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DRC

Democratic Republic of Congo: a conflict with multiple implications

- IV Online magazine - 2025 - IVP602 - March 2025 -

Publication date: Tuesday 25 March 2025

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The capture of Goma and Bukavu, the regional capitals of North and South Kivu respectively in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by the 23 March Movement (M23), strongly supported by the Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF), is certainly a turning point for the DRC.

The reasons for the conflict are many, and cannot be summed up as a desire to control the DRC's many gold, coltan, tin and tungsten mines. This conflict, which has now lasted for three decades, is still being waged by the same actors, regardless of the changes in the names of the armed groups. Another appalling constant is the suffering inflicted on the civilian population, the vast majority of whom go from refugee camps to humanitarian refuges to escape the wars, looting and massacres. This thirty-year belligerence is the cause of death of several million people, deaths directly linked to the multiple battles or to disease and malnutrition.

These incessant wars can be explained in terms of two competitions. The first is regional, combining economic interests and geostrategic stakes. The second, less talked about, is local and has to do with access to land. This is a central issue that needs to be addressed in the light of Belgium's colonial policy over the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi.

Regional competition

Félix Tshisekedi, president of the DRC in 2019 following a rightly disputed election, has pursued a policy of diplomatic alliance with Rwanda and Uganda. These two countries, which border the eastern region of the DRC, have in the past supported armed interventions against Kinshasa. Although Tshisekedi had promised Rwanda a strong economic relationship, he favoured Uganda. At the time, Uganda was investing in transport infrastructure with the construction of roads on two routes, Kasindi-Beni-Butembo and Bunagana-Goma, enabling it to take advantage of the economic activity in North and South Kivu. This choice was strongly contested by Paul Kagamé, President of Rwanda. He does not accept the marginalisation of his country in favour of Uganda, with which he has difficult relations.

The weakness of the DRC

A few months later, the M23 armed group, which had already been used in 2012, was re-activated and given a political wing, the Alliance du Fleuve Congo (AFC). Backed by elements of the FRD, the M23/AFC conquered most of North and South Kivu with relative ease over the course of the two-year war. The DRC's armed forces (FARDC) were unable to contain the offensive. This is the result of numerous failures in the chain of command and the corruption of officers. Added to this is the lack of homogeneity in the battalions, due to the difficulties of integrating the armed groups, a counterpart to the various peace agreements signed over the years. The Congolese soldiers, poorly equipped, poorly paid and with inadequate logistics, are totally demotivated. In fact, the FARDC largely subcontracts the war to various militias that have come together under the name of *Wazalendo* (meaning patriots in Kiswahili).

Marx's famous quote 'history repeats itself in two stages, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce' is perfectly suited to Tshisekedi's attempt to repeat the operation that took place in 2013 when joint troops from South

Africa, Tanzania and Malawi, under the colours of the UN mission MONUSCO, succeeded in routing the M23. At the same time, Western countries put financial pressure on Rwanda. But since then, political conditions have changed and the various approaches have been in vain.

Rwanda's rising power

Tshisekedi had repeatedly called for the departure of MONUSCO, which he considered ineffective. He changed his mind and asked to postpone his departure, hoping for help from the UN mission against the M23/AFC.

Rwanda has forged links with the major European capitals. It agreed to be the host country for asylum seekers on behalf of Britain, even though this project did not come to fruition. It is also one of the main contributors to the UN peacekeeping forces and is involved in securing oil installations in the north of Mozambique, in Cabo Delgado. It is a stable market for the sale of minerals, which are vital to the energy transition, and the icing on the cake is that it is the only African leader to approve Trump's closure of USAID.

DRC seeks military support

Félix Tshisekedi will struggle to find countries willing to lend a hand to the FARDC. He turned to Kenya, taking advantage of the good relations he enjoyed with Kenyatta, who also helped finance his candidacy in 2018. He obtained military intervention from this East African country. The intervention was not unselfish, as Kenyatta has a strong presence in the banking sector and saw it as an opportunity to gain a foothold in an economic area where only 10% of the population has a bank account. But just as Kenyan army troops were beginning to land in the DRC, Kenya changed its president. The newly elected president, William Ruto, was reluctant to take part in the operation and used every means of delay to avoid a military confrontation with the M23/AFC and Rwanda.

The Congolese president then turned to the countries of southern Africa. South Africa responded positively by sending almost 3,000 troops. This was an opportunity for South Africa to participate in the mining operation and to assert its leadership role on the continent. However, these troops had little impact on the course of the war. In South Africa, on the other hand, the death of 14 soldiers sparked debate and opposition within the country. It also led to a diplomatic row between Kagame and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Tanzania preferred to play the role of mediator, organising the last summit bringing together all the protagonists in Dar es Salaam. For Tanzania, the economic stakes are high, as the DRC has become its biggest export market within the East African Community.

Uganda is playing a double game. It publicly defends the sovereignty of the DRC but at the same time assures a benevolent neutrality to the M23/AFC, and even provides support by allowing the armed group to use its territory for logistical operations.

Burundi is the only country to stand shoulder to shoulder with the DRC, providing resources - nearly ten thousand men - but this is still only a small number in the face of the battle-hardened men of the M23/AFC and the well-equipped special forces of the Rwandan army. Burundi is above all concerned by these forces stationed a few hundred metres along the western part of its border with the conquest of South Kivu and its capital Bukavu.

Burundi's Hutu-led government is the result of a kind of coup d'état that undermined the governmental architecture that provided for collegiality between Tutsis and Hutus in the management of power, following the Arusha Accords in 2000. Evariste Ndayishimiye, the president of Burundi, obtained from the Congolese authorities the possibility of fighting his armed opposition, in particular the Resistance for the Rule of Law in Burundi (RED-Tabara), which operates inside the DRC and was at one time supported by Rwanda. The capture of South Kivu by the M23/AFC, which claims to defend the Tutsis, represents a potential danger for the Burundian dictatorship.

