

Africa Programme Meeting Summary

African geopolitics and conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Foreign armed groups in eastern DRC

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Introduction

Over 120 armed groups currently operate in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), causing widespread insecurity, suffering and displacement. While the vast majority are based in the DRC, a small contingent of foreign armed groups dominate headlines and have played a major role in shaping policy responses to violence in eastern DRC.

This document summarizes the discussions that took place during the first session of a series of virtual roundtables held in November–December 2022. This session examined foreign armed groups in eastern DRC, with a particular focus on the M23 (March 23) Movement, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). The session looked at what is known about these groups, their origins, motivations, structures and belief systems, and explored the relative importance of domestic, ideological and external pressures in driving mobilization and recruitment. This virtual roundtable was jointly hosted by the Chatham House Africa Programme and the Hanns Seidel Foundation (Kinshasa office).

Armed groups and state relations

Relationships between armed groups and the state are neither unitary nor static. Some foreign armed groups collaborate with state actors – either in the DRC or their country of origin – while others are in conflict with states or have shifting or ambiguous relationships. Neither armed groups nor states are monolithic in character; relationships change across both time and geography, depending on the strategic context. The relationship between the DRC state and the FDLR, for instance, has fluctuated since 1994, including instances when the DRC army has turned on its erstwhile partners. It is important not to accept oversimplifications.

These relationships are often occluded and difficult to understand. Governments frequently do not acknowledge their relationship with armed groups, instead working covertly through intelligence services, as is the case with Burundi, or through military collaboration at operational level, as with the DRC. In the case of the FDLR, there may be covert backing from some Kigali-based Rwandan actors, alongside discreet support from members of the Rwandan diaspora – ‘state’ links must be understood as extending to elites who are close to power or who are looking for access to it.

The nature of a foreign armed group’s relationship to the DRC state both dictates the capacity for action of the armed group and shapes the consequences of conflict. For example, the nature of the relationship between the FDLR and the DRC state determines likely patterns of violence as well as the possibility of peace. Centrally mandated collaboration between the FDLR and the DRC state would affect the relationship between Rwanda and the DRC differently, for example, than would strategic collaboration with intelligence services or operational accommodations with the army at local level.

The relationship between foreign armed groups and the governments of their country of origin must also be considered. There are ambiguous links between states and militia in the DRC, where regional rivalries – for instance between Burundi and Rwanda – are played out via militias in the DRC which then establish links to elements of the DRC army and intelligence services.

Governments and parties in power across the region frequently have their origins in armed groups that were themselves once considered terrorist movements – those governments' attitudes and policies toward the actions of foreign armed groups in the DRC are conditioned by these histories.

Socio-economic drivers of armed group violence

Armed group violence in the DRC has its roots in a multifaceted crisis caused by the fragility of the state, weaknesses in governance and the presence of regional actors, who are drawn in by the lure of the DRC's wealth. Affecting relationships between peoples and populations, this crisis drives intercommunal violence within the DRC and has important socio-economic impacts on the region. This risks the creation of a vicious cycle, with violence as the main survival mechanism.

Economic incentives are important to the creation of armed groups, at both local and regional levels, but there is a complex interplay between economic ambitions and issues of land and security for countries neighbouring the DRC, whose policies with respect to the DRC are expressions of internal political challenges in those states. Rwanda, for instance, frames its intervention in the DRC as self-defence for threatened minorities, notably residing in highland areas, who are trying to make use of foreign interventions to further their own aims. These relationships are not fixed and involve a range of interests regarding the resources and land at stake.

Some foreign armed groups have become integrated into local dynamics, leading to their 'adoption' by local groups and their participation in community forums, which helps the foreign groups to secure their positions and sustain them over time. Conversely, local people try to develop relationships with foreign armed groups which would work to their own advantage. Focusing on these alliances could allow the relationship of foreign armed groups with the DRC state, and their participation in the DRC economy, to be better understood.

It is difficult to build and maintain stability amid widespread criminal violence. This instability then pushes individuals towards joining armed groups. Recruitment is taking place in schools in the DRC, targeting young boys who have no other options or wish to be able to protect their families. Armed groups become a refuge and are seen as a place where dignity can be guaranteed, which in turn drives the creation of other armed groups.

It is critical to consider – and to understand – what the DRC represents to those entering the country from neighbouring states. Members of foreign armed groups will not want to return to their states of origin if they perceive they will have fewer opportunities there. It is also important to consider what the armed groups represent to power seekers and economic elites, both in the DRC and in neighbouring countries. Armed groups must not be viewed as disconnected from society – on the contrary, they are very much part of the DRC’s economic, political, and social landscape.

The evolution of armed group violence in eastern DRC

Key factors

Fragmentation

The number of armed groups in the DRC is estimated to have grown to 120 in recent years. The factors driving armed group fragmentation and proliferation are poorly understood. Extreme fragmentation has also characterized the development of the DRC’s social and political landscape, resulting in an explosion not only in the number of political parties – now numbering 631, with over 100 gaining representation in parliament – but also in the numbers of media and non-governmental organizations. The proliferation of stakeholders in the DRC makes progress complex and difficult to achieve in terms of policy change, demobilization programmes and peace talks.

Involution

Involution is when a conflict ‘turns in on itself’ and is carried forward by its own momentum, becoming increasingly complex, entrenched, and self-replicating. Factors which can contribute to this process include the emergence within the armed forces of the DRC (FARDC) and armed groups of a military bourgeoisie, which views conflict as an end in itself. War becomes a money-making opportunity for many different actors, as well as a way of life. Involution has affected the political economy in the region.

Extraversion

Renewed intervention by neighbouring states has resulted in large scale escalation in the DRC. While the reasons for these interventions are not clear, it is important to try and understand them. For example, exports of gold from the DRC to Rwanda constituted the DRC’s largest source of foreign earnings between 2013 and 2021, accounting for income of \$1.6 billion in that period. Although this explains why Rwanda would want to continue to have an influence in the DRC, it has not triggered the current crisis. Rather, the authoritarian regime in Rwanda requires external justification, and intervening in the DRC occupies the Rwandan military, which poses the greatest threat to its own governing regime. In addition, such intervention bolsters the domestic

legitimacy of the governing Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) by highlighting the continued presence of the FDLR and anti-Tutsi sentiments in the DRC.

Uganda's authoritarian regime is also under threat, and external intervention allows opportunities for patronage, legitimacy-building and tightening government control of oil deposits along the country's border with the DRC, as well as protecting a large consumer base for Ugandan exports in eastern DRC.

Triggers of the current escalation

The M23

Wishing to remain relevant in the context of a new demobilization programme, the M23 movement 'ramped things up' to protect their own interests. The M23 agenda is poorly defined and changes rapidly, but many of the movement's members are motivated by military integration and the prospect of re-entering society and finding a job. However, the 'our flag will never fall' rhetoric employed by the DRC government, and other elements of its media discourse, have created new challenges to the reintegration of M23 members into society or the military.

Marginalization

Other M23 members are driven by the perception that Tutsis are not welcome in eastern DRC. While there is increased hate speech and discrimination towards DRC Tutsis, this is predominantly a response to the current crisis rather than its cause. Thousands of DRC Tutsis currently live in Rwandan refugee camps; social exclusion and citizenship lie at the root of the crisis, but the M23 movement is neither representative of nor a valid interlocutor for the DRC Tutsi. Nor is the Rwandan government a genuine partner in solving these problems.

Regional rivalry

Foreign intervention is also linked to rivalry between the Ugandan and Rwandan governments, in turn triggered by Ugandan actions following a deadly terrorist attack in Kampala in 2021. At the time, the Ugandan government was building roads to the eastern DRC city of Goma and was deploying its military into areas that Rwanda perceived as core interests. The Rwandan government believed that this deployment would allow Uganda to partner with Rwanda's DRC-based enemies, leading to the destabilization of the Rwandan regime.

Political dynamics in the DRC

DRC President Félix Tshisekedi broke his alliance with former President Joseph Kabila in 2021, leaving him in the position of having to reconfigure power structures, including in the security sector. This has diminished his ability to respond to the security crisis in the east of the country, and the weakness of the DRC army during this crisis has been more striking than during previous episodes.

De-escalation

De-escalation must occur before any peace processes can commence, and the potential levers for this must be identified. For example, in the armed confrontations of 2008, with the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), and 2012, with the M23, international pressure proved to be the most effective lever in both cases. However, on this occasion forceful diplomacy behind closed doors has not produced an equally strong public response from the international community. French, UK and US diplomats have said very little, which has led the Rwandan government to believe that there is international support for its actions. The UK is continuing to contest legal challenges on its bilateral deal to send with asylum seekers to Rwanda, while France is using Rwandan forces to protect its oil installations in Mozambique. It seems impossible that the crisis in eastern DRC can be resolved without the withdrawal of the M23, and foreign pressure is likely to be the most effective way to achieve this. Hence, France, the UK and the US will be required to make use of their leverage in a more public way.

In 2013, the M23 was not seen as a legitimate political actor. In contrast, the current crisis is prompting outside players to attempt to position the M23 as a valid interlocutor in the conflict. The Nairobi peace process, which began in early 2022, has to date reflected this uncertainty and lack of leverage. The UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) and the East African Community regional force, which comprises troop contingents from Burundi, Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan, are not willing to repeat the use of military leverage which proved effective against the M23 in 2013. The reluctance of foreign actors to engage militarily leaves potential for greater involvement on the part of Russia.

Diplomats need to prioritize relationships at the level of regional heads of state before addressing armed groups. However, the question remains as to what they should be trying to achieve. Current peace initiatives are Africa-led, with Western actors taking a long-term view which is primarily focused on economic issues and trade – potentially to push for transparent and legitimate economies in which the presence of armed groups would be less appealing. The DRC government needs to offer a peace process, a strategy for effective demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) of rebel groups, and effective proposals for local reconciliation and institutional reform. This is especially important given that elections are scheduled for 2023. Unresolved challenges include questions as to which armed group leaders are legitimate, which will prove effective interlocutors, and how discussions can progress. It is unclear what kind of political bargain will emerge.