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The Fault Line: The African Great Lakes Conflict and its International Context

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The conflict in the Great Lakes region of North and South Kivu—eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo—reignited in 2021, triggered by military clashes between the Congolese armed forces and the M23 rebel group. The recent escalation coincides with inter-ethnic violence spreading into neighboring countries. The following working paper by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Institute for International Studies of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (IIS MGIMO) examines at all facets of the conflict and the possible ways to resolve it. The work is based on the results of an April 2024 RIAC-IIS MGIMO situational analysis on the topic, and includes input from leading Russian and African experts.

The opinions expressed in this working paper reflect solely the personal views and analytical outlook of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Non-Profit-Making Partnership Russian International Affairs Council.

The full text of the working paper is available on RIAC's website. Feel free to download it and leave comments via the direct link: russiancouncil.ru/paper88

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Introduction. Russia and the Great Lakes Region

Oleg
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This new Working Paper, published by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Institute for International Studies (IIS), MGIMO University, examines the conflict in the African Great Lakes region and the prospects for its resolution. Mainly, this means the confrontation between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which also affects, to an extent, the neighboring countries, located in the basins of Lake Victoria, Tanganyika, Nyasa (Malawi), Turkana, Edward, Albert and Kivu. This paper is based on the results of a special situational analysis conducted in April 2024 by RIAC and IIS MGIMO, with contributions from a number of Russian and African experts.

The publication is divided into four parts. The first part offers different views on the causes and historical background of the conflict in the Great Lakes region in conjunction with political developments in these countries and the complex dynamics of relations between them. Experts analyze the key players in the region, their stances and how they evolved over time, as well as explore the role of individuals and the relationships between the state leaders.

The second part examines the non-state actors involved in the conflict and the dynamics of proxy warfare, as specific elements of this phenomenon are observable in this region of Africa.

The third part, as its title *Economic Drivers of the Conflict* suggests, looks at how this conflict is intertwined with the economic situation in the region and the struggle for control over the extraction of natural resources in the countries involved. In this section, the authors present a broader and somewhat bleaker international context for the confrontation in the Great Lakes region and, simultaneously, highlight one of the key factors hindering the conflict's swift resolution.

The fourth part draws attention to the severe humanitarian crisis in the Great Lakes region, which has been effectively left to fester for nearly thirty years, and how it affects the local population exposed to intermittent fighting. This part also sheds light on the plight of the Rwandophone minority, also known as the *Banyamulenge*, who live in eastern Congo and serve as yet another catalyst for confrontation.

Russia is currently pursuing a proactive policy to strengthen cooperation with a number of regional players and in East Africa as a whole. Recent years have seen a step-up in political dialogue at all levels, including top officials. This dialogue is not only beneficial for bilateral relations but also fits naturally into Russia's pan-African policy aimed at implementing the decisions of the second Russia-Africa Summit held in St. Petersburg in 2023. Russian companies propose and launch new economic projects in the region. Currently, Rosatom State Corporation is developing nuclear infrastructure in Rwanda and has resumed its

Mkuju River uranium mining project in Tanzania. Russia and Tanzania also now have a working mechanism in the form of the Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation, which they agreed to set up as far back as late 2022. Russia has also been developing military and military-technical ties with Uganda and the DRC, while new points of contact are emerging in such areas as healthcare and education. In 2023-2024, several Burundian delegations visited Russia, and in April 2024, Kampala, capital of Uganda, hosted a joint Russian-African conference on combating infectious diseases.

Many of these projects are clearly aimed at ensuring the energy and food security, as well as technological sovereignty of these states, and boosting their resilience in the face of external and internal crises. It appears that it is precisely these objectives that Russia should take as a starting point when it comes to shaping its position on this long-standing conflict.

It is my hope that this Working Paper will offer readers substantial material for reflection. Echoing the sentiment expressed by one of the authors in their contribution, I would like to encourage the expert community to employ a wide range of formats to study and discuss this conflict, which carries potentially far-reaching consequences not only for the region but also for the international system as a whole.

PART I. HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The Conflict Between the DRC and Rwanda: Historical Roots

Tatyana
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What Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have in common is not only their relatively recent "Belgian" colonial past, but also a significant presence of Rwandan Hutu and Tutsi peoples, who began settling on the present-day territory of the DRC as early as the eighteenth century. In the early twentieth century, as the colonizers arbitrarily drew borders in the Great African Lakes region, the Kinyarwanda-speaking peoples (Kinyarwanda is one of the official languages of Rwanda, along with English, French and Swahili) found themselves cut off from the area where the majority lived by the administrative and later state border, although they retained cultural, economic and other ties with it. In turn, many Congolese still regard "Rwandans"—both Tutsis and Hutus—as outsiders, a perception that, amid political and socioeconomic instability, becomes a factor capable of fueling conflict.

The key task that Paul Kagame—who de-facto came to power in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide, officially became president in 2000 and was reelected for the fourth time in 2024—and his regime had was to ensure the survival and prosperity of the "Tutsi nation." That included even the Tutsis living in the DRC, who under Mobutu Sese Seko (1965-1997) were deprived of their right to actively participate in political and economic processes. This continued despite the 1972 law that allowed "Rwandans" to have Congolese citizenship: while technically citizens, they held no rights associated with citizenship and could not, for example, own land.¹ This inevitably led to conflicts between them and other ethnic groups.

Meanwhile, more than a million Hutu Rwandans settled in eastern DRC after the genocide. They feared retribution from the Tutsi, mainly from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—a political-military organization led by Kagame, which emerged victorious from the 1994 Hutu-Tutsi confrontation and was subsequently transformed into the ruling party.

The influx of Rwandan refugees into eastern DRC led to increased tensions, especially between the local Tutsis and the displaced Hutus, which in turn served as one of the catalysts for the First Congo War in 1996.

In the DRC, Hutu refugees predominantly settled in the cities of Goma (850,000-900,000), Bukavu (200,000-300,000), and Uvira (about 60,000), including approximately 25,000 former Rwandan Armed Forces soldiers and about 40,000 *Interahamwe*—Hutu militiamen who had committed mass atrocities against the Tutsi during the genocide.² These former soldiers and fighters turned their

¹ Muraya, J., Ahere, J. Perpetuation of Instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: When the Kivus Sneeze, Kinshasa Catches a Cold. ACCORD. Occasional Paper Series. 2014. No. 1. Pp. 1-46.
URL: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/sin/185859/ACCORD-occasionalpaper-2014-1.pdf>

² Kisangani, E.F. The Massacre of Refugees in Congo: A Case of UN Peacekeeping Failure and International Law. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 2000. Vol. 38. No. 2. P. 173.

corner of the DRC into a hive of political and military activity, setting up several militia bases in the provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu, which they used to launch transborder raids into Rwanda. At the same time, they kept engaging in armed clashes with the Congolese Tutsi, also known as the *Banyamulenge* (or *Banyarwanda*).

With the security situation deteriorating and an outright war over access to natural resources and control of smuggling routes (for transporting diamonds, gold, columbite-tantalite), numerous local militias began to emerge in eastern DRC. Some of them were anti-Kigali, some anti-Kinshasa, but more often than not they were fighting each other.

In the fall of 1996, the South Kivu authorities demanded that the Tutsis leave the DRC and thus forced them to seek help from the Rwandan government. The destabilization of the political situation culminated in a full-scale war that quickly engulfed the entire eastern part of the country. Mobutu Sese Seko, then President of the DRC, supported the Hutus, while the Tutsis formed the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo (ADFL) led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila and found themselves standing against the regular Congolese army. Among its objectives, the ADFL sought to overthrow the government in Kinshasa. In May 1997, Alliance troops entered the Congolese capital with the support of the Rwandan and Ugandan armies, and Mobutu fled the country. On May 29, Kabila was sworn in as president.

The ADFL's actions allowed Kagame's army to virtually eliminate the Rwandan Hutu bases in the DRC. Moreover, the Rwandan authorities assumed that they now had "their" president who could finally solve the "Hutu problem," i.e. stomp out their militias. However, Kabila's accession to power marked the beginning of a new chapter for the DRC: the people accused the new president of ignoring Congolese interests and of "handing over" both Kivus to Kigali. Anti-Rwandan sentiment spread rapidly in the eastern part of the country, and the Mai-Mai militias, composed of fighters from different ethnic groups, began to clash with the Rwanda Defense Forces (RDF) stationed in the DRC.

Despite the increasingly unstable political situation, Kabila managed to carry out a number of economic reforms, thus earning the trust of the international community. In the wake of these "successes," the Congolese leader sought to weaken Kigali's influence in eastern DRC. On July 27, 1998, he ordered the expulsion of foreign—mainly Rwandan—military and civil servants, thus ending the military cooperation that had brought him to power. By that time, however, numerous Rwandan entrepreneurs—miners and traders—had established themselves on Congolese territory, particularly in areas rich with mineral deposits and valuable timber. The Rwandans were earning substantial profits from exporting these products, which they were naturally reluctant to lose.³

³ Rwanda in Congo: Sixteen Years of Intervention. *African Affairs*. July 9, 2012.

URL: <https://archive.globalpolicy.org/security-council/index-of-countries-on-the-security-council-agenda/democratic-republic-of-congo/51744-rwanda-in-congo-sixteen-years-of-intervention-.html>

The current president of the DRC, Felix Tshisekedi, has repeatedly expressed his willingness to improve relations with neighboring countries, including Rwanda.⁴ Indeed, Kinshasa and Kigali have signed several trade and economic agreements.⁵ Still, violence in eastern DRC showed no sign of abating. The fall of 2021 saw a rapid escalation triggered by M23,⁶ a Rwandan-backed Tutsi rebel group seeking to establish control over mineral deposits in North Kivu and is notorious for its brutality towards civilians.⁷ The main reason for the 2021 unrest was the failure of the Kinshasa government to implement the 2013 Nairobi Agreement, which meant amnesty and a chance to go home for combatants who fled the DRC fearing persecution. M23 also clashes with Congolese militias, most notably the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), founded by the Hutus who took part in the 1994 genocide and then fled to the DRC.⁸

Between 2021 and 2023, border regions in the North Kivu were shaken by recurrent fighting between the RDF and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), as well as between M23 rebels and units of both regular armies.⁹ The confrontation became particularly heated in the run-up to the Congolese elections in December 2023, partly in response to Tshisekedi's comments that Kagame was behaving "like Hitler" and had ambitions to "expand Rwanda into eastern DRC." Kigali saw these statements as a "loud and clear threat."¹⁰

The situation stayed tense throughout 2024. In January, for example, an exchange of fire occurred in the Rwandan border region of Rubavu.¹¹ In February, Kinshasa accused Kigali of shelling the international airport in Goma and damaging a civilian airplane as a result.¹² In March, M23 seized the town of Sake in North Kivu and forced most of its population to flee to the province capital, Goma. The number of internally displaced persons in North Kivu exceeded 200,000 in February-March 2024 alone.¹³ In May, the RDF attacked refugee camps near Goma, killing 12 people and injuring at least 20.¹⁴

⁴ Democratic Republic of Congo: Background and U.S. Relations. Congressional Research Service. March 25, 2022. URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43166>

⁵ DR Congo claims invasion by Rwandan soldiers. *Krasnaya Vesna*. October 19, 2021. URL: <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/fcba422d>

⁶ The March 23 Movement, or the Mouvement du 23 Mars, takes its name from the March 23, 2009 peace agreement.

⁷ Ssuuna, I. Rwanda says it killed a Congolese soldier who crossed the border, heightening tensions. *The Associated Press*. January 17, 2024. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/rwanda-congo-military-border-c53d5f990fe285e784b30c2c6d8c841e>

⁸ Kasongo, A.A. DRC conflict: Why is fighting intensifying and can it threaten regional stability? *Reuters*. February 20, 2024. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/why-fighting-is-flaring-eastern-congo-threatening-regional-stability-2024-02-19/>

⁹ The African Union expressed concern about the crisis in relations between the DR Congo and Rwanda. *TASS*. June 6, 2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14897033?ysclid=lwq2lzh71946344782>

¹⁰ Malala, J. Africa Is Heading Toward Another Deadly War. *Bloomberg*. August 31, 2024. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-07-31/drc-and-rwanda-conflict-africa-is-heading-toward-war>

¹¹ Ssuuna, I. Rwanda says it killed a Congolese soldier who crossed the border, heightening tensions. *The Associated Press*. January 17, 2024. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/rwanda-congo-military-border-c53d5f990fe285e784b30c2c6d8c841e>

¹² DR Congo accuses Rwanda of airport 'drone attack' in restive east. *Al Jazeera*. February 17, 2024. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/17/dr-congo-accuses-rwanda-of-airport-drone-attack-in-restive-east>

¹³ Rwanda-backed rebels are choking the Congolese people, yet this is one conflict the world can easily end. *The Guardian*. April 11, 2024. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/apr/11/rwanda-militias-drc-goma>

¹⁴ At least 12 killed in bomb attacks on eastern DR Congo displacement camps. *Al Jazeera*. May 4, 2024. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2024/5/4/at-least-12-killed-in-bomb-attacks-on-eastern-dr-congo-displacement-camps>

It is worth noting that Tshisekedi constantly accuses Kagame of condoning the violence carried out by M23. The Rwandan leader, of course, denies this, but unconvincingly so. In addition, UN experts confirmed in their July 2024 report that M23 receives support from the Rwandan government,¹⁵ while Rwandan army uniforms and weapons used by M23 have been found at sites where the rebels fought.¹⁶

For his part, Paul Kagame's condition for de-escalation is the demobilization and repatriation of the FDLR—an anti-Rwandan Hutu-dominated rebel group backed by the DRC.¹⁷

The conflict between the DRC and Rwanda, like most other African conflicts, is complex: it involves a confrontation among different tribal communities, reflects political divisions between the two states, and involves a rivalry for access to natural resources—all while local populations struggle to survive and Rwandan and Congolese "warlords" search for new ways to accumulate wealth.

Rwanda's involvement in the Congolese economy is to an extent driven by the fact that trade from eastern DRC flows through there, owing to lower transportation costs and the considerable distance to Kinshasa. It should be noted, however, that a substantial portion of this "trade" is smuggling. For example, most of the gold mined in eastern DRC is illicitly exported to Rwanda and Uganda. Interestingly enough, both countries deny any involvement in this trade, even though they export far more gold than they produce.¹⁸

Rwandans have established a monopoly on the exploitation of Congolese natural resources by forcing out local businessmen and levying (mostly illegal) taxes in the occupied territories. Rwandan businessmen have large swaths of land in eastern DRC, and while some were acquired legally, others were seized during conflicts.

From a political standpoint, the Kagame regime's actions are complex and somewhat contradictory when it comes to the DRC. Although the Rwandan authorities have repeatedly stated that they seek to end discrimination and violence against the Tutsi, Kigali's support for Congolese militias, especially M23, does exactly the opposite. It heightens tensions and leaves the Tutsi as the most vulnerable group within the Congolese population.

The Rwandan leader has repeatedly stated that his government intends to repatriate some 60,000 Congolese refugees who have settled in Rwanda and are draining its resources. The DRC, however, believes that Kigali is reluctant to return them because their presence provides a pretext for interfering in Congo's

¹⁵ Malala, J. Africa Is Heading Toward Another Deadly War. *Bloomberg*. August 31, 2024.

URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-07-31/drc-and-rwanda-conflict-africa-is-heading-toward-war>

¹⁶ Fatchina, E. DRC-Rwanda conflicts: What are the two countries accusing each other of? *Afro-impact*. June 1, 2022.

URL: <https://www.afro-impact.com/en/drc-rwanda-conflicts-what-are-the-two-countries-accusing-each-others-of/>

¹⁷ DR Congo's Conflict: Rwanda's motives to support the M23 rebels. *Robert Lansing Institute*. February 23, 2024.

URL: <https://lansinginstitute.org/2024/02/23/dr-congos-conflict-rwandas-motives-to-support-the-m23-rebels/>

¹⁸ Lawler, D. Rebel offensive in eastern Congo threatens key border city. *Axios*. November 7, 2022.

URL: <https://wwwaxios.com/2022/11/08/m23-offensive-goma-drc-accuses-rwanda>

internal affairs. In addition, the DRC is convinced that one of Rwanda's objectives in the current conflict is to annex North Kivu.

One way or another, it seems that both states are preparing for a war which will probably involve other countries: Uganda, Burundi, Angola, and others. As for the DRC, the country has started to actively buy weapons. In 2023, it spent \$794 million—double the amount in 2022¹⁹—on armored vehicles, drones and other military equipment. In turn, Rwanda recently deployed Turkish TB-2 Bayraktar²⁰ drones to the Kamembe airbase near the DRC border.

Although conflicts in eastern DRC, including the current Congolese-Rwandan conflict, have a long and dramatic history, the persistent animosity between certain groups within the population is beginning to have an increasingly visible impact on the current situation. It seems that it will take several generations before the "Rwanda factor" loses its conflict-triggering potency in the context of the Congo-Rwanda relations.

¹⁹ Malala, J. Africa Is Heading Toward Another Deadly War. *Bloomberg*. August 31, 2024.

URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-07-31/drc-and-rwanda-conflict-africa-is-heading-toward-war>

²⁰ DRC / Rwanda | Scenarios for interstate conflict. *Dragonfly Intelligence*. March 13, 2024.

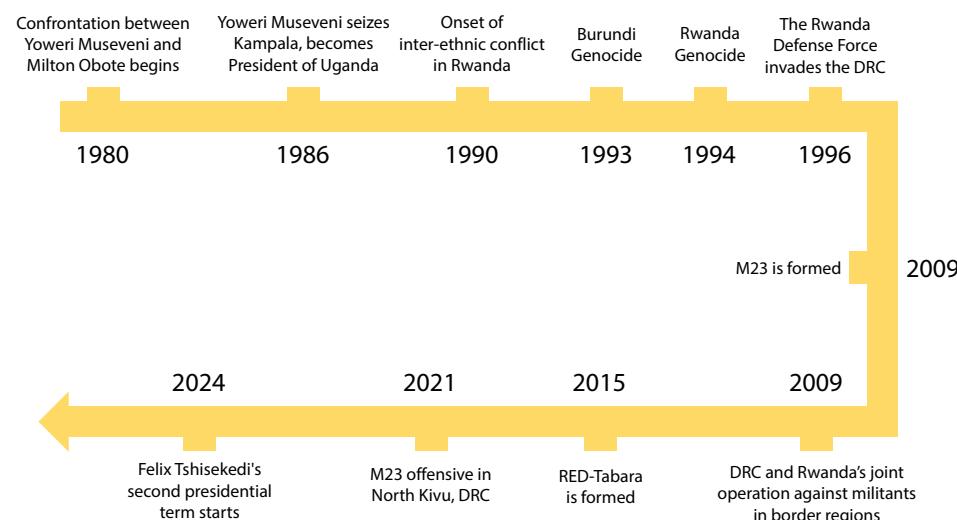
URL: <https://dragonflyintelligence.com/news/drc-rwanda-scenarios-for-interstate-conflict/>

Conflict in Eastern DRC: What is its Nature?

Conflicts in the Great Lakes region started to escalate with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Sensing that the confrontation between the Western bloc, led by the United States, and the Eastern bloc, led by the Soviet Union, was coming to end, U.S. political elites began to seriously consider gaining control over the heart of Africa.²¹

In 1980, after Idi Amin Dada's dictatorship in Uganda was overthrown with the help and direct military support from Tanzania, Milton Obote returned to power.²² After Obote's victory in the November 10, 1980 presidential elections, the losing candidate, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, launched a war. Then Presidents of Zaire and Tanzania, Mobutu Sese Seko and Juvénal Habyarimana respectively, supported Museveni over Obote. As Ugandan insurgents were active near the borders of Zaire and Rwanda, both naively believed that Museveni would resolve Uganda's internal conflicts and thus bring peace to the region.

Figure 1. Conflict Timeline



Source: Compiled by the author based on open data

On July 27, 1985, after yet another coup in Uganda, General Tito Okello proposed that all opposition movements cease hostilities and join a government of national

²¹ One of the most comprehensive academic studies on this is Galina Sidorova's *Africa: The War of Ideas and the War of People in the Mirror of the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, which sheds light on new aspects of armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Great Lakes region as a whole (see: Sidorova, G.M. *Africa: The War of Ideas and the War of People in the Mirror of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (from a diary of a diplomat)*. Moscow: Nauka – Eastern Literature, 2015. 527 p.).

²² Apollo Milton Obote was the first President of Uganda, serving from 1966. In 1971, after a coup that brought Idi Amin Dada to power, Obote fled to Tanzania.

Valens
Maniragena

unity,²³ but Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Army (NRA) refused. In the fall of 1985, Okello's government and the NRA entered peace talks in Nairobi, Kenya, mediated by President Daniel arap Moi. However, the NRA had no intention of adhering to the peace deal signed in December 1985. On January 26, 1986, Museveni's forces stormed and captured Kampala, and on January 29, 1986, he was sworn in as the new president of Uganda.

During his official visit to Rwanda in 1986, journalists asked Museveni if an attack on Rwanda could be launched from Uganda's territory. He responded that it would never happen. African researchers Noel Ndanyuzwe²⁴ and Eugène Rwamuchyo²⁵ believe it was at that time that the attempts to remove Rwanda's president began.

The conflict between Rwanda and the DRC can hardly be called interethnic—just as the conflict in Rwanda had not been purely interethnic until 1994. A more accurate description would be a struggle for control over the DRC's resource-rich territory. Waving the ethnicity banners is merely for show,²⁶ to ensure impunity for those who commit economic and military crimes.

In many ways, the clashes in eastern DRC are a continuation of the Rwandan war. The conflict began in 1996 when the Rwandan army invaded Zaire (now the DRC) under the pretext of protecting the local Tutsis from genocide by Hutu refugees. Meanwhile, the United States and France continued to interfere in the relations between the Great Lakes region countries. This dynamic is examined by contemporary historian and Great Lakes region researcher, Charles Onana in his book *Holocaust in Congo: The International Community's Omerta*.²⁷ He points out that since 1994, Rwandan troops and militias, supported by Bill Clinton and later Nicolas Sarkozy's governments, have invaded the DRC.

Today, the DRC and Burundi claim—not without reason—that Rwanda supports the armed groups destabilizing their countries. The DRC is at war with M23, mainly in the North Kivu province. M23 receives support from Rwanda and Uganda, while RED-Tabara—a group based in South Kivu and composed largely of Burundians who participated in the failed 2015 coup—is causing significant problems for the Burundian government.

Rwanda, for its part, believes that its neighbors are unable to adequately address the problems they face. The presence of Rwandan refugees in the DRC is perceived as a threat to Rwanda's security. Under President Joseph Kabilé, the country cooperated with the DRC's army to carry out several military operations,

²³ Balezin, A.S. *Tropical and Southern Africa in Modern Times: People, Problems, Events*. Textbook. Moscow: KDU, 2008. Pp. 224-229.

²⁴ Ndanyuzwe, N. *The Global War in Africa: Anglo-American Conspiracy in the Context of the Rwandan Genocide. Inquiry into the Secret Archives of the Ugandan National Army* (in French: *La guerre mondiale africaine. La conspiration anglo-américaine pour un génocide au Rwanda. Enquête dans les archives secrètes de l'armée nationale ougandaise*). Sources du Nil, 2014. 534 p.

²⁵ Rwamucyo, E. *Museveni and Kagame's Grand Strategy in Black Africa* (in French: *Big Tactic de Museveni et Kagame en Afrique noire*). Nodus, 2023. 446 p.

²⁶ See: Memorandum of the Intwari Partnership addressed to the UN Security Council (in French: *Mémorandum du Partenariat-Intwari adressé au Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU*). *L'Hora*. February 2008. URL: <https://l-hora.org/fr/memorandum-du-partenariat-intwari-adresse-au-conseil-de-securite-de-lonu-fevrier-2008/>

²⁷ Onana C. *Holocaust in Congo: The International Community's Omerta*. Artillery, 2023. 504 p.

such as *Umoja Wetu*,²⁸ *Kimya-1* and *Kimya-2*.²⁹ The Rwandan leadership often claims that they pose no danger. However, there are concerns that this is merely an excuse for Rwandan forces to remain in the DRC and protect the transnational companies involved in mineral extraction there.³⁰

²⁸ The goal of this operation was to eliminate the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda. It was carried out by the armed forces of the DRC and Rwanda. See: Launch of the military operation Umoja Wetu between the DRC and Rwanda (in French: Lancement de l'opération militaire Umoja Wetu entre la RDC et le Rwanda). *GL News*. January 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.grandslacnews.com/posts/histoire-20-janvier-2009-lancement-de-l-operation-militaire-umoja-wetu-entre-la-rdc-et-le-rwanda-4150>

²⁹ DRC: Operation Kimia-2 – FARDC Faces the Risk of Losing Support from MONUC (in French: RD Congo: Opération Kimia II - Les FARDC sous la menace du retrait du soutien de la MONUC) *ReliefWeb*. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/rd-congo-op%C3%A9ration-kimia-ii-les-fardc-sous-la-menace-du-retrait-du-soutien-de-la-monuc>

³⁰ Ndanyuzwe, N. The Global War in Africa: Anglo-American Conspiracy in the Context of the Rwandan Genocide. Inquiry into the Secret Archives of the Ugandan National Army (in French: La guerre mondiale africaine. La conspiration anglo-américaine pour un génocide au Rwanda. Enquête dans les archives secrètes de l'armée nationale ougandaise). *Sources du Nil*, 2014. 534 p.

The Role of Individual Actors in Rwanda–DRC Relations Amid the Ongoing Conflict

Sergey
Karamaev

Among the various political, economic, and social factors shaping the conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, one deserves particular attention: the role of the individuals in power. The primary actors engaged in actual fighting on the ground are the M23 rebel group and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). However, this conflict can also be seen as a confrontation between the presidents of the DRC and Rwanda, Félix Tshisekedi and Paul Kagame, respectively.³¹

When Félix Tshisekedi was first elected President of the DRC, many political analysts considered him a pro-American politician.³² Despite the fact that the 2018 elections were widely recognized as fraudulent by numerous observers, NGOs, and even the U.S. itself,³³ the State Department officially welcomed Tshisekedi in his new role and affirmed its commitment to working closely with the new government.³⁴ Some also thought he was "Kabila's puppet," pursuing policies beneficial to the former president.³⁵ Most importantly, at that time, he had good relations with Paul Kagame: in March 2019, the Rwandan president personally invited Tshisekedi to the VII Africa CEO Forum. At the event, both presidents declared that "the time for reconciliation and rebuilding has come" and that "we need to build bridges, not walls."³⁶

The real basis for this unity was that, as a newcomer to regional politics, Tshisekedi desperately needed new investors: all contracts signed with large transnational corporations by his predecessors were benefitting specific individuals but not the DRC's economy.³⁷ Kagame agreed to help his "protégé," hoping for a *quid pro quo* from Tshisekedi in the future in the form of political or economic preferences. Until a certain point, both sides worked toward improving relations while seeking to normalize the situation in the conflict zone. The steps they took included negotiations with M23 and FDLR, adopting roadmaps for gradual disarmament, granting amnesty and concluding a peace treaty. However, sometime later,

³¹ The Russian Academy of Sciences outlines possible causes of the DRC-Rwanda conflict. *Izvestiya*. July 28, 2023. URL: <https://iz.ru/1550904/2023-07-28/v-ran-nazvali-vozmozhnye-prichiny-konfliktu-mezhdu-dr-kongo-i-ruandoi>

³² Why Did Washington Let a Stolen Election Stand in the Congo? *Foreign Policy*. April 28, 2021. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/28/washington-congo-drc-stolen-election-biden-democracy-diplomacy-state-department/>

³³ How Washington Got on Board With Congo's Rigged Election. *Foreign Policy*. February 1, 2019. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/01/how-washington-got-on-board-with-congos-rigged-election-drc-tshisekedi-kabila-great-lakes/>

³⁴ U.S. Response to Constitutional Court Decision in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *U.S. Department of State*. January 23, 2019. URL: <https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2019/01/23/u-s-response-to-constitutional-court-decision-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>

³⁵ DR. Congo. Kabila's puppet cuts its strings. *South World*. March 3, 2021. URL: <https://www.southworld.net/dr-congo-kabila-puppet-cuts-its-strings/>

³⁶ Africa CEO Forum: Paul Kagame and Félix Tshisekedi show unity in Kigali (in French: Africa CEO Forum: Paul Kagame et Félix Tshisekedi affichent leur entente à Kigali). ADIAC. March 27, 2019. URL: <https://www.adiac-congo.com/content/africa-ceo-forum-paul-kagame-et-felix-tshisekedi-affichent-leur-entente-kigali-97588>

³⁷ Why did Paul Kagame and Félix Tshisekedi fall out? How can we repair relations? *Gateteviews*. February 6, 2023. URL: <https://gateteviews.rw/why-did-paul-kagame-and-felix-tshisekedi-fall-out-how-can-we-repair-relations/>

Tshisekedi completely reversed his position. In early 2022, he publicly accused Rwanda of seeking to profit from the ongoing conflicts in the Great Lakes region.³⁸ What prompted this drastic change is a subject of much speculation. Among those believed to have influenced this decision are the United States, former president Joseph Kabilo, the DRC's business elite, and other actors—which to a certain extent confirms the earlier argument that Tshisekedi was indeed far from being an independent player.

From Kagame's perspective, such behavior was unacceptable. He is a man who was forged in the harshest conditions of guerrilla warfare, and being tough became a cornerstone of his personality. As both his supporters and opponents point out, Kagame has always demonstrated iron self-discipline and demanded the same from others.³⁹ He has shown himself capable of political flexibility and compromise should the circumstances demand it, but this flexibility never turned into opportunism—when it came to certain things, Kagame remained steadfast.⁴⁰ Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Kagame considered Tshisekedi his "protégé," and such an abrupt change in the latter's attitude toward him personally and toward the conflict in the Great Lakes region could not but affect the Rwandan president. Undoubtedly, Kagame is not so naive as to believe that his DRC counterpart would owe him for life, but from Kagame's point of view, Tshisekedi could have shown more restraint and diplomatic tact.

When Tshisekedi compared Kagame to Hitler in December 2023,⁴¹ it further soured the relations between the two. Kagame has every reason to view himself as the person who halted one of the largest genocides in modern history, and such a comparison is, for him, a direct personal insult. In early 2024, Angola mediated a tentative agreement to hold a meeting between the two heads of state,⁴² but the rocket attack on refugee camps in Goma in May of the same year effectively turned the situation back into a confrontation.⁴³

At the time of writing (summer 2024), relations between the two presidents, and therefore between the two countries, are in a phase of escalating tensions. Both sides have been using various media platforms to accuse each other of lying⁴⁴ and

³⁸ Felix Tshisekedi: It is suicidal for a country in our subregion to think that it will always reap dividends by maintaining conflicts with its neighbors (in French: "Il est suicidaire pour un pays de notre sous-région de penser qu'il tirerait toujours des dividendes en entretenant des conflits avec ses voisins.") 7sur7. February 27, 2022.

URL: <https://7sur7.cd/2022/02/27/felix-tshisekedi-il-est-suicidaire-pour-un-pays-de-notre-sous-region-de-penser-quil>

³⁹ François Misser. Africa's leaders: psychology matters. *Good Governance Africa*. October 14, 2019.

