CHAPTER 6

Regional and International Mediation in the Great Lakes Crisis

Richard Moncrieff and Kseniya Oksamytna

Introduction

The crisis in the Great Lakes region started in late 2021 as a flare-up of long-simmering regional tensions. Fighting has pulled in non-state armed groups in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and several neighbouring countries, primarily Rwanda but also Uganda and Burundi. The M23 insurgent group (named after a failed peace deal signed on 23 March 2009) is a Rwanda-backed Tutsi Congolese armed group that has recently occupied large swaths of territory in eastern DRC, including lucrative mining sites and the major cities of Goma and Bukavu. From 2022 to 2024, Angolan president João Lourenço served as an AU-appointed mediator between Kigali and Kinshasa in the so-called Luanda Process. Despite being a credible and trusted mediator, Lourenço's diplomacy failed as the parties disagreed on sequencing, overloaded the negotiation agenda and stalled for time as their forces clashed on the ground.

Following advances by M23 and the Rwandan army in early 2025, Qatar took over the mediation process between the Congolese government and M23 after Kinshasa yielded to pressure for direct negotiations with the rebels. In parallel, the US facilitated the Washington Agreement between Rwanda and the DRC in June 2025, which entailed a commitment to a ceasefire and disengagement of forces. However, the agreement did not silence the guns or restore Congolese control over its territory, and the Doha track faced delays. The difficulties encountered by Angolan and Qatari mediators, as well as the faltering implementation of the US-facilitated agreement, are caused by the belligerents' belief that they can advance their interests through military force, their reluctance to undertake confidence-building measures, regional and international divisions, and the lack of pressure on the parties to commit to a workable deal.

In the past, successful mediation in the Great Lakes has worked in two contexts. First, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, significant international engagement saw all parties come under sustained pressure to work towards an agreement, with a substantial financial peacebuilding package serving as an incentive. Second, after the establishment of constitutional rule in the DRC in 2006, mediation worked when Kigali, Kinshasa and Kampala engineered unofficial deals through backroom channels and then invited international actors to give a

seal of approval. None of these conditions currently applies, and the latest talks have been accompanied by public posturing but little progress on the ground. Given this, following the Washington deal, it is likely that mediators will place less emphasis on achieving M23's withdrawal from the areas it has conquered and will instead focus on the narrower goal of trying to achieve fragile ceasefires.

This chapter presents an analysis of regional and international mediation in the African Great Lakes crisis in four main sections. The first section outlines the background of the crisis, tracing the conflict from the Rwandan genocide to the re-emergence of M23 in November 2021. Section two traces the Luanda Process and efforts by Angolan President João Lourenço to mediate between Kinshasa and Kigali, and examines a series of obstacles that ultimately led to the failure of the process and Lourenço's withdrawal in 2024. The third section distils developments in 2025, including the emergence of Qatar and the US as the key mediators in the crisis, the signing of the Washington Agreement in June and the Doha Declaration of Principles a month later, before analysing the rising challenges of implementation. The concluding section draws critical lessons from the process and considers prospects going forward.

The Contested Background to the post-2021 Great Lakes Crisis

Conflict parties, diplomats and observers all have widely differing interpretations of the "root causes" of violence in eastern DRC since the 1990s. These differences sow confusion and underlie antagonisms between diplomats and officials, complicating mediation efforts.[1] Different parties and observers alternately emphasize external factors and the nefarious role played by neighbouring countries or failures and neglect by governments in Kinshasa. Some interpretations focus on localized disputes over land or customary authority. Other observers and many Congolese citizens emphasize more distant actors such as Western governments and companies that seek, with the complicity of the DRC's neighbours, to pillage the DRC's mineral wealth. When echoed by warring parties, whether Congolese or foreign, these narratives serve to underline victim status and focus attention on specific grievances, while diverting attention from the more material motivations behind the fighting.

