

SADC and South Africa's response

Since 2021 SADC has been relatively quiet on the issue of the M23 crisis. This is surprising given that the SADC-led FIB has been active in the eastern DRC for 10 years and was

³⁴ UNSC, S/2022/967: *Midterm Report*, 13-14.

formed in response to the 2012–2013 M23 crisis (see above). In the communiqué issued following the January 2023 SADC troika summit, SADC condemned the upsurge in conflict and activities by armed groups, including M23 rebels, and the support provided to these armed groups by foreign forces.³⁵ In a reference to the EACRF, it said the summit ‘resolved to initiate dialogue among the Member States of different Regional Economic Communities that have deployed forces within the DRC with a view to establish and implement mechanisms for the effective coordination of their interventions in the DRC.’³⁶

Over the past 20 years South Africa has been an on-off player in the DRC

Over the past 20 years South Africa has been an on-off player in the DRC. From hosting the 2002 Sun City peace talks to deploying the FIB in 2013, it has secured itself a space as a player in the Great Lakes. However, it has been substantially less active in the past 10 years than in the previous decade. Since Tshisekedi came to power in 2019, the relationship between South Africa and the DRC has been eclipsed by other bilateral relationships, notably that between Kenya and the DRC. In addition, the DRC’s joining the EAC – although logical from an economic perspective – has certainly raised eyebrows in South African foreign policy circles.³⁷

A further complicating factor is the poor relationship between South Africa and Rwanda, which has been undermined by Rwanda’s repeated sponsored assassinations of exiled opposition leaders on South African territory.³⁸ The normalisation of diplomatic relations between the two has been on the cards for several years, but remains stalled.³⁹ Despite the fact that South Africa is both a continental leader and arguably the injured party in the Rwanda–DRC relationship, South Africa is extremely timid if not meek when it comes to engaging with Rwanda on a political level. This stems from the South African perception that criticising Rwanda for its human rights record or its destabilising role in the Great Lakes will make it look as though it is siding with Western countries and alienate it from other African states.⁴⁰

35 Government of South Africa, The Presidency, “Communiqué of the Extra-ordinary Organ Troika Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Southern African Development Community”, January 31, 2023.

36 Government of South Africa, The Presidency, “Communiqué of the Extra-ordinary”.

37 SA foreign policy expert, discussion with Stephanie Wolters, February 2023.

38 Patrick Karegeya, a former head of Rwandan external intelligence who had fled to South Africa, was murdered in Johannesburg on December 21, 2013. General Kayumba Nyamwasa, a former chief of staff of the Rwandan army, also went into exile in South Africa, where he now lives under state protection. He survived three Rwandan assassination attempts in South Africa. Michela Wrong, *Do Not Disturb: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad* (London: Fourth Estate, 2021), 1–22.

39 Peter Fabricius, “What Price for Normalising SA-Rwanda Relations?” *ISS Today*, July 9, 2021.

40 Foreign policy actors in South Africa, discussions with Stephanie Wolters, May 2022.

Rwanda's military intervention in northern Mozambique is another factor complicating the relationship. In 2021 Mozambique asked Rwanda to support it in its fight against an Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado, northern Mozambique, while turning down help from South Africa and SADC countries. SADC forces were eventually deployed later in 2021, but the presence of an outsider such as Rwanda in a country traditionally aligned with SADC created a new dynamic in the relationship. This, too, plays a role in the reticence that characterises South Africa's approach to Rwanda.

Rwanda's military intervention in northern Mozambique is another factor complicating the relationship

While holding the rotating presidency of the AU PSC in February 2023, South Africa convened a special meeting on the eastern DRC. Many anticipated that South Africa might use this meeting to enhance its role in the DRC crisis. Following the EAC summit in early February, Tshisekedi made a last-minute visit to South Africa and met twice with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. It seems that, after courting the EAC for the past few years, the EAC's current position on how to resolve the M23 crisis has pushed Tshisekedi to seek new allies in Southern Africa. But Ramaphosa did not add a new dimension to the discussion, merely stating that the hostilities must cease and that all armed groups – the M23, ADF and FDLR – must disarm. This position was echoed in the final communiqué:⁴¹

[The PSC] demands that all armed groups, particularly the M23, as well as the ADF, and FDLR to immediately cease hostilities and unconditionally withdraw from the eastern DRC; and in this respect, urges for the expeditious implementation of the outcomes of the Luanda and Nairobi processes, as well as the Communiqué of the Mini-Summit of Luanda of 23 November 2022.

Strangely, despite the fact that SADC's January 2023 meeting emphasised the need for cooperation between it and the EAC, the final PSC communiqué made no mention of SADC, thanking only the EAC for its efforts in the eastern DRC.⁴²

41 AU Peace and Security Council, Communiqué, 1140th Meeting (Heads of State and Government Level), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, February 17, 2023.

