

Africa Programme Meeting Summary

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

The wider response

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10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE T +44 (0)20 7957 5700
contact@chathamhouse.org www.chathamhouse.org
Charity Registration Number: 208223

Introduction

This document summarizes the discussions that took place during the third session of a series of virtual roundtables held in November–December 2022. This session focused on the topic of regional and international policy responses to conflict dynamics in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Participants discussed the DRC's evolving regional and international relationships: including relations with Angola and South Africa (historically two of the DRC's most important regional partners), policy options for harmonized bilateral and multilateral responses, and the future of United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). This virtual roundtable was jointly hosted by the Chatham House Africa Programme and the Hanns Seidel Foundation (Kinshasa office).

The DRC and Southern Africa

DRC–Angola relations

The DRC (previously known as Zaire) represents one of the few areas where Angola has historically maintained a coherent and focused foreign policy – described by participants as a ‘permanent intervention’. This long historical relationship has been punctuated by seven major episodes: (1) the Angolan–Portuguese colonial state's support for the Katangese secession in the 1960s; (2) Zaire's support (under Mobutu Sésé Seko) of anti-MPLA forces¹ in Angola's civil war; (3) Angola's intervention in the First Congo War in 1996; (4) Angola's intervention in the Second Congo War from 1998; (5) Angola's support for Laurent-Désiré Kabila's overthrow of Mobutu; (6) Angola's role in supporting Joseph Kabila's accession; and, (7) Angolan influence on the transition from President Joseph Kabila to President Felix Tshisekedi.

Angola's contemporary engagement with the DRC has been driven by three interlinked priorities:

- **Borderland stability:** the results of Angola's August 2022 elections highlighted the strongholds of Angolan political opposition in the regions that share a border with the DRC. Angola has also sought to engage with the DRC to limit turbulence and de-escalate separatist movements in Cabinda (an enclave of Angola, where the main opposition party retains a majority) and in Angola's Zaire province and other diamond-producing borderland regions.

¹ Those fighting against the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

- **Oil dispute management:** a long-standing dispute between Angola and the DRC on the usage of oil blocks near Cabinda, since the Mobutu era, has been subdued in recent years as the DRC government has been occupied by other priorities. The administration of Angolan president João Lourenço nevertheless retains an interest in ensuring DRC claims on oil regions and drilling rights, in Angolan/contested waters near the DRC, remain muted.
- **Symbolism and international legacy:** Angola’s former president, José Eduardo dos Santos, was known as an architect of peace, and President Lourenço wishes to continue this tradition and define his own legacy through championing peace, and enhancing Angola’s record and image.

But despite the persistence of these issues, the two countries’ engagements, under Tshisekedi and Lourenço, have become more muted, partly due to Tshisekedi’s moves to re-balance the DRC’s bilateral engagements in the region and reduce dependency on Angola, including by requesting support from Rwanda in his initial years. Though this ‘failed rebalancing’ has seen him turn once again to Angola, including through requesting support with jet fighters and general defence. President João Lourenço has likewise prioritized domestic problems stemming from low oil prices and significant debt exposure.

There are few Angolan private sector investments in the DRC, which has also reduced Angola’s vested interests in the DRC. Angola’s reluctance to support the DRC militarily has limited its leverage and opened space for new entrants such as Kenya to seek to fill this void. The current DRC administration no longer listens to Angola in the way it once did.

The Lourenço administration has, however, sought influence through its diplomatic engagements, including heading the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), and seeking accommodations with other regional players, notably Rwanda. Angola and Rwanda’s involvement in the two Congo wars has impacted the countries’ relationship, which is both antagonistic and respectful. The two countries have carried out joint military operations elsewhere, such as the Angola–Rwanda collaboration in the Central African Republic. The Maputo administration in Mozambique also consulted Angola about Rwanda’s ability to deliver support for security operations in Mozambique’s northern Cabo Delgado province. A cessation of hostilities in relation to the ongoing M23 crisis was agreed in Luanda, Angola, in November 2022 between the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Angola.

DRC–South Africa relations

The nature and unstable foundations of the DRC state have been critical in shaping interactions between South Africa and the DRC. South Africa’s interventions in the DRC began in 1996 at the request of President Mobutu, who was facing a challenge from political opponent Laurent Kabila (and poor relations with President Moi of Kenya) – leading to negotiations between the Mobutu and Kabila facilitated by President Nelson Mandela. South Africa has

since played a critical role in the DRC's elections and transitions of power. This included support infrastructure to organize and oversee elections. However, it is unclear whether South Africa maintained this role during the DRC's 2018–19 transition.

Both the DRC and South Africa are members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and South Africa retains both economic and security interests in the DRC. From a regional security perspective, South Africa played a central role in brokering the 2002 Sun City Agreements and Inter-Congolese Dialogue² and laid the foundations for the establishment of a South Africa–DRC Bi-National Commission (BNC), under South African President Thabo Mbeki in 2004, though the lack of a consistent government and continual turnover of ministers in the DRC has limited its subsequent success.

South Africa's investments in reconstruction and development initiatives, after the Congo wars, helped to further cement South Africa's role as a development partner to the DRC, with a focus on security sector reform, and capacity- and institution-building. South Africa's contributions to the UN Force Intervention Brigade were also notable, including support for logistics, particularly helicopter units, and military health services.

Security and economic interests

But South Africa's handling of the Central African Republic crisis raised important questions about the former's military capacity and the shortcomings of its unilateral approach in the region. Operations to combat extremism in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, and South Africa's engagements in the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), have also impacted South Africa's bandwidth overseas and limited engagement, particularly involving the South African Defence Force, in the DRC. The reported jihadist movements associated with the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in eastern DRC is perceived to be supported by a well-rooted regional network including money transfers from Johannesburg.

From an economic perspective, South Africa and Zambia provide an estimated 71 per cent of the DRC's imports from Africa, reflecting the importance of South Africa's trade relations with the DRC and highlighting the balance of trade between the two countries. The prioritization of economic and security interests is worthy of further examination. Economic benefits may be perceived as a dividend of the security dimensions of South Africa's engagement.

South Africa–DRC relations should also be considered within the broader geopolitical context of the Great Lakes region. The DRC's accession to the East African Community (EAC) in July 2022 suggests a shift in the key power brokers in the DRC away from its traditionally significant Southern African partners (South Africa and Angola). Though the DRC maintains parallel

² The Sun City Agreement was an agreement that was signed between some of the warring parties in the Second Congo War on 2 April 2003 at the luxury South African casino resort of Sun City, as a result of the Inter-Congolese dialogue (ICD).

membership of both SADC and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), roundtable participants noted that there was uncertainty over the sustainability of the Tripartite Mechanism on Dialogue and Cooperation between Angola, DRC and South Africa. In addition, Kenya's deployment of troops in eastern DRC demonstrates the country's appetite for a more competitive and ambitious foreign policy in the wider region's political and security affairs, complicating existing relations between South Africa and other countries in the region. South Africa's participation in MONUSCO is also being widely questioned due to growing negative public sentiment, while the wider crisis of confidence in the UN's mandate and approach signals the potential of increased regionalization in peace and security initiatives.

Evolving regional security architecture

The 'cacophony' of peacebuilding actors involved in the DRC include the African Union (AU); United Nations bodies such as MONUSCO and the UN Envoy on the Great Lakes region; the ICGLR; and three regional economic communities (RECs) – SADC, the EAC and ECCAS. The DRC's overlapping memberships of the EAC, SADC and ECCAS pulls the country in different directions and has led to a fragmented landscape of regional organizations with an interest in finding a solution to the DRC's problems. Meeting participants noted that the RECs are currently mainly arenas for political elites to voice their national interests with limited tangible impact.

Kenya is the latest entrant in the EAC and the country has significant economic interests in the DRC. It remains to be seen how much leverage Kenya has and is willing to exercise in eastern DRC, and it was noted that the Kenyan president William Ruto is the youngest head of state in a region where seniority holds particular importance. Under Kenya's leadership (under Lieutenant-Colonel Obiero) of the newly deployed East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) in the DRC, the EAC seems to be replacing SADC as the most significant regional body. But there is a marked lack of clarity on how the East African regional force will operate, its mandate and the current challenges that it faces. This is partly due to deliberate opacity, as the EAC equates sharing operational documents with giving strategic advantage to opposing forces. But from an accountability perspective, meeting participants argued that the EAC should be pushed to publish its operational documents, rules of engagement and other legal and technical regulations pertaining to force deployment.

This is particularly key given the weak confidence, among DRC communities, in regional and international partners. This is underpinned by a general perception that economic interests drive the activity of international actors rather than a genuine interest in resolving crises. Given the lack of results in the history of international engagement in the DRC – and the more than 120 armed

groups operating in the east of the country – many DRC citizens do not believe that a new EAC force is the answer.

