



# A New Approach for the UN to Stabilise the DR Congo

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**What's new?** The Security Council is seeking new ways to stabilise the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), with an eye to drawing down the long-running UN peace operation there. In parallel, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi wants to strike a new security agreement with neighbouring countries to suppress armed groups in the country's east.

**Why does it matter?** The persistence of over 100 armed groups in the eastern DRC is a threat to both Congolese civilians and regional stability. The country's neighbours have also often used these militias as proxies to attack one another and control economic resources.

**What should be done?** The Security Council should strengthen the UN mission's capacity to analyse the armed groups' political links and resolve local grievances these groups can exploit. The UN should support President Tshisekedi's regional diplomacy, with an emphasis on political reconciliation and economic integration among the DRC's neighbours as steps to increase security.

## I. Overview

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The Security Council has to agree on a new mandate for the two decade-old UN peace-keeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by 20 December. In many ways, this exercise is routine. The Council has passed dozens of resolutions on the DRC since the country descended into civil war in the 1990s. Yet Council diplomats think that this negotiation may be more important than most. There are tentative signs that the Congolese government and regional powers in central Africa could work together to mitigate the DRC's internal instability. The UN may be able to use its diplomacy and peacekeepers to move this process forward.

Over recent years, the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), has prioritised bringing armed groups in the east under control but its track record at best is mixed. In the DRC's eastern provinces, Ituri and North and South Kivu, dozens of armed groups are still at large, killing civilians and threatening regional stability. The Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), deployed under UN auspices in 2013, helped to defeat the M23 rebel movement but is struggling to rein in remaining armed groups, one of which, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), based in North Kivu, has proven particularly obstinate. While some reports suggest ADF

leaders have ties to Islamist networks abroad, in reality, the group is mostly locally embedded. It often fights alongside local militias and exploits communal conflicts to win support. Within both MONUSCO and the Security Council, officials and diplomats disagree on whether the answer lies in better-funded military operations or in efforts to mediate local disputes and win over communities in affected areas.

Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi, who took office in January, has used his first year as chief executive to promote better relations with the DRC's neighbours, including Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. His core theme has been the need for a joint approach to tackle the armed groups in the eastern DRC. Tshisekedi's regional counterparts, who have long exploited those groups as proxies, remain highly suspicious of one another, but have all been willing to engage to some degree in military and intelligence talks this year. There is a risk that some or all of the governments involved will use these interactions as cover for increased military interference in the DRC. But there is nonetheless a chance that Tshisekedi will achieve his apparent goal of establishing a new framework for regional cooperation.

The Security Council thus has an opening to rethink its approach to the DRC. Council members have long been frustrated by MONUSCO's inability to stabilise the east, and most believe that it should draw down gradually in the years ahead. They are nonetheless cautious about how firmly to push for such a drawdown, due to the armed groups' continued ravages but also because an outbreak of Ebola in eastern DRC has complicated the mission's work there. Unlike his predecessor, Joseph Kabila, President Tshisekedi signals that he is keen to keep working with the UN to suppress armed groups. Council members have also been encouraged by the president's regional diplomacy, and generally agree that the UN should now do what it can to help him, even while keeping one eye on an eventual exit.

In its mandate renewal, the Security Council should:

- ❑ indicate support for President Tshisekedi's mediation aimed at de-escalating political tensions in the region, whether in the resolution's text or in statements made upon its approval; UN diplomats in Kinshasa, Kigali and Kampala should do the same. Overall, reducing tensions among DRC and its neighbours should precede any joint military operations;
- ❑ direct MONUSCO to prioritise political analysis and information gathering as the basis for military decisions, and to back this up with more local mediation efforts targeting warring local communities in ADF-afflicted areas. These efforts would aim to reconcile these communities and then cooperate with them to develop more precise military operations against the ADF, who would also be more likely to demobilise if they lose local support. The FIB should follow this information-driven approach and cooperate with MONUSCO's wider civilian protection mission; and
- ❑ ensure that references to the ADF reflect realities on the ground, avoid playing up its transnational ties and defer to the UN mission regarding optimal policies for dealing with the threat the group poses.