URL: <https://gga.org/up-close-and-personal/>

⁴⁰ Paul Kagame: No compromise on African values. *New African*. February 7, 2020.

URL: <https://newafricanmagazine.com/22114/>

⁴¹ DR Congo president compares Rwanda's Paul Kagame to Hitler. *Africanews*. December 9, 2023.

URL: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/09/dr-congo-president-compares-rwandas-paul-kagame-to-hitler/>

⁴² US hopes Angola can help ease Rwanda-DRC tensions. *Jacaranda FM*. May 16, 2024.

URL: <https://www.jacarandafm.com/news/news/us-hopes-angola-can-help-ease-rwanda-drc-tensions/>

⁴³ Grief and anger as Congo mourners blame Rwanda-backed rebels for attack. *Reuters*. May 16, 2024.

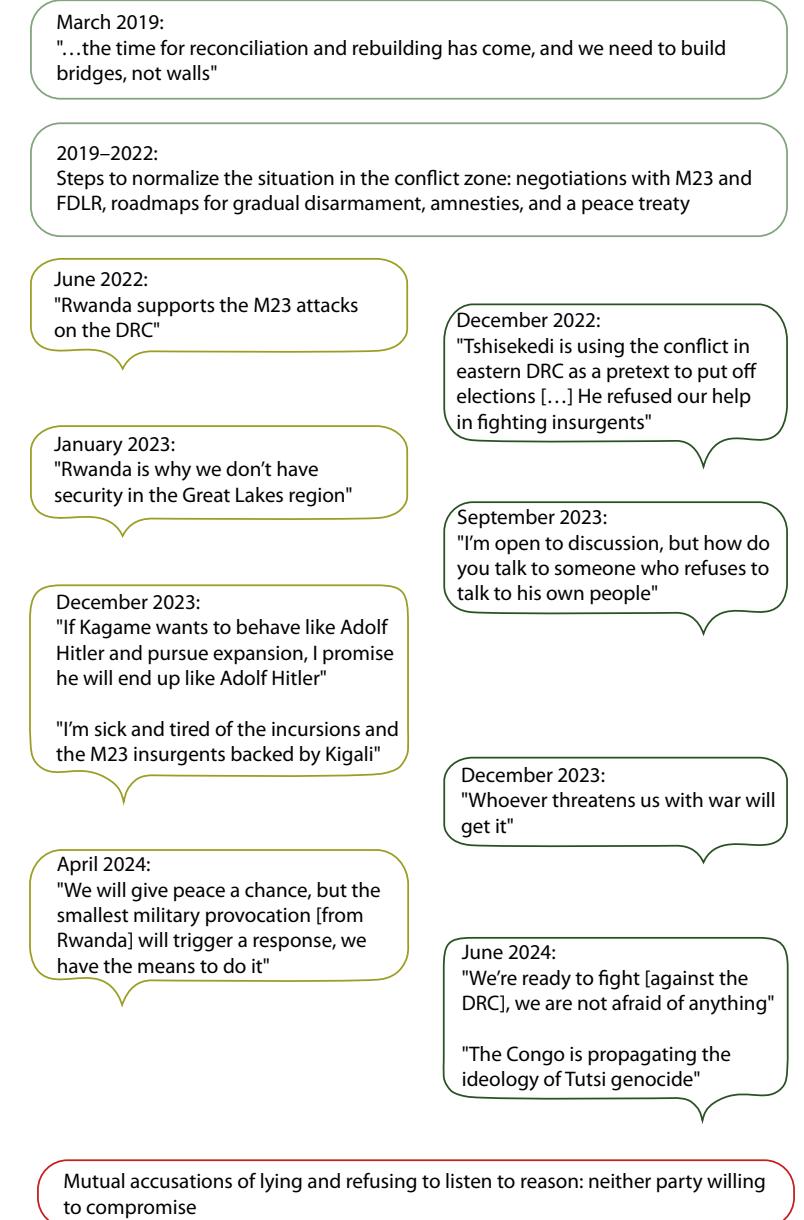
URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/grief-anger-congo-mourners-blame-rwanda-backed-rebels-attack-2024-05-16/>

⁴⁴ Time runs out on Tshisekedi's most egregious lie. *The New Times*. June 5, 2024.

URL: <https://www.newtimes.co.nw/article/17114/opinions/time-runs-out-on-tshisekedis-most-egregious-lie>

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Figure 2. Timeline: Escalatory Rhetoric Used by Tshisekedi and Kagame



Felix Tshisekedi
President of the DRC



Paul Kagame
President of Rwanda

Source: Compiled by the author based on open data

of refusing to listen to the voice of reason.⁴⁵ Neither side is willing to compromise: Kagame due to his "strongman of Africa" persona, and Tshisekedi because of his dependence on external actors and his current inability to gain military control over the conflict zone. Any further loss of initiative in eastern DRC would undermine his already fragile political position.

⁴⁵ Pressure mounts on Rwanda over violence in DR Congo. *LeMonde*. February 21, 2024.

URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20240221194343/https://www.lemonde.fr/en/e-monde-africa/article/2024/02/21/pressure-mounts-on-rwanda-over-violence-in-dr-congo_6546494_124.html

PART II. WHEN THERE IS (NO) BALANCE OF POWER

M23: Profile, Goals, and Capabilities

Leonid
Tsukanov

The March 23 Movement (M23) is a Congolese rebel group that represents the interests of the ethnic Tutsi minority. Its predecessor was the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP)—a rebel group founded by General Nkunda on July 25, 2006, as he split from the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD). Like the RCD, the CNDP aimed to defend the rights of the Tutsi people in the North Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At its peak, the CNDP is estimated to have had between 2,200 and 8,000 fighters.⁴⁶ It gained notoriety in the first phase of the Kivu conflict (2012-2013), capturing several large towns.

The exact size of M23 is unclear, but at its height in mid-2012, the movement was believed to have around 3,000 fighters. However, after suffering a major military defeat in 2013, its numbers were significantly reduced. By the time the group entered peace talks, it had lost at least 40% of its personnel due to casualties and retreats.⁴⁷ With the resurgence in 2021, the group's size fluctuated between 500 and 700 fighters, with some reports suggesting up to 2,000—likely reflecting not only its own forces but also "troop reinforcements" from Rwanda,⁴⁸ a point frequently mentioned by local politicians.⁴⁹ As of mid-2024, M23 operates in eastern DRC, controlling parts of North Kivu province and threatening its capital, the city of Goma, since February 2024, by laying siege to the main roads into the city.⁵⁰

The group's primary objective remains the same: to force the Congolese government into public concessions. M23 demands that Kinshasa uphold the rights of the Congolese Tutsis (Banyamulenge), as well as implement the 2013 agreements, which included integrating M23 fighters into the national defense forces, granting amnesty, and transforming the political wing of M23 into a recognized political party.⁵¹ However, these goals clash with the central government's position, as President Félix Tshisekedi has firmly rejected any compromises with the

⁴⁶ Renewed Crisis in North Kivu. *HRW*. October 23, 2007.

URL: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/10/24/renewed-crisis-north-kivu>

⁴⁷ Vogel, C. Big Victory as M23 Surrenders, But Not an End to Congo's Travails. *IPI Global Observatory*. November 11, 2013.

URL: <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2013/11/in-drc-one-militia-m23-down-49-more-to-go/>

⁴⁸ Rwanda Inside DRC, Aiding M23. *VOA Africa*. August 4, 2022.

URL: <https://www.voafrika.com/a/wranda-inside-drc-aiding-m23--report/6686811.html>

⁴⁹ DR Congo's president calls for sanctions against Rwanda for supporting M23 rebels. *Anadolu*. September 26, 2024.

URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/dr-congos-president-calls-for-sanctions-against-rwanda-for-supporting-m23-rebels/3341773>

⁵⁰ Crime rife in DRC's rebel-besieged city of Goma. *The Guardian*. May 17, 2024. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/may/17/goma-drc-rwanda-m23-rebels-wazalendo-militias-democratic-republic-congo>

⁵¹ Baudon, A. M23: A Forgotten War and an Overshadowed Ceasefire. *ICCT*. August 9, 2024.

URL: <https://www.icct.nl/publication/m23-forgotten-war-and-overshadowed-ceasefire>

rebels.⁵² Moreover, in May 2022, the DRC government declared M23 a terrorist organization,⁵³ which left very little room for diplomatic resolution.

The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that Kinshasa views M23 not as an autonomous political force, but as Rwanda's proxy that is following Kigali's orders.⁵⁴ As a result, whenever the insurgents succeed, it is automatically interpreted as foreign intervention, which only drives the already low level of trust between the DRC and Rwanda even lower.

Looking at the relationship between the DRC government and M23, it is important to recognize the hidden agenda behind the group's actions. The insurgents aim to establish full control over the resource-rich eastern Congo, which boasts vast deposits of precious metals, diamonds, and ore minerals, as well as key transportation routes (such as the Mombasa-Goma road and the road from the Bukavu port inland).⁵⁵ Taking control of these areas would give M23 a significant advantage, allowing them to threaten Kinshasa not only with political and reputational damage but also with the economic consequences of a prolonged conflict. However, there's another side to this process: the growing risk of secession in the eastern part of the country (which could lead to the creation of a "threatening" buffer zone between the DRC and Rwanda) is one of the reasons the DRC government remains reluctant to reconcile with M23 or allow their representatives into the state governance system.

Turning to the situation on the ground in North Kivu, it is clear that M23's operational capabilities are limited. Aside from Rwanda, which indirectly supports the insurgents (though officially denies doing so⁵⁶), the movement has no permanent allies. Local militias either stay neutral or collaborate with the government forces. Additionally, jihadi movements have become more active in the rebel-controlled zones. These radicals exploit division in order to recruit new fighters (promising protection from other groups, among other things), while regularly resorting to terror tactics against neutral parties.⁵⁷ So far, M23 commanders have not been able to counter the rising influence of the jihadists.

M23's approach to governance can hardly be called successful. Between 2021 and 2023, the group made several attempts to establish their own "civil institutions" and appoint loyal officials,⁵⁸ but in practice, their activities have mostly boiled

⁵² M23 leader says DR Congo rebel group will not disarm. *Club of Mozambique*. July 7, 2023.

URL: <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/m23-leader-says-dr-congo-rebel-group-will-not-disarm-240611/>

⁵³ DRC classifies M23 rebels as terrorists. *Xinhua*. May 28, 2022.

URL: <https://english.news.cn/20220528/845411c27e3647dca984da41637eb1c8/c.html>

⁵⁴ DR Congo President Accuses Rwanda of Supporting M23 Rebels. *Anadolu*. June 6, 2022.

URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/world/dr-congo-president-accuses-rwanda-of-supporting-m23-rebels/2606484>

⁵⁵ Nikolskaya, M. The Big Little War in Eastern Congo. *Russia in Global Affairs*. August 2, 2023.

URL: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/bolshaya-malenkaya-vojna-kongo/>

⁵⁶ Rwandan foreign minister says Congo refused to sign deal to ease M23 conflict. *Reuters*. October 5, 2024. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/rwandan-foreign-minister-says-congo-refused-sign-deal-ease-m23-conflict-2024-10-05/>

⁵⁷ ISIL-affiliated rebel fighters blamed after 38 killed in DR Congo attack. *Al Jazeera*. June 8, 2024.

URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/8/killed-by-isil-fighters-in-drc-attack>

⁵⁸ North Kivu: M23 Install Parallel Government in Jomba (in French: Nord-Kivu: le M23 installe une administration parallèle à Jomba). *Radio Okapi*. February 26, 2022.

URL: <https://www.radiookapi.net/2022/02/26/actualite/securite/nord-kivu-le-m23-installe-une-administration-parallele-jomba>

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Table 1. Armed Groups in the Great Lakes Region

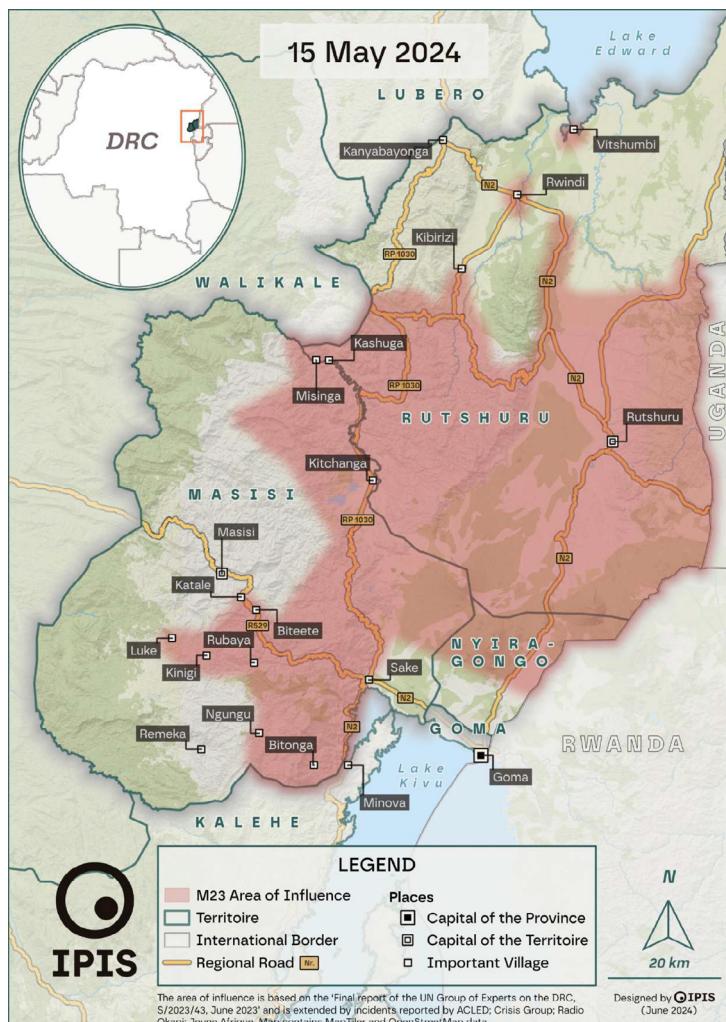
Name	Operates in	Objectives	Current Status (summer 2024)	Patrons
M23	DRC: North Kivu Rwanda (alleged source of supplies and training)	1. To ensure the DRC authorities uphold Tutsi rights 2. To ensure implementation of the 2013 agreements that provide military and political protection to the Tutsi 3. To gain control over the area rich in rare earth metals and to profit from selling them to global players	Engaged in a successful offensive against the DRC army. Keep capturing cities, and seized one of the largest rare earth metal (coltan) deposits in April 2024	Rwanda (according to the DRC), aiming to gain control over rare earth metal deposits, which are almost non-existent in Rwanda itself
Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)	DRC: Ituri, North Kivu Uganda	To seize power in Uganda and establish a radical Islamist regime	Carrying out attacks on civilians (including foreigners) and Ugandan government officials, primarily along the DRC border; occasionally conduct terrorist attacks in more central regions of Uganda	ISIS*
Resistance for the Rule of Law (Mouvement de la Résistance pour un État de Droit), RED-Tabara	Burundi DRC: South Kivu (base) Rwanda (training)	To overthrow the current Burundian government and bring the military officials that attempted a coup in 2015 to power	Personnel: 500 to 800 people Accused of organizing terrorist attacks and assaults on civilians in Burundi, including attacks reported in 2024	Rwanda (according to the DRC and Burundi)
Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda, FDLR)	Rwanda DRC: Kivu (base and training location)	To bring the Hutu back to power in Rwanda	Personnel: 1,000 to 1,500 people According to Rwanda, the group is extorting money from civilians along the border with the DRC and carrying out regular attacks in Rwanda	DRC (according to Rwanda), aiming to create a counterbalance to the Rwandan authorities

Source: Compiled by the author based on open data

*The organization is banned in Russia.

down to collecting taxes. Another attempt was made in early 2024, when rebel administrations were set up in the towns of Rutshuru, Kiwanja, Rubare, and Bunagana—this time with a focus on long-term governance.⁵⁹ However, the loyalty of local residents to the new administration remains questionable, as M23 appointees are unable to guarantee them protection or ensure that the system functions properly.

Figure 3. M23 Area of Influence in the DRC, May 2024



Source: The International Peace Information Service (IPIS)⁶⁰

⁵⁹ M23 DRC Rebels Install Parallel Administration. VOA Africa. January 31, 2024.

URL: <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/m23-drc-rebels-install-parallel-administration/7461162.html>

⁶⁰ Shifting Frontlines: Visualizing the Evolution of the M23's Territorial Influence in Early 2024. IPIS. June 20, 2024. URL: <https://ipisresearch.be/publication/shifting-frontlines-visualizing-the-evolution-of-the-m23s-territorial-influence-in-early-2024/>

It seems unlikely that there will be any significant shifts in the confrontation between Kinshasa and M23 in the near future. The group currently lacks the resources to quickly capture Goma, especially in light of the recent deployment of fresh government troops there. However, it is certainly capable of wearing the city down, taking advantage of the deteriorating public mood in the province.⁶¹ If Goma falls again, it will create a dangerous conviction that the central government is incapable of maintaining control, which will dramatically increase the risk of new anti-government uprisings. Against this backdrop, Kinshasa may well use the dire situation in North Kivu as a pretext for making controversial political decisions—such as involving private military companies to fight against M23.

⁶¹ Crowded camps and local aid: How DR Congo's M23 conflict is impacting Goma. *African Arguments*. April 19, 2024. URL: <https://africanarguments.org/2024/04/crowded-camps-and-local-aid-how-dr-congos-m23-conflict-is-impacting-goma/>

Defense Forces of the DRC and Rwanda

"The Clumsy Leopard": The Armed Forces of the DRC⁶²

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the most unstable countries in the world today. This is particularly true in the military and political spheres, as well as in terms of the overall security situation in the country. The modern-day DRC has gone through a string of disasters and some of the bloodiest wars on the African continent. However, the state of affairs both within the country and along its borders, especially in the east, remains far from promising. The tragic events of the 1990s and 2000s had a direct impact on the formation and evolution of the DRC's armed forces. In general, the central government's inability to provide adequate national security poses serious obstacles to the peaceful development of the country.

The Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) in their current form were established in 2004, following the adoption of legislation that provided a new organizational structure for the country's military.⁶³ It was set up in line with the agreements made during the inter-Congolese dialogue, specifically the transitional process agreement signed in December 2002 in Pretoria.⁶⁴ This agreement envisioned a restructured and integrated national army. In practice, the new armed forces of the DRC were a structure that integrated both soldiers that served in the Congolese army under Mobutu Sese Seko and Laurent-Désiré Kabila and members of Congolese rebel groups such as the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC), and so on. Over time, other groups, such as the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), also became part of the DRC armed forces.⁶⁵

Creating a new army from once-opposing groups presented a serious challenge for Kinshasa: the new system had to allow for balance among a large number of former rebel commanders. As a result, the FARDC have both a sprawling and cumbersome command structure. Overall command is exercised by the President of the DRC, who serves as Commander-in-Chief. Direct command of the armed forces is vested in the Minister of Defense. The main operational body is the General Staff. In addition to this, there are three branches of the military (the army, air force, and navy—each with their own chief of staff), ten military regions,

Maksim
Nikulin

⁶² The DRC's coat of arms features a leopard's head. The descriptor is the author's own. – Editor's note. See: Article 1 of Democratic Republic of the Congo's Constitution of 2005 with amendments through 2011. *ConstituteProject*. 2013.

URL: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/cng128142.pdf>

⁶³ Act No. 04/023 of 12 December 2004 on the General Organization of the Defense and Armed Forces (in French: Loi No. 04/023 du 12 novembre 2004 portant organisation générale de défense et des forces armées). *Leganet*. November 12, 2004. URL: <https://www.leganet.cd/Legislation/Droit%20Public/Ministères/defense/loi.04.023.12.11.2004.pdf>

⁶⁴ Global and Inclusive Agreement on Transition in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Pretoria Agreement). *UN Peacemaker*. December 16, 2002. URL: <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/9332>

⁶⁵ Peace agreement between the Government of the DRC and the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP) (in French: Accord de paix entre le gouvernement et le Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP)). *Afrikarabia*. March 23, 2009.

URL: <https://afrikarabia.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Accord-CNDP-RDC-23-mars-2009.pdf>

and the commanding officers of various units (divisions, brigades, regiments, battalions). In September 2014, three defense zones were created,⁶⁶ with their command structures in between the general staffs of the military branches and the regional commands.

Such a fragmented military structure has resulted in a number of problems that prevent Kinshasa from responding effectively to the security challenges and threats it faces.

Firstly, from an operational standpoint, the FARDC are a heterogeneous structure. The government has failed to create anything resembling a professional army or instill a kind of "Congolese" corporate culture in the personnel. Currently, the armed forces seem more like a collection of various armed groups and rebels who are not necessarily fully loyal to Kinshasa.

Secondly, this diversity leads to management problems. For example, Congolese expert Jean-Jacques Wondo Omanyundu points out that in 2023, 24 generals (including the Deputy Chief of Staff, the Commander of the Third Defense Zone, and the Commander of the 34th Military Region),⁶⁷ were stationed in the North Kivu province and barely coordinated with each other. The DRC armed forces basically resemble an inverted pyramid with more officers than rank-and-file soldiers.

Thirdly, alongside the inefficient management system, there is the issue of corruption. This has been acknowledged by DRC President Félix Tshisekedi, who stated that there was a "mafia-like structure"⁶⁸ within the army, as well as the police and government, that is involved in illegal activities and undermines the overall security in the country. One of the popular corruption schemes includes underpaying the personnel.⁶⁹

In reality, the Congolese army is a cumbersome and ineffective structure. According to the Military Balance 2024 data, the FARDC are comprised of approximately 134,000 personnel, divided between the army (103,000), the navy (6,700), and the air force (2,500).⁷⁰ In addition, there is the Republican Guard (8,000), which answers directly to the President of the DRC but is not part of the armed forces. However, assessing the combat readiness of these forces is

⁶⁶ June 17, 2013 – Decree No. 13-071 on the organization and functioning of defense zones (in French: 17 juin 2013. – ORDONNANCE No. 13-071 portant organisation et fonctionnement des zones de défense). *Le droit en République démocratique du Congo*.
URL: https://www.droitcongolais.info/files/412.06.13.13-Ordonnance-du-17-juin-2013_zones-de-defense.pdf

⁶⁷ Omanyundu J.-J.W. Decryption: The causes of the FARDC's poor performance against the M23. *African Desk for Strategic Analysis*. February 18, 2023.
URL: <https://afredesk.org/en/decryption-the-causes-of-the-fardcs-poor-performance-against-the-m23/>

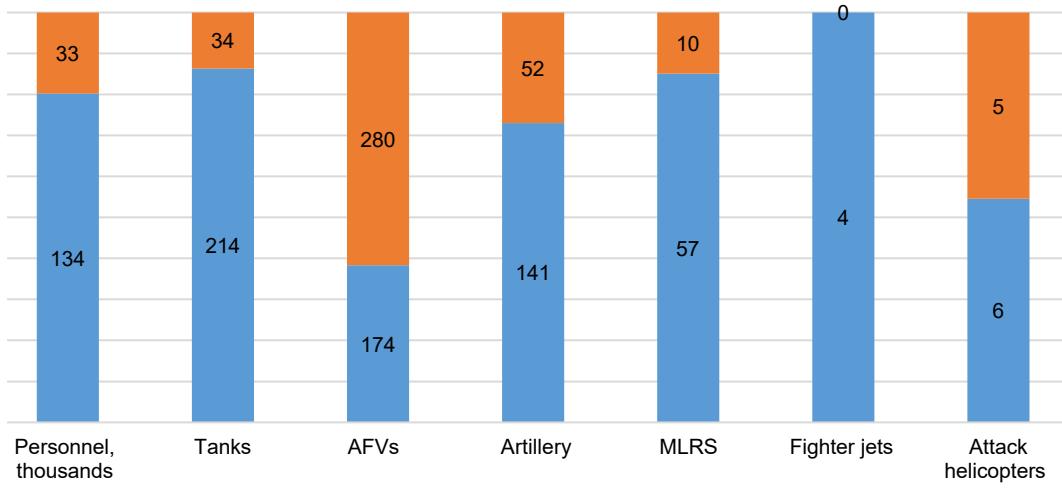
⁶⁸ DRC: Félix Tshisekedi denounces the "mafia" in the army and institutions (in French: RDC: Félix Tshisekedi dénonce la «mafia» dans l'armée et les institutions). *Jeune Afrique*. June 20, 2021.
URL: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1191024/politique/rdc-felix-tshisekedi-denonce-la-mafia-dans-larmee-et-les-institutions/>

⁶⁹ Escaping the conflict trap: promoting good governance in the Congo. *International Crisis Group Africa Report*. No. 114. July 20, 2006. URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/114-escaping-the-conflict-trap-promoting-good-governance-in-the-congo.pdf>; Clement C. European Security and Defence Policy: The First 10 Years (1999–2009) (ed. by G. Grevi, D. Helly, N. Keohane). Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2009. P. 247. URL: http://www.efsps.eu/docs/ESDP_10-web.pdf

⁷⁰ *The Military Balance* 2024. London: Routledge. P. 485.

no trivial task. According to Jean-Jacques Wondo Omanyundu, the FARDC lack tables of organization and equipment, meaning neither the General Staff nor the Ministry of Defense has a clear picture of the actual number of personnel.⁷¹

Figure 4. Military Capabilities of the DRC and Rwanda, units



Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the Military Balance 2024⁷²

The same goes for the FARDC weaponry and equipment, most of which is obsolete and unserviceable.⁷³ For example, out of 174 armored fighting vehicles (AFVs) the DRC has in service, most date back to the 1950s to 1980s: around 70 BTR-60PB, 20 BMP-1, 6 MT-LB, and 3 BTR-50 (USSR); 58 Panhard M3, 17 AML-60, and 14 AML-90 (France); 19 EE-9 Cascavel (Brazil).⁷⁴ Among the more modern units, there are 30 MCAV-20 armored vehicles (UAE) in service with the Republican Guard,⁷⁵ and 20 Mbombe-4 (South Africa).⁷⁶ The situation is slightly better with tanks: in the 2000s, Kinshasa decided to replace the outdated Chinese Type 59 and Type 62 tanks and purchased T-55, T-72AV, and T-64B1M tanks from Kiev⁷⁷ (32, 100, and 25 units, respectively). These now constitute a fundamental part of the DRC army's "armored fist."⁷⁸

⁷¹ What is the actual basis for pragmatic army reform in the DRC? (in French: Omanyundu J.-J.W. Quelles bases concrètes d'une réforme pragmatique de l'armée en RDC?) *Desk Africain d'Analyses Stratégiques*. January 12, 2014. URL: <https://afredesk.org/quelles-bases-de-reforme-pragmatique-de-larmee-en-rdc/>

⁷² *The Military Balance 2024*. London: Routledge. Pp. 485–486, Pp. 511–512.

⁷³ Democratic Republic of Congo. *DefenceWeb*. April 23, 2013. URL: <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/security/african-militaries/democratic-republic-of-congo/>

⁷⁴ *The Military Balance 2024*. London: Routledge. P. 486.

⁷⁵ Congolese military operating MCAV-20 armoured vehicles. *Janes*. July 25, 2023. URL: <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-news/land/congolese-military-operating-mcav-20-armoured-vehicles>

⁷⁶ *The Military Balance 2024*. London: Routledge. P. 486.

⁷⁷ Ukraine 2006. *UNROCA original report*. URL: <https://www.unroca.org/ukraine/report/2006/>; Ukraine 2010. *UNROCA original report*. URL: <https://www.unroca.org/ukraine/report/2010/>; Ukraine 2016. *UNROCA original report*. URL: <https://www.unroca.org/ukraine/report/2016/>

⁷⁸ *The Military Balance 2024*. London: Routledge. P. 486.

The DRC Air Force has both combat aircraft (four Su-25 fighter jets) and attack helicopters (three Mi-24 and three Mi-24V).⁷⁹ In addition, Kinshasa has ten transport helicopters (5 Bell 205, 2 Mi-8, 2 Bell 206L Long Ranger, 1 AS332L Super Puma).⁸⁰

Lacking the resources to carry out a full-scale military reform, the DRC leadership chooses to rely on the operational level steps that could influence the course of the conflict in the eastern provinces. These include using paramilitary groups, such as Wazalendo⁸¹—the local militia—as well as recruiting external security providers, both at the state and private levels. In this respect, two private military companies stand out: Agemira, which handles the maintenance of Congolese aviation, and Congo Protection, which trains FARDC units.⁸² On top of that, the DRC placed several orders for new and affordable aviation equipment: six light attack aircraft, Mwari, from South Africa in late 2021, and nine reconnaissance-strike UAVs, CH-4B, from China in February 2023.⁸³

"The Roaring Lion": The Rwanda Defense Force⁸⁴

The Rwandan defense forces in their current form were founded based on the Rwanda Patriotic Army—the military wing of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) —following the end of the Rwandan Civil War in 1994. Since 2002, their official name is the Rwanda Defense Force (RDF). The new structure had virtually nothing in common with the Rwandan Armed Forces circa Grégoire Kayibanda (1962–1973) and Juvénal Habyarimana (1973–1994) presidencies, as they were predominantly Hutu at the time.

It is important to note that from the 1990s until the end of the civil war in 2003, Rwandan forces were involved in active combat on the DRC territory. Despite the peace agreement, the Rwandan troops continued low-intensity military activities and operations against rebels in the border region. By the mid-2000s, Rwanda emerged from the two Congo wars with a disciplined and experienced army, well-equipped to carry out missions abroad. Structurally, it was light infantry, i.e. troops that operated either on foot or using high-mobility vehicles, primarily in rough terrain.

Since the mid-2000s, the RDF have taken part in various peacekeeping missions under the aegis of the United Nations and the African Union (AU). Their first peacekeeping operation was the 2004 African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS). Other notable missions include the AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in Sudan, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the African-led International

⁷⁹ *The Military Balance* 2024. London: Routledge. P. 486.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Wazalendo add to Eastern DRC's complex brew of combatants. *Africa Defense Forum*. January 16, 2024. URL: <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/01/wazalendo-add-to-eastern-drcs-complex-brew-of-combatants/>

⁸² M23 crisis flares again in North Kivu: context, dynamics and risks. *IPIS*. November 16, 2023. URL: <https://ipisresearch.be/weekly-briefing/m23-crisis-flares-again-in-north-kivu-context-dynamics-and-risks/>

⁸³ Second batch of CH-4 drones arrive DR Congo. *Military Africa*. May 20, 2024. URL: <https://www.military.africa/2024/05/second-batch-of-ch-4-drones-arrive-dr-congo/>

⁸⁴ The RDF coat of arms features a lion. – Editor's note. See: Rwanda Defence Force. *Ministry of Defence of Rwanda*. URL: <https://www.mod.gov.rw/rdf/overview>

Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the African-led International Support Mission to Central African Republic (AFISMCAR), and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).⁸⁵ In 2020 and 2021, the Rwandan government deployed contingents to the Central African Republic (CAR)⁸⁶ and the Cabo Delgado province in Mozambique⁸⁷ at the request of the respective governments. Thus, Rwanda has become one of the key security providers in the Sub-Saharan African region.

