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The Risk of Military Expansion in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Threat of Wider Regional Conflict

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Abstract

As military clashes between the M23 rebel group, purportedly supported by Rwanda and Uganda, intensify, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is once again at risk of regional instability. This paper looks at the dangers of military growth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and how it might lead to a wider Great Lakes conflict. The research focuses on the roles of important players, such as MONUSCO, regional alliances, and international actors assisting insurgent organizations, and draws on current geopolitical developments. It contends that there are serious risks to regional peace and security from the further militarization of the conflict if its underlying political and socioeconomic roots are not addressed. The study highlights the necessity of political commitment to lasting peacebuilding and revitalized diplomatic structures.

Keywords:

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); M23; MONUSCO; Regional Conflict; Great Lakes Region; Peacekeeping; Military Expansion.

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Introduction

African interlocutors and external actors need to act quickly to prevent the bloodshed in the Great Lakes Region, since the possible factors in a shifting political calculation could be behind the sponsors of the March 23 Movement (M23) rebel group beginning another conflict. DRC is also a place that is yet to recover after the disastrous Congo Wars of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the militaries of seven African States intervened and took part in the Congo, killing up to an estimated 5.4 million Congolese people ([Fabricius 2024a](#)).

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), besides the 6,000 estimated M23 soldiers, there are about 4,000 Rwandan soldiers, and there is also evidence from UN investigators that M23 has Ugandan backing ([Africa Centre for Strategic Studies 2022](#)). The troops of M23 rebels have already taken over the city of Goma, and this has created shockwaves throughout the region, and a bigger war in this region is imminent ([International Crisis Group 2025](#)). It is particularly worrying that this development comes at a time when it is highly considered that M23 is backed by the Rwanda Defense Force (RDF), as Rwanda still has interests in the DRC.

Problem Statement

The United Nations has been active in the region, as well as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, since the start of 1999. At first, the organization was present in the country with its peacekeeping forces, under the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) mandate. In 2010, the mission was changed to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

Nowadays, the UN Mission has the strength of over 1500 members, including combat soldiers, a peacekeeping army charged with the responsibilities of conducting focused war attacks in an effort to eliminate groups perceived to be a menace to the state power ([Nantulya 2024](#)). Security in the DRC is also not in a good state, with the primary aggressors being rebel groups and criminal organizations. Nevertheless, the armed community-based self-defense groups are on the increase. MONUSCO has been reacting to this trend through aerial activities and undertaking short-term measures that focus on the enhancement of the defense of civilians, which is by integrating well-trained police-military patrols in its plans. The organization has also engaged more soldiers to deal with the high tensions that have hounded the communities ([Africa Centre for Strategic Studies 2022](#)). Although this has been done, it seems that there is no commitment to neutralizing the conflict. This has, however, been lacking in operational coordination between MONUSCO and other forces due to the reports of violent operations among other forces.

This paper argues that the ongoing military expansion in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, driven by the resurgence of the M23 rebel group and the involvement of regional actors like Rwanda and Uganda, poses a significant threat to regional stability and peace, and that without a shift from militarized responses to comprehensive political and diplomatic engagement, the Great Lakes Region risks relapsing into widespread conflict.

Background

The conflict in DRC, which has been ongoing for more than two decades, has had negative implications for the country's socio-economic and political outcomes despite the presence of international actors such as the United Nations. The UN's unsuccessful peacekeeping operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo should be stopped slowly and receptively. The need to avoid a security gap within the country created by the DRC war is overstressed. The spread of the 23 March Movement (M23) across the country, including such places as North Kivu, has raised deep concern, in particular, for the secretary of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (Fabricius 2024a). Actually, considering the fact that the analysts believe Rwanda has increased its support to M23, this rapid escalation can, in all probability, trigger a broader regional conflict.

MONUSCO has already trained many recruits of the DRC government, called the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC), who are set to protect Sake and Goma against the M23. Since the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has been authorized by the African Union to deploy forces at the regional level, the regional force is yet to achieve full operating capacity ([International Crisis Group 2025](#)). In case the conflict in the region continues, the countries surrounding the area also face a risk of spill-over in the Greater Lakes region, and this is likely to lead to an even more devastating impact, as indicated in a report submitted by Sierra Leone, Algerian, Mozambican, and Guyana representatives ([Nantulya 2024](#)). Moreover, Japanese representatives claimed that enhanced military activities by the gangs, like M23, ruined the lives of communities besides posing a threat to human security. In that sense, the support given to M23 and other armed militia should be halted since the further display of such support can end up jeopardizing the region to the brink of massive war ([Africa Centre for Strategic Studies 2022](#)).