## II. The MONUSCO Dilemma

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Diplomats and UN officials in New York tend to agree that the organisation needs a new approach in the DRC.<sup>1</sup> The Security Council dispatched peacekeepers to the country to help end its enormously bloody civil war on 30 November 1999. Twenty years later, MONUSCO consists of over 16,500 soldiers and police officers, more than any other blue helmet operation. Costing over \$1 billion a year, it is also the third most expensive UN mission, just behind those in Mali and South Sudan.<sup>2</sup> Many Security Council members, not least the U.S., have asked if MONUSCO has cost too much for too long.<sup>3</sup>

Yet there is no easy exit strategy available. The majority of the country, particularly the west, is relatively calm. A security crisis in the southern region of the Kasai has abated following a MONUSCO surge in the area. Most MONUSCO personnel are deployed in the provinces of Ituri and North and South Kivu in the country's east. Armed groups killed approximately 1,900 civilians in the Kivus from June 2017 to June 2019, while a surge of fighting in Ituri has displaced over 300,000 people since early June 2019.<sup>4</sup>

The presence of these armed groups is both a source and symptom of regional instability. The DRC's neighbours – including Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda – have long used groups based on Congolese soil as proxies to threaten one another. Rwandan officials say Uganda, for example, supported an attack by DRC-based exiles on their territory in October.

Some leaders also highlight apparent links between one of these groups, the Allied Democratic Forces, a group that originated in Uganda and is now based in North Kivu, and transnational jihadists, though such connections may be overstated. President Tshisekedi and UN Secretary-General António Guterres have noted reports of cooperation between the ADF and the Islamic State.<sup>5</sup> Guterres used a visit this sum-

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<sup>1</sup> For more, see Tatiana Carayannis, "The Democratic Republic of the Congo", in Sebastian von Ein-siedel, David M. Malone and Bruno Stagno Ugarte, eds., *The UN Security Council in the 21st Century* (London, 2016), pp. 661-680; Alan Doss, "United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)", in Joachim A. Koops, Thierry Tardy, Norrie MacQueen and Paul D. Williams, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 803-817; "Charting a Future For Peacekeeping in the Democratic Republic of Congo", CIVIC, 21 October 2019; and Alexandra Novosseloff, "Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in the DRC/MONUC-MONUSCO", Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> MONUSCO's approved budget from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020 was \$1.012 billion while the budget for the UN Mission in South Sudan \$1.183 billion and the UN Mission in Mali was \$1.138 billion.

<sup>3</sup> For more, see Crisis Group, "Open Letter to the UN Secretary-General on Peacekeeping in DRC", 27 July 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, "DR Congo: 1,900 Civilians Killed in Kivus over 2 Years", Human Rights Watch, 14 August 2019 and "Massive Displacement Reported in North-eastern DRC amid New Violence", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 18 June 2019.

<sup>5</sup> A June 2019 report by the Security Council's DRC sanctions committee's Group of Experts concluded that "the radical interpretation of Islam by ADF and its recent propaganda suggested a willingness to be associated with other Islamist groups" and noted that "for the first time, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant had claimed an attack on Congolese territory in April 2019". The Group found no evidence of direct collaboration, however, and was unable to confirm direct links between

mer to the DRC to portray the ADF as part of a jihadist network stretching from Libya to Mozambique.<sup>6</sup> Regional intelligence and security sources, however, say the ADF's links to international jihad are disparate and incidental and that the armed group's killings of civilians is motivated by local political factors in the DRC itself.<sup>7</sup> Many UN officials share this view.<sup>8</sup>

The UN has tried various strategies to manage these armed groups. Congolese and UN officials have attempted to persuade some to merge their fighters into the ranks of the Congolese army, with limited success.<sup>9</sup> After one group backed by Rwanda, the M23, seized the regional hub of Goma in 2012, the Security Council mandated a stand-alone Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) – consisting of troops from South Africa, Tanzania and Malawi – to “neutralise” the militias. This unit was initially successful, as the M23 collapsed as a major force in 2013, even if some of its veterans now appear to be active with other armed outfits.<sup>10</sup>

The FIB has, however, struggled to deal with groups relying on asymmetric tactics, losing over twenty troops in clashes with the ADF since 2017. The UN's failure to tackle this problem is a source of public anger. Residents of Beni city set fire to MONUSCO offices last month in protests over the UN's inability to prevent ADF attacks on civilians that claimed (according to uncertain estimates) over a hundred lives since the start of a new army offensive in November.<sup>11</sup> The situation in the eastern DRC presents the Security Council with a knotty dilemma. Keeping MONUSCO is expensive and offers no clear path to resolving the problem of armed groups. But drawing the mission down rapidly could risk a further spike in the groups' activities – potentially dragging in their regional patrons – that could both destabilise the eastern DRC further and undermine the legitimacy of the Kinshasa government in the country as a whole.