Yet the EAC is itself cognizant of the careful balancing required between engaging with international partners and protecting the region's interests. It has sought to learn from the perceived failure of SADC after the Force Intervention Brigade (which was initially proposed as a Neutral Intervention Brigade by Uganda supported by South Africa) was absorbed under a MONUSCO banner, leaving it exposed to perceived external manipulation. EAC officials have highlighted that they are only interested in financial (and not human) resources from external partners. Notwithstanding SADC's current weaknesses and lack of bandwidth, it was pointed out that the DRC will likely be forced back onto SADC's agenda ahead of the country's 2023 general elections, due to the necessary assistance required for preparation and support. It is not yet clear whether the EAC and SADC initiatives will be complimentary or in competition in the DRC. The importance of harmonizing the Kenyan–Angolan peace processes was also underlined by meeting participants.

Bilateral and multilateral responses

Despite the climate of distrust towards international actors, bilateral partners can still play a positive role in the DRC. It was noted at the meeting that old and new bilateral partners are perceived differently by different sections of DRC society. For example, there is a small group of young people in the region that are supportive of Russia and Vladimir Putin – a similar phenomenon as seen in West Africa. The economic interests of China in the DRC (particularly regarding cobalt) were also noted – a permanent solution to the long-standing crisis in eastern DRC will be difficult without China's input.

Bilateral engagement should ideally be channelled through regional forums, such as the EAC, and supported by wider supranational institutions, such as the AU and the UN, to ensure effectiveness and cohesion. Participants argued that bilateral investments have the potential to support constructive regional dialogues among the DRC and its neighbours (particularly Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi) to address key cross-border issues such as refugee protection and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). Despite a tendency to vilify Rwanda, primarily due to allegations of its support to the M23 rebel group in eastern DRC, Rwanda must be part of finding a long-term solution and its concerns cannot be swept under the carpet. Bilateral partners can also help the EAC and ICGLR (who first proposed a regional force in response to the M23 crisis in 2013) to clearly define command and control structures within the EAC regional force.

The DRC government can also work with bilateral partners to develop and implement a long-term strategy for reforms to tackle the root causes of conflict in eastern DRC. This should include a comprehensive institutional, constitutional, security sector and governance reform package, including electoral security issues ahead of the scheduled elections at the close of 2023.

The role and future of the UN in the DRC

The UN is currently in a difficult position in the DRC, characterized by political and military paralysis, with broken trust among host communities and peacekeepers. However, it is also important to recognize that failures of the UN are often exaggerated and used to manipulate public opinion to the benefit local politicians. The vast geography and diversity of the DRC has also led to MONUSCO and other actors facing a range of challenges across different areas of the country.

Participants highlighted that UN peacekeeping in active conflict situations is marked by an ambivalence, in that it is expected to manage conflicts (if not resolve them), but traditionally lacks an offensive or enforcement capability to manage parties who are not amenable to a peaceful resolution. The language of the original resolution introducing the Force Intervention Brigade reflected an awkward compromise, authorizing the brigade to take all necessary steps to protect civilians (including offensive action) ‘without establishing a precedent’. However, the interpretation of this language comes down to political rather than legal questions and further speaks to the ambivalence of the Security Council and UN hierarchy in managing conflict.

Unclear guidance on the use of force has stunted the effectiveness of MONUSCO and public buy-in. This has been compounded by a wider context of uneven DRC state authority across the country and ongoing institution-building. The phrase ‘robust peacekeeping’ became a euphemism for dealing with the contradiction between what forces are authorized to do and what they are capable of doing. Misaligned expectations among the local citizenry, government, troop-contributing countries and the UN Security Council, continue to exacerbate the difficult and often contradictory role that UN bodies play. This ambiguity should be a key area for international focus.

The meeting discussion highlighted that the mandate of MONUSCO (previously MONUC) has tended to reflect the random aspirations of members of the UN Security Council, rather than a logical response to a strategic set of challenges. While the DRC elections and peaceful transfer of power in 2018–19 paved the way for a promising democratic path, a basic level of security – which is being threatened in eastern DRC – is itself required to achieve progress in areas such as the reinforcement of the justice system, economic development and the rule of law. Long-term stability in the DRC must be built through harmonized investments in addressing social, infrastructural, socio-economic, ethnic and other sociological challenges. Reviving the UN as an institution and rebuilding bottom-up confidence in host countries and communities will be a similarly complex and difficult endeavour.