

The GLOCEPS

Policy Paper

Strengthening Regional Conflict Resolution in DRC: A Diplomatic Approach

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Executive Summary

The ongoing conflict in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), exacerbated by the M23 insurgency, has escalated into one of the most complex and protracted crises in Africa. Key contributing issues include multiplicity of inconclusive regional initiatives, vested interests of political actors, the geopolitics of Eastern and Southern Africa, and identity politics and proxy wars. These have led to a dire humanitarian crisis affecting millions of civilians. The political deadlock has prevented meaningful diplomatic progress, with Rwanda and DRC pursuing conflicting interests, while the M23 continues to

expand its territorial control, destabilizing the region. The brief recommends, a renewed diplomatic focus to resolve the deadlock between the DRC and Rwanda through a coordinated, joint effort between the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This should involve all stakeholders, including the M23 while addressing the root causes; establishing a dedicated coordination task force between humanitarian agencies to secure humanitarian corridors and strengthening existing ceasefire agreements.



Context

The recent capture of key territories, including Goma and Nyabibwe, by the March 23 Movement (M23) has aggravated the already volatile situation in Eastern DRC. This underscores the urgent need for robust and coordinated conflict resolution mechanisms to address the multifaceted challenges plaguing the region. The Eastern DRC, home to over 120 armed rebel groups, has become a hotbed of instability, with the M23 emerging as a particularly powerful threat to national and regional security. Composed primarily of ethnic Tutsis whose population straddle across Eastern DRC and Rwanda, the M23 has blamed the Congolese government of systemic discrimination of Tutsis, fueling their resurgence in 2022 after nearly a decade of dormancy. This resurgence can be partly linked to the growing agency of their inclusion in the government and support by external actors. In the absence of a government administrative presence in Eastern DRC, M23 has stepped in to fill the vacuum. Their territorial gains in North and South Kivu have not only displaced thousands of civilians but also heightened tensions between the DRC and Rwanda, with Kinshasa accusing Kigali of financing and arming the rebels with ultimate intention of annexing the resource endowed region, a claim Rwanda strongly denies. In turn, the DRC has been accused of leveraging ethnic Hutu militias, such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and local Mai Mai groups to counter the M23. Rwanda has accused FLDR of containing

elements of 1994 génocidaires whose intention is to force a regime change in Rwanda. The resultant situation has entrenched a proxy conflict that undermines peace building efforts.

The failure to effectively address this crisis is characteristic of the broader shortcomings in the current conflict resolution mechanisms operating in the region. The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has faced widespread criticism for its inability to protect civilians and restore stability, despite its 26-year presence in the DRC. With 12,800 troops on the ground, MONUSCO's perceived inefficacy has eroded public trust, highlighting the limitations of its implementation capacity. Similarly, regional initiatives, while well-intentioned, have struggled to achieve meaningful progress due to the conflicting mandates and coordination challenges. The East African Community Regional Force (EACRF), deployed under the Nairobi Process, initially succeeded in brokering a ceasefire and reclaiming key territories from the M23, creating a buffer zone for civilians. However, its political approach and reluctance to launch offensive operations against the rebels led to its eventual withdrawal in December 2023, following repeated ceasefire violations and the resurgence of M23 in previously liberated areas. This vacuum was later filled by the Southern African Development Community Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC), which adopted a more offensive approach that aligned with the DRC's preference for aggressive counter-insurgency. However, SAMIDRC has faced its own challenges, including personnel and equipment shortages, and increased resistance from the Rwanda backed M23 which have hampered its effectiveness and resulted in significant casualties. The lack of synergy between these peacekeeping initiatives including the Luanda and Nairobi



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processes underscore the need for a harmonized and collaborative approach to conflict resolution.

The DRC's dual membership in both the EAC and the SADC presents a unique opportunity for these regional bodies to pool resources, and work with a common purpose to address the conflict. A joint EAC-SADC peace process supported by MONUSCO, could address the logistical and operational gaps that have plagued individual missions, while also facilitating the efficient distribution of humanitarian aid to the millions of displaced civilians, particularly women and children, who bear the brunt of the crisis. Moreover, such collaboration could enhance the credibility and legitimacy of peacekeeping efforts, fostering greater trust among local populations and stakeholders.