42 AU PSC, Communiqué, 1140th Meeting: "Welcomes the deployment of the EAC Regional Force to the eastern DRC and pays tribute to the Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) to the EAC Regional Force for their commitment to the promotion of regional peace and security; and decides to support its deployment and operations; in this regard, authorizes the Council in collaboration with the Commission and the Governance Structures of the AU Peace Fund, to immediately work out modalities for the utilization of the Fund and report back to the PSC within six weeks".

The AU's response

The AU has so far done little to actively support peacemaking efforts in the eastern DRC, despite the involvement of the EAC, the ICGLR and SADC. This may just be the AU respecting the principle of subsidiarity, whereby it defers to a regional economic community to intervene first in a situation. However, it still has a significant role to play in terms of making sure that the conflict in the Great Lakes remains a high priority on the African peace and security agenda, not least by keeping it on the agenda of the monthly PSC meetings. However, judging from meetings around the annual summit, there is currently little interest in becoming more involved. Instead, the PSC has kicked the can back to the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSC-F, also called the Addis Ababa Accords):⁴³

[The PSC] 3. Reaffirms that the Framework Agreement remains a viable instrument to support the DRC and institutions in the region to achieve peace and stability, and calls for its urgent revitalization; emphasizes that signatory countries individually and collectively need to redouble their efforts to fully implement the national and regional commitments enshrined in the Framework Agreement; 4. In this context, requests the AU, in collaboration with EAC, ECCAS, SADC, ICGLR, and the UN to urgently work towards the revitalization of the Framework Agreement and report back to Council, within six weeks.

Effectiveness of the responses

At the time of writing, it has been 18 months since the start of the crisis. The many regional and international efforts to de-escalate tensions between Rwanda and the DRC, to get the M23 to retreat to positions held in early 2022, and to get Rwanda to halt its support to the M23 have not had an impact on the diplomatic or military situation.

Under its new deployment plan, the EACRF could possibly make a difference by placing greater military pressure on the M23, but even this is doubtful

Under its new deployment plan, the EACRF could possibly make a difference by placing greater military pressure on the M23, but even this is doubtful. And, if Rwanda does not want the M23 to lose ground, it will not allow it to. The more the situation persists, the more the military clash becomes one between the M23, a movement backed by an EAC state,

⁴³ AU PSC, Communiqué, 1140th Meeting.

and a force composed of troops from EAC countries. This is a risky scenario. Add to that Rwanda's insistence that it is right – that its own security is threatened by the FARDC and its on-off alliances with the FDLR – and internal EAC matters become even more sensitive.

The Nairobi Process, meanwhile, hovers above this reality with little tangible connection to or impact on the serious military crisis on the ground, or on the tensions between the main protagonists. Political talks between Kinshasa and Congolese armed groups are not irrelevant or unnecessary, of course, but the agenda set by the Nairobi talks is vague. It is difficult to ascertain what added value it brings either to the bigger picture of armed violence in the eastern DRC or to resolving the acute crisis of the moment. In addition, as the M23 gains ground and military confrontations remain active, with more and more players involved, it is also unrealistic to expect armed groups to surrender their weapons, canton themselves and subscribe to a DDR process. In fact, the resurgence of the M23 is having the opposite effect, despite the Nairobi Process (see above).

At this stage, it is difficult to tell whether the architects of the EAC approach really had the measure of the problems in the eastern DRC. The military approach – one of many such efforts over the years – does not differ fundamentally from past operations, and the political track seems ill-conceived. Like other approaches before it, the EAC's point of departure is that the problem lies only with and within the DRC: Congolese armed groups must be compelled to disarm, and armed groups on DRC territory must be militarily defeated. This kind of approach misses the bigger regional picture, dealing with symptoms rather than cause. Importantly, it fails to address the central issue of a lack of trust between the four core Great Lake countries – the DRC, Burundi, Uganda and Rwanda.

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This does not mean that such efforts must be in vain. With strong political will from EAC member states and the engaged support of international actors, the EAC's intervention can become a successful element in a wider regional strategy to address long-term instability in the Great Lakes. The alternative – failure – is a missed opportunity to address stability in the eastern DRC and the Great Lakes in a concerted and holistic manner. It would also be a significant blow to the EAC's reputation and coherence, as well as to the wider goal of rendering Africa's peace and security architecture more robust and effective. At its very worst, if current efforts fail, there is a real risk of war between Rwanda and the DRC.

What next? Recommendations

Four very different discussions are vital to resolve the situation.

First, in the short term, the Congolese government needs to hold talks with the M23 leaders about implementing the broken promises of the 2013 Kampala accords. Second, Tshisekedi needs to engage in discussions with Kagame about Rwanda ending its support to the M23. Third, a political process needs to take place between the heads of state of the core Great Lakes countries in order to address the long-term drivers of conflict in the region. Fourth, in support of overall regional stability, direct talks should be initiated between the governments of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi and the anti-government rebels fighting them from DRC territory.