In another report, prepared by the Russian Federation, it was indicated that, although it is commonly referred to as a forgotten crisis, it is one of the oldest and bloodiest conflicts with no match in casualties so far (Fabricius 2024b). It happens to be quite unfortunate that efforts that have been made on the diplomatic front have amounted to limited achievements, thus the need to have countries that have economic and political interests influence the parties that matter.

The United States was also an advocate of the fact that operations of MONUSCO in North Kivu must continue until more improvement is made ([International Crisis Group 2025](#)). This was why, in their opinion, Rwanda, as a major troop-contributing nation in UN peacekeeping operations, could not tolerate the conduct of the M23 members. Consequently, there has to be a solution to allow the Congolese to stabilize their eastern province and Rwanda to maintain internal security.

The international peacekeeping force created in the Democratic Republic of Congo has existed long enough, and such an operation ought to be slow and cautious. It is strongly stressed that the conflict in the DRC needs to be counteracted to avoid a vacuum in domestic security. The secretary of MONUSCO has expressed concerns over the recent explosive rise of the M23 across the country, particularly in regions of the country such as North Kivu ([Nantulya 2024](#)). Also, given that analysts believe that Rwanda has stepped up its support to M23, this sudden development is fraught with the strong likelihood of prompting an even greater regional war.

Justification of the Study

The fragile balance of peace in the Great Lakes Region, which encompasses nine neighbouring states, is also under jeopardy because of the ongoing instability in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Concerns reminiscent of the First and Second Congo Wars are raised by the reappearance of violence involving numerous state and non-state entities. The M23's comeback and the participation of surrounding nations point to a structural breakdown in the current conflict resolution processes, notwithstanding years of peacekeeping missions and regional diplomacy. The pressing need to evaluate the effects of military expansion in the DRC, investigate the possibility of regional spill-over, and pinpoint avenues for a long-term political resolution justifies this study. The research also contributes to the literature on African conflict dynamics, peacekeeping missions' effectiveness, and international mediation efforts.

Methodology

The qualitative research design used in this study is based on desk-based content analysis. It synthesizes information from scholarly publications, regional policy declarations, official UN reports, and journalistic inquiries from reliable sources, including the Institute for Security Studies, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, and the International Crisis Group. The approach enables a critical analysis of the conflict's military, political, and diplomatic aspects. The study uses a theme approach to evaluate the efficacy of diplomatic and peacekeeping efforts, player motivations, and regional ramifications. Triangulation of data is used to improve the reliability and validity of results.

Expansion of Conflict outside Congo

Goma, the capital of the strategically important and mineral-rich North Kivu Province in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), was well-planned and accomplished. This capture continues M23's expanding push to regain control of territory in the eastern DRC, which began in 2022 ([International Crisis Group 2025](#)). Alongside this, there have been initiatives to boost resource exploitation and create a parallel civilian administration in regions under M23 control. This implies that maintaining and maybe extending their geographical control is a longer-term goal for the rebel organization and their local supporters.

At least 17 peacekeepers, including those from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) serving in MONUSCO, have been killed; hospitals are overrun with casualties, many of whom are civilians; businesses and shops are being looted; heavy ordnance is landing in civilian areas; and the attacks have caused a major humanitarian crisis, forcing displaced people to flee further south in the already unstable South Kivu or across the Rwanda border ([International Crisis Group 2025](#)). Since January 2024, over 500,000 people have been displaced. Hundreds of angry demonstrators in Kinshasa are calling on the government to act swiftly and forcefully to retake the lost land ([Fabricius 2024a](#)). Others are demanding firearms so they can join the battle in the east, while others have set fires in front of Western embassies in protest of the international community's inability to put an end to the violence.

There is intense pressure on Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi to address the violence, which is generally assumed to be originating from Rwanda and Uganda ([Fabricius 2024a](#)). With Kisangani, Bunia, Bukavu, and Goma serving as key epicentres, the Congo wars of the 1990s and 2000s also began in eastern DRC, and eventually, seven African militaries were involved. The regional anxiety is fuelled by fears that Rwanda, which has about 10 percent of the DRC's population, would gain disproportionate influence over one of Africa's largest countries with nine neighbours ([International Crisis Group 2025](#)). The regionalization of the conflict further complicates efforts to find solutions to fundamental political and social issues.