Currently, Tanzania is set to host a joint summit of EAC and SADC on 7th and 8th February 2025 to discuss the ongoing conflict in Congo. However, the success of any peace building initiative hinges on resolving the underlying political impasse between the DRC and Rwanda, with the current bad blood between President's Tshisekedi and Kagame hindering any meaningful diplomatic progress. This lack of political goodwill has not only emboldened the M23 but also disrupted regional trade, particularly in strategic hubs like Goma, which serves as a critical link between the Northern Corridor and the Indian Ocean. The resulting economic losses, coupled with the humanitarian toll of the conflict, underscore the

urgent need for sustained multifaceted diplomatic approach that addresses both the immediate security challenges and the underlying political and economic drivers of the conflict.

Key Issues

The following key issues are pertinent in strengthening regional conflict resolution mechanisms in Eastern DRC.

Multiplicity of regional inconclusive initiatives

The numerous peacekeeping initiatives running in the DRC have different approaches to addressing the ongoing conflicts and this erodes progress in resolving the crisis to its logical conclusion. Concurrent interventions from MONUSCO, SAMIDRC and EACRF, which until recently (December, 2023) withdrew its troops have been plagued with ineffective coordination. EACRF assumed a political approach and managed to oversee a ceasefire brokered by the Nairobi process and successfully taking back key locations occupied by M23, creating a buffer for civilians. However, due to political interference, violation of the ceasefire and the withdrawal of troops from DRC, the rebels returned to these areas further escalating the conflict. SAMIDRC, on the other hand, is mandated on a fully military intervention. SAMIDRC's mandate appealed more to the DRC as they agreed to launch an offensive in countering the M23 unlike EACRF. The force continues to face significant personnel



and equipment challenges leading to the loss of about 13 of their soldiers in one week. The escalating crisis calls for a coordinated and joint effort between EAC and SADC in resolving the escalating conflict.

DRC continually relapses into conflict despite numerous interventions highlighting that these mandates fall short of addressing the root causes of the conflict. Failure of MONUSCO to restore stability with over 20 years in operation highlights the weak implementation capacity. In addition, both EACRF and SAMIDRC have suffered from logistical challenges further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. DRC is a member of both the EAC and SADC, and of great economic contribution to the region. Therefore, instability in DRC portends to eventual destabilization of the wider Great Lakes region. Harmonizing strategic interests between EAC and SADC presents a bigger opportunity to pool resources to facilitate any peacekeeping mission.



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Identity politics and proxy wars

The conflict in Eastern DRC is driven by identity politics, with the Congolese Tutsis fighting for recognition after being marginalized by Kinshasa despite their deep historical roots. The DRC government's refusal to fully acknowledge them as Congolese has fueled longstanding grievances, pushing them to take up arms to assert their place in a country that continues to treat them as foreigners. The systematic exclusion has continued to impede

the group's rights to access land, active political representation, and adequate security. This marginalization is compounded by the presence of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a Hutu rebel group that Kigali views as a direct security threat, given its ties to the genocidal forces that fled Rwanda in 1994. Rwanda, perceiving the FDLR as an existential danger, backs the M23 as a counterforce, while Kinshasa, in turn, has leveraged the FDLR as a strategic tool to check the M23 and apply pressure on Rwanda. This has created a dangerous proxy war, where both governments manipulate armed groups to advance their security agendas, further entrenching instability.

Moreover, the shared ethnic identity between M23 and Rwanda's ruling elite means that Rwanda's support whether overt or covert is almost inevitable, as ethnic solidarity naturally drives intervention. The absence of effective governance in Eastern DRC exacerbates the crisis, creating a power vacuum that allows armed groups to flourish, as local communities, feeling abandoned by the state, seek protection through militarization. Consequently, the region remains trapped in a vicious cycle where identity, security concerns, and state neglect perpetuate conflict, making any resolution impossible without addressing these deep-seated historical and political dynamics.