Talks between Kinshasa and the M23 are important for several reasons:

- They weaken M23 and Rwandan propaganda that the Banyamulenge and Congolese Tutsi populations (which the M23 says it represents) are threatened by the Kinshasa government.
- They disentangle the M23 from its Rwandan backers and forces it to put forward its domestic agenda – if those interests drive it, it will conclude a deal, if they do not, its real interests will be exposed, adding up to a de facto victory for Tshisekedi.
- If Tshisekedi makes the politically risky concession that his government engage in direct talks with the M23, it gives him greater leverage to push the EAC and the international community for concessions from the Rwandan government.

Kigali-Kinshasa talks

Both leaders have backed themselves into a corner over the past year, and any solution aimed at getting them to a negotiating table has to involve face-saving measures. It is vital that Rwanda be pushed to make an immediate and tangible concession if Tshisekedi is to accept taking the politically risky step of engaging in negotiations with the M23. Alternatively, international actors can support Tshisekedi by acting against Rwanda for its support of the M23. So far there have been calls for Rwanda to end its support of the M23, however, while the situation is far more tense than in 2012–2013, when several donors halted aid, there have been no consequences for Rwanda thus far in 2023.

Talks between Kinshasa and Kigali should focus primarily on de-escalating tensions and taking concrete steps towards normalising diplomatic relations through a frank discussion about both countries' interests and concerns. For Kigali the incentive to do this could be the prospect of a larger regional peace process that effectively addresses Rwanda's long-standing security issues. The initial talks between Kigali and Kinshasa could also include both sides drawing up a road map for addressing long-term drivers of instability, which

should be attended to in the regional political process. These should include key issues such as the safety of Congolese Tutsi refugees and an engagement from Kinshasa to break all associations with the FDLR.

A high-level regional political process

A high-level regional political process is vital to address the long-term drivers of instability in the Great Lakes region. Such a high-level process would complement the dialogue between Kinshasa and Kigali to de-escalate the immediate crisis. It would address the core drivers of violence, instability and political tension by examining questions such as regional rivalries, economic incentives for instability, security challenges, economic tensions and natural resource exploitation. It should be led by a former head of state with no history in the region, with support from a team of experts and mediators who know the region.

A fundamental aim of such a process should be to establish new levels of trust between the core Great Lakes countries. Equally important is identifying where the benefits of stability and peace lie for all four countries concerned. Such a process should be led by the AU, with strong support from the UN.

The PSC-F, which resulted from the 2012–2013 M23 crisis, is a good roadmap, but the accords have never been respected by their signatories – notably in terms of commitments related to non-interference in neighbouring states’ internal affairs. The UN Special Envoy’s Office has made good progress in moving the parties towards greater cooperation on certain key issues such as intelligence sharing. Crucially, the PSC-F has been a useful form for keeping dialogue at a regional level going.⁴⁴ And while the PSC-F can be a good institutional home to support a high-level regional political dialogue, on its own it is not the right institution to initiate and lead the kind of political dialogue that the region needs. For such a dialogue to be taken seriously, and to be able to impose its resolutions, it needs to set a fresh agenda and it must come from the AU and the UN.

Talks between core GL countries and their armed opponents

Finally, it is vital that Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi begin to address their own domestic political challenges by engaging in talks with the armed groups opposing them. They cannot continue to blame their own security challenges on the DRC’s inability to govern its territory effectively.⁴⁵ This will make a significant contribution to calming the eastern DRC and allowing the DRC authorities to address their own challenges with domestic armed groups. It is also a vital element in the process of returning the Great Lakes region to long-term sustainable peace.

⁴⁴ AU PSC, Communiqué, 1140th Meeting, 23–25.

⁴⁵ Stephanie Wolters, “Peace in the Great Lakes Region: Time for a Regional Approach” (Occasional Paper 310, SAIIA, Johannesburg, September 2020), 3.

Conclusion

The strong resurgence of the M23, coupled with evidence that Rwanda is supporting the group, has shown that key drivers of conflict in the region remain unresolved. New proposals such as that by the EAC to deploy troops from the region to the eastern DRC and to hold peace talks between Congolese rebel groups are problematic in design but could be harnessed into a bigger regional and international solution. Such a solution can only succeed if it includes talks between the heads of state of the core Great Lakes countries and commitments are aimed at fundamentally recalibrating relationships in the region. This should be followed up with sustained and consistent policies from regional and international actors – SADC, EAC, INGLR, AU, UN and bilateral actors – regarding regional interference in another Great Lakes member state.

The strong resurgence of the M23, coupled with evidence that Rwanda is supporting the group, has shown that key drivers of conflict in the region remain unresolved

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Cover image

East African Regional Force (EACRF) officials meet with M23 rebels during the handover ceremony at Rumangabo camp in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, January 6, 2023 (Guerchom Ndebo/AFP via Getty Images)

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