Despite these differences, analysts generally take as their starting point the influx of Rwandan refugees and militias into the DRC following the civil war and genocide in Rwanda in 1994.[2] The situation in the DRC was already fragile, as President Mobutu, in power since 1965, attempted to buttress his regime by playing the ethnic card, fuelling tensions between the many communities that call eastern DRC home. In 1996, frustrated by the continued presence of extremist Rwandan militias near its border, Kigali deployed its army into the DRC, while also creating and supporting proxy armed groups. Two subsequent wars pitted first Rwanda and its Congolese allies against the government of Mobutu, and then Rwanda, Uganda and their allies against their erstwhile Congolese partner and now Congolese president, Laurent Kabila. The latter was backed up by an array of African armies in what

[1] Jason Stearns and Archie Macintosh, "Rwanda-RD Congo. La guerre des récits", AfriqueXXI, 21 August 2024. Available at https://afriquexxi.info/Rwanda-RD-Congo-La-guerre-des-recits (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[2] The principal sources used for this review of the background to violence in eastern DRC are successive reports of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC; authors' interviews with civil society, security experts, former rebels, diplomats and officials in Goma, Kigali, Kampala, Kinshasa and western capitals over many years; and the excellent single volume account by Jason Stearns, *The War That Does Not Say Its Name* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021).

became known as Africa's First World War. These conflicts created fertile ground for other disputes, including between allies fighting over the spoils of their victories, most infamously, Rwanda and Uganda, who fought each other at various points in the protracted war for control of the Congo. Non-state armed groups proliferated, and the army collapsed.

In 1999, Laurent Kabila was assassinated by a bodyguard and succeeded by his son Joseph. The latter's more conciliatory stance towards Kigali and Kampala and their various Congolese proxies created an opening for Western and African efforts to end the war. This resulted in the Sun City peace agreements of 2002 and 2003, which led to a new constitution and elections in 2006, won by Joseph Kabila.

Since 2006, the DRC has seen 20 years of constitutional rule but also persistent and often widening violence, a seeming contradiction that lies at the heart of the country's current predicaments. Although plagued by incoherent decision-making and corruption, the state has in some ways strengthened over time. Increasing revenues from industrial mining have bolstered government finances. Even the corruption and violence of the poorly governed state have their own stability as elites find advantages amid the disorder and remain largely insulated from instability. The strength of the Congolese state, often underestimated by diplomats and observers confronted with the day-to-day chaos of Kinshasa, marks a fundamental shift from the peacebuilding era of the 1990s and 2000s, during which time international actors accompanied a wider state-building project. By other metrics, however, the country continues to slide into chaos. Armed violence in the east (in the South Kivu and North Kivu provinces and Ituri) has increased since the end of the war.[3] The army, still divided between the different factions that merged following early 2000s peace deals and beset by rent seeking and corruption, is extremely weak and predatory.[4]

During Kabila's presidency, Kinshasa's relations with Uganda and Rwanda oscillated. At times, these two neighbours supported rebel groups fighting against the Congolese army. But at other times, they cooperated with the Congolese authorities in hunting down cross-border armed groups – in Rwanda's case, the Rwandan Democratic Liberation Front (FDLR in French, led by former genocidaires from Rwanda), and in Uganda's case, the Islamist rebels, the Allied Democratic Front (ADF). In any case, despite the end of the regional war, both Uganda and Rwanda saw eastern DRC as an area of vital concern, whether to boost their economies through licit and illicit trade or secure their borders against perceived threats.

In the first two years of his presidency, Félix Tshisekedi – who succeeded Kabila in 2019 following controversial elections – also cooperated with Kampala and Kigali to allow them to track down cross-border armed groups on Congolese territory. In 2021, this on-off cooperation ruptured.[5] According to several sources and as indicated in speeches by Rwandan leaders at the time, Kigali was angered at Kinshasa's deal with Kampala which saw Ugandan troops and contractors enter the DRC to build and protect a new road network,

[3] See the short summary, based on data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, in Pierre Jacquemont, "Les conflits dans l'est de la République Démocratique du Congo", Etude (Paris, Fondation Jean-Jaurès, 2025).

[4] See, for example, Judith Verweijen, "Soldiers without an army? Patronage networks and cohesion in the armed forces of the DR Congo", *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 44, No. 4 (2018), pp. 626–646.

[5] International Crisis Group, "Easing the turmoil in the eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes", Crisis Group Africa Briefing, No. 312 (Nairobi/Brussels, 2022). Available at https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/b181-dr-congo-great-lakes.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

thus undermining Rwanda's place in regional trade.[6] Determined to push back on what it saw as a threat to its dominant position in North Kivu province, Rwanda decided to re-activate the M23 insurgent group.