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the Islamic State and ADF. “Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo”, S/2019/469, 7 June 2019.

<sup>6</sup> “UN chief Guterres warns of ‘continental scale’ terrorism in Africa”, The Defense Post, 3 September 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interview, private security contractor working on counter-terrorism activities in East Africa, November 2019. Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer from Great Lakes country, Brussels, October 2019. Crisis Group telephone interview, DRC intelligence source, September 2019. Crisis Group interview, UN official, October 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, New York, September 2019; former MONUSCO officials, November 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See Jason Stearns, Judith Verweijen and Maria Eriksson Baaz, *The National Army and Armed Groups in Eastern Congo: Untangling the Armed Knot of Insecurity* (The Rift Valley Institute, Usalama Project, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> République Démocratique du Congo, Province de l'Ituri, Comité provincial de sécurité, “Compte rendu de l'interrogatoire des 04 éléments M23 et 01 civil, arrêtés à Kadilo/territoire Mahagi en date du 01 avr 2018”; and Crisis Group interviews, armed group member and MONUSCO official, August and October 2019.

<sup>11</sup> The most recent ADF attacks were a reprisal following the army offensive that MONUSCO had not supported. In the wake of these events, the UN has agreed to joint military operations against the ADF. See “UN peacekeeping chief visits restive eastern DR Congo after protests”, AFP, 30 November 2019; “Nord-Kivu : la MONUSCO et les FARDC planifient des opérations conjointes contre les ADF”, Radio Okapi, 27 November 2019.

### **III. President Tshisekedi's Positive Impact**

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Given the eastern DRC's fragility, no one at the Security Council favours MONUSCO's full and immediate withdrawal. Yet notwithstanding the continuing challenges in the Kivus and Ituri, many Council members are cautiously optimistic that there is an opening to rethink the UN's role in the DRC. There are three main reasons why they are hopeful.

The first is that the DRC's 2018 presidential election resulted in a fairly smooth transition of power from Joseph Kabila (who had held office since 2001) to Félix Tshisekedi, despite pockets of serious violence and widespread vote-rigging.<sup>12</sup> Council members, nervous that Kabila could spark greater violence to retain power, delayed an in-depth discussion of MONUSCO's future until after the polls. Once Tshisekedi was in office, they capitalised on the annual Security Council discussion of the mission's mandate in March to request an independent strategic review of the operations by October.<sup>13</sup> The UN delivered this review on schedule, and it is now in the public domain. It proposes a three-year drawdown of MONUSCO, unless major political upsets block the process.<sup>14</sup>

The second reason for optimism in the Council is that President Tshisekedi seems willing to talk constructively with the UN about what to do with the mission.<sup>15</sup> To be sure, his domestic political base is weak, and he relies on Kabila's good-will to govern in Kinshasa. Nevertheless, the new president has made a point of establishing positive relations with MONUSCO. In stark contrast to Kabila, who increasingly saw the UN as an obstacle to his ability to hold onto power and often in private demanded MONUSCO's withdrawal, Tshisekedi has signalled that he wants to work with the UN to defeat the armed groups in the east. His attitude makes it easier for the Council to propose changes to the mission that will allow it first to confront the eastern threat and then begin a drawdown without worrying that Kinshasa will pull the rug out from under it first.

The final reason for Security Council members' relative positivity is that Tshisekedi has also made improving relations with the country's neighbours a priority, urging them to consider coordinating joint operations against armed groups on Congolese territory.<sup>16</sup> The feasibility and wisdom of these ideas is uncertain, given that some of his neighbours still support proxy armed groups in the eastern DRC, but the president has flagged the possibility of a different approach to dealing with violence in

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<sup>12</sup> For more, see Crisis Group Statement, "DR Congo: A Recount and Talks to Find a Way Out of the Crisis", 19 January 2019.

<sup>13</sup> "Security Council, Adopting Resolution 2463 (2019), Calls for Strategic Review of Stabilization Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo, Extends Mandate", UN Security Council Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 29 March 2019.

<sup>14</sup> "Letter dated 24 October 2019 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council", S/2019/842, 25 October 2019.

