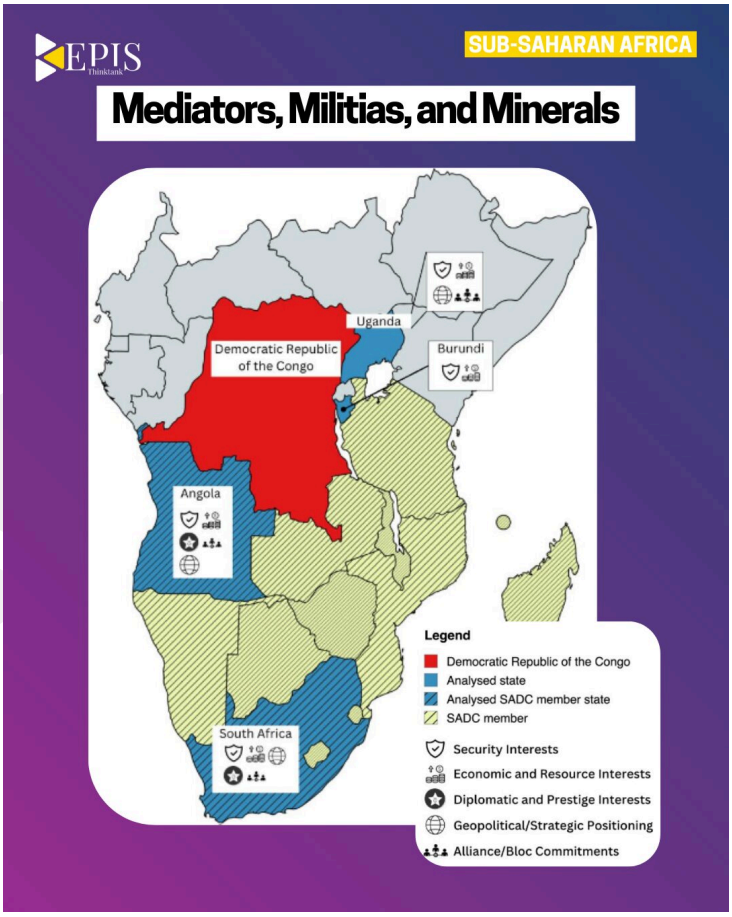
Mediators, Militias, and Minerals

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Introduction

Even 30 years after the First Congo War, the eastern part of the country remains unstable. In an offensive earlier this year, Rwandan-backed forces succeeded in capturing two provincial capitals, Goma and Bukavu. The fighting for Goma alone has claimed 3,000 lives, while tens of thousands of civilians fled to neighboring provinces or across borders to Burundi and Uganda. International observers are warning of the conflict's significant potential to escalate regionally, given rising tensions among various actors.

While Rwanda's activities remain the focus of international reporting and sanctions efforts, numerous other states within the Great Lakes region (and beyond) are also pursuing their own strategic objectives in eastern DRC. This is not a new phenomenon; the First Congo War (1996–97) was already highly internationalised, involving over a dozen states. Today, too, the strategic behavior of countries engaged in the DRC is largely shaped by security concerns of neighboring states, access to eastern Congo's resources, and broader economic interests. In addition, many states are motivated by the prospect of enhancing their diplomatic prestige through effective mediation between the conflicting parties. The following section will briefly examine the strategic interests of key actors in relation to their motivations for involvement.

Angola: Mediator Without Mandate

Following the EU's sanctions against Rwanda, M23 announced its withdrawal from the peace talks in Luanda. The breakdown of peace talks has since led Angolan President João Lourenço to abandon his in 2022 African Union appointed mandate as mediator. Citing the failed talks and the role of Angola as the newly appointed chair of the African Union, João Lourenço stated his intend to find a new head of state to take on the mediator role. Angola's withdrawal notably coincided with Qatar's announcement – on the very day the Luanda talks were set to take place – that it had hosted Rwandan President Kagame and his Congolese counterpart, Félix Tshisekedi, for direct talks. With Angola seemingly sidelined, the Angolan presidency explained its decision to step away, as having to do with multiple factors, including ones outside of the African context.