The existing Rwandan army is a small, disciplined, and professional force, with a total of 33,000 personnel (32,000 in the army and 1,000 in the air force).⁸⁸ Unlike the DRC army, the Rwandan military does not have a large arsenal of equipment. The army's fleet is made up of just 34 tanks (24 Soviet T-54/T-55 and 10 Israeli Tiran-5)⁸⁹ and 280 AFVs, which include both Cold War-era French AML-60/AML-90 (around 90 units) and Panhard Buffalos, South African Ratel-23 (around 13 units), Ratel-60 (10), and Ratel-90 (15), as well as more modern vehicles like the Turkish Cobra/Cobra II (76), South African RG-31 Nyala (40), Chinese WZ-551 (20), and French VBL (16).⁹⁰ After 2015, Rwanda purchased several self-propelled howitzers, including Chinese 122mm CS/SU-1 (6) and SH-3 (6), and Israeli 155mm ATMOS 2000 (5).⁹¹

The Rwandan Air Force has no combat aircraft and relies on helicopters—both attack (2 Mi-24V and 3 Mi-24P) and multipurpose (5 Mi-17-1V, 4 Mi-17, 1 Mi-17MD, 1 Mi-17V-5, 1 AW139).⁹²

When comparing the defense forces of the DRC and Rwanda, it is easy to draw parallels with the biblical story of David and Goliath. The small and mobile Rwandan army seems far more effective than the cumbersome and inefficient DRC forces.

However, the current state of the DRC armed forces is a direct result of the internal political developments at the turn of the twenty-first century. The need to integrate various opposing factions into a unified military made the new army into a tool for balancing power within the DRC, while economic issues prevented the allocation of sufficient funds to maintain it at an adequate level. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Kinshasa's efforts to restore order in the eastern provinces have been unsuccessful, considering that some of its opponents, such as M23, function more like full-fledged armies than rebel groups.⁹³

⁸⁵ *The Military Balance 2024*. London: Routledge. P. 464.

⁸⁶ Rwanda deploys force protection troops to Central African Republic. *Ministry of Defence of Rwanda*. December 20, 2020. URL: <https://www.mod.gov.rw/news-detail/rwanda-deploys-force-protection-troops-to-central-african-republic>

⁸⁷ Rwanda deploys joint force to Mozambique. *Ministry of Defence of Rwanda*. July 10, 2021. URL: <https://www.mod.gov.rw/news-detail/rwanda-deploys-joint-force-to-mozambique-1>

⁸⁸ *The Military Balance 2024*. London: Routledge. P. 512.

⁸⁹ Tiran-5 is an Israeli modification of captured T-55 tanks, captured during the Six-Day War of 1967.

⁹⁰ *The Military Balance 2024*. London: Routledge. P. 512.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ UN envoy warns Congo's M23 rebels are acting like an army. *The Associated Press*. June 30, 2022. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/africa-rwanda-united-nations-peacekeeping-forces-angola-c995421228c480461af02cc68dc9b4aa#>

In contrast, the RDF were forged in the heat of the civil wars that swept Rwanda and the DRC in the 1990s and early 2000s, with armed units of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) transforming into a fully-fledged and professional military. To a significant extent, the credit for this should be attributed to the leader of the RPF and the current president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame. The current situation minimizes the army's involvement in political life and prevents it from becoming a political actor. On the other hand, the Rwandan army does not have enough personnel or equipment to carry out large-scale operations on DRC territory. Furthermore, any full-scale Rwandan military operation would raise questions as to its objectives. For example, establishing control over the North Kivu province would not go unnoticed by the international community or the neighboring countries, as it would impact the regional balance of power. Additionally, it would harm both Rwanda's image and that of its defense forces, which are considered one of the most effective security providers on the continent.

This is why Kigali sticks to indirect warfare, supporting the M23 rebels and backing them through a media campaign, while denying its involvement in the conflict in Kivu and accusing the DRC of collaborating with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ See, e.g.: RDF requests release of soldiers. *Ministry of Defense of Rwanda*. May 28, 2022. URL: <https://www.mod.gov.rw/news-detail/rdf-requests-release-of-soldiers>; Rwanda clarifies security posture. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Rwanda*. February 18, 2024. URL: <https://www.minaffet.gov.rw/updates/news-details/rwanda-clarifies-security-posture>

PART III. ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF THE CONFLICT

The Lobito Corridor in the Global Geoeconomic Context

The implementation of the Lobito Corridor project holds strategic significance that extends far beyond the borders of the three African nations directly involved—Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zambia. In this context, it is worth taking a closer look at the project against the backdrop of global geoeconomic developments, particularly the intensifying competition between the United States and China, including in the high-tech sector, which has become increasingly important for the African continent as well.

Denis
Degterev

The Shape of U.S.–China Rivalry in Africa

Until recently, the rivalry between China and the United States in Africa remained limited in scope due to a number of objective reasons.⁹⁵ In both trade turnover and investment inflows, China is far ahead of the U.S. Given that the continent's investment needs amount to trillions of dollars, the debate over who will invest tens of billions more—the U.S. or China—is not particularly relevant for African nations.

Whereas Donald Trump never visited Africa during his presidency,⁹⁶ the Biden administration noticeably increased its diplomatic engagement with the continent. In December 2022, Washington hosted the second U.S.–Africa Leaders Summit, attended by the heads of state or government from 49 African countries (mostly presidents and prime ministers, with four countries represented by their foreign ministers), as well as the African Union.⁹⁷

The first efforts to counter China's influence in African infrastructure development involved joint projects with the U.S.'s QUAD partners⁹⁸ as part of initiatives like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (Japan and India) and Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure. The very name of the latter project implies a contrast with the perceived quality of the infrastructure built by China. While these efforts introduced some localized competition with

⁹⁵ See: Degtyarev, D.A. (ed.). *Competition between the USA and China: Opportunities for Russia*. Moscow: Aspect Press, 2024. Pp. 206–210;

10 Things to Know about the US-China Rivalry in Africa. The U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit is about U.S. relations with the continent – but China sits in the background. *United States Institute of Peace*. December 7, 2022. URL: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/12/10-things-know-about-us-china-rivalry-africa>

⁹⁶ Urmov, A.Yu. *USA – Africa: Policy of the Trump Administration. 2017–2019*. Moscow: IAF RAS, 2020. 294 p.

⁹⁷ U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit. *US Department of State*. URL: <https://www.state.gov/africasummit/>

⁹⁸ Khudaykulova, A.V., Ramich, M.S. "Quad 2.0": A Four-Party Dialogue to Counterbalance China in the Indo-Pacific Region. *Polis. Political studies*. 2020. Vol. 29(3). Pp. 23–43.
URL: https://www.fnisc.ru/index.php?page_id=2624&jn=polis&jn=polis&jid=56572020

Chinese investments, particularly in East Africa,⁹⁹ their overall impact has been limited.

One reason is that Japanese investors, backed by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), often refrained from operating the port infrastructure they helped construct. With no commercial interests of their own, they handed control over to local authorities—who in turn often passed it on to Chinese companies. This sparked visible frustration on the Japanese side,¹⁰⁰ as they found themselves, in effect, building high-quality infrastructure that ultimately facilitated China's expanding presence.

Nevertheless, by 2024, the United States—thanks to the accumulated “critical mass” of initiatives aimed at containing China—finally managed to reach the point when it could counter Beijing on a strategic level, offering financing that was comparable to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This was made possible through the simultaneous implementation of several projects and the creation of institutions designed to counter China globally, including in Africa:

The launch of the Blue Dot Network, an initiative by the United States, Japan, Australia, Spain, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Turkey, as well as Canada, the Czech Republic, Peru, and Palau, aimed at developing infrastructure and funding projects in developing countries. The project's Secretariat started operations in April 2024 at the OECD headquarters in Paris.¹⁰¹

The establishment of the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) in 2022, which Angola, Zambia, and the DRC joined.¹⁰²

The formation of the Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation, compromising 32 Atlantic coastal countries on four continents, including nearly all coastal African nations from Morocco to Angola (except Cameroon and the DRC).¹⁰³ This was announced during the General Debate of the UN General Assembly in September 2023.

The creation of the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) in 2019, a new U.S. government agency whose top priority is “infrastructure and critical minerals.”¹⁰⁴

The launch of the U.S. Countering Chinese Influence Fund by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of State, with an annual budget of \$300 million.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ See: Korybko, A. The competition between China and India in East Africa as expressed through the rival Silk Road and Asia-Africa Growth Corridor projects. In: *Africa's turn to the East and Russia's interests*. Moscow: Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. 2018. Pp. 97-112;

¹⁰⁰ Amuhaya, C., Degterev, D. Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy Tool: Competition of Projects of Aid Allocation to Kenya between Japan and China. *Asia and Africa Today*. No. 12. Pp. 68-74. 2019.

¹⁰¹ Kitaoka S. Vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. *Asia-Pacific Review*. 2019. 26 (01). Pp. 7-17.

¹⁰² Blue Dot Network. *US Department of State*. URL: <https://www.state.gov/blue-dot-network/>

¹⁰² Memorandum on the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment. *White House*. June 26, 2022. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/06/26/memorandum-on-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>

¹⁰³ Atlantic Cooperation. *US Department of State*. URL: <https://www.state.gov/atlantic-cooperation/>

¹⁰⁴ Investing in Development. *US. International Development Finance Corporation*. URL: <https://www.dfc.gov/>

¹⁰⁵ Countering Malign Influence and Actors. *USAID Key Accomplishments. USAID*. URL: <https://www.usaid.gov/document/usaid-key-accomplishments>

Although China is one of the non-regional shareholders in the African Development Bank (AfDB), it is the United States and its allies that play a dominant role there, collectively controlling 41.27% of non-regional voting shares. The Bank's executive directors include Canadian, Danish, Belgian, U.S., German, Italian, and Argentinian nationals. Moreover, the United States has openly acknowledged its influence over the African Development Bank, alongside the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁰⁶

The most tangible outcome of these broader efforts is the Lobito Corridor project, whose official website explicitly states that this investment represents "the first alternative from Washington DC to China's Belt and Road Initiative."¹⁰⁷ In order to effectively counter China, the United States was compelled to significantly adjust its approach to foreign assistance, moving beyond traditional humanitarian cooperation (such as support for NGOs, education, healthcare, and so on) and entering the domain of infrastructure development—an area where China, and earlier the Soviet Union, had long been active in Africa.¹⁰⁸ Historically, the West has not encouraged infrastructure and industrial development in the Global South. The relevant department of the World Bank was restructured in the 1990s.

By the time the U.S.-backed Lobito Corridor initiative was launched, China had already become the largest foreign investor in the mining industries of the DRC and Zambia, with a project portfolio across the three countries exceeding \$20 billion (see Table 2). Notably, even the railway across Angola to the port of Lobito had already been renovated with Chinese government support between 2006 and 2014, as part of a major \$2 billion infrastructure project.¹⁰⁹

Table 2. Chinese BRI Investment in the Lobito Corridor Countries, 2013-2023

Country	Key Areas of Cooperation	Investment, USD billion
Zambia	Mining, oil production, gas pipeline construction, energy, communications	11.8
DRC	Mining, hydrocarbon exploration, infrastructure, storage, communications	6.0
Angola	Energy, mining, natural resource processing, port infrastructure, communications	4.2
TOTAL		22.0

Source: *Observer Research Foundation*¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Degtyarev, D.A. "Collective self-reliance": A new reading of the concept in the Sahel in the context of the emergence of a multipolar world. *Scientific notes of the Institute of Africa of the Russian Academy of Sciences*. 2024. No. 2. P. 73.

¹⁰⁷ Lobito Corridor: What It Is & Why It Matters. *Invest Lobito Corridor*. January, 2024.
URL: <https://www.lobitocorridor.org/history-background>

¹⁰⁸ Davidchuk, A.S., Degterev, D.A., Korendyasov, E.N. Soviet structural assistance to the Republic of Mali in 1960-1968. *Bulletin of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia. Series: International Relations*. 2022. No. 22 (04). Pp. 714-727.

¹⁰⁹ Lobito Corridor: What It Is & Why It Matters. *Invest Lobito Corridor*. January, 2024.
URL: <https://www.lobitocorridor.org/history-background>

¹¹⁰ Gupta, P. The Lobito Corridor: The West's bid against Chinese domination in Central Africa // Observer Research Foundation. December 11, 2023.
URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-lobito-corridor-the-west-s-bid-against-chinese-domination-in-central-africa>

In contrast, U.S. (and more broadly, Western) investments in these three countries are only planned to increase to just over \$2 billion (see Table 3)—a figure that is significantly smaller than China’s.

Table 3. Planned G7 PGII Investments in Lobito Corridor Countries

Country	Key Projects	Investment, USD billion
Zambia	Zambia-Lobito Railway, soft loans for small businesses, Airtel digital infrastructure expansion	0.66
DRC	Lobito Atlantic Railway, soft loans for small businesses, Airtel digital infrastructure expansion	0.45
Angola	Lobito Atlantic Railway, 900 MW solar power plants	0.90
TOTAL		2.01

Source: Observer Research Foundation¹¹¹

Foreign experts have pointed out that China invests in the region bypassing the U.S.-centric financial system and its key coordinating body, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which underlies the collective West’s monopoly on project financing in the Global South.¹¹² Still more worrying is the mechanism that aligns the activities of tens of thousands of Chinese state-owned companies in foreign markets. It allows China to rapidly mobilize both funding and, crucially, the efforts of its economic operators to implement projects of strategic importance abroad.¹¹³

Nevertheless, the United States has succeeded in establishing a localized advantage over non-Western actors in this part of Africa. Moreover, the ongoing Lobito Corridor project is driven not only by political considerations but also by economic ones.

From 5G Wars to Multilayered Containment of China’s High-Tech Industry

Under the first Trump administration, the U.S. launched the Clean Network initiative in 2019–2020, aiming to curb the spread of Chinese 5G technologies—primarily those developed by Huawei and ZTE—around the world.¹¹⁴ At the time, China was leading in the deployment of more affordable 5G solutions, including

¹¹¹ Gupta, P. The Lobito Corridor: The West’s bid against Chinese domination in Central Africa. *Observer Research Foundation*. December 11, 2023.

URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-lobito-corridor-the-west-s-bid-against-chinese-domination-in-central-africa>

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Carmody, P. Post-Peak China in Africa. *Hungarian Journal of African Studies*. 2023. Vol. 17. No 1. Pp. 14-15. 2023.

URL: <https://journals.lib.pte.hu/index.php/afrikatanulmanyok/issue/view/642>

¹¹⁴ The Clean Network. U.S. Department of State. URL: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-clean-network/>

within Europe.¹¹⁵ Chinese firms were also actively piloting and implementing their 5G technologies across African countries.¹¹⁶

The Biden administration significantly adjusted the U.S. approach to technological competition with China,¹¹⁷ expanding it to target intermediate segments of the global supply chain—most notably, the semiconductor sector. This led to the creation of the CHIP-4 (also referred to as FAB-4) alliance, which includes Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and the United States. However, Washington did not stop there. Despite restrictions on semiconductor exports to China under the CHIP-4 framework, the U.S. is quite pessimistic about a true decoupling within what is essentially one big East Asian semiconductor ecosystem—one that accounts for up to 90% of global chip production. The interdependence between Korean, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Chinese suppliers is extremely high, and their factories are often located within just a few hundred kilometers of one another.

As a result, the U.S. has resorted to implementing its “Plan B”: creating a fully U.S.-based domestic semiconductor production cluster from scratch.¹¹⁸ Washington has introduced a range of incentive packages for the world’s leading semiconductor manufacturers, including East Asian firms, aimed at ramping up production on American soil. A similar approach is being applied to other high-tech industries, particularly in the context of the clean energy transition. In effect, the U.S. continues to deepen the process of decoupling from globalized tech supply chains¹¹⁹—an effort it initially set in motion.

The Lobito Corridor should be considered within this broader context: as a strategic supply route for raw materials (especially “green metals”) to fuel high-tech manufacturing in the United States and Europe. The main idea is to ensure that the critical natural resources required for this production are exported exclusively westward, effectively cutting off alternative routes to the east (see Figure 5). Those behind the Lobito Corridor initiative argue that the distance from major mining zones—notably the Katanga region in eastern Congo and the Zambian Copperbelt—to the port of Lobito is significantly shorter than to alternative ports in Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa (Durban), or Namibia.¹²⁰

Just as Cold War-era rhetoric revolved around securing “non-communist” deposits and supply chains,¹²¹ in today’s context of “new bipolarity”¹²² the focus

¹¹⁵ Degterev, D.A. (ed.). *Competition between the USA and China: Opportunities for Russia*. Moscow: Aspect Press. 2024. Pp. 116-121.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., Pp. 210-211.

¹¹⁷ Degterev, D.A. (ed.). *Competition between the USA and China: Opportunities for Russia*. Moscow: Aspect Press. 2024. Pp. 68-73.

¹¹⁸ Danilin, I.V., Selyanin, Ya.V. The Nanometer Race: American Policy Towards Taiwan and the Republic of Korea. *Global Economy and International Relations*. 2023. 67 (11). Pp. 80–88.

¹¹⁹ Danilin, I.V. U.S.-China Tech War: Risks and Opportunities for China and the Global Tech Sector. *Comparative Politics*. Vol. 11. No. 4. Pp. 160–176. 2020. URL: <https://www.sravpol.ru/jour/article/view/1246>

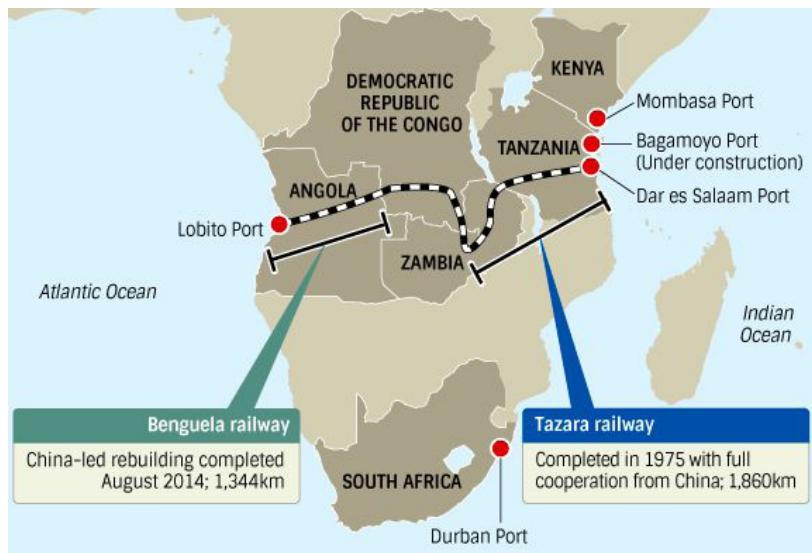
¹²⁰ Lobito Corridor: What It Is & Why It Matters. *Invest Lobito Corridor*. January, 2024. URL: <https://www.lobitocorridor.org/history-background>

¹²¹ Ogunbadejo, O. *The International Politics of Africa’s Strategic Minerals*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. 1-14.

¹²² Degterev, D.A., Ramich, M.S., Tsvykh, A.V. U.S. – China: “Power Transition” and the Outlines of “Conflict Bipolarity.” *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*. 2021. Vol. 21. No. 2. Pp. 210 – 231.

has shifted to securing “non-Chinese” resource deposits and value chains. Applying this terminology to African mineral assets comes with caveats, as a significant portion of reserves in the DRC, Zambia, and Angola have already been awarded as concessions to Chinese companies. As such, the collective West is now actively working to regain control over these mineral resources.

Figure 5. Competing Export Routes for Natural Resources in Southern Africa



Source: *China-Lusophone Brief*¹²³

It is no coincidence that both U.S. and Chinese delegations have become more frequent visitors to Angola. In just the first four months of 2024, several top-level visits took place: U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited on January 25 and met with President Joao Lourenco;¹²⁴ Chinese Premier Li Qiang followed on March 15, also meeting with the Angolan president;¹²⁵ and USAID Administrator Samantha Power visited on April 25–26 and even traveled by train along the Benguela railway.¹²⁶

That said, the issue extends beyond China’s import of African raw materials. In fact, substantial volumes that are exported eastward via the Indian Ocean actually

¹²³ Lobito Corridor set to become the world’s most important critical minerals railway. *China-Lusophone Brief*. February 16, 2023. URL: <https://www.clbrief.com/lobito-corridor-set-to-become-the-worlds-most-important-critical-minerals-railway/>

¹²⁴ Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Angolan Foreign Minister Téte António at a Joint Press Availability. US Department of State, January 25, 2024. URL: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-angolan-foreign-minister-tete-antonio-at-a-joint-press-availability/>

¹²⁵ Li Qiang Meets with Angolan President João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço. MFA of PRC. March 15, 2023. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202403/t20240316_11261570.html

¹²⁶ Administrator Samantha Power Concludes Her Visit to Angola. USAID. April 26, 2024. URL: <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/apr-26-2024-administrator-samantha-power-concludes-her-visit-angola>

go to the Gulf countries (mainly the UAE),¹²⁷ India, Japan, and others. These nations—not just China—stand to incur losses. The same goes for transit states in East Africa, such as Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and South Africa. This raises the question of how to compensate for lost revenues, lest the “decoupling” dynamic deepen even within Africa itself. Already, Atlantic-coast nations tend to fall within the U.S. sphere of influence, while East African states are increasingly aligned with China. China also maintains a far larger network of trade and economic agreements with foreign partners than the United States, which tends to focus more on global military deployment.

It is particularly noteworthy that most of the investments discussed above are being directed toward infrastructure for exporting raw materials from Southern Africa, rather than for processing on site.¹²⁸ Despite a series of policy papers and recommendations published by the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) in 2023–2024, urging the extension of value chains within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) as part of the energy transition,¹²⁹ there is still a long way to go before those ideas are put into practice.

¹²⁷ On the Trail of African Gold. Quantifying production and trade to combat illicit flows. SwissAid. May 30, 2024. URL: <https://www.swissaid.ch/en/articles/on-the-trail-of-african-gold/>

¹²⁸ Saleem, M. Large MNCs Involved in Technology and the Green Transition Abet Extractive Post-Colonial Relations with the Global South – But Who, if Anyone, Can Take Measures to Reduce Exploitative Habits from MNCs? *LSE International Development Review*. 2024. Vol. 1. Issue 1. Pp. 15-16. URL: <https://ildr.lse.ac.uk/articles/82>

¹²⁹ Cloete, D. et al. Exploring the Critical Minerals Ecosystem in SADC: Country Barriers and Enablers. SAIIA. September 27, 2023. URL: <https://saiia.org.za/research/exploring-the-critical-minerals-ecosystem-in-sadc-country-barriers-and-enablers/>

Mining in Eastern Congo: Current Situation and Prospects

Vsevolod
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The Changing structure of the global economy and the ongoing energy transition have already given rise to a new system of interconnected markets: the extraction of critical minerals,¹³⁰ their processing and use in the manufacture of high-tech products. Some estimates put the market size for energy transition minerals at \$325 billion in 2023.¹³¹ Given their significant reserves of critical minerals, many African countries hope to turn these resources into a major source of government revenue. The key player here is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, particularly its eastern regions, where several separate mining zones have emerged for the extraction of cobalt, copper, coltan (a source of tantalum and niobium)¹³² and other minerals. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, in 2023 the DRC accounted for 57% of global cobalt production,¹³³ 41% of global tantalum production,¹³⁴ and 10% of global copper production.¹³⁵ The development of the Congo's mining sector also generates spillover benefits for neighboring countries—most notably Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zambia—which serve as transit routes for ore mined in eastern DRC.

It is important to recognize that eastern Congo¹³⁶ is a vast region—roughly the size of Turkey or Chile (about 750,000 sq. km)—with an ethnically diverse population. What happens in one part of the region does not necessarily affect others. For example, tensions near Lake Kivu, including the activity of the M23 rebel group, border disputes between the DRC and Rwanda, and the general escalation in that area, have only an indirect impact on the southeastern areas that share a border with Zambia and Tanzania.

It is also essential to understand the difference between different mining regions. For example, coltan is mined by small-scale miners in the Lake Kivu region: the ore is low-grade, found close to the surface, and is not cost-efficient enough for industrial-scale mining. After extraction, the ore is transported overland through Rwanda to ports in East Africa and then exported from there. In 2023 alone, Rwanda officially exported \$1 billion worth of minerals, a figure driven primarily by the transit of Congolese coltan.¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Critical minerals, sometimes referred to as strategic minerals, are natural resources that are essential to the global economy but whose reserves may be at risk. These include, for example, cobalt, copper, lithium, nickel, and rare earth elements.

¹³¹ Global Critical Minerals Outlook 2024. Market Review. IEA.

URL: <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-critical-minerals-outlook-2024/market-review>

¹³² Columbite-tantalite (coltan, $(\text{Fe},\text{Mn})(\text{Nb},\text{Ta},\text{Ti})_2\text{O}_6$) is a solid solution of columbite and tantalite, an ore from which the elements niobium and tantalum are extracted.

¹³³ Mineral Commodity Summaries 2024. USGS. *Science for a Changing World*. P. 63.
URL: <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2024/mcs2024.pdf>

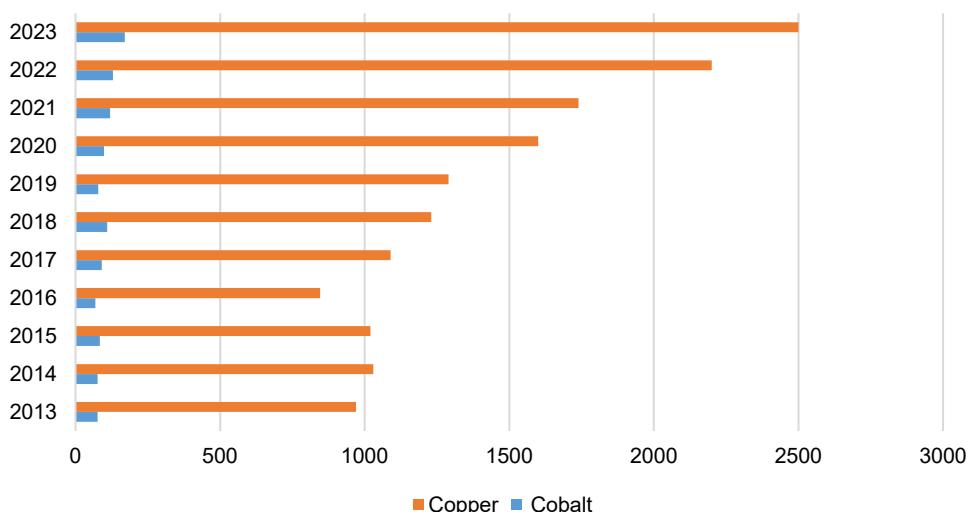
¹³⁴ Ibid., P. 177.

¹³⁵ Ibid., P. 65.

¹³⁶ The term "Eastern Congo" is traditionally used to refer to the territory of two provinces of the Belgian Congo, Orientale and Katanga.

¹³⁷ Rwanda's mineral exports rake in record high \$1bn in 2023 // The New Times. July 10, 2024.

URL: <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/14541/news/economy/rwandas-mineral-exports-rake-in-record-high-1bn-in-2023>

Figure 6. Cobalt and Copper Production in the DRC, thousand tons

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the United States Geological Survey (USGS)¹³⁸

The cobalt and copper reserves that many see as the future of the global battery industry—and the foundation of the DRC's economic prospects—are concentrated in “the Copperbelt”: a series of geological formations in the southern DRC and northern Zambia. Ore from the Copperbelt is exported via different routes—primarily through South Africa and Tanzania. Therefore, it is important not to conflate the situation in Kivu and that in Katanga, nor the strategic interests of non-African actors involved in these regions.

Competition for Africa's critical minerals is intensifying year by year, and the race between Western and Chinese investors for control of mines is becoming increasingly fierce. As these markets are still developing, African countries are working on the legal and regulatory frameworks to govern these sectors, while the roster of foreign investors changes year to year. At this stage, it is crucial for African nations to avoid repeating the mistakes made in the oil and gas sector.¹³⁹ That experience shows that the window for structuring the industry and laying down the norms and regulations is short, and once established, rules tend to be rigid and difficult to revise. Even today, the oil and gas sectors in countries like Algeria, Egypt, and Nigeria largely operate under frameworks established during the late colonial period.

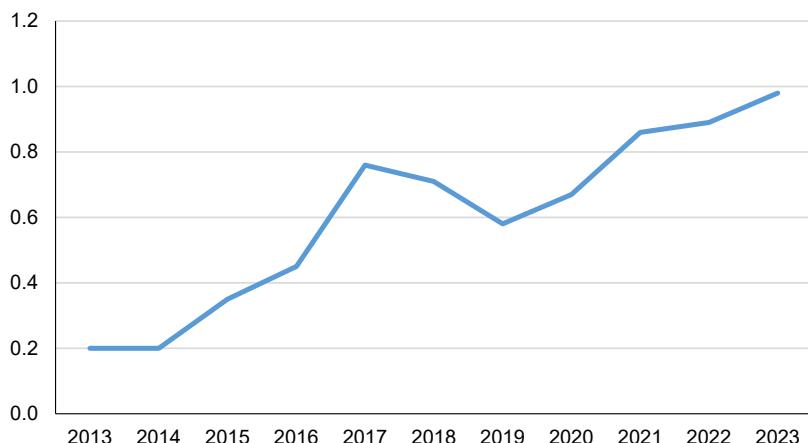
When it comes to mineral extraction, especially in remote inland regions like eastern Congo, transport infrastructure plays a decisive role. Considering the perpetually problematic situation with rail and road networks, even a single non-electrified railway line to a port on the Atlantic or Indian Ocean can trigger

¹³⁸ Mineral Commodity Summaries 2024. USGS. *Science for a Changing World*.
URL: <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2024/mcs2024.pdf>

¹³⁹ Such mistakes include the structural orientation of African oil and gas sectors toward exports rather than the development of domestic markets, the lack of transparency in the allocation of extraction and exploration licenses, and so on.

rapid development of the mining sector and tether entire mining and processing regions to specific consumer markets.

Figure 7. Tantalum Production in the DRC, thousand tons



Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the United States Geological Survey (USGS)¹⁴⁰

The DRC is a vivid illustration of the East–West rivalry in Africa. So far, Kinshasa has managed a relatively successful balancing act between Washington and Beijing, occasionally indulging the interests of both. On the one hand, the Congolese authorities see Chinese investors as strategic partners for the development of the mining sector. The DRC has joined the East African Community (EAC), which will facilitate the export of minerals to ports on the East African coast. On the other hand, Kinshasa actively supports the Lobito Corridor project, which will enable it to export ore to the West African coast, and has regularly put pressure on Chinese investors by suspending their operations. Meanwhile, Western corporate influence within Congo's mining industry is becoming increasingly visible.

Thanks in no small part to media attention and the scale of its financing (as the U.S. has historically prioritized trade over large-scale infrastructure projects in Africa), the Lobito Corridor has become one of the key signs of Washington's renewed interest in Africa. The Corridor consists of several interconnected projects aimed at developing transport infrastructure across Angola, the DRC, and Zambia, providing these countries with access to the Atlantic coast. The existing transport infrastructure—specifically, the Benguela Railway, which runs 1,866 km from Tenke in the DRC to Lobito in Angola, connecting eastern Congo (Katanga) and the Atlantic coast—was originally constructed in the early twentieth century during the colonial period. Later, parts of the railway were used to export uranium (including for the Manhattan Project), tin, and copper

¹⁴⁰ Mineral Commodity Summaries 2024. USGS, *Science for a Changing World*. P. 63.
URL: <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2024/mcs2024.pdf>

from the Belgian Congo to Atlantic ports.¹⁴¹ Civil conflicts in both Angola and the DRC in the second half of the twentieth century led to the railway's decline and fragmentation. Although parts of the line were restored during the 1990s and 2000s, they operated in isolation from one another.

In July 2022, the Angolan government announced the results of the tender for the 30-year concession of the Lobito–Luau railway section (1,344 km). The winning bid came from the Lobito Atlantic Railway consortium, in which Singaporean commodity trader Trafigura and Portuguese construction firm Mota-Engil each hold a 49.5% stake, and Belgian rail infrastructure operator Vecturis holds 1%. Their offer prevailed over a competing bid from a Chinese consortium (CITIC, Sinotrans, and CR20).¹⁴² Under the terms of the concession agreement, the consortium is to pay the Angolan government \$2.125 billion over the 30-year period.¹⁴³ It has also committed to increasing freight volume on the line to 4.98 million tons by the twentieth year of the concession and to invest approximately \$310 million in infrastructure development. The agreement provides for a twenty-year extension if the consortium builds a branch off the Benguela Railway from Luacano to Jimbe, on the Zambian border.

In July 2023, the railway was formally transferred to the consortium. In February 2024, the first freight contracts were signed: Trafigura secured rights to transport 450,000 tons annually starting in 2025,¹⁴⁴ while a consortium of Canadian mining company Ivanhoe Mines and Chinese firm Zijin Mining that has a copper extraction project in the DRC (the Kamoa-Kakula mine)—another example of ongoing Sino-Western partnerships in Africa—was granted transport capacity ranging from 120,000 to 240,000 tons per year starting in 2025 (and 10,000 tons in 2024).¹⁴⁵ In addition, in December 2023, AGL, a subsidiary of Swiss shipping giant MSC, received a concession for the Port of Lobito, with a commitment to invest at least \$100 million in its development.¹⁴⁶

The Lobito Corridor project enjoys strong backing from Western countries. At the 2023 G7 Summit, U.S. President Joe Biden announced Washington's intention to support the project through the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and

¹⁴¹ Africa's secret weapon: Extracting this resource will help present the continent's true potential to the world. *RT*. March 7, 2024. URL: <https://www.rt.com/africa/593782-uranium-africa-energy-markets/>

¹⁴² Trafigura/Mota-Engil/Vecturis versus CITIC/Sinotrans/CR20 for Lobito Corridor Bid. *Africa Business +*. January 25, 2022. URL: <https://www.africabusinessplus.com/en/810869/trafigura-mota-engil-vecturis-versus-citic-sinotrans-cr20-for-lobito-corridor-bid/>

¹⁴³ Initial investment of \$100m, and rental fees of \$319.4m in the first 10 years, \$787.4m in the second 10-year period and US\$919.0m in the final decade. See: Lobito Corridor concession deal signed. *Railway Gazette International*. November 8, 2022. URL: <https://www.railwaygazette.com/infrastructure/lobito-corridor-concession-deal-signed/62920.article>

¹⁴⁴ Kamoa-Kakula, Trafigura become first Lobito railway corridor customers. *Mining Weekly*. February 7, 2024. URL: <https://www.miningweekly.com/article/kamoa-kakula-trafigura-become-first-lobito-railway-corridor-customers-2024-02-07>

¹⁴⁵ Ivanhoe Mines' Kamoa-Kakula Signs Term Sheet to Export Copper Along Lobito Atlantic Railway Corridor. *Ivanhoe Mines*. February 7, 2024. URL: <https://www.ivanhoe-mines.com/news-stories/news-release/ivanhoe-mines-kamoa-kakula-signs-term-sheet-to-export-copper-along-lobito-atlantic-railway-corridor/>

¹⁴⁶ Signing of the concession contract for the multipurpose terminal and containers at the port of Lobito. *Africa Global Logistics*. December 11, 2023. URL: <https://www.aglgroup.com/en/signing-of-the-concession-contract-for-the-multipurpose-terminal-and-containers-at-the-port-of-lobito/>

Investment (PGII).¹⁴⁷ In October 2023, the governments of the United States, Angola, the DRC, and Zambia, along with the European Commission and the Africa Finance Corporation (AFC)¹⁴⁸ signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate on the Corridor's development. In February 2024, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) announced a \$250 million loan to the AFC to finance construction of a branch railway line connecting Zambia to the Benguela railway in Angola.¹⁴⁹ The loan is subject to approval by the U.S. Congress.

The Lobito Corridor is clearly meant to become an alternative export route for minerals from Zambia and southeastern Congo, counterbalancing the existing "eastern corridor." As of 2024, most of the extracted ore from the Copperbelt is still trucked either east or south and then exported through Tanzanian and South African ports to China. In recent years, China has also boosted investment in railway infrastructure in Tanzania and Zambia to streamline these export routes.¹⁵⁰

At the same time, the Lobito Corridor project carries considerable risks. Traditionally, U.S. companies have shown limited interest in direct investment in Africa's mining sector. In fact, Washington often outsources this to Australian and Canadian firms, which, until recently, relied heavily on Chinese financing, often guaranteed by future delivery contracts. The success of the project will depend on the U.S. and its partners' ability to secure new offtake agreements¹⁵¹ for ore—most of which are currently held by Chinese companies—and on their capacity to push Kinshasa into easing regulatory pressure on foreign investors, particularly in terms of environmental, labor and industrial standards. Apart from China, the launch of the Lobito Corridor could also affect Tanzania, as Congolese and Zambian transit routes represent a major source of its revenue.

¹⁴⁷ FACT SHEET: Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment at the G7 Summit. *The White House*. May 20, 2023. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/fact-sheet-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment-at-the-g7-summit/>

¹⁴⁸ AFC (Africa Finance Corporation) is a pan-African financial institution established in 2007. Its largest shareholder is the Central Bank of Nigeria (41.9%). Other shareholders include ten African countries, the Nigerian reinsurance company Africa Re, the African Development Bank, and the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA), which was founded by the League of Arab States.

¹⁴⁹ DFC Announces New U.S. Financing for Africa's Lobito Corridor. DFC. February 8, 2024. URL: <https://www.dfc.gov/media/press-releases/dfc-announces-new-us-financing-africas-lobito-corridor>

¹⁵⁰ MoU signed to revitalize TAZARA railway. *Global Times*. September 4, 2024. URL: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202409/1319255.shtml>

¹⁵¹ An offtake agreement is a purchase contract for a commodity—typically raw materials—that has not yet been produced or extracted. It is concluded between a producer planning to manufacture or extract a specific quantity of a product and a company (the off-taker) that agrees to buy it in advance for future use.

PART IV. HUMANITARIAN DIMENSION

Strangers Among Friends: Rwandophones in the Congo

The 2021 escalation of the conflict between Rwanda and the M23 rebel group on one side, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the other, drew renewed attention to the status and rights of Rwandophones—those of Rwandan origin who speak the indigenous language Kinyarwanda. In academia and research, they are also sometimes referred to as the Banyamulenge or Banyarwanda, but the definitions of these terms are imprecise and vary greatly depending on the source. Since language serves as the main marker of their geographic origin, the following research will use the term “Rwandophones” to refer to those who speak Kinyarwanda. The group is sometimes assumed to include Kirundi speakers as well, given how closely the two languages are related.

Estimates suggest that there are approximately 40 million Rwandophones living in the Great Lakes region, but only about 13 million have Rwandan passports.¹⁵² The rest live in border areas of Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, the DRC, and Kenya. Some were naturalized through migration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while others have lived in the region for at least four centuries.

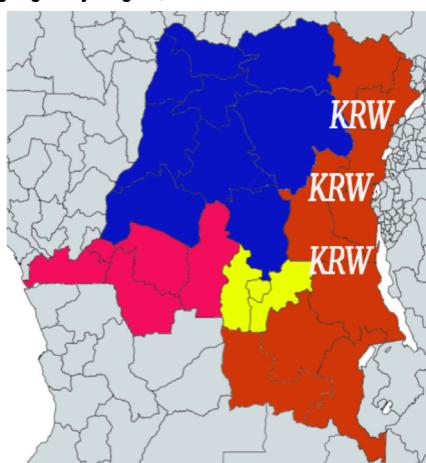
Figure 8. Distribution of Predominant Languages by Region, the DRC

Distribution of Predominant Languages by Region, the DRC

Dominant language:

- ◆ Lingala
- ◆ Kikongo
- ◆ Tshiluba
- ◆ Swahili

KRW Kinyarwanda



Source: Compiled by the author based on open data

In Uganda, Kinyarwanda speakers—often referred to as *Myaru*—do not constitute a politically or ethnically unified minority. The group includes Hutu, Tutsi, Twa, and others, and among the Hutu living near the DRC-Rwanda border,

¹⁵² Nirimngabo, G. Security Crisis and Complex Banyarwanda Equation in DRC. *The EastAfrican*. August 4, 2022. URL: <https://www.theeastfrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/security-crisis-and-complex-banyarwanda-equation-in-drc-3904854>

Mayya
Nikolskaya

many consider themselves more “indigenous” to Congo than the Tutsi.¹⁵³ Their degree of loyalty to the Rwandan government also varies considerably.¹⁵⁴ While Rwandophones in other countries of the region have generally integrated into society and enjoy full citizenship rights, in the DRC—where their population is estimated at up to 400,000 people¹⁵⁵—they have, for decades, been at the very center of an unresolved and violent conflict. As of spring 2024, Burundi has also become involved in the escalation.¹⁵⁶

The Phantom Menace

For much of its history, eastern Congo has been a magnet for migration. Its fertile lands have drawn both those seeking steady work and those fleeing violence in their home countries. Back in 1937, during the colonial period, the Belgian administration launched the Banyarwanda Immigration Mission to Zaire (as Congo was then called) to address labor shortages on plantations. In 1959, a new wave of refugees arrived in North Kivu following the Rwandan Revolution, and again after Burundi and Rwanda gained independence in 1962. Another surge of migration came in 1972, after the genocide carried out by the Bujumbura Tutsi regime.¹⁵⁷

However until the 1990s, the fact that this minority was linguistically and ethnically different had not been heavily politicized. It only became dangerous to be a Rwandophone in the Congo after three turning points.

The first was the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which sent waves of refugees into eastern Congo, including members of the *Interahamwe*, the Hutu militia responsible for the genocide. Thus, the hostility between the two ethnic groups was transplanted to Congolese soil. Many ex-*Interahamwe* fighters and their sympathizers regrouped to form the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) led by Paul Rwarakabije, whose default *modus operandi* was terrorizing Rwandophones.

The second and third turning points were the First and Second Congo Wars, when Rwandan forces invaded Congolese territory in 1996 and 1998, respectively. These interventions created a lasting association in the minds of many Congolese between Kinyarwanda speakers and Kigali’s political agenda. In the eyes of the general public, Rwandophones came to be seen as agents of Paul Kagame’s expansionist ambitions—regardless of their individual political views or affiliations.

¹⁵³ Büscher K. (ed.) *Urban Africa and Violent Conflict Understanding Conflict Dynamics in Central and Eastern Africa from an Urban Perspective*. Routledge 2019. 230 p.

URL: <https://www.routledge.com/Urban-Africa-and-Violent-Conflict-Understanding-Conflict-Dynamics-in-Central-and-Eastern-Africa-from-an-Urban-Perspective/Buscher/p/book/9780367730376>

¹⁵⁴ Nirimngabo, G. Security Crisis and Complex Banyarwanda Equation in DRC. *The EastAfrican*. August 4, 2022. URL: <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/security-crisis-and-complex-banyarwanda-equation-in-drc-3904854>

¹⁵⁵ Rubiera, C.L. The Banyamulenge: How a Minority Ethnic Group in the DRC Became the Target of Rebels – and its own government. *The Conversation*. March 13, 2023. URL: <https://theconversation.com/the-banyamulenge-how-a-minority-ethnic-group-in-the-drc-became-the-target-of-rebels-and-its-own-government-201099>

¹⁵⁶ Mutebi, E. Burundian Army Intensifies Massacre of Banyamulenge in DRC. *The Great Lakes Eye*. March 18, 2024.

URL: https://thegreatlakeseye.com/post/?s=Burundian-army-intensifies-massacre-of-Banyamulenge-in-DRC_1342

¹⁵⁷ Jacquemot, P. The dynamics of instability in eastern DRC. *Forced Migration Review*.

URL: <https://www.fmreview.org/jacquemot/>

This belief has taken strong root, especially among Congolese nationalists. One of the recurring themes is the idea of a conspiracy in which President Kagame's government is allegedly using Rwandophones as a "Trojan horse" to place loyal proxies in positions of power in the DRC. According to this theory, such individuals would then enable Rwanda to continue exploiting the DRC's mineral resources and ultimately work toward annexing part of Kivu and undermining the Congolese state.

Another source of tension for the local population is the land issue. Accusations of "foreign origins" and conspiracy are often linked to the fact that some Rwandophones have acquired land that once belonged to white settlers or tribal chiefs. Competition over land and water has only exacerbated the conflict between the communities forced to coexist. Traditional leaders and tribal chiefs, whose role is to mediate such disputes, have failed to do so, as they have largely lost their authority after being displaced multiple times across eastern DRC due to ongoing armed conflict.

Hostile sentiment toward Rwandophones is actively fueled through social media, where graphic photo and video content is circulated, accompanied by threats of violence.¹⁵⁸ In this media climate, radical militias under the broad label Mai-Mai feel justified in publicly "exposing" those they identify as outsiders by robbing and beating them in the streets, and attacking their businesses.¹⁵⁹ According to UN reports, such incidents most frequently occur in the so-called Hauts-Plateaux (High Plateau) region, Fizi, Mwenga, and Uvira,¹⁶⁰ all located in the South Kivu province. There, Rwandophones clash with local Bafuliiru/Bafulero, Bayindu/Banyindu, and Babembe communities, which leads to the involvement of various armed groups and militias organized and allied along ethnic, linguistic, or regional lines. In major cities along the border of eastern Congo—Goma, Bukavu, Nyangezi, and Uvira—youth militias known as *Wazalendo* ("patriots") often prevent Rwandophones from accessing voter registration centers. They are barred from entering restaurants and shops owned by members of other ethno-linguistic groups.¹⁶¹

Constant accusations of being aligned with the "aggressor" inevitably provoke a backlash. Despite being fragmented, Rwandophones sometimes respond collectively by supporting armed groups—including M23—that promise to retaliate. This, in turn, sparks new cycles of violence. Another form of resistance

¹⁵⁸ Ndahinda, F.M., Mugabe, A.S. Streaming Hate: Exploring the Harm of Anti-Banyamulenge and Anti-Tutsi Hate Speech on Congolese Social Media. *Journal of Genocide Research*. May 2022.

URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360718892_Streaming_Hate_Exploring_the_Harm_of_Anti-Banyamulenge_and_Anti-Tutsi_Hate_Speech_on_Congolese_Social_Media

¹⁵⁹ Ntanyoma, R.D., Hintjens, H. Expressive Violence and the Slow Genocide of the Banyamulenge of South Kivu. *Ethnicities*. Vol. 22(3). 2022. Pp. 374–403. URL: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/14687968211009895>

¹⁶⁰ Democratic Republic of the Congo: The Situation of the Banyamulenge (2020 to March 2022). Austrian Red Cross. ACCORD. April 2022.
URL: https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2071779/ACCORD_DR+Congo_Situation+of+Banyamulenge.pdf

¹⁶¹ The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): The situation around the Banyamulenge (Tutsi or Banyarwanda). Hate discourse aimed at Rwandans, Tutsis, and the Banyamulenge community (in French: République Démocratique du Congo (RDC): Situation des Banyamulenge (Tutsi ou Banyarwanda). Discours de haine contre les Rwandais, les Tutsi et la communauté Banyamulenge). Asylos. 2023. URL: <https://asylos.libguides.com/c.php?g=713694&p=5162432>

is exercised by Rwandophone human rights advocates and researchers, such as Delphin Ntanyoma, Enock Sebinezza, and Zachee Muhamiriza, who seek to draw attention to the community's plight. Their main demands center around security, civil rights, and political inclusion. At this point, separatist rhetoric is largely absent from their discourse.

Liberté, Fraternité, Congolité?

All of these developments took on an even darker tone amid the escalation in late 2021. At that time, members of the DRC Parliament Nsingi Pululu and Noel Tshiani put forward a bill centered on the concept of "congolité"—that is, Congolese identity.¹⁶² In essence, the bill is meant to restrict eligibility for presidency and other top state positions to individuals who are not only citizens of the DRC but also have two Congolese parents. If adopted, this legislation would effectively strip Rwandophones of the right to run for office. Many still do not have Congolese citizenship despite having lived in the DRC for generations. Some even lost their citizenship in the 1980s due to state policy. Until as recently as 2023, many Rwandophones did not possess valid passports; those with refugee status retained identification documents from Rwanda, Burundi, or other countries. Meanwhile, Congolese citizens have long used voter registration cards, rather than national ID cards, to confirm their right to vote.¹⁶³ This created a legal paradox: Rwandophone communities that have lived in the DRC for decades, even lifetimes, are not legally allowed to vote and simultaneously face significant obstacles to naturalization.

The *congolité* law also has an important symbolic dimension. By using the term *congolité*, the bill's sponsors reintroduced into public discourse the idea of "purity of origin," suggesting that some individuals are more Congolese than others—a concept that inevitably breeds social alienation. History offers a comparable example from Côte d'Ivoire in the 2000s, where similar emphasis on citizenship law and the concept of *ivoirité* ultimately led to civil war. As of December 2024, the law has not been passed—thanks in large part to the efforts of Congolese human rights and religious organizations.¹⁶⁴ However, that does not mean the issue has ceased to be relevant. On the contrary, the fierce debate in the DRC parliament revealed that it is more pressing than ever.

Despite the (often inconsistent) efforts by international organizations, the problem of the status and well-being of the Rwandophone minority remains largely absent from the global agenda. At the same time, this community is routinely used as a convenient political pawn by both sides in the conflict. For Congolese nationalists,

¹⁶² Congolese Law: Nsingi Pululu Calls Former Presidents Mobutu and Kabila Foreigners (in French: Lusimana B. Loi sur la congolité: Nsingi Pululu qualifie les ex-présidents Mobutu et Kabila d'étrangers). Agence d'information d'Afrique centrale. July 26, 2021. URL: <https://www.adiac-congo.com/content/loi-sur-la-congolite-nsingi-pululu-qualifie-les-ex-presidents-mobutu-et-kabila-detrange>

¹⁶³ Nikolskaya M.V. "Congolité": Dividing Lines in the Political Life of the Contemporary DRC. *Journal of International Analytics*. 2024. 15(1). Pp.118-135.

¹⁶⁴ In the DRC, the proposed law on "congolité" is criticized from all sides (in French: En RDC, la proposition de loi sur la «congolité» est critiquée de toute part). *Courrier International*. April 11, 2023. URL: <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/identite-en-rdc-la-proposition-de-loi-sur-la-congolite-est-critiquee-de-toute-part>

it offers a way to keep state institutions and the military mobilized,¹⁶⁵ and to channel public frustration away from other domestic issues. For actors across the border, the plight of the Rwandophones serves as a justification for pursuing a military resolution to the bilateral conflict.

Meanwhile, neither Kinshasa nor Kigali has developed any mechanisms for integrating this part of the population. Maintaining only fragmented ties to a homeland that is not prepared to take them back, and living in what is effectively a territorial limbo, Rwandophones—just as they were many years ago—are left to fend for themselves.

¹⁶⁵ Rutazibwa, P. Discussing the Causes and Context of Wars and Conflict Involving the Banyarwanda from the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. *AfricArXiv*. 2023. URL: <https://doi.org/10.21428/3b2160cd.259767b3>

The Forgotten Humanitarian Crisis in the DRC

Alexey
Demidov

The humanitarian crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the most severe and protracted in the modern world. The latest estimates show that by the end of 2024 more than 25 million Congolese will be in need of emergency assistance.¹⁶⁶ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has expressed deep concern over the deteriorating situation in the country. In addition to providing daily support to affected communities, the organization seeks to raise awareness of what it considers a prime example of a forgotten humanitarian crisis—i.e. one that has been largely overlooked by the international community.

On the one hand, the current situation in the DRC is a continuation of a drawn-out crisis: over the last thirty years, conflicts in the eastern provinces alone have claimed the lives of at least 6 million people¹⁶⁷ and brought about a range of humanitarian challenges. On the other hand, what is happening today marks a fundamentally new and far more complex development, as humanitarian conditions have rapidly worsened due to the escalation of armed conflict in the eastern provinces. The humanitarian crisis in the Congo manifests as a network of interlinked problems that reinforce one another.

The scale of internal displacement in the DRC is immense. In 2023, the country recorded its highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in history: a total of around 7 million people were forced to flee their homes.¹⁶⁸ As a result, the DRC ranks third in the world in terms of internal displacement.¹⁶⁹ Displacement gives rise to a host of issues, including a food crisis, loss of livelihood, lack of access to essential services such as healthcare, poor sanitation and outbreaks of disease, security risks, and the separation of families. The situation is further exacerbated by the shifting frontlines, which often leads to people being displaced multiple times, forcing them to repeatedly endure these hardships. Mass displacement not only disrupts the lives of those directly affected, but also places an immense burden on host communities.

One of the most alarming aspects of the crisis is the deterioration in humanitarian protection for civilians. This includes indiscriminate shelling that harms non-combatants, the separation of families, a sharp increase in sexual violence, and the continued recruitment and use of child soldiers by armed groups. In 2023, the number of Congolese in need of humanitarian protection was estimated at 9.8 million,¹⁷⁰ and this figure is expected to rise as the conflict continues.

¹⁶⁶ DRC Humanitarian Crisis: Why Cash is Best. *ReliefWeb*. October 7, 2024.

URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/drc-humanitarian-crisis-why-cash-best>

¹⁶⁷ Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Global Conflict Tracker*. May 15, 2024.

URL: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-democratic-republic-congo>

¹⁶⁸ The Forgotten People of North Kivu. *ICRC*. March 1, 2024. P. 6.

URL: https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/RDC/icrc_report_the_forgotten_people_of_north_kivu.pdf

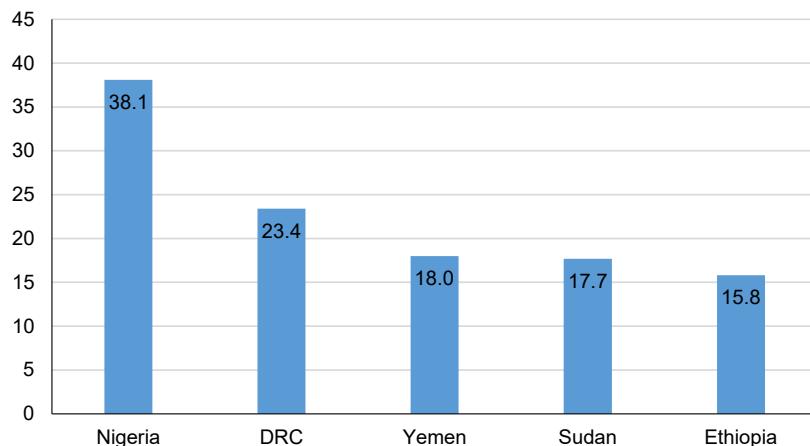
¹⁶⁹ 2024 Global Report on Internal Displacement. *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*. May 14, 2024. P. 8.

URL: <https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/IDMC-GRID-2024-Global-Report-on-Internal-Displacement.pdf>

¹⁷⁰ Humanitarian Crisis Analysis 2024. Democratic Republic of the Congo. *The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency*. March 31, 2024. P.2. URL: <https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2024/04/22142914/DRC-HCA-2024.pdf>

In 2024, the DRC ranked second globally in terms of the number of people facing acute food insecurity, with 23.4 million individuals affected.¹⁷¹ Fighting has disrupted critical transportation routes connecting cities to rural areas, severely impacting the delivery of food and driving up prices. Many farmers have become displaced and abandoned their fields, further undermining agricultural production. This is how the conflict is damaging every part of the country's food security situation.

Figure 9. Number of People in Acute Food Insecurity in 2024, millions



Source: UN Food and Agriculture Organization¹⁷²

Another major source of concern is the lack of access to medical care in areas of armed conflict. Fighting hampers the delivery of medications, the deployment of medical personnel, and the transportation of patients. Healthcare workers and facilities are periodically targeted by armed groups. The few remaining clinics and medical stations are overwhelmed by the growing number of sick and injured people, particularly in areas where IDPs are concentrated.

At present, the humanitarian challenges in the DRC are extremely serious, interlinked, and worsening as the conflicts escalate. Yet humanitarian aid for the DRC rarely becomes a priority for international donors. For example, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), approximately \$2.25 billion was required for humanitarian operations in the DRC in 2023, yet only 41.8% of that amount was actually funded.¹⁷³ Humanitarian efforts are also slowed by a cumbersome bureaucratic process for approving expenditures. The ICRC operates somewhat differently: after assessing the situation, the organization may begin working first and secure funding afterward. This flexible approach enables faster responses to rapidly escalating humanitarian crises, such as the one in the DRC.

¹⁷¹ Hunger Hotspots. FAO–WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity: June to October 2024 Outlook. *WFP and FAO*. Rome, 2024. P.6. URL: https://www.hungerhotspots.org/Reports/FAO_WFP_HH_Report_JunOct2024.pdf

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Coordinated Plans 2023. OCHA Services. 2024. URL: <https://fts.unocha.org/plans/overview/2023>

Another key challenge for humanitarian action in the DRC is limited access to affected populations. For a variety of reasons, including logistical constraints and security risks, some regions are difficult to reach. Many displaced people do not stay in official IDP camps, but instead take refuge in remote forest areas or with local families. Only about 20% of those displaced make it to camps, where it is easier for them to receive humanitarian aid.¹⁷⁴ The ICRC concentrates its efforts on reaching people who are inaccessible to other humanitarian actors—those living in rural areas and in territories controlled by non-state armed groups. The organization is able to operate in such areas thanks to its long-standing presence in the country and its ongoing dialogue with all parties to the conflict.

Through its operations, the ICRC helps people survive and begin to meet their own basic needs. Its work includes restoring water supplies, providing medical care, and helping to reunite families. The ICRC also plays a critical role in promoting awareness and compliance with international humanitarian law—a vital step in reducing the frequency of violations, which are often a key cause of the humanitarian issues described above. For instance, people frequently flee their homes because they fear what armed parties to the conflict might do to them.

If the conflict in the DRC continues to escalate, there is a serious risk that the humanitarian crisis could slide into complete catastrophe. Ongoing mass displacement could exceed the capacity of humanitarian organizations to respond. It is essential for governments and other stakeholders to use their influence in order to ease the suffering of conflict victims, promote respect for international humanitarian law, and support humanitarian relief efforts. Raising awareness of the humanitarian situation in the DRC and drawing international attention to it is of critical importance.

¹⁷⁴ The Forgotten People of North Kivu. ICRC. March 1, 2024. P. 6.
URL: https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/RDC/icrc_report_the_forgotten_people_of_north_kivu.pdf

Afterword. Conclusions and Recommendations for Russia

Mayya
Nikolskaya

The conflict in the Great Lakes region of Africa is one of the continent's oldest and most deeply-rooted crises. Over the past century, it has gone through multiple cycles of bloody interethnic violence that has spilled over into neighboring countries. Its epicenter remains in the North and South Kivu provinces of the DRC, where, since November 2021, fighting has continued unabated between the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) and the M23 armed group, which receives unofficial backing from Rwanda. As of 2024, the number of internally displaced persons and refugees in the border regions has exceeded 7 million.

The main drivers of the conflict are structural in nature:

- The weakness of the central government in the DRC, which is only partially capable of governing a territorially fragmented and “porous” state.
- Competing claims by various actors, including external ones, to control valuable resources—particularly rare earth minerals—and to reshape the region's export routes.
- Ethnopolitical fragmentation and hostility toward the Kinyarwanda-speaking population, which is concentrated largely in the two Kivu provinces.

Nearly all parties to the conflict in the Great Lakes region, except for the DRC itself, appear interested in preserving the status quo: a state of low-intensity conflict. However, the level of militarization on all sides and the widespread availability of arms in the region suggest that in the event of an escalation, the outbreak of another large-scale African war cannot be ruled out.

In light of all this, it is clear that a military solution to the crisis is virtually impossible. Nor are there promising alternatives in the legal realm, such as recourse to existing international judicial mechanisms. Attempts to exert international pressure on the parties to the conflict have yielded, at best, short-term effects, while peacekeeping missions by the United Nations, the East African Community, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have repeatedly failed to deliver results.¹⁷⁵

African-led diplomatic efforts are currently focused on two main tracks: the Nairobi Process, under the auspices of the East African Community, and the Luanda Process, led by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). The Nairobi Process is meant to mediate between the DRC government and various armed groups operating in the east of the country, while the Luanda track focuses on direct dialogue between the DRC and Rwanda. So far, however, neither initiative has achieved any significant progress toward a peaceful resolution.

¹⁷⁵ See, e.g.: Fabricius, P. Military Muscle Rather than Mediation Prevails in DRC. *Institute for Security Studies*. July 12, 2024. URL: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/military-muscle-rather-than-mediation-prevails-in-drc>

All things considered, any resolution will require proactive engagement first and foremost from the primary actors themselves: the DRC, M23, and Rwanda, with the participation of Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Kenya. The optimal stabilization scenario involves creating conditions under which all parties—including local militia leaders—stand to gain at least some tangible benefits. However, lasting peace will be impossible without strengthening the institutional and security capacities of the DRC’s central government and enhancing the effectiveness of state institutions across the DRC.

In this context, Russia cannot, and should not, align itself exclusively with any one party to the conflict. It is important to secure the status of a major player on the African continent, one whose reputation remains untainted by questionable deals in the Great Lakes region, unlike that of many other external actors. Through existing negotiation tracks, Russian diplomacy is in a position to engage all sides and act as a credible guarantor of agreements. At the same time, confidential dialogues between the parties could be initiated to build trust and momentum.

Despite the efforts of some international institutions, the peace process in the Great Lakes region continues to receive very limited financial support from the international community. It would be prudent to encourage better coordination of international efforts aimed at addressing the region’s humanitarian challenges through various platforms, including BRICS+. Russia could encourage the latter to serve as a collective mediator, which would raise the credibility of BRICS in the eyes of African partners.

Regional security, as well as the maintenance of a sustainable balance of power in Central Africa, is inconceivable without support for and the reinforcement of Congolese statehood. Russia could contribute to this effort by participating in local mineral processing ventures and by supporting African countries in developing sovereign models of resource governance. Lastly, training Congolese specialists in Russian colleges and universities could help develop the country’s human capital, scientific capacity, and skilled workforce.

The path of gradual internal development may not offer quick results, but it is precisely this kind of evolution that has the potential to bring about positive peace in the Great Lakes region: one rooted in the integration of fragmented social and political elements into a coherent and functional whole.

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Notes

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