Vested interests of political actors

The political stalemate between the leaders of Rwanda and the DRC has been a major impediment to finding a lasting resolution to the conflict. The failure of the two heads of state to reach a common understanding has prevented meaningful diplomatic progress, particularly in the context of the Luanda and Nairobi peace processes. The ongoing tension was evident when DRC President Tshisekedi snubbed the 24th Extraordinary Summit of EAC Heads of State, choosing instead to attend a





meeting facilitated by the Luanda process, which was seen as a direct challenge to EAC's role in mediating the conflict. This lack of political goodwill between Kinshasa and Kigali has exacerbated the security situation, with M23 rebels continuing to expand their territory increasing civilian displacement. The failure to address the underlying political issues has left both the DRC and Rwanda pursuing conflicting interests, while the M23 capitalizes on the situation to pursue their interests. Tensions have also been exacerbated by the open hostility between Rwandan President Paul Kagame and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, with both leaders issuing implied threats that risk escalating the conflict. To avoid a broader regional crisis, diplomatic engagement should be prioritized, with a focus on facilitating dialogue between all parties, including M23. This approach is vital to avert a looming refugee crisis that could strain the already fragile economies of Eastern and Southern Africa.

Uganda and South Africa's roles in the ongoing conflict cannot be understated, and any lasting solution should include them in the negotiations, given their vested interests. Uganda, which shares borders with both Rwanda and the DRC, plays a complex role in the crisis. While Kampala has engaged in security operations against armed groups like the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in Eastern DRC, its historical ties to M23 complicate its diplomatic position. Additionally, Uganda's economic

interests, particularly its trade links through the Eastern DRC, makes a case for solid regional stability essential. Meanwhile, South Africa, as a major regional power and a key actor in African Union-led peace initiatives, has also been drawn into the crisis. Its economic stakes, including investments in mining and infrastructure, further inform the need for stability. Given these dynamics, a comprehensive resolution should integrate Uganda and South Africa into the mediation process to ensure a balanced and sustainable peace.

Influence of geopolitical actors

Geopolitical actors continue to play a key role in fueling instability in Eastern DRC to advance their strategic interests, particularly regarding critical minerals. The region is home to vast deposits of uranium, coltan, cobalt, and other rare earth minerals essential for global industries, including electronics and renewable energy. Major global powers, regional actors and international corporations are accused of either directly or indirectly supporting armed groups to secure access to these resources. Rwanda has long been implicated in backing M23 as part of its broader strategy to control mineral supply chains, while Western and Chinese companies vie for influence over mining concessions, often exploiting the region's instability to negotiate favorable terms. The conflict, therefore, is not just a local insurgency but a reflection of broader geopolitical rivalries over resource extraction and economic dominance.



Furthermore, the inability of international mechanisms, such as MONUSCO, to stabilize the region has created a power vacuum that external actors continue to exploit. The rivalry between Western countries and China over critical minerals has heightened tensions, as both sides seek to secure reliable supply chains amid increasing global demand for clean energy technologies. This geopolitical contest has emboldened local and regional actors to engage in proxy conflicts, further destabilizing the DRC. Without a concerted effort to address the external economic motivations behind the conflict, particularly the illicit mineral trade, the cycle of violence in eastern DRC is likely to persist, deepening the humanitarian crisis and threatening regional security.



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Humanitarian crisis

The protracted conflict in the Eastern DRC has precipitated a dire humanitarian crisis, with civilians bearing the brunt of the violence. The resurgence of the M23 and the subsequent territorial battles have led to mass displacements, making DRC one of the largest internal displacement crises in the world. Civilians in conflict-affected areas, particularly women and children, face severe human rights violations, including sexual violence, forced recruitment, and indiscriminate attacks. The capture of strategic towns like Goma by the M23 has further exacerbated the situation, disrupting access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and food supplies. Humanitarian organizations struggle

to operate in these volatile zones due to insecurity and logistical challenges, leaving millions without adequate assistance. The lack of effective protection mechanisms for civilians, despite the presence of peacekeeping missions like MONUSCO and regional forces, underscores the urgent need for a more robust and coordinated humanitarian response.

The humanitarian crisis is further compounded by the economic fallout of the conflict, which has crippled livelihoods and deepened poverty in the region. The disruption of trade routes, particularly through key hubs like Goma, has led to skyrocketing storage and transportation costs, disproportionately affecting small-scale traders and farmers. This economic strain has created a vicious cycle, where poverty fuels recruitment into armed groups, and continued violence perpetuates economic decline. Moreover, the environmental degradation caused by illegal mining and deforestation, often controlled by armed groups, has long-term implications for food security and climate resilience. Addressing the humanitarian crisis, therefore, requires not only immediate relief efforts but also sustainable economic interventions that empower local communities and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation by armed factions.

The international community's response to the humanitarian crisis has been inadequate, characterized by funding shortfalls and fragmented



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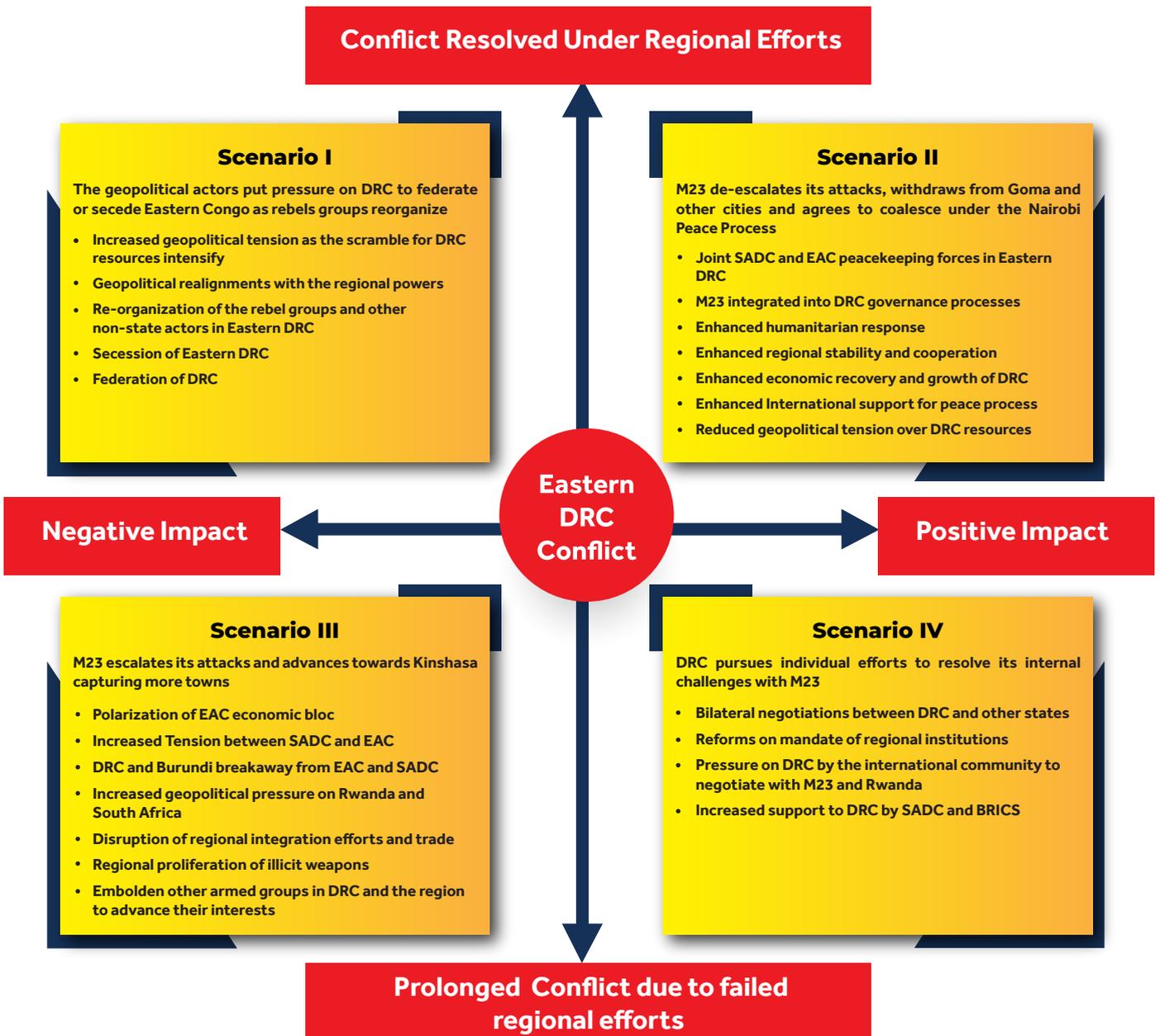