<sup>15</sup> During his speech at the 74th UN General Assembly, for example, Tshisekedi said that the DRC "still needs MONUSCO but we need a MONUSCO that is focused, that is well equipped, that is strong and that has a properly adapted mandate". Félix Tshisekedi, speech to the 74th UN General Assembly, 26 September 2019.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, "Regional military chiefs agree on plan to eradicate armed groups in DR Congo", *The New Times*, 26 October 2019.

the Kivus and Ituri that does not rest on an open-ended MONUSCO presence. At the very least, Tshisekedi has attempted to broker a de-escalation of tensions between two important regional neighbours, Rwanda and Uganda, which have fought each other directly, and through proxies, on Congolese soil.<sup>17</sup> While Tshisekedi's proposal for a new generation of coordinated anti-armed group operations with his neighbours could backfire – creating an alibi for regional powers to target their rival's allies and boost their own proxies – his overall emphasis on regional cooperation is encouraging.

As a result, Security Council members can see a pathway, albeit an arduous one, out of their dilemma over what to do with MONUSCO. This pathway could involve a final push to deal with the armed groups in the eastern DRC involving MONUSCO, accompanied by an effort led from Kinshasa to resolve regional frictions that have fuelled those groups. It does not offer MONUSCO a quick exit. The UN would, at a minimum, have to invest more in stabilisation efforts in the east in the near and medium term. It is not at all clear that these efforts will bear sufficient fruit within three years to roll up the mission in 2022 or 2023. Moreover, Council members are keenly aware that the DRC will gear up for a new presidential election in 2023, and many suspect that the UN will need to stay on to support this round of polls.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, with these developments in mind it is worth asking, first, if there is a realistic chance of dealing with the threat of armed groups like the ADF militarily in the medium term; and, secondly, whether President Tshisekedi can advance relations among the DRC's neighbours on security cooperation in the same period to a point where a real regional settlement to end the armed groups problem is conceivable. It is also necessary to reflect on how the UN could help such a regional settlement come together. If the UN, regional powers and the Congolese authorities can make progress on these parallel tracks, it may be possible to build a robust framework for maintaining peace in the eastern DRC that does not rely on the indefinite presence of peacekeepers.

#### **IV. The UN and Armed Groups: The Case of the ADF**

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The main sticking point in Security Council discussions of the next MONUSCO mandate concerns the use of military force against armed groups. Since 2013, there has been a split within MONUSCO between the FIB – meant to focus on “neutralising” armed groups through offensive operations – and the rest of the force, which concentrates on protecting civilians through patrols, establishing area security and other deterrent measures.

While in 2013, the FIB helped defeat Rwandan-backed M23 rebels – which used fairly conventional military tactics to seize and hold territory, many Council members and DRC-based UN officials complain that it has since become too cautious and lacks the skills necessary to counter guerrillas such as the ADF. Whereas the M23 was a clearly identified rebel army attempting to capture specific patches of territory,

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<sup>17</sup> “Memorandum of Understanding of Luanda between the Republic of Uganda and the Republic of Rwanda”, 21 August 2019; and “Uganda, Rwanda committed to Luanda agreement – officials”, *The East African*, 16 September 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, New York, September 2019.

the ADF's tactics are different. It targets the army, but also combines forces with local militias, stirs up communal conflicts and perpetrates massacres of civilians, often at night, under opaque circumstances.<sup>19</sup> A number of Council members – including France, the UK and the U.S. – would like to see the FIB refocus on civilian protection tasks similar to the rest of the mission, perhaps acknowledging that an all-out military strategy to defeat the ADF is unrealistic.<sup>20</sup>

South Africa, which is both a lead contributor to the FIB and a member of the Security Council in 2019-2020, has countered that the main problem its personnel faces is a lack of good situational and signals intelligence to track down groups such as the ADF. Pretoria, which brokered the political deal ending Congo's war in 2003 does not want the FIB to lose its status as an offensive force with its own chain of command separate from that at MONUSCO headquarters. It sees the FIB as a source of influence over Kinshasa at a time when President Tshisekedi appears to be prioritising relations with his central African neighbours, including Rwanda. Tanzania, the other major FIB contributor, which like South Africa has frosty relations with Rwanda, supports this view. President Tshisekedi, meanwhile, has indicated that he could support more joint operations between the FIB and the Congolese army (though the fact that some army officers have links to armed groups could compromise such cooperation).