Rwanda's plans

There is therefore a real geostrategic and economic competition between the countries to gain a leading position in the process of integrating the regional market in the east of the DRC. This process involves mineral exploitation, transport and, above all, processing and sales. Rwanda's ambition is to be the hub of this economy, but other countries such as Uganda and even Tanzania remain serious competitors.

In addition to the economic aspect, Rwanda has a specificity linked to the genocide of the Tutsis in 1994. Paul Kagamé justifies his support for the M23/AFC by his desire to eradicate the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), a Hutu armed group made up of former genocidaires who were able to form in the shadow of the French army's Operation Turquoise, presented as a humanitarian intervention. These FDLR carried out armed incursions into Rwanda and could have represented a danger in the immediate period of the genocide. This has long since ceased to be the case. With less than a thousand men, they survive in the east of the DRC and more often than not serve as auxiliaries to the DRC's armed forces. A situation denounced by Kagamé, though at the same time, it allows him to disseminate internally an ideology of a besieged citadel that favours the dictatorship he has established. After thirty years in power, he won the last elections with a score of 99.15%. Opponents are either treated as genocidaires or executed, even in exile. For Rwanda, the east of the DRC represents not only real economic opportunities but also a need to establish strategic depth for the country.

Local competition

The internal factors of the crisis in the DRC are often ignored, yet they remain essential to understanding the continuity of the armed groups, all supported by Rwanda, that have been in power for three decades now. The Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo (AFDL) in 1996, then the Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie (RCD) in 1998, the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP) in 2006, the M23 in 2012 and now the M23/AFC have all had access to land as their main concern from the outset.

Colonial manipulation

This issue has its roots in Belgium's colonial policy. Belgium regularly modified the periphery of the administration of chiefdoms in Central Africa. It either grouped them together or created new ones according to the needs of its policy. These chieftaincies play an important role, as it is they who grant plots of land.

During the Second World War, the colonial authorities made up for the shortage of labour on the plantations by bringing almost 100,000 Rwandans, mainly Hutus, to the Congo. To better control this population, the colonial authorities set up a chieftaincy headed by a Tutsi. This chieftaincy, set up right in the middle of Buhunde territory, never ceased to cause tensions. It was abolished by the Belgians in 1957, putting an end to access to land for people

from Rwanda.

Access to land

A second wave of immigration took place, made up of Tutsis fleeing persecution by the new Hutu leaders during Rwanda's independence process. They arrived in a DRC that was in turmoil when it gained independence in 1960. In 1963, this situation gave rise to the Kanyarwanda war, which lasted three years. It pitted the Hunde and Nande communities, who considered themselves indigenous, against the Hutus and Tutsis. With Mobutu's arrival in power and his Zairianisation policy, the land now belonged to the state. This change opened up opportunities for the Tutsis. This often well-educated population was able to occupy important positions in the administration and thus acquire large landholdings, freeing themselves from the power of the traditional chieftaincies. Since then, the legitimacy of land titles has been contested on an ongoing basis, especially as two types of legislation - state and customary - now coexist. Although the contexts in the DRC have varied, the policy of the various groups supported by Rwanda has always been concerned with and determined to secure the controversial land ownership of the Tutsis.

While the issue of mineral exploitation is undeniably becoming central today in the armed conflict between Rwanda and the DRC, this was not always the case. During their territorial conquest, the leaders of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD) and the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP) set up an administration in the Kivu region that enabled these leaders and their relatives to acquire land through purchases, even though sometimes the sellers were not necessarily willing to sell their land.

Risk of the conflict spreading

This is exactly what the M23/AFC is doing. It is replacing the Kivu regional authorities with its own men, indicating that its plan is for the long term. Ignoring calls for a ceasefire at the Dar es Salaam summit, Rwandan and M23/AFC troops have taken Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu. In the conquered territories, the new leaders are pursuing a brutal policy of normalisation, giving refugees in the camps around Goma 72 hours to return to their villages, regardless of the security situation. Once again, hundreds of thousands of weakened and sometimes sick people will find themselves on the roads.

Overthrowing the regime

Will Rwanda be content with a strong presence in the east of the DRC, benefiting from the country's mineral wealth, or will its ultimate goal be to overthrow Tshisekedi by allying itself with the opposition? One element of the answer may lie in the creation of the AFC, a structure that aims to unite at least some of Tshisekedi's opponents.

The AFC has done this work. It succeeded, for example, in integrating the Coalition des patriotes résistants congolais (PARECO) in North Kivu, the Twiraneho in South Kivu, a self-defence group of the Banyamulenge, Tutsis who have been in the DRC since well before the colonial period, the Forces de résistance patriotique de l'Ituri (FRPI), whose former leaders have been convicted by the International Criminal Court of crimes against humanity, and many others of lesser importance. Political figures such as Adam Chalwe, former leader of former Congolese president Joseph Kabila's party, and the former spokesman for Jean-Pierre Bemba's movement, have also joined the AFC.

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Félix Tshisekedi is much weakened, not only because of the territorial conquests of the M23/AFC, but also because of his desire to amend the constitution, opening up the possibility that he could run for a third presidential term, which is widely disapproved of in the country. Corneille Nangaa, the leader of the AFC, once again expressed his objective of 'liberating the whole of Congo'. His intention is to repeat the 1997 seizure of power by the AFDL, supported by Rwanda and Uganda, which overthrew Mobutu, rapidly sparking a regional conflict on Congolese soil. This situation cannot be ruled out, with the possibility of direct clashes between Burundi and Rwanda, and a risk of the war spreading, once again resulting in hundreds of thousands of victims among the civilian population.

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