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Geopolitical Motivations of the Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Photo Credit: The Times

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is plagued by an intractable conflict driven by various geopolitical factors. The struggle for control over the region's rich natural resources and the involvement of armed militias as proxies by neighbouring countries have resulted in millions of deaths and displacements. There are several external geopolitical dynamics that play a crucial role in the quest for lasting peace and stability in the fragile country.

The increasing global shift towards green energy resources has made the DRC a focal point for many major powers. The country's reserves of minerals like lithium, cobalt, and coltan, which are essential for producing electric cars and mobile devices, have sparked a rivalry among China, Russia, France, and the US in their scramble to secure these valuable resources. These powers are represented by their respective multinational corporations, including DeBeers, Anglo American Plc Mini Conglomerate, Afrimex, and Fodeco. Extracting these resources has prompted significant investment by foreign-owned companies in machinery, personnel, road connections, and transport equipment to optimize

their operations. Consequently, there is a growing demand for adequate security to protect these processes, including the safe transportation of valuable raw materials, amidst hostility from local militias and regional players. As a result, some companies resort to hiring global private security firms like the controversial Wagner Group or even engaging dissatisfied military or local militia groups.

China vs the US rivalry also manifests in the DRC as both states seek to acquire the raw materials necessary for semiconductor production. The US aims to curtail China's dominance in semiconductor manufacturing, as China currently produces 75% of the world's semiconductors, by reviving its semiconductor manufacturing capabilities and sourcing raw materials, mainly from Africa. Additionally, Russia utilizes the Wagner Group to pursue its foreign interests, including protecting its sphere of influence via South Africa. With Russia and South Africa being members of the BRICS bloc, their relations have strengthened, leading to joint naval exercises



Photo Credit: Global Witness



with China. South Africa's involvement in the conflict can be seen as a strategic move to protect the interests of its allies. Consequently, this resource competition threatens to overshadow the peace efforts made in the fragile state.

Tensions between the DRC and Rwanda pose a significant obstacle to peace due to historical issues between the two parties. Rwanda previously invaded eastern DRC in 1996, seeking out groups believed to be responsible for the Rwandan genocide. This incursion drew in multiple regional states, leading to the First Congo War and the ousting of Mobutu Sese Seko's government. Subsequently, in 1998, the Second Congo War erupted when DRC's President Kabila expelled foreigners, including Rwandan and Ugandan forces, from the Congolese territory out of fear that these neighbouring states would annex the resource-rich region. This policy sparked the Tutsi rebellion, forming the M23, composed of Tutsi refugees from Rwanda.

Presently, DRC suspects Rwanda of supporting the Tutsi-dominated M23, while Rwanda accuses DRC, Uganda, and Burundi of supporting the Hutu-controlled Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). Escalating tensions culminated in a Rwandan attack on a DRC aircraft in January 2023. This recent attack portrayed Rwanda as the aggressor, yet Rwanda has expressed concern over the involvement of foreign mercenaries employed by the DRC government, further fueling the conflict. Peace initiatives, such as the Luanda peace process, aimed at reconciling these inter-state differences to enhance peace and security in the DRC and the region, remain elusive.



Uganda's quest for influence within the DRC's mineral industry is a key driver of the conflict. Although Uganda exports gold as one of its top products, it lacks significant deposits of this valuable resource. According to the US Department of the Treasury, in 2022, more than 90% of Congolese gold is smuggled through strategic supply chains in Uganda. This means that armed groups are involved in these illegal sales while carrying out their illicit activities. Additionally, terrorist attacks originating from rebel groups in DRC pose a significant concern for Uganda's security. The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a terrorist group that operates in both countries, is considered a threat to Uganda's borders. ADF has conducted attacks in both states, resulting in the loss of over 700 lives. The joint airstrike by Uganda and DRC against ADF rebel camps in November 2022 further complicates the situation due to Rwanda's support for ADF.