Whatever the FIB's wider significance to various regional actors, some UN officials are sceptical that its relatively poor performance against the ADF derives from lack of resources. Instead, they argue that the brigade relies too heavily on offensive tactics designed to deal with conventional military threats, such as the M23, rather than a counter-insurgency model based on deep knowledge of areas of ADF influence.<sup>21</sup>

The dispute pitches Pretoria against the Security Council's permanent members and is divisive in New York, but also arguably conceals more fundamental differences within MONUSCO about how to handle armed groups. These are well illustrated by the case of the ADF, which is not only the most violent group in the eastern DRC, but also has alleged ties to transnational jihadists. These links, while arguably overstated, nonetheless complicate policies aimed at containing it.

The challenge of how to deal with the ADF is a polarising issue in MONUSCO beyond the FIB. On one hand, some of the mission's military planners are predisposed to participate in the Congolese army's strikes against the ADF, which they portray as an Islamic State-linked terrorist outfit. MONUSCO uses drones but also relies on the army's intelligence to identify suspected ADF camps and fix targets. Some of the mission's civilian analysts, on the other hand, complain that conducting military operations in this way is at best risky and at worst flawed. They say that aerial surveillance alone can be misleading, in that it may identify armed elements that pose no immediate security threat unless they are provoked. Relying too heavily on this

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<sup>19</sup> "Mass Killings in Beni Territory: Political Violence, Cover-ups and Co-optation", Congo Research Group, September 2017.

<sup>20</sup> In a November 2019 report, the UN Secretary-General also emphasised the centrality of MONUSCO's protection of civilians mandate and echoed these Council members' calls for a whole-of-mission approach to protecting civilians. "United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – Report of the Secretary-General", UNSC S/2019/905, 26 November 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, September 2019.

methodology means that MONUSCO military planners are often less inclined to account for local politics in ADF-influenced areas, where the armed group is often inter-woven into murky communal conflicts. As a result, MONUSCO's military planners are often less aware than they should be about whether their planned operations risk kicking open a hornet's nest.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the ADF has also developed allies within the army, who in turn often leak information about jointly planned operations with MONUSCO. Some civilian staff therefore point out that joint army operations fail to kill many ADF fighters, often provoke ADF commanders into retaliatory killing sprees against civilians – including those whom they believe collaborated with the army in targeting them – and as a result spark tensions among locals who blame each other for massacres. Popular anger is often then directed at MONUSCO. Protesters' recent torching of the mission's offices in Beni following army operations and ADF reprisals is an unprecedented reaction that raises questions about whether the mission's perceived ties to the army in turn expose the UN to being identified by some parts of the population as a party to the conflict.

That the ADF is deeply embedded in local politics makes it a particularly thorny challenge. While the group, which migrated from Uganda to North Kivu in the 1990s, has links to Islamist networks operating out of mosques in the eastern DRC and elsewhere, it also has a web of equally or more important relationships with local power-brokers including chiefs, other militias and senior army officers, according to MONUSCO officials and UN Security Council investigators.<sup>23</sup> ADF commanders have settled and even married into communities in the chieftaincy of Bambuba Kisiki, near Beni, where they manipulate local power disputes among rival chiefs. These disputes started widening in 2014 as the country geared up for the presidential election that was supposed to take place in 2016. Some chiefs cooperated with the army, while others grew closer to anti-government armed groups. The ADF often found itself on opposing sides of such conflicts, acting as mercenaries available to all.<sup>24</sup>

Recognising these complexities, MONUSCO's leadership has tried in the past to develop what it has referred to internally as a "comprehensive approach" to neutralising the armed group. On paper, this approach would involve using MONUSCO's civilian staff analysis of the ADF's sophisticated relationships to local and national political actors as a guide for military planners considering how best to target the group. If implemented, such analysis would include assessments on how to work with and reconcile rival local communities so they might collectively renounce their links to the ADF and provide MONUSCO with reliable information on where to interdict the armed group or arrest its commanders.

