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What should weigh on Europe's consciousness

Europe cannot bring peace to eastern Congo, but it can choose action over inaction. Too long has the EU dodged responsibility for its involvement

For more than 25 years, the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been the scene of one of the deadliest conflicts in the world. There are millions of displaced people, depopulated areas, serious human rights violations and a hollowed-out state authority. In local political debates, this complex and tragic conflict is often portrayed not only as distant, but also as irresolvable from the outside. But this portrayal is simply wrong. In fact, the war in Congo is shaped by regional geopolitics, global economic interests and international political decisions. Europe is not a neutral observer in this conflict. On the contrary, Europe's selective engagement and restraint have become a part of the current problems.

On paper, Europe's involvement in the DRC is considerable. The EU and its member states are among the largest humanitarian donors, and Brussels regularly reaffirms its commitment to Congolese sovereignty. However, given the long duration and intensity of the crisis, this involvement is too cautious and predominantly reactive. Instead of developing a genuine political strategy, the EU relies on selective crisis management.

While convenient, this approach is increasingly unsustainable. Eastern Congo is the epicentre of overlapping conflicts involving dozens of armed groups and actors from neighbouring states. The resurgence of the M23 rebel movement has once again destabilised North and South Kivu as well as the surrounding areas, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians. Rwanda's support, documented by UN experts, has now been officially acknowledged by the government in Kigali. This underscores the regional nature of the conflict.

Even so, the EU is hesitant to respond decisively. The measures taken so far have been cautious. Why? In many parts of Europe, Rwanda

continues to be seen as a success story of development cooperation and a reliable partner in Africa. However, if violations of Congolese sovereignty only trigger symbolic reactions, the message to other actors is clear: the political costs for an aggressor remain manageable. Brussels' caution points to a general dilemma in EU foreign policy: How can strategic partnerships be reconciled with normative commitments?

Throwing money at problems

Beyond that, the EU is deeply entangled in the political economy of the conflict. Electric vehicles, renewable energy systems and batteries are highly dependent on Congolese raw materials such as cobalt, coltan and copper. These resources are indispensable for Europe's digital infrastructure and green industrial transition. The EU's Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) recognises this dependency and aims to create resilient supply chains. But instability in supplier countries, which is also driven by global demand, is largely treated as a technical risk rather than a political challenge.

Nevertheless, Europe cannot credibly pursue strategic autonomy in the field of raw materials if it remains politically detached from the conflicts that shape the conditions of extraction. Without stricter due diligence and enforcement mechanisms, the CRMA risks reinforcing existing patterns: securing access to resources while externalising the social and political costs. A values-based industrial policy requires binding rules that prevent European demand from fuelling violence and exploitation in eastern Congo.

Humanitarian aid and development assistance take precedence over sustainable political engagement.

Structural weaknesses in EU foreign policy further exacerbate these tensions. Member States differ significantly in terms of their historical ties, strategic priorities and tolerance of political risks in the Great Lakes region. The result is well known: strong rhetoric, generous humanitarian aid, but reluctance to engage with politically sensitive partners.

Consequently, humanitarian aid and development assistance take precedence over sustainable political engagement. As important as they are, neither humanitarian aid nor development cooperation can replace a strategy that specifically targets the causes of current violence. The destruction of schools, clinics and infrastructure in eastern Congo is outpacing efforts to rebuild them. Without credible efforts to curb interference from the region, stop foreign funding of armed groups and strengthen the DRC's state authority, development aid risks becoming a

vicious circle.

A more effective EU policy must take the regional dimension of the conflict seriously. The violence in eastern Congo is inextricably linked to the security interests and domestic politics of neighbouring states. Yet strategic partnerships, budget support and even security cooperation with these countries have continued largely unchanged, rather than being made conditional. This reluctance to apply meaningful conditionality undermines the EU's credibility as a political actor.

What the EU can and should do

If the EU wants to contribute to a meaningful resolution of the conflict in eastern Congo, it must replace its current minimalist approach with a coherent political strategy. This does not require the invention of new instruments. The EU already has considerable diplomatic, economic and regulatory influence at its disposal. What is lacking is the willingness to use the existing instruments in a coordinated and politically consistent manner. In this context, three priorities are paramount:

First, the EU must draw clear red lines. Cooperation with neighbouring countries of the DRC should be explicitly linked to respect for Congolese sovereignty and compliance with UN Security Council resolutions, including Resolution 2773 on the withdrawal of M23 troops. This conditionality should apply to all policy areas: development aid, security cooperation, political dialogue and access to EU programmes. Targeted sanctions should not be seen as symbolic gestures, but as part of a graduated response framework triggered by verifiable benchmarks. Predictability rather than escalation is key: regional actors need to know in advance which of their actions will entail political and economic costs.

Second, the EU must integrate the goal of conflict resolution into its raw materials strategy. The EU Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) has given the Great Lakes region strategic importance, but it remains politically disconnected from the EU. But EU demand can no longer be isolated from the consequences of conflict-related raw material extraction. Access to European markets, investment guarantees and strategic partnerships under the CRMA should be made conditional on robust due diligence, transparency and demonstrable improvements in security conditions. Strengthened enforcement of supply chain obligations and their explicit linkage to peace and stabilisation objectives would transform European demand from a source of risk into an instrument of positive influence.

Europe should push for a newly designed, feasible UN mission that focuses on protecting civilians, accountability and supporting Congolese institutions.

Thirdly, the EU must regain its political leadership role in peace mediation and promotion. The US diplomatic approach, which focuses on economic issues, has so far had no positive effect on the conflict situation. Instead of submitting to this approach, the EU should work to consolidate mediation efforts within a coherent, multilateral framework. Europe must work to end parallel diplomatic initiatives and ensure that peace talks are conducted in a single format with clearly defined participants. European engagement should prioritise enforceability over process: dialogues should be linked to timetables, monitoring mechanisms and consequences.

Furthermore, the reform of the UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO) must be pursued with determination. It has often been rightly criticised for its limited effectiveness and its strained relations with local communities. However, a hasty withdrawal aimed at appeasing the domestic public, which has simply grown weary of wars far from home, would leave a dangerous vacuum. Instead, Europe should push for a newly designed, feasible mission that focuses on protecting civilians, accountability and supporting Congolese institutions.

Europe cannot, of course, impose peace on eastern Congo. But the question is whether the old continent is prepared to be part of a solution rather than remaining a silent spectator to a tragedy. For too long, the international response to the Congo has been minimalist: just enough to be seen to be involved, but never enough to change the realities on the ground. Europe must move away from dealing with the consequences of the conflict and towards shaping the political environment. In this way, it can effectively influence the factors that have been driving this war for years.



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