Despite Angola no longer representing an active mediating role, and it seemingly being far away from the violence in the DRC's eastern provinces, developments in the DRC are deemed highly important by Angola's leadership. Even if the conflict doesn't directly border Angola, sharing a 2,500-kilometre land border, the longest in mainland Africa, inevitably leads to cross-border risks associated with instability in the DRC. Consequently, a big concern of Angola is Congolese refugees and migrants. Migrants fleeing often end up in illegal mining operations in Angola, leading to tensions between Angolans and Congolese. In 2018 such tensions escalated into an ethnic conflict in the diamond mining town of Lucapa that led to some 300,000 Congolese fleeing the country. Despite tensions surrounding immigration, Angola is deeply invested in its neighbors affairs due to a shared history and many familial ties between both nations. For example, during Angola's strive for independence and later civil war, the DRC themselves hosted thousands of Angolan refugees and fighters.

Angola's interests in the DRC go beyond security and migration concerns as both nations are key members of the Lobito Corridor, a major infrastructure project linking Angola, DRC, and Zambia. The multibillion-dollar

project, launched under the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, is in part motivated by the desire to rival China for access to mineral resources in the region. Participation in regional infrastructure projects of this nature also aligns with Angola's broader ambition to position itself as a regional diplomatic power.

South Africa: The Big Looser

At a SADC leaders' summit on Thursday, 13 March 2025, the decision to terminate SADC's mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC) was announced. The decision followed a situation where South Africa lost 14 soldiers and SAMIDRC troops were effectively trapped in and around captured Goma, rendering their mandate untenable. SAMIDRC was created after the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF), deployed under the umbrella of the East African Community until 2022, fell out with Kinshasa due to its unwillingness to go after M23 directly and point fingers at Rwanda. Following EACRF's departure, South African officials justified the deployment to the DRC by citing their commitment under SADC's Mutual Defence Pact, which provides for collective action in the event that a member state is threatened or attacked.

Motives for South African and SADC involvement are often questioned, especially since SADC only got involved two years into the conflict. Sceptics of the SADC Mutual Defence Pact narrative, looking for ulterior motives, point at the ANC's history of corruption scandals, coupled with the DRC's mineral wealth as the real motivation for the deployment. Historically however, South Africa has long considered the DRC to be part of its sphere of influence. In post-apartheid South Africa, under Nelson Mandela, the country started positioning itself as a continental peace broker. It is in this capacity that Mandela played a mediating role in the Second Congo War (1998–2003), culminating in the South Africa hosted and led Sun City peace negotiations of 2002. As a result of which a transitional power-sharing agreement between President Joseph Kabila and various rebel factions was reached and the path laid for free and fair elections of a key SADC member.

Ultimately, however, the conflict represents a humiliating crisis that puts into question South Africa's ability to protect its allies and ability to stand by its commitments. After pledging support to a SADC member state based on normative principles, investing public resources and South African lives in the operation, South Africa was ultimately incapable of fulfilling its mandate. The withdrawal forced it to abandon all its principles, playing straight into the hands of Rwanda.

Uganda: The Tightrope Walker

Uganda pursues its own economic and (security) political interests in the eastern Congo, avoiding clear alignment with Rwanda or the DRC. Its army cooperates with Congolese troops in Ituri province in the fight against

CODECO militias and the Islamist rebels of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), aiming to protect both national and ethnic security interests. The ADF has its roots in western Uganda, emerging in the late 1990s from the merger of several Ugandan rebel groups. A key founding faction was the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), which had been fighting against the Museveni regime since the late 1980s. Today, the ADF exhibits significant jihadist elements, with large parts of the group ideologically and, presumably, organisationally aligned with the Islamic State. Since 2021, Ugandan troops have been deployed in Ituri at the invitation of the Congolese government to combat the ADF. However, within the framework of Operation Shujaa, Ugandan troops are also targeting CODECO, a coalition of militias from the Lendu ethnic group, which also operates in north-eastern Congo's Ituri province. The Lendu, traditionally farmers, have historically been in conflict with the Hema, a pastoralist community. The group is held responsible for numerous human rights violations and massacres of civilians. On 10 February, a CODECO attack on villages in Djugu territory resulted in the deaths of 51 people. Ugandan President Museveni himself belongs to the Hema ethnic group. In the days following the attack in Djugu, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, Chief of the Ugandan Defence Forces and son of President Museveni, advocated for the occupation of Bunia, the provincial capital of Ituri. Shortly thereafter, in coordination with the Congolese government, Ugandan troops were deployed in Bunia, and a few weeks later, they were stationed further north in Mahagi.

Although Uganda is actively engaged alongside Congolese forces in the fight against rebel groups in Ituri province, UN reports from June last year provide evidence that Uganda has been politically and militarily supporting the M23. While Uganda officially denies any involvement with M23, Kainerugaba has expressed support for the group, referring to them as 'brothers of ours' who are fighting for the rights of Tutsis in the DRC. On 21 March, Kainerugaba even travelled to the Rwandan capital, Kigali, where he met with President Kagame and high-ranking military officials.Recently, he has also advocated for a defence pact between Rwanda and Uganda, incorporating a mutual assistance clause. At the same time, Uganda is keen to secure its sphere of influence in Ituri province against both M23 and Rwanda.

The motives behind this double-sided strategy appear to lie in Rwanda's (security) political and economic calculations. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a key market for Ugandan goods. At the same time, a significant share of Uganda's most important export commodity, gold, originates from eastern Congo, from where it is informally exported to Uganda. While the ADF directly affects Uganda's security interests, the potential threat of attacks on oil installations in western Uganda also suggests an economic dimension to the fight against the ADF. While the CODECO militia undoubtedly poses a significant threat to the Hema ethnic group,

Uganda exploits this as a "pretext to militarily secure [its] wider objectives in [the] Eastern Congo." (Clark cit. in The East African, 2025).

Burundi: The Cautious One

Burundi, too, is engaged in combating rebel groups in its border region within South Kivu province in the DRC, targeting factions that originate from its own territory. RED-Tabara was founded in 2015 in the context of the controversial re-election of Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza, an ethnic Hutu. In February of last year, the group launched an attack on the Burundian border village of Buringa, resulting in the deaths of nine people. Rwanda, whose political elite is once again predominantly composed of ethnic Tutsi, has been accused by Burundi of supporting RED-Tabara, which is likewise Tutsi-dominated. Tensions between Burundi and Rwanda remain high. As early as 2015, Burundi closed its border with Rwanda amid accusations that Kigali was supporting protesters in the political crisis following Nkurunziza's disputed re-election. Although the border was reopened seven years later, it was once again shut in 2024 after Burundi accused Rwanda of complicity in a RED-Tabara attack in western Burundi, which claimed 20 lives, due to its alleged support for the group.

Since 2021, several hundred Burundian soldiers are believed to have been stationed in eastern DRC to combat RED-Tabara. In doing so, they have reportedly cooperated with the FDLR, a Hutu-led militia that traces its origins to factions responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. In the context of the current M23 offensive, Burundian troops initially fought alongside Congolese forces against M23. However, as M23 continued its advance southwards and eventually threatened to capture Uvira, a city near the Burundian border, Burundian forces withdrew from the DRC in mid-February.

Although high-level military talks between the two countries led to a temporary de-escalation in early March, with both sides reportedly agreeing to "control their own respective sides of the DRC border," Burundian President Évariste Ndayishimiye later accused Rwanda in a BBC interview of planning an attack on Burundi.

While Burundi's engagement in eastern Congo can largely be understood as a strategy for regime survival, its deployment of troops in support of the Congolese army against M23 is also economically motivated. As one of the world's poorest countries, Burundi is facing a severe economic crisis and is in urgent need of foreign currency. Payments from the DRC for troop deployments play a crucial role in addressing this financial shortfall.

Conclusion

While Rwanda's actions in the Kivu regions remain at the centre of international reporting, the conflict in eastern Congo has long taken on a regional dimension. Numerous actors pursue a wide array of heterogeneous inter-

ests through various means and shifting alliances. The key players in eastern Congo extend far beyond those discussed here: one need only consider Qatar's mediation efforts, Romanian mercenaries in Goma, fallen peacekeepers from Malawi, Tanzania, and Uruguay, or the mediation attempts by the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

A closer examination reveals that the conflict is highly complex and multidimensional, resisting simplistic narratives of a bilateral rivalry between Rwanda/M23 and the DRC.

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