M23 is the latest in a long line of Kigali-backed insurgent groups, which have voiced concern over the treatment of Congolese Tutsis while fighting both for their own enrichment and influence, and on behalf of the Rwandan state. M23 briefly occupied Goma, North Kivu's capital, in 2012 before being pushed back by a combination of military action by UN peacekeepers and diplomatic pressure on Rwanda. M23 then re-emerged in November 2021 when it attacked Congolese border posts. From there, the rebels advanced into North Kivu with fighting increasing throughout 2022. Relations between Kinshasa and Kigali deteriorated, and regional actors stepped in to mediate.

The Luanda Process 2022–2024: Unable to Break the Deadlock

As violence worsened and Kinshasa pointed the finger at Kigali for supporting M23, the presidents of the DRC and Rwanda met in Luanda in July 2022 in an attempt to normalize relations. President João Lourenço of Angola hosted the talks in his capacity as an AU-appointed mediator. Kinshasa and Kigali signed the Luanda road map, committing to a ceasefire, the withdrawal of M23 from occupied positions and action against the FDLR. The road map contained additional provisions on disarmament and the repatriation of foreign fighters, hate speech, refugee returns and the prevention of illicit exploitation of natural resources. It established a role for Angola in verifying mutual accusations by Rwanda and the DRC concerning respectively their support of M23 and the FDLR.[7]

M23, however, immediately rejected the road map and, along with Rwandan troops, pressed home their advantage on the ground. The group claimed that any agreement signed by Rwanda did not represent them and requested direct negotiations with Kinshasa.[8] Kigali simply denied its troops were present, despite growing evidence. M23 took over the towns of Rutshuru and Kiwanja in October 2022, followed by the capture of the town of Kitshanga in January 2023, thereby gaining control over supply routes to Goma, the capital of North Kivu with a population of 2 million. M23 then expanded into Lubero territory, which is considered the Ugandan zone of influence. As M23 strengthened positions for the early 2025 takeover of Goma and Bukavu (discussed below), it received support from Rwanda in the form of weapons, technology, logistics and the deployment of thousands of troops.[9] Boosted by its advances and seeking to leverage them for a role in Congolese politics, in late 2023 M23 formed a political wing, Congo River Alliance (AFC in French), formulating demands for the replacement of Tshisekedi's government.

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[6] Initial Rwandan motivations for backing M23 are derived from the authors' interviews of security specialists and diplomats in 2023 and 2024. See also President Kagame's speech to the Rwandan parliament, video 8 February 2022. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuI8L44PDHU (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[7] Road Map on the Pacification Process in the Eastern Region of the DRC, 6 July 2022. Available at https://www.peaceagreements.org/agreements/2538/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[8] TV5 Monde, "RDC/Rwanda: le M23 déclare ne pas 'être engagé' sur un cessez-le-feu", 7 July 2022. Available at https://afrique.tv5monde.com/information/rdcrwanda-le-m23-declare-ne-pas-etre-engage-sur-un-cessez-le-feu (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[9] For details of Rwandan support for M23, see annual reports of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC. This analysis also relies on the authors' interviews with diplomats, security specialists and direct witnesses to M23 recruitment within Rwanda in 2023 and 2024.

As relations between Kinshasa and Kigali soured, diplomatic initiatives multiplied. In late 2022, the East African Community, which DRC had joined the preceding year, deployed a peacekeeping force headed by a Kenyan force commander.[10] This came in addition to Kenya's role, since 2022, in hosting talks between Kinshasa and armed groups (the Nairobi Process). However, the relations between the DRC and Kenya grew strained as Tshisekedi accused the East African Community force of ineffectiveness and even collusion with M23.[11] To replace it, he invited another regional mission, this time led by the Southern African Development Community, which he hoped would take the fight to M23 in place of his dysfunctional army. In addition to the regional force and the UN peacekeeping operation (MONUSCO), Kinshasa relied on the pro-government Wazalendo militia, international mercenaries, Burundian troops and the FDLR. All these forces did not prevent M23 from expanding: for example, the rebels captured the lucrative Rubaya mining site in April 2024.[12]

As M23 advanced, Angola attempted to keep the Luanda Process alive. Several meetings of Congolese and Rwandan foreign ministers and intelligence chiefs recommitted the parties to the ceasefire and joint action against armed groups. M23 continued rejecting ceasefires agreed by Kinshasa and Kigali. Faced with the breakdown of the Kinshasa-Kigali diplomatic relations, Lourenço pursued shuttle diplomacy between the two capitals. Tensions deepened, however, and public rhetoric grew increasingly hostile. Following the May 2024 attack on a displacement camp on Goma's outskirts implicating Rwandan troops, the Congolese foreign minister appealed to the UN to take action against Rwanda and accused Kigali of preparing a genocide of Congolese Hutus.[13] Angola brokered a two-week humanitarian truce in August 2024, which provided only a temporary respite.