Burundi's involvement in the DRC peace process is motivated by bilateral trade, regional integration opportunities, and the geopolitics of the Great Lakes Region. With a porous border, Burundi is particularly vulnerable to the spillover effects of the DRC conflict, hosting numerous refugees from the DRC. Additionally, the presence of rebel groups like Red Tabara and the National Liberation Forces (FNL) in DRC has played a significant role in Burundi's engagement along the DRC borders. These rebel groups, opposing the current regime, are covertly targeted by Burundi forces disguised as civilians to avoid detection by international actors. The migration





crisis and the effort to suppress government rebels influence Burundi's actions in the fragile state.

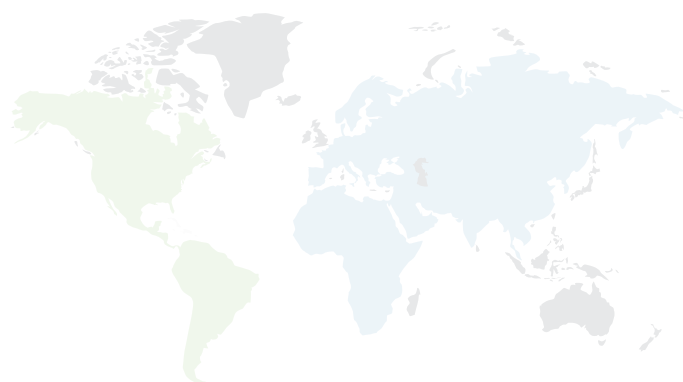
As a neighbour of the DRC, Burundi acts as a transit route and trading hub for the legal and illegal exchange of gold, coltan, cobalt, and cassiterite from the DRC. Both countries plan to collaborate with Tanzania to construct an electrified railway connecting Dar es Salaam's port, Bujumbura, and Kinshasa. This project aims to increase trade volume among the three countries. However, its realization depends on achieving lasting security in the DRC.

Angola's foreign policy towards the DRC conflict is guided by its territorial and economic interests. A critical concern for Angola is the rebel group Front de Libération de l'Enclave de Cabinda (FLEC), based in the Cabinda province, which accounts for half of Angola's oil production. Due to its proximity to the southern border of the DRC, Cabinda poses a security threat that Angolan rebels in the DRC may exploit against President João Lourenço's regime, which relies heavily on oil for 75% of its revenue. To prevent Cabinda from seeking autonomy, Angola requires a friendly and stable Kinshasa to counter the secessionist threat and safeguard its economic interests. Angola's pursuit of peace and stability in the DRC protects its sovereignty over Cabinda and secures its oil interests against rebels and potential dissidents.

Kenya plays a regional leadership role as an influential member of the East African Community (EAC). Since the DRC joined the EAC, Kenya has had a strategic interest in the conflict's outcome

and in preventing full-scale warfare among EAC members. The DRC's accession to the EAC has contributed to a 24% increase in the economic bloc's GDP. Therefore, Kenya is vested in securing its businesses, including banks operating in the DRC, promoting bilateral trade, and utilizing the Mombasa port more effectively. Since 2021, trade between Kenya and the DRC has been positive, with import and export values reaching US\$32.98 million and US\$223.05 million, respectively. Kenyan banks and private firms have also invested \$1.6 billion in the DRC. However, insecurity in the eastern part of the DRC, external interference, and political instability pose threats to Kenya's interests. Former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta is currently leading the intra-state DRC peace process known as the Nairobi Process, and the Kenya Defence Forces have been deployed under the East Africa Community Regional Force in eastern DRC.

In conclusion, these geopolitical motivations constitute the primary obstacles to achieving lasting peace in the DRC. The conflict gravitates on the country's abundant natural resources, external relations, and the business opportunities it presents to investors. Therefore, peace-building efforts should prioritize addressing the diplomatic and economic factors as the principal drivers.



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