

## Africa Programme Meeting Summary

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

## The role of East Africa

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## Introduction

This document summarizes the discussions that took place during the second session of a series of virtual roundtables held in November–December 2022. This session focused on the role of East Africa in geopolitics and conflict dynamics in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Participants discussed the DRC's changing regional relations with East Africa, including the differing views on the DRC from the administrations in Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania; as well as the potential implications of an East African regional force and its facilitation of peace talks. The session also examined the DRC's regional identity and the main challenges in exercising its own policy autonomy in the region. This virtual roundtable was jointly hosted by the Chatham House Africa Programme and the Hanns Seidel Foundation (Kinshasa office).

## The DRC's evolving regional identity and role

The DRC is geographically close to East Africa and the other members of the East African Community (EAC), which it formally joined in July 2022. It also has a long history of economic exchanges eastwards, reaching beyond the African continent and into the Indian Ocean through the ports of Mombasa (Kenya) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania). Despite the DRC's natural linkages to its east, however, relationships have frequently been complicated by a web of interdependent domestic and regional political factors. A prime example of this was the DRC opposition forces' call for President Joseph Kabila's indictment in 2012, following accusations of a covert deal made by him with Rwanda's President Paul Kagame to allow Rwandan forces into eastern DRC.

The start of Félix Tshisekedi's presidency in 2019, however, marked a proclaimed shift in the DRC's regional policy. Tshisekedi's intention that the DRC should join the EAC was indicative of his apparent desire to distance himself from his predecessor. Security, economic and political considerations all played a part in motivating this domestic policy shift:

- **On the security front**, the announcement was made in the context of persistent and deeply rooted insecurity in eastern DRC, notably the resurgence of M23, and the inability of the DRC army to respond effectively to these security threats.

- **Economically**, the fragility and challenges facing the DRC economy – i.e. the inefficiency of the banking sector, the depth of the informal economy and the lack of a robust industrial sector, all contributed to the perception that, by joining the EAC, the DRC would benefit from greater interdependence with wealthier and more stable economies. The DRC's failure to ratify the EAC's Protocol on Peace and Security, in particular, points to the primary importance of economic considerations in the country's decision to join the bloc.
- **Politically**, the decision to join the EAC represented an opportunity for Tshisekedi to move decisively away from his predecessor's regional policy – which had focused heavily on SADC and Southern Africa – as part of efforts to convey a new approach aimed at responding more effectively to citizens' growing concerns, particularly in a context of a post-election period in which the new administration needed to build political legitimacy.

## The DRC and East African Community integration

Many commentators have noted the EAC's apparent haste in admitting the DRC in early 2022, considering the country's lack of compatibility with certain preconditions for admission. The DRC certainly benefited from the close relationship between President Tshisekedi and Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta who – while chair of the EAC Summit – played a crucial role in pushing for the DRC's admission. It should be noted, however, that an apparent precedent had been set in 2016 through the admission of South Sudan.

The integration of the DRC has given the EAC an opportunity to test its security protocol. The bloc has not hitherto successfully nor substantively involved itself in security issues. Rather, its integration model has been driven by its economic agenda – including, arguably, the admission of the DRC. The deployment of the EAC Joint Regional Force in the DRC thus presents an opportunity to test some of the normative frameworks that the EAC has developed over time.

The deployment of the regional force raises two crucial questions. What are the true, principal objectives of troop-contributing countries. And what can differentiate the EAC force from countries that have previously intervened in eastern DRC? Key challenges and uncertainties around the EAC's regional force include:

- **Operational considerations:** The EAC has not yet outlined its plans to harmonize the modalities, logistics and military operations adopted by its troop-contributing members. There is a high likelihood of these countries competing for influence as each pursues its own national interests. Such competition increases the risk of deepening regional tensions, provoking diplomatic standoffs and harming the efficiency of the regional force's operations. Beyond the critical point of harmonization, the command structure has not yet been defined or agreed. Kenya, the country contributing the most, has assumed control as of today. Will it subsequently relinquish control through a rotational command structure, for example, as each state ultimately seeks to pursue its own political and economic interests? Will the contributing countries allow their forces to operate under any national command but their own?
- **Funding considerations:** The funding of the EAC military operation remains the biggest uncertain factor. Addressing his country's parliament in November 2022, Kenya's cabinet secretary for defence announced the government's intention to spend \$37 million on the military operation in eastern DRC. This comes in a domestic context of deepening economic fragility and government budget cuts. How the operation will be funded remains unclear in other EAC countries as well. Burundi, for instance, may lack the resources needed to sustain its contribution over a long period of time. These funding uncertainties arguably heighten the risk of countries exploiting mineral resources in the DRC for their own economic benefit and underscore the urgency of the need for greater clarification of the financing of the operation.
- **Institutional challenges within the EAC:** The EAC, as it stands today, is built on good relations between its member countries' heads of state. The presidents hold strategic power in the EAC Summit, and any significant disagreement between them thus creates the risk of slowing down operational and decision-making processes within the institution as a whole. The rift between President Kikwete of Tanzania and President Kagame of Rwanda in the early 2010s, for instance, risked bringing the EAC to a halt. The current difficulties in the relationship between Presidents Tshisekedi and Kagame have similar potential to undermine the efficiency of EAC policy implementation in the DRC.