The implementation of the Luanda Road Map was hampered from the outset by disputes about sequencing. Kigali insisted on the "neutralization" of the FDLR before lifting its "defensive measures" (a euphemism for its support for M23 and Rwandan troop deployments). Kinshasa demanded the withdrawal of M23 and Rwandan forces first, arguing that Kigali instrumentally exaggerated the FDLR threat to justify its presence.[14] In August 2024, Congolese and Rwandan foreign ministers agreed in Luanda on a plan for the "neutralization" of the FDLR and "disengagement" of the forces. Neither side hurried to implement its end of the bargain. In September 2024, under international pressure, Congolese forces attempted to capture the FDLR commander. In a botched operation, which observers suspect was sabotaged from within the Congolese army, soldiers mistakenly attacked one

[10] International Crisis Group, "Regional powers should drive diplomacy in DR Congo as M23 surrounds Goma", 30 November 2022. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/democratic-republic-congo/regional-powers-should-drive-diplomacy-dr-congo-m23-surrounds-goma (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[11] Jenna Russo, "East Africa's troops are leaving the DRC: what went wrong and what comes next", The Conversation, 11 December 2023. Available at https://theconversation.com/east-africas-troops-are-leaving-the-drc-what-went-wrong-and-what-comes-next-219500 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[12] UN Security Council, "Letter dated 27 December 2024 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council", S/2024/969, 27 December 2024.

[13] Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Coopération Internationale, Francophonie et Diaspora Congolaise, "Bombardement du camp des déplacés de Mugunga: la RRD saisit le Conseil de Sécurité de l'ONU", 9 May 2024. Available at https://diplomatie.gouv.cd/2024/05/09/bombardement-du-camp-des-deplaces-de-mugunga-la-rdc-saisit-le-conseil-de-securite-de-lonu/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[14] For insight into the positions of both sides, see declarations by the permanent representatives of the DRC and Rwanda in debates at the UN Security Council in 2023 and 2024.]

of the Wazalendo groups.[15] Overall, the hoped-for trade-off between tamping down on the FDLR and Rwandan withdrawal was difficult to achieve on the ground.

Efforts to press ahead with the implementation of the Luanda Road Map continued until the end of 2024. In early November, Congolese and Rwandan foreign ministers launched the reinforced verification mechanism with Angolan and MONUSCO facilitation. They also agreed on a joint concept of operations (CONOPS) to tackle the FDLR.[16] Despite these encouraging signals, President Kagame pulled out of the planned December 2024 summit in Luanda. During the preparatory ministerial meeting the day before the summit, Kigali blindsided Kinshasa by demanding that it engage directly with M23, which Tshisekedi continued to oppose.[17] Kinshasa felt that Kigali was shifting goalposts for the withdrawal of its "defensive measures" instead of reciprocating Congo's attempts to go after the FDLR. In March 2025, Angola formally ended its role in the Luanda Process under the pretext of devoting its energies to its rotating chairpersonship of the AU, while in reality acknowledging the lack of progress and the entry of Qatar as a new mediator.[18]

The Luanda Process faced several significant obstacles. First was the pre-eminence of developments on the battlefield over those around the negotiation table. Kinshasa consistently overestimated both its army's ability to hold ground and the advantages given by mercenaries, local auxiliaries, regional forces and MONUSCO. Faced with M23's advances, Tshisekedi had little choice but to enlist the support of all available allies, creating huge problems of trust and coordination.[19] M23, on the other hand, could request capable back-up from Rwanda every time it came under military pressure. For M23 and Rwanda, it made little strategic sense to engage in negotiation in good faith while they were ascendant on the ground.

The second obstacle was the overlooked interests of the warring parties. The occupation of mineral-rich areas of eastern DRC provided tangible economic benefits to Rwanda and M23 cadres. For example, the occupation of the Rubaya mining site increased the export of coltan through Rwanda, enriching M23 in the process.[20] In contrast, the Luanda Road Map offered no tangible benefits that could entice M23 to relinquish positions, such as amnesties or integration of security forces. On the other side, the negotiations failed to take sufficient account of Kinshasa's domestic constraints. Tshisekedi felt politically obliged to take a hard line against M23 and Rwanda rather than engage in the sort of backroom dealing that led to

[15] Jeune Afrique, "En RDC, l'armée cible des FDLR...et touche un de ses alliés", 7 September 2024. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1614251/politique/en-rdc-larmee-cible-des-fdlr-et-touche-un-de-ses-allies/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[16] UN Security Council, "Letter dated 27 December 2024".

[17] Radio France Internationale, "DR Congo, Rwanda peace talks in Angola cancelled after hitting 'deadlock'", 15 December 2024. Available at https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20241215-dr-congo-rwanda-leaders-hold-peace-talks-in-angola (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[18] Africa News, "Angola ends mediation role in the DRC-Rwanda conflict amid failed talk," 24 March 2025. Available at https://www.africanews.com/2025/03/24/angola-ends-mediation-role-in-the-drc-rwanda-conflict-amid-failed-talk/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[19] Authors' interview, senior UN security source, Goma, June 2024.

[20] UN Security Council, "Letter dated 27 December 2024".

imperfect peace deals in the past.[21]

The third obstacle was the lack of clarity of the negotiating agenda. The initial Luanda Road Map presented the steps the parties needed to take as mutually beneficial measures aimed at stabilizing the region, improving the humanitarian situation and revitalizing trade. Over time, this changed, as mediators began framing the demands for the "neutralization" of the FDLR and the M23 withdrawal as mutual concessions. This led to disputes over sequencing, as described above. Both demands were also imprecise and difficult to verify. Rwanda shifted from denying its support for M23 to acknowledging "defensive measures". It also shifted from prioritizing demands for the FDLR defeat to insisting on direct talks between Kinshasa and M23. The lack of clarity and sincerity in the parties' positions prevented Angola from making progress.

The fourth obstacle came in the form of regional tensions and wider international divisions. The Angolans invested significant diplomatic effort into their mediation and were careful to maintain a neutral position and avoid public mudslinging. Yet despite the formal AU mandate, Lourenço did not enjoy unified political backing from African powers. Several African countries value their relations with Kigali and do not wish to challenge Rwandan actions. In turn, the DRC's relations with a number of African nations were complicated. Kinshasa fell out with Kenya when it expelled the East African Force. It also strained relations with South Africa when it prevaricated on cutting off the FDLR. Uganda played an ambivalent role in the crisis, allowing M23 free passage and access to refugee camps for recruitment.[22]

In terms of international divisions, many Western countries failed to exercise the leverage they had over Rwanda. Donors did not introduce significant sanctions or cut aid until early 2025 due to economic and security partnerships they had developed with Kigali, such as the Rwandan counter-terrorism deployment in Mozambique that was partly funded by the EU, or the EU's 2024 critical minerals deal with Rwanda. Kinshasa had overestimated the international outrage over Rwanda's violation of its neighbour's sovereignty. Without the willingness of either Western or regional actors to pressure both sides into concessions, the Luanda Process faltered.

After Goma's Fall, Doha and Washington Take the Mediation Baton

In the course of 2025, as the Luanda Process floundered and fighting surged on the ground, Qatar and the US became the key mediators in the Great Lakes crisis. This development poses important questions about the possibilities and limits of international facilitation of the Rwanda-DRC talks, including whether the introduction of powerful but more distant mediators could help overcome the obstacles faced by the AU's Angolan-led efforts. It seems that Doha and Washington have, in fact, encountered very similar problems to those faced by Luanda. As the Rwandans and M23 continue to fight the Congolese army and its allies on the ground, despite signing peace agreements, mediators are lowering their ambitions, which will likely now focus more on establishing and achieving or maintaining fragile ceasefires than on negotiating the insurgents' withdrawal.

[21] International Crisis Group, "DR Congo: a full plate of challenges after a turbulent vote," 26 January 2024. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/democratic-republic-congo/dr-congo-full-plate-challenges-after-turbulent-vote (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[22] International Crisis Group, "Easing the turmoil".

On 27 January 2025, M23, heavily supported by Rwandan troops and weaponry, took over Goma, the largest city in eastern DRC. [23] The fighting pitted the insurgents against the Congolese army, Wazalendo, several hundred mercenaries, MONUSCO and the Southern African mission, as noted above. The move was undoubtedly initiated in Kigali. According to diplomatic sources, Rwanda was emboldened by the expectation that the new US administration would view the takeover more favourably than its predecessor administration would have.[24] Once M23 secured Goma at the end of January, the insurgents took over Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province, at the start of February. Over the subsequent two months they expanded their footprint, meeting little organized resistance as the Congolese army had retreated in disarray. Diplomats, observers and some Congolese politicians were concerned that the insurgents might advance further into the country, forming alliances with other disgruntled armed groups and opposition politicians, and destabilize the government in Kinshasa.[25]

Since the end of March, however, M23's expansion has slowed. To the north of M23's positions on the border between North Kivu and Ituri provinces, the Ugandan army had deployed troops with Kinshasa's consent, officially to fight the ADF, but also to protect its economic interests, creating an obstacle to M23's expansion.[26] M23's push south has met fierce, if highly disorganized, resistance from the Congolese and Burundian armies and Wazalendo fighters around Uvira city in South Kivu. Finally, the attention brought by the Washington and Doha mediation efforts likely helped curb Rwandan enthusiasm for expanding M23's footprint.

Western countries reacted to M23's takeover of Goma by calling on M23 and Rwanda to withdraw their forces. Notably, the UN Security Council strongly condemned M23's actions and named Rwanda as an aggressor, a step that both Western powers and the UN had previously baulked at. European donors suspended or delayed some aid packages to Rwanda and imposed individual sanctions on Rwandan army commanders, reflecting this new firmer position.[27] The country's biggest donor, the World Bank, however, did not change its spending plans.

The fall of Goma and Rwanda's advance into DRC territory raised tensions among African powers. Southern African countries, especially South Africa, which formed the bulk of the force that fought Rwandan troops around Goma, were initially furious at Kigali's actions. Other countries were more circumspect, wary of alienating Kigali, especially as Rwandan troops play an important role supporting governments and armies in the Central African Republic and Mozambique. The result was confusion: Angola first pulled out, then called for

[23] The fall of Goma was well covered in international and national media. For a good summary, see Paul Nantulya, "Risk of regional conflict following fall of Goma and M23 offensive in the DRC", Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 29 January 2025. Available at https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Risk-of-Regional-Conflict-1.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[24] Authors' interviews of diplomats with insight into the thinking of the Rwandan leadership, March 2025.

[25] Authors' interviews with diplomats and experts, March and April 2025.

[26] Kristof Titeca, "Uganda's chess game in eastern DRC: with or without M23?" Egmont Policy Brief, No. 345 (Brussels, Royal Institute for International Relations, 2024); Kristof Titeca and Giovanni Salvaggio, "Understanding Uganda's (ambiguous) actions in eastern DRC: military interventions to protect roads and trade?" Egmont Paper, No. 134 (Brussels, Royal Institute for International Relations, 2025).

[27] Romain Gras, "L'UE sanctionne des généraux rwandais à l'aube d'une semaine décisive", Jeune Afrique, 17 March 2025. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1668824/politique/lue-sanctionne-des-generaux-rwandais-a-laube-dune-semaine-decisive/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

more talks in Luanda, only to withdraw again when the presidents of Rwanda and the DRC appeared in Doha without Luanda's prior knowledge.[28] The African Union then decided to create a new panel of mediators headed by Togolese President Faure Gnassingbé, backed up by five former presidents, each with a thematic lead.[29] This move, and the composition of the panel itself, was intended to merge the different, largely moribund African initiatives and seemed more oriented to calming African tensions by balancing different regional groups than to making headway on the peace process itself.

With the African response floundering, other mediators stepped in, namely Qatar and the US. On 18 March, Kagame and Tshisekedi met in Doha. The resulting communique contained little new, committing the parties again to stop the fighting, but the meeting itself took both observers and African diplomats by surprise. Qatar is an important investor in both the DRC and Rwanda, and Kigali regards relations with Doha as important to offset pressure from Western donors. While clearly a welcome initiative, reactions to the Doha meeting pointed to emerging rivalries between African and non-African mediators.[30] Nevertheless, the Qatar/US initiative continued to gather pace. In early April, President Trump's Africa advisor toured the region. US officials then invited Rwandan and Congolese counterparts to a series of meetings in Washington to hammer out a deal.

For three months, the Congolese and Rwandan officials gathered in Washington differed on familiar issues but came under growing pressure. Disagreements focused mainly on Congolese and US demands that the Rwandan army withdraw from Congolese soil. While the US mediators accepted that M23 would not disband quickly, they did press Rwanda to pull its troops out without conditions. Rwanda resisted this by arguing that they should withdraw only once talks between Kinshasa and M23 had advanced, and only once Kinshasa took clear action against the FDLR. US officials recognized these as delaying tactics and continued to pressure Rwanda to withdraw.[31] In parallel, American officials attempted to spur US private sector investment in the mining sector in eastern DRC, hoping to create conditions for a "winning peace" in which both Kinshasa and Kigali could benefit from the legitimate minerals trade.

The Qatari initiative and American follow-up eventually bore fruit in the Washington Agreement on 27 June. The agreement committed Rwanda and the DRC to cease hostilities, respect territorial integrity and discontinue support for non-state armed actors. Less than a month after the Washington Agreement, the DRC and M23 signed the Doha Declaration of Principles, agreeing on a ceasefire, the restoration of state authority in rebel-held areas, a prisoner exchange and technical points on refugee returns and a joint monitoring

[28] Romain Chanson, "Est de la RDR: des médiations, une fusion et beaucoup de confusion", Jeune Afrique, 13 March 2025. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1667931/politique/est-de-la-rdc-des-mediations-une-fusion-et-beaucoup-de-confusion/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[29] Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, former South African President Kgalema Motlanthe, former President of the Central African Republic Catherine Samba Panza and former Ethiopian President Sahle-Work Zewde. Jeune Afrique, "Est de la RDC: la SADC et l'EAC remanient leur équipe de facilitateurs", 25 March 2025. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1671855/politique/est-de-la-rdc-la-sadc-et-leac-remanient-leur-equipe-de-facilitateurs/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[30] Africa Press, "Angolan president surprised by Qatar initiative on DRC conflict", 21 March 2025. Available at https://www.africa-press.net/angola/all-news/angolan-president-surprised-by-qatari-initiative-on-drc-conflict (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[31] Authors' interview of a US diplomat, June 2025.

mechanism. Qatari mediators have also proposed that M23 form a joint force with the Congolese police, an idea that will likely meet little enthusiasm in Kinshasa. The parties declared their intention to conclude a comprehensive peace deal in mid-August, a deadline they repeatedly missed.

Several months after the Washington Agreement, and despite the impressive fanfare around its signature, there has been no progress towards any of the main stated aims of the deal, while fighting continues on the ground. This suggests that mediation between Rwanda and the DRC has faced similar obstacles to those encountered since 2022. Both sides seem willing to sign agreements, which they then reinterpret according to their interests, blaming the other party when fighting resumes. For example, divergent understandings of the Washington deal emerged almost immediately, again focused on sequencing Rwandan withdrawal relative to the DRC's commitments.[32] As before, Kigali argued that it would only fully pull out if the FDLR insurgents were "neutralized" (i.e. killed), and its troops have since remained on Congolese soil. Despite committing to an immediate ceasefire in Washington, the DRC government was already deploying extra troops to South Kivu in anticipation of more fighting. Kinshasa also continues to buy new arms, hire mercenaries and carry out drone attacks on M23.

The Washington and Doha negotiations took place in an evolving international environment. The Trump Administration's foreign policy efforts focused on fast-paced negotiations leading to agreements that the US president could present as successes to fulfil his electoral promise to "end wars". The difficult questions of follow-up, implementation schedules and guarantees were not always at the forefront. Furthermore, the Trump Administration showed a wavering commitment to the norms of territorial integrity and inviolability of borders, making the Rwandan occupation of its neighbour's territory seem more acceptable. At the same time, amid deepening geopolitical tensions, mediators like Qatar sought to facilitate pragmatic but limited deals that could temporarily ease civilian suffering.

While American mediators have attempted to tie talks to mineral sector investments, the linkage between mineral deals that could benefit US business and the actual peace process has never been fully clarified. US interest in DRC minerals is hardly new, and President Trump's predecessor also took a keen interest via the Lobito Corridor infrastructure project. Several well-financed US investors are eyeing opportunities, though they will necessarily work on a far longer time frame than American diplomacy. Nevertheless, while President Trump does seem motivated to turn the Great Lakes peace process into business opportunities, it is not clear if such investment provides mediators with actual leverage over the parties, given widespread global interest and existing Chinese investments in the DRC.

Conclusion

As of September 2025, the Washington Agreement was facing implementation difficulties, and the Doha track was experiencing delays. Like Angola before them, the US and Qatar have run into hurdles, including continued fighting, disagreements over sequencing, proliferating agendas, public posturing and blame games, complicated regional geopolitics, lack of international pressure and the reality of consolidating and expanding territorial control by

[32] Jeune Afrique "Est de la RDC: 'la levée de nos mesures défensives est conditionnée par la neutralisation des FDLR', insiste le Rwanda", 30 June 2025. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1702112/politique/est-de-la-rdc-la-levee-de-nos-mesures-defensives-est-conditionnee-par-la-neutralisation-des-fdlr-insiste-le-rwanda/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

M23 that delivers tangible economic benefits to the rebels and their Rwandan backers.

On the ground, a new power structure is emerging, bearing scant relation to diplomatic discussions. On 14 September 2025, M23 paraded 7,000 new fighters, many recruited from defeated Congolese military units, and announced plans to train an additional 12,000.[33] M23 is consolidating control and may be in the process of shedding its previous dependence on the Rwandan army. Meanwhile, the military and administrative reforms that would be needed to tip the balance of power back to the Congolese government are formidable challenges that seem beyond Kinshasa's squabbling political elite. Whatever motivates Rwanda – security, economic gain, territorial expansion – Kigali seems determined to gain control of large areas of North Kivu and will back up its M23 allies if needed.

The obstacles faced by successive mediators illustrate the broader difficulties of crisis management in an international environment where the norms of territorial integrity and non-interference are weakening, and diplomatic attention is limited. Some diplomats may have seen the fighting in the Great Lakes as relatively amenable to mediation, yet resolving entrenched conflicts, even if they are between small or donor-dependent states, is never straightforward. The era of sustained mediation backed by substantial aid packages, as was the case in the early 2000s, seems long past. Furthermore, the erosion of norms of territorial integrity by Russia and Israel, and Trump's pronouncements has encouraged Rwanda to pursue de facto annexation of Congolese territory, and to simply face down the pressure coming from Angolan and then Qatari and American diplomats. Mediators' requests to Kinshasa – to respect a ceasefire and stop collaborating with the FDLR or other armed groups – have similarly seen little progress. Elites in Kinshasa, unthreatened by violence in the east, are under insufficient pressure to enter negotiations in good faith and understandably resist any compromise on what they see as Kigali's and M23's real objectives of territorial control.

The gap between mediators' objectives and the reality on the ground ultimately stands as the most important lesson from the Great Lakes crisis. In the past, international efforts have borne fruit when the countries of the region have chosen to resolve their differences and work together against armed groups, and have sought international backing to fund and legitimize their political alignment. Such alignments have been short of trust and have not lasted, but they nevertheless brought respite for the suffering people of eastern DRC. Currently, relations between Kigali and Kinshasa seem to offer little opportunity for fruitful mediation on the overarching issues of territorial integrity, while M23 shows no willingness to negotiate away its gains. Consequently, mediators will have to focus on achieving working ceasefires and limiting conflict spillover to prevent a broader regional conflagration, as well as reducing civilian suffering and displacement. Such a pragmatic approach can keep the parties talking and ensure the conflict remains in the international spotlight.

[33] Radio France International, "Est de la RDC: l'AFC/M23 exhibe un nouveau contingent de 7000 hommes malgré les négociations en cours à Doha", 6 September 2025. Available at https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20250916-est-de-la-rdc-l-afc-m23-exhibe-un-nouveau-contingent-de-7-000-hommes-malgr%C3%A9-les-n%C3%A9gociations-en-cours-%C3%A0-doha (accessed on 25 November 2025).