In practice however, the "comprehensive approach" has been too complicated to organise. MONUSCO military planners prefer to draw on the information civilian analysts have, but keep them out of the room when they finally develop their battle plans, citing the need for operational secrecy. By the same token, MONUSCO's civil

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<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, September 2019; former MONUSCO official, November 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, Congo Research Group. Crisis Group interviews, former MONUSCO officials stationed in Beni, and former Group of Expert officials, November 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group researcher's interviews in a previous capacity, chiefs from Bambuba Kisiki, Beni, October 2019.



affairs section, which works most closely with local communities, shies away from proactively investigating links between chiefs and the ADF, with civil affairs staff saying their terms of reference relate to communal tensions and not armed groups.<sup>25</sup>

The debate over MONUSCO's future is, therefore, a chance not only to review the FIB's role within MONUSCO but also the mission's overall approach to military and civilian information gathering and decision-making. The independent review of the mission delivered to the Security Council in October refers to the need for an "intelligence-backed approach" in dealing with the ADF.

A few steps would help. MONUSCO should invest more resources in developing a better understanding of the armed group's links to local communities, in Bambuba-Kisiki and elsewhere, by hiring more researchers who can investigate these links. When brokering peace deals between chiefs, UN officials should encourage them to renounce their links to the ADF, while promising to increase deployments in their areas to protect their communities from retribution. If the mission is able to develop its own understanding of all local conflict actors, it will also be in a position to advocate to the army where it should focus military operations, instead of being pulled into operations by army commanders who may have motivations other than to neutralise the ADF. By working with locals to flush out the ADF, the UN may also stand a better chance of negotiating disarmament with the armed group without resorting to offensive military operations.

## **V. Getting Regional Diplomacy Right**

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Félix Tshisekedi's emergence as a champion of regional cooperation has taken some observers by surprise. The president, whose ascension to office was marred by credible accusations of vote-rigging in the 2018 presidential election, has no military experience or significant knowledge of the eastern DRC. He has also had to navigate serious tensions between his Rwandan and Ugandan counterparts, Paul Kagame and Yoweri Museveni. Kagame accuses Museveni of supporting Rwandan rebels, including militias in the Kivus, and Rwandan intelligence officials believe that Uganda is colluding with Burundi in this intervention.<sup>26</sup> Museveni has in turn purged his security services of officials alleged to be close to Kigali. Relations hit a low in February, when Rwanda closed a commercially important border crossing to Uganda.

Despite these frictions, Tshisekedi and Angolan President João Lourenço – the two newest leaders in the region – have pushed for regional reconciliation. They hosted quadripartite meetings with Kagame and Museveni in July and August. At the second of those meetings, the Rwandan and Ugandan leaders signed an agreement committing to end their dispute, though tensions persist between them.<sup>27</sup> In addition to leaders' meetings, the intelligence chiefs of the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania gathered in June in Kinshasa to discuss how to counter the threat posed

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<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former MONUSCO military and civilian officials, November 2019.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Paul Nantulya, "Escalating Tensions between Uganda and Rwanda Raise Fear of War", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 3 July 2019. Crisis Group interview, Rwandan official, Kigali, June 2019.

<sup>27</sup> "Leaders of Rwanda and Uganda sign pact in bid to end tension", Reuters, 21 August 2019.

by armed groups in the eastern DRC.<sup>28</sup> They met again in November, and the Burundian intelligence chief also participated in this second conclave.<sup>29</sup>

This flurry of diplomatic activity precipitated discussions of military cooperation in the eastern DRC. Though Tshisekedi appears to have been open to working with a range of neighbours, including southern African states, Rwanda moved fastest to table ideas for a new framework for cross-border operations as part of a regional rapprochement in the summer.<sup>30</sup> In October, in an apparent response to Rwanda's proposal, the Congolese army outlined a potential arrangement under which forces from neighbouring countries could launch offensives against militias on Congolese territory under its oversight.<sup>31</sup>

It is unclear if this proposal will prove feasible. At a regional meeting in late October, Uganda refused to agree to the creation of an "integrated chief of staff" to coordinate the region's militaries.<sup>32</sup> Concerned that Rwanda would exploit the regional coalition to entrench its forces in the DRC, Kampala has indicated that it prefers to coordinate cross-border missions bilaterally with the Congolese army. Nonetheless, Presidents Tshisekedi and Museveni have continued to discuss the issue, and further regional talks are expected to take place.<sup>33</sup>

While discussions among the leaders are welcome, the military proposal raises serious concerns. There is a risk that, despite their supposed cooperation, the DRC's neighbours will use their license to operate on Congolese soil as an opportunity to boost proxy forces and target long-time enemies to their own advantage. The resulting operations could fuel fighting, exact a heavy toll on Congolese civilians and further erode their already limited faith in the army, if it appears to be subservient to other states' militaries.