In 2012, M23 strategically managed to take over the city of Goma, which is considered a strategic location in the country. Today, the group is even larger and more organized and armed and comprises well-trained personnel, making it a force that necessitates special attention. Since 2022, M23 has managed to carry out multiple strikes and attacks, resulting in the capture of large areas such as the provinces in the North and South Kivu ([Nantulya 2024](#)). The use of its heavy artillery, combat drone, and surface-to-air missiles confirms the argument that they enjoyed massive state support. Also, their equipment and uniforms show that they do not look like a mixed crew.

As a former guerrilla fighter and retired South African Army General, Maomela Motau shared his account of the nature of and tactics used by the guerrilla fighters to understand what is going on in DRC. His account reveals that M23 fighters must be supported by a strong force or group. Another complex issue is the dynamic regionalist relationships of Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo ([International Crisis Group 2025](#)). Burundi and DRC have as many as 10,000 troops with an Imbonerakure government militia in the eastern region ([International Crisis Group 2025](#)). People on the ground fear that any time the violence might break out, since more Congolese troops are leaving Goma in boats to the town of Bukavu in South Kivu, where Burundian forces are based.

It is also crucial to note that the Goma assault occurred in a different security environment. During the early periods of the war, Uganda used to fight alongside Rwanda. This implied that despite Uganda being bitter enemies with Rwanda today, it was not at the time antagonistic to M23 when it seized control of Goma in 2012. Some 1,000 members of the M23 disappeared in 2014 (a group of fighters was disarmed and cantoned in Rwanda) after the group was disbanded in 2013 and cantoned in a military base in western Uganda ([International Crisis Group 2025](#)). After concluding a deal with the DRC, Uganda is now building new roads, bridges, and other infrastructure in North Kivu in 2021, starting with the road between Bunagana and Rutshuru, Goma, and all the way to the Rwandese border. Rwanda and Uganda have been marred with military activity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since the two countries had initially joined forces and successfully battled with a single military force against the Congolese longstanding ruler, Mobutu Sese Seko, during the First Congo War. Later, they engaged in battle on the Congolese territory during the Second Congo War in favor of opposing factions that were interested in overthrowing the government of Laurent Kabila. It is therefore difficult to know how the top military leaders of the two countries will behave in the latest escalation of hostilities, judging by the previous rush of activities between them.

Recommendations

There are so many uncertainties in the rapidly developing crisis in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. One thing remains the same, though. The background political, social, and economic issues that have given rise to instability are not issues that can be helped by a military reaction. Already, there exists a mechanism to handle the outer facets of the crisis of the neighbours and the internal conflict of the DRC, like the nationality and citizenship problems. The Sun City Accords that were signed as the culmination of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD) in 2001 through 2003 created a model of a comprehensive peace that addressed deep-rooted leadership of both political and socioeconomic problems in Congo. The external features of the issue were managed through the simultaneous Lusaka Peace Accord. The result of both processes and the localization of the framework in the unstable Ituri region was the establishment of the International Conference on

the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), a UN engagement tool, which helps to commit all parties. In a bid to lure Rwanda and the DRC into political interaction, two lines of operation, i.e., the Luanda process, led by Angolan President Joao Lourenco, and the Nairobi process, led by Kenyan President William Ruto, would reawaken some of this institutional recall and expertise. To renew the structures of dealing with the root causes and give new life to these discussions, the immediate issue is to create the political desire to de-escalate.

Conclusion

The violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo is a tense intersection of regional rivalries, unresolved socio-political issues, and old grievances rather than a singular internal problem. The M23 rebel group's comeback, which has reportedly received support from Rwanda and Uganda, highlights how consistently national and international actors have failed to put long-term peace frameworks into action. Even though MONUSCO and other peacekeeping missions have brought about some temporary security, their effectiveness has been hampered by a lack of political will, coordination, and sincere dedication to resolving the conflict's underlying issues.

A wider regional conflict similar to the catastrophic Congo Wars of the past could be rekindled by the crises' increasing militarization, especially the deliberate takeover of areas like Goma. Thus, the Great Lakes Region continues to face a significant danger of conflict escalation in the absence of a firm shift toward inclusive discourse, regional diplomacy, and long-term development plans. In addition to the removal of foreign interference, legal Congolese institutions must be empowered, and regional peace mechanisms like the Luanda and Nairobi processes must be reactivated, for the DRC to experience sustainable peace. Reactive initiatives have outlived their usefulness; instead, principled, coordinated, and proactive diplomacy must be prioritized.

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DECLARATION on AI use

The authors maintained full responsibility for the intellectual content, interpretation of data, and conclusions.