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The war we aren't watching

Rwanda isn't in eastern DRC because of an immediate threat — it's there for the long haul

This Sunday, 16 February, the M23 rebel group took over Bukavu, the second town in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This happened two weeks after they had taken over Goma, the other strategically important town in eastern DRC. All of this signifies a major escalation of the conflict.

A string of UN reports over the last years have shown Rwandan support both logistically to the armed group, as well as through direct presence of Rwandan troops in the DRC. Last year, a conservative estimate of the UN group of experts put the number of Rwandan troops on Congolese territory at 3 000 to 4 000; and with the takeover of Goma, this is estimated to have increased to 6 000 or 7 000.

It's not the first time the M23 conflict emerges. It began in 2012 when a group of Congolese Tutsi rebels, known as the March 23 Movement (M23), mutinied against the DRC government. The group was formed by former members of the CNDP (National Congress for the Defense of the People), who had been integrated into the Congolese army under a 2009 peace deal. They accused the government of failing to uphold the agreement, particularly regarding political representation and the treatment of Tutsi communities. Backed by Rwanda and, to some extent, Uganda, M23 quickly seized territory in eastern DRC. After major international pressure on Rwanda, and military pressure on M23, the group was defeated in 2013. Yet, in November 2021, the group re-emerged, used by Rwanda as a proxy.

The Congolese response to the conflict in eastern DRC has been suffering from a range of structural problems, such as widespread corruption in the army, or its collaboration with armed groups, including the FDLR. There also have been a range of missed opportunities in talks with, and demobilisation of, (remnants of) M23.

But this does not fully explain the interests of Rwanda in eastern DRC, and what motivated, what can only be characterised as, an invasion of a

neighbouring country?

Defending interests as per tradition

Kigali sees eastern DRC as a threat to its national security. It particularly sees the FDLR rebel group, consisting of remnants of former genocide perpetrators, as a major threat to its territory. Rwanda's vision cannot be separated from the aftermath of the genocide, influencing their particularly offensive and maximalist security posture. In a February 2024 statement, the Rwandan government argued in reference to the FDLR that 'Rwanda reserves the right to take any legitimate measures to defend our country, so long as this threat exists'.

It must be recognised that the security threat by the FDLR is not of the magnitude that it legitimises such a widespread military response by M23 and Rwanda. Their military response is therefore a mixture of what Kigali perceives as a legitimate concern – in their post-genocide maximalist security posture – but also an instrumentalisation of this threat. For example, when M23 re-emerged in November 2021 – largely re-activated by Rwanda – FDLR was estimated to have been between 500 to 1 000 troops; a far stretch from posing an existential threat to Rwanda.

On top of that, the role of Rwanda as 'fireman-arsonist' needs to be emphasised. Over the last 20 years, it has supported several armed groups in eastern DRC, and therefore it has played an important role in fuelling violence in the area. The M23 rebellion is a good example here. In theory, the rebellion was started to protect the Tutsi population in DRC. While there indeed are legitimate grounds to this population's historical marginalisation, the M23 rebellion has further stoked inter-ethnic tensions, and led again to increased insecurity for the Tutsi population.

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Rwanda sees eastern DRC as its historical sphere of influence. It will therefore seek to preserve this influence in the East, and will act whenever it feels this influence to be threatened. This is also widely seen as the reason why Rwanda re-activated M23 in November 2021. At that point, Rwanda felt its interests in DRC were directly threatened. Neighbouring countries Burundi and Uganda were allowed to operate militarily in eastern DRC, whereas Rwanda was not. Particularly the military operation of Uganda was seen as a direct threat to Rwanda. Uganda for example planned to construct a road in eastern DRC, which was

going directly in Rwanda's zone of influence. Rwanda therefore sought to protect its interests in the way it has traditionally done so: through an armed group, in this case M23.

The Rwandan involvement in eastern DRC also fits into a broader historical narrative of a 'Greater Rwanda'. President Kagame has publicly questioned the colonial borders between Congo and Rwanda. About a year ago, he claimed how 'The borders that were drawn during colonial times had our countries divided (...) A big part of Rwanda was left outside, in eastern Congo, in southwestern Uganda and so forth and so forth.' There are no explicit territorial claims in statements such as these; but they are widely understood in this way by the Congolese — especially because such claims have been made in the past, going back to the First Congo War (1996-1997).

It's not just about resources

It must also be acknowledged that Rwanda has vested economic interests in Congo. Since 2016, gold is Rwanda's most important export product, and it is widely acknowledged that most of this gold comes from eastern DRC.

For all of these reasons together, Rwandan political elites have with varying degrees of openness been talking of eastern DRC as a bufferzone, or about a 'Kurdistan' model.

It's therefore crucial to see the operations of Rwanda and M23 as a mixture of the above-mentioned elements. In a range of media, there is for example much emphasis on the resource element of the current war, which is depicted as being fought primarily for access to mineral resources. And indeed, this does play a role: M23 occupied the Rubaya mine, which is estimated to provide 20 per cent of the world's coltan. UN reports have shown how M23 exports an estimated 120 tons of coltan per month from this mine, which goes to Rwanda. At the same time, it's important to nuance these dimensions: as but one example, M23 only conquered the mine in April 2024, two and a half years after it (re)started its rebellion.

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M23 puts much effort in showing its 'benevolent rebel rule'. It wants to show it's more capable and effective than Kinshasa at governing the East. This has also led to a flurry of online activity, of influential pro-Kigali personalities showing the 'liberation' of Goma

and eastern DRC, and the 'good work' done by M23. These efforts conveniently ignore the displacement caused by this most recent war and the violence conducted by M23 against the civilian population. In the first half of 2024 alone, M23 displaced an estimated two million people; and since the beginning of this year, another 700 000 were displaced. There are also reports of summary executions by M23; abduction and forced recruitment (including of children), and forced labour.

The factors previously mentioned all suggest that Rwanda is in the Kivu provinces for the long haul: it has invested more troops, and has occupied a larger territory than in 2012/2013. It's no coincidence that all this takes place in the context of what is happening in Gaza and Ukraine: the international response to invasion and annexation has shifted. And indeed, other than statements of condemnation – most recently by the European Parliament – there has been little international action: Germany has suspended aid talks, and the UK has threatened to cut aid; but other than that, not much has materialised. In the absence of this, Rwanda and M23 continue their plan to establish a 'sphere of influence'. As shown above, this offensive is not based on a direct threat, but more on the pursuing their interests. This however comes at a major human cost, provoking a major humanitarian crisis in the region.



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