Overall, proposals for military cooperation are likely to be effective only if they are tied to political efforts by regional powers to resolve the broader differences – concerning influence in the region, access to natural resources, historical ties to rebel movements and competition for control over the authorities in Kinshasa – that led them to use the eastern DRC as a proxy battlefield in the first place. There is a need for de-escalation and confidence-building efforts among Kigali, Kampala and Bujumbura to reduce their overall distrust. The Tshisekedi-Lourenço effort to ease Rwandan-Ugandan tensions has been a step in this direction, even if not a complete success. Rather than rush toward military cooperation in isolation, President Tshisekedi should encourage his counterparts to engage in more extensive political de-escalation initiatives before they send troops across the border.

As for the UN, it has some capacity to influence Great Lakes regional diplomacy. While MONUSCO does not have a mandate to engage in regional security issues, the

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<sup>28</sup> "Final communiqué: Intelligence meeting on negative forces in the Great Lakes region", UN Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 7 June 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Tweet by the Office of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for the Great Lakes, @un\_greatlakes, 6:04 pm, 5 November 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and UN officials, Kinshasa, October 2019.

<sup>31</sup> "Document État-Major Intégré", signed by Mbala Munsense Célestin, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC), October 2019.

<sup>32</sup> "RDC : la création d'un état-major intégré avec des pays frontaliers à l'étude", RFI, 26 October 2019.

<sup>33</sup> "Foreign Troops Enter DRC: Why the Goma Meeting Failed", Kivu Security Tracker, 18 November 2019.

separate office of the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Great Lakes – based in Nairobi – is explicitly tasked with promoting regional cooperation. While focusing on the specifics of the MONUSCO mandate in December, Security Council members acknowledge that this matter cannot be detached from the special envoy's work with the DRC's neighbours.

At the start of this year, Secretary-General Guterres appointed Huang Xia – the first Chinese civilian official to hold a UN peace and security mandate at this level – as envoy. Xia was instrumental in crafting the intelligence chiefs' meetings but has otherwise moved cautiously in promoting regional cooperation, focusing more on economic relations than on political affairs as he has built up working relations with regional leaders.<sup>34</sup>

Some Security Council members would like to see Xia talk more about security and political matters and speculate that he could leverage Beijing's economic clout in central Africa to create incentives for closer DRC-Rwanda-Uganda cooperation.<sup>35</sup> Forging a sustainable regional framework for addressing security challenges between the DRC and its neighbours could be his most significant task. Xia's office has been working on a new strategy for the Great Lakes that will hopefully clarify how it can support a framework for security in the eastern DRC alongside MONUSCO.

## **VI. Conclusion**

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Even as Security Council diplomats recognise that the time is not ripe for major changes to MONUSCO, the forthcoming mandate renewal presents an opportunity to bolster President Tshisekedi's efforts to forge new regional relationships. Council members should use the renewal to signal their strong support for these efforts, whether in the resolution's text or in their statements on its approval, and ensure that their representatives in Kinshasa, Kigali and Kampala press this point with their interlocutors.

In the meantime, the council should use this mandating process to direct MONUSCO to prioritise political analysis and information gathering as the basis for its military decisions, and to back this up with more local mediation efforts targeting ADF-afflicted areas with the aim of reconciling the residents and then identifying, sidelining or, if necessary, militarily defeating ADF fighters. While it may be necessary to compromise on the FIB's status in the mission, the Council should insist that the FIB also follow this information-driven approach and cooperate with the wider mission on civilian protection. Council members should be careful about how they refer to the ADF, ensuring that their comments reflect the realities of a group that is largely locally rooted, rather than motivated by international jihadist agendas.

Overall, the Council and other UN actors – including Secretary-General Guterres, MONUSCO's leadership and Special Envoy Xia – should aim to send common messages about the parallel priorities of 1) local conflict resolution in the eastern DRC and 2) regional de-escalation efforts to cut off support for the armed groups. If the UN system in the DRC and Great Lakes can focus on achieving these priorities, there

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<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior UN official, Nairobi, July 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Security Council members, New York, November 2019.

may be an opportunity to put the region's stability on a surer footing as the Security Council mulls the conditions for MONUSCO's exit.

**Nairobi/New York/Brussels, 4 December 2019**

Appendix A: Map of DR Congo



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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**Regional Offices and Field Representation**

Crisis Group also operates out of over 25 locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.

**See [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org) for details**

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