- **Domestic considerations within the DRC:** The political calendar in the DRC is significant here, as the next presidential election is scheduled to take place (along with legislative elections) in December 2023. With Tshisekedi being eligible to seek re-election as president, suspicions will likely rise regarding his motivation for greater involvement within the EAC. Uncertainty surrounding the DRC people's response to the EAC regional force in the coming months is also clouding the potential success of the operation. Handling public opinion will be crucial given rising suspicions of foreign military actors using intervention as a "Trojan horse" to exploit the country's mineral resources. How can the EAC bring DRC citizens on board? The current situation in Mali, with growing antagonism towards the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), demonstrates the importance of considering domestic public opinion in the design and implementation of the EAC regional force.
- **Regional considerations on the continent:** The role of SADC in the context of the EAC military operation in the DRC is a crucial challenge that also needs addressing. SADC has long been involved in eastern DRC – including as part of the UN's stabilization mission MONUSCO – and some of its members may not be content to see other states move to benefit from the DRC's mineral resources. In this context, a roadmap for the reconfiguration of the regional security apparatus needs to be set out, and the two uncertainties need to be addressed. First, will the EAC actively engage and even collaborate with SADC on this front? And second, will SADC be willing to provide guidance and insight on the most effective ways to navigate the complex security situation in eastern DRC?
- **Long-term considerations:** The EAC regional force is, at the outset, planned to operate over a period of six months. This is hardly long enough to tackle the entrenched security threats in eastern DRC meaningfully and for the long term. Who will take over once the peace enforcement operation has been drawn down? Is the EAC already in close contact with the government in Kinshasa to support security reforms that will be put into place? A long-term view is critical to the efficacy and legacy of any peace enforcement operations, particularly in the DRC.

While the EAC's new engagement with peace and security, notably in a context of persistent security threats and instability in eastern DRC, can be considered a positive development, many interlinked uncertainties and challenges remain. President Tshisekedi may have misunderstood the degree of tensions within the EAC, and EAC members may not have grasped the full depth of complexities that a military involvement in the DRC will represent. There is also the risk for the Tshisekedi administration that the DRC's underdeveloped economy becomes increasingly dominated by capital from East Africa. Such miscalculations have the potential to contribute to an uncertain security and diplomatic outcome.

## Regional foreign policy towards the DRC

In the early period of Tshisekedi's presidency – in 2019 and 2020 – there was a sense of a reset in regional relations. The newly elected president placed a strong emphasis on improving relations with Uganda and Rwanda in particular. At this time, Tshisekedi was able to exert greater independence in shaping foreign policy than as regards domestic policy, given the initial political 'marriage' whereby former president Kabila retained a strong influence over decision-making. Some progress could initially be observed, with the resumption of flights to and from Rwanda, the appointment of a new Rwandan ambassador to Kinshasa, and the development of large-scale infrastructure projects with Uganda.

A fundamental question needs to be asked, however. Was this reset under the DRC's new president based on a fundamental shift in regional relations and in the drivers of political, economic and security concerns that have contributed to three decades of insecurity in eastern DRC? Or should this shift be assessed, in hindsight, as more superficial than it seemed?

- **Uganda and the DRC:** Since President Tshisekedi took office in January 2019, there has been a very superficial improvement in the DRC's relations with Uganda – and it is the regional relationship that remained, in many ways, the most intact. Military cooperation between the Ugandan and DRC armies started in November 2021, with the two operating jointly against the Allied Democratic Forces insurgency, and is still underway. Many sensitive questions remain unanswered, however, including the role played by Uganda in allowing M23 forces to transit through its territory. This regional relationship is certainly not as transparent as it ought to be, and tensions remain.
- **Rwanda and the DRC:** Relations between the DRC and Rwanda have now significantly deteriorated, to possibly the worst level witnessed in decades. President Tshisekedi's decision, in 2019, to allow Rwandan forces clandestine access to eastern DRC was incompatible with the fundamental shift in bilateral relations that he publicly advocated, and potentially jeopardized the sovereignty of eastern DRC. While there were some subsequent signs of progress in DRC–Rwanda relations, there has been a marked deterioration since 2021, as has been evident in repeated accusations openly made by the DRC's political leadership concerning Rwanda's role in facilitating the rise of M23.

Profound distrust remains between key players in the regional apparatus affecting the DRC. Notwithstanding President Tshisekedi's early rhetoric and apparent policy direction in favour of improved regional relations, no fundamental changes had been observed in the drivers of instability in the region by the end of 2022, and regional tensions and rivalries continue to be played out in eastern DRC. In this context, the present M23 crisis must be

understood as a product of regional geopolitics: it is about much more than M23 as a unitary group.

This raises a major concern regarding the EAC regional force: that of asymmetry. For its operation in eastern DRC, the EAC has taken a regional military approach in the absence of a formal regional political approach. Political concerns are being addressed as domestic, and confined to the DRC, while military concerns are being viewed as regional. This is coupled with issues of neutrality in the EAC force, particularly with regard to Rwanda. Moreover, there is the challenge of restructuring the role of those troops already operating on the ground against domestic opponents, notably Burundian forces, now being co-opted into the EAC force.

Overall, the EAC's strategy concerning the DRC is arguably one of deferral, in that it avoids taking on some of the most fundamental and politically sensitive issues. The current situation poses critical risks to the EAC, to stability in eastern DRC, and to all actors seeking to bring peace to the region.

These fundamental issues will need to be addressed through regional political dialogue between the region's heads of state, however complex and deeply layered such a process needs to be. The role of the wider international community would be to complement this process. In the absence of a strong and fluid regional political dialogue between EAC heads of state – involving structured, clear objectives set and agreed by all sides – the risk of grave diplomatic and security incidents will only increase. The stakes are going up, and there is an urgent need for an open conversation, coherence of effort and a mutually agreed roadmap to peace.