coordination. Despite repeated appeals by the United Nations (UN) and humanitarian agencies, donor fatigue and competing global crises have resulted in limited international coverage leading to insufficient financial support for DRC-specific initiatives. Additionally, the lack of synergy between humanitarian actors and peacekeeping missions has hindered the effective delivery of aid. While

MONUSCO and regional forces are primarily focused on security, their operations often overlook the protection of humanitarian corridors, leaving aid workers vulnerable to attacks and looting. A more integrated approach, where peacekeeping missions prioritize the safety of humanitarian operations and facilitate access to conflict zones, is essential to mitigate the suffering of civilians.

Possible futures and scenario building.

The following quadrant presents the possible futures that may arise from the conflict and their regional implications on the Eastern Africa region.



Conclusion

The escalating violence in the Eastern DRC, compounded by the M23 insurgency and the absence of a coordinated regional response, poses a significant threat to regional stability, with far-reaching security, economic, and humanitarian implications. The failure of existing diplomatic frameworks to address the underlying causes such as governance failures, ethnic tensions, and geopolitical rivalries has perpetuated the crisis, creating a policy vacuum that emboldens armed groups and undermines peace efforts. If left unresolved, the conflict risks destabilizing the entire Great Lakes region by fueling cross-border tensions, exacerbating refugee flows, and disrupting economic integration efforts. Urgent and coordinated action by regional blocs, including the EAC and SADC, is critical to harmonizing peace

initiatives, securing humanitarian aid corridors, and fostering a sustainable political settlement. Without a decisive policy shift that prioritizes inclusive dialogue, conflict resolution mechanisms, and long-term stabilization strategies, the DRC will remain a flashpoint for instability, threatening not only its own future but also the security and economic progress of its neighbors.



Recommendations

1. The DRC government should;
 - a) agree to round-table negotiations with Rwanda;
 - b) prioritize involvement of all stakeholders including armed groups in the mediation process; and
 - c) oversee structural reforms to reduce inequality and corruption ensuring economic development;
2. The Rwanda government should;
 - a) agree to round-table negotiations with DRC; and
 - b) curtail support to M23 to halt the taking of territories in Eastern Congo till negotiations are settled.
3. EAC and SADC should;
 - a) facilitate well-coordinated mediation and negotiations between DRC and Rwanda by establishing a formal EAC-SADC Joint Task Force to align strategies, pool resources, and create a unified approach to peacekeeping;
 - b) establish a dedicated coordination task force between humanitarian agencies, MONUSCO, and regional forces to secure humanitarian corridors and facilitate safe access to affected areas;



- c) engage neutral mediators such as the AU Chairperson, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, or respected African statesmen to facilitate direct dialogue between Presidents Kagame and Tshisekedi;
- d) harmonize the Luanda and Nairobi peace processes under a single, neutral mediation mechanism led by the African Union (AU) and supported by regional actors such as the EAC and SADC;
- e) strengthen existing ceasefire agreements by deploying a neutral verification team to monitor compliance by all parties, including the FARDC, M23, and Rwanda;
- f) support a broader political settlement process that includes armed groups like M23, community leaders, and civil society to address grievances fueling the insurgency; and
- g) in collaboration with UN, impose and enforce targeted sanctions on individuals, corporations, and state actors found to be financing or benefiting from illicit mineral trade in DRC.



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