

Analysing the Challenges Faced by the East African Community Regional Force in Countering M23 Rebels in Eastern DR Congo

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Abstract: This paper investigates why the East African Community's [EAC] intervention in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC] failed to stop the M23 rebels. Despite the EAC's mission to advance peace and stability in the area, the intervention's goals were unmet. This study determines the leading causes of the intervention's failure by critically examining how it was carried out and the dynamics of the dispute. These include the difficulty in coordinating amongst EAC member nations, the scarcity of military equipment and workforce, and the complexity of the DRC conflict. The results highlight how crucial it is to resolve underlying grievances and strengthen regional collaboration while attempting to resolve disputes. Using the knowledge gained from this example, stakeholders can endeavour to create more potent plans for advancing peace and stability in the Great Lakes region.

Keywords: East African Community [EAC], M23 rebels, Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC], Regional intervention, Conflict resolution, Coordination.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC] has long been plagued by instability, conflict, and humanitarian crises, with various armed groups vying for power and control over the region. One such group, the M23 rebels, emerged as a significant threat, causing widespread violence and displacement in the area. In response to the escalating crisis, the East African Community [EAC] initiated a military intervention aimed at neutralising the M23 rebels and restoring stability to the region. However, despite these efforts, the intervention failed to achieve its objectives, raising critical questions about the efficacy of regional interventions in conflict resolution and the broader implications for peace and security in the Great Lakes region.

The East African Community [EAC], comprised of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, DRC, and Uganda, has increasingly positioned itself as a critical regional actor in addressing security challenges in the Great Lakes region (Bainomugisha & Rwengabo, 2016). With a mandate to promote peace, stability, and economic integration among its member states, the EAC's intervention in the DRC represented a significant step towards fulfilling its regional responsibilities (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2013).

However, the failure to effectively thwart the M23 rebels underscored the complexities and challenges associated with regional interventions in conflict-ridden environments. The emergence of the M23 rebels in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC] posed a significant threat to regional stability and security (Prunier, 2008). The M23 rebels, comprised of former Congolese soldiers, capitalised on grievances related to governance, ethnicity, and resource exploitation to garner support and expand their influence in the region (Makonye, 2023). Their activities, marked by violence, human rights abuses, and illicit resource exploitation, further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the DRC and strained relations between neighbouring states (Vogel, 2023). Against this backdrop, the East African Community [EAC] intervened militarily to support the Congolese government's efforts to combat the M23 rebels and restore stability to the region. However, despite initial successes and international support, the intervention ultimately faltered, highlighting critical shortcomings and limitations in its execution.

In the context of the failure of the East African Community intervention to thwart the M23 rebels in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the independent variables mainly encompass the factors that influence or affect the effectiveness and results of the intervention. These could include the level of coordination among EAC member states, cooperation, and unity of purpose among East African Community member states in executing the intervention. The dependent variables would be the success or failure of the EAC intervention to confront the M23 rebellion in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC]. This could be measured by the degree of neutralisation of the rebels, restoration of stability in the region and achievement of the objectives of the intervention. These variables help to understand the factors influencing the outcome of the intervention and provide a framework for analysing the effectiveness of regional interventions in conflict resolution.

The failure of the East African Community [EAC] intervention in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC] to thwart M23 rebels has far-reaching implications for regional security dynamics and conflict resolution efforts. A critical aspect that merits scrutiny is the internal dynamics within EAC member states that influenced the effectiveness of the intervention. Rwanda and Uganda, two prominent members of the EAC, have been accused of supporting the M23 rebels, complicating the objectives of the intervention and raising questions about the EAC's ability to act coherently to address regional security challenges (Vogel, 2023).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The East African Community [EAC] Force's inability to effectively neutralise the M23 rebels in 2023 highlights significant challenges in regional security governance and counterinsurgency operations. Despite concerted efforts and the deployment of resources, the EAC Force faced numerous obstacles that hindered its mission success. Understanding this failure's underlying causes and implications is crucial for enhancing future conflict resolution and peacekeeping strategies within the East African region.

The M23 rebel organisation, which has increased its activity in the border region with Rwanda and Uganda since the end of 2021, presented the most significant obstacle in the east. It then seized much of the province of North Kivu, finally encircling the capital, Goma, nearly entirely. The DRC joined the EAC, where international efforts to manage the situation came to a head. However, neither the EAC's army deployment nor diplomatic efforts made a significant difference (Berwouts, 2023). East Africa's current geopolitics is a complicated synthesis of the region's exterior linkages, entanglements, and intra-regional political, economic, and security factors. Concerning the regionalised conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and the expanding military presence of foreign countries in the larger East African region, the geopolitics of /security in the region is examined (Zajontz & Shangwe, 2024). According to Makonye, discrimination against Tutsis from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other ethnic populations in North and South Kivu is the primary grievance at the core of the M23 conflict. Similarly, the M23 insurgents believe that the Kivus are their homeland and that the DRC's mainland is their obligation (Makonye, 2023). Reyntjens analyses thirty years of Central African instability, bloodshed, conflict, and extraordinary human misery. Previously viewed as a peripheral, landlocked, uninteresting region politically and economically, the African Great Lakes region is at the centre of a significant geopolitical realignment with implications for the entire continent starting in the 1990s. The unpredictability is still present now. It contends that a unique and contingent combination of elements explains the dynamics of the protracted instability. He argued that although this confluence of elements aids our understanding of the past, it might also help predict the future. There is always a chance of conflict as long as these conditions exist. The weaknesses of the Congolese state, the territorial expansion of civil wars in nearby nations, the shifting of regional alliances, the profitability of war, the connection between local issues, and the impunity for serious human rights crimes are the elements he studied here. According to him, the state's weakness is one of the primary issues facing the DRC. Even while some efforts have been made to rebuild it, the state is still in a very precarious situation, especially [though not alone] in the East, where violence has continued to rage and previous crises have erupted (Reyntjens, 2023). The stability of the Great Lakes area faced a complicated security threat with the advent of the M23 insurrection in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Affairs). Comprising primarily of troops who had defected from the Congo, the rebel group could secure foreign support by taking advantage of concerns within marginalised populations. The EAC Force's mission to

restore peace and security in the region was severely hampered by this complex web of internal and foreign factors(Vogel, 2023).

The failure of the EAC Force to neutralise the M23 rebels in 2023 reflects a convergence of internal, regional, and international factors that impede effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts in the Great Lakes region. Addressing the root causes of conflict, enhancing regional cooperation, and fostering inclusive political dialogue are essential steps towards sustainable peace and security. Learning from past failures and adopting a comprehensive, multidimensional approach to peacebuilding will be critical in preventing similar setbacks in the future.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research consults primary and secondary sources to analyse the EAC force's inability to defeat the M23 insurgents. Direct observations of the insecurity in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo are considered primary sources, as are official comments and reports released by the EAC. The M23 rebels' activities and the violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo are contextualised through scholarly papers, reports, and analyses from reliable sources, considered secondary sources. Utilising a qualitative methodology, the investigation delves into the underlying dynamics by referencing themes from international relations, conflict studies, and peacebuilding.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The inability of the East African Community [EAC] Force to successfully combat the M23 rebels in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC] can be examined through the prism of realism, a well-known theory in international relations. Realist theory strongly emphasises states' rational behaviour, which is motivated by power dynamics and self-interest in the global system and frequently leads to rivalry and conflict. Realism's application to the EAC's failure to counter the M23 rebellion exposes underlying power conflicts, competing interests, and the constraints on regional collaboration.

The failure of the EAC Force can be attributed, in part, to the self-interested behaviour of member states within the East African region. Realist theory posits that states prioritise their security and interests above collective goals, leading to a lack of unity and cooperation. In the case of the EAC Force, member states may have pursued individual agendas, such as safeguarding their borders or maintaining influence in the DRC, rather than prioritising the collective goal of defeating the M23 rebels(Mearsheimer, 2001). Moreover, realist analysis underscores the role of power dynamics in shaping international relations and security initiatives. The EAC Force's failure may reflect power asymmetries among member states and external actors, influencing decision-making and resource allocation. Powerful states within the EAC, such as Kenya and Tanzania, may have exerted disproportionate influence over the force's operations, potentially undermining its effectiveness or diverting resources for their interests(Waltz, 2010). Realist theory also highlights the significance of strategic calculations and perceptions of threat in shaping state behaviour. The failure to address the M23 insurgency may stem from divergent assessments of the threat posed by the rebels among EAC member states. States with minimal direct security stakes in the DRC may have been less inclined to allocate resources or prioritise military intervention, particularly if they perceived the M23 rebellion as a localised issue with limited spillover effects(Morgenthau, 1973). Furthermore, realist principles underscore the importance of considering external influences and the broader geopolitical context in analysing regional security dynamics. The failure of the EAC Force to counter the M23 rebels may have been compounded by interference from external actors, such as neighbouring states or international powers, seeking to advance their interests in the DRC. Competition for control over strategic resources, geopolitical influence, or proxy conflicts may have undermined the cohesion and effectiveness of the EAC's response (Gilpin, 1981).

A realist analysis of the EAC Force's failure to thwart the M23 rebels in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo highlights the centrality of self-interest, power dynamics, and strategic calculations in shaping regional security initiatives. The inability of EAC member states to overcome divergent interests, power asymmetries, and external influences underscores the challenges of achieving practical cooperation in a realist international system.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. The Role of the East African Community [EAC] in Conflict Resolution

The main challenge in resolving the M23 crisis was the ambiguity of the group's character. Different readings of the origins and motivations of M23 have led to significant confusion in determining the most appropriate response. For some, the M23 is an expression of widespread anger at a dysfunctional Congolese government, corruption and abuses – abuses, historically, which Congolese of Rwandan origin have particularly felt. This line of analysis considers the M23 to have legitimate grievances that could be the subject of a negotiated solution. For others, the M23 was the latest in a long line of rebel movements linked to Rwanda that represent a proxy for the economic or security ambitions of the Rwandan state. However, an illegitimate actor requires a firm military response.([Shepherd, 2018](#)).

Eight partner states currently make up the East African Community. ([EAC](#)), a regional intergovernmental organisation with its headquarters located in Arusha, Tanzania. These states are the Republic of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of Kenya, the Republic of Rwanda, the Federal Republic of Somalia, the Republic of South Sudan, the Republic of Uganda, and the United Republic of Tanzania.([EAC, 2023](#)). With a mandate to promote peace, stability, and economic integration among its member states, the EAC's intervention in the DRC represented a significant step towards fulfilling its regional responsibilities. However, the failure to effectively thwart the M23 rebels underscored the complexities and challenges associated with regional interventions in conflict-ridden environments.

Moreover, the intervention highlighted broader geopolitical interests and power struggles within the Great Lakes region, further complicating efforts to achieve a sustainable resolution to the conflict in the DRC. Rwanda's historical involvement in Congolese affairs, stemming from the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide and subsequent cross-border conflicts, has shaped its strategic calculations and security policies vis-à-vis the DRC.([Beswick, 2012](#)). Similarly, Uganda's interests in the region, particularly its historical ties to various armed groups operating in eastern Congo([Autesserre, 2010](#)), have influenced its approach to the conflict and its role within the EAC intervention.

4.2. Emergence and Dynamics of the M23 Rebellion

The first determining factor in the M23 conflict was the M23's assertion that it represents the particular and legitimate grievances of Congolese of Rwandan origin, particularly the Tutsi communities of North Kivu. These include protecting Tutsi from violence, particularly at the hands of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda [FDLR], returning Congolese Tutsi refugees from camps in Rwanda, and resolving long-standing uncertainty about their status as Congolese citizens. Many of these issues were reflected in the terms of the peace agreement on March 23, 2009. The M23's agenda expanded throughout the conflict, moving beyond its initial locally anchored demands to position itself as the champion of all Congolese against a corrupt and dysfunctional society, notably after the group captured the vital city of Goma in November 2012, and briefly expressed its intention to expand its rebellion throughout the DRC. These two linked programs have been proposed interchangeably at different times by the M23 and its supporters.([Shepherd, 2018](#)). Another factor in the conflict is the continued role of Rwanda, and to a lesser extent, Uganda, in seeking to maintain covert external influence and control over areas of eastern DRC. These actors intervene both as a buffer against threats emerging from Congolese territory, particularly from the FDLR, and the growing risk that a new generation of internal Rwandan dissidents will find refuge in the DRC. It is also for them a mechanism to defend the well-established economic and security advantages felt mainly by a local elite linked to Rwanda and often Tutsi. This elite had taken root during the domination of eastern DRC by the RCD-G and notably controlled trade routes, mining sites and vast pasture areas. Although it cannot be proven, these resources likely significantly benefited Rwanda. Thus, for many Congolese observers, the M23 represents the continuation of the long-standing conflict with Rwanda.([Shepherd, 2018](#)).

The crucial—yet little-discussed—factor is that the rebellion is led by independent troublemakers acting to further their agendas. Competition for mineral wealth, trade, and land access within the DRC drove them, and this impression and part of reality were linked to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo as the site of resource conflict. The leader of the original group of 300 rebel troops, whose uprising in early 2012 marked the M23's historical debut, Bosco Ntaganda, was foremost among these disruptors. Over the years, Bosco has played a significant role in several confrontations involving the Great Lakes, most notably the inter-communal violence in Ituri in 2002 that contained the potential for genocidal dimensions.

According to the first of these views, the M23 rebellion was sparked by accumulated frustration over the government's failure to implement the CNDP peace agreement of March 23, 2009, combined with widespread discontent over the shortcomings of the governance of the Congo. According to the second, the immediate cause of the M23 rebellion was Rwanda's reaction to the Congolese state's attempt to deploy former M23 fighters. CNDP army officers are moving away from the East, threatening the parallel chains of command that have allowed them to retain significant military power and control of mining sites and trade routes. Under the third, the M23 represented the region drawn into a conflict it had not provoked and reacting to circumstances rather than following a strategic plan. Each view has generated different narratives and various and sometimes incompatible approaches to ending the conflict.

The emergence of the M23 rebels in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC] posed a significant threat to regional stability and security([Man-Byemba, 2023](#))The M23 rebels, Comprised of former Congolese soldiers, capitalised on grievances related to governance, ethnicity, and resource exploitation to garner support and expand their influence in the region.([Analytica, 2023](#)). Their activities, marked by violence, human rights abuses, and illicit resource exploitation, further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the DRC and strained relations between neighbouring states.

4.3. Challenges Faced by the EAC Intervention

Against this backdrop, the EAC intervened militarily to support the Congolese government's efforts to combat the M23 rebels and restore stability to the region.([Armande, 2023](#)) The East African Community Regional Force [EACRF] was authorised at the 22nd Ordinary Summit of EAC Heads of State, held in Arusha, Tanzania, in July 2022. Its deployment began in November 2022.

According to the EAC Secretariat, the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) had the following mandate([Secretariat](#)):

- Jointly plan and conduct Operations with the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) in the Joint Operations Area (JOA) to defeat the armed groups elements in the Eastern DRC;
- Support FARDC in concretising and maintenance of law and order;
- Support DRC in collaboration with humanitarian agencies to continue humanitarian relief to populations affected by Armed group elements activities, including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and
- Support in the Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery and Stabilization Program (P-DDRCS).

However, despite initial successes and international support, the intervention ultimately faltered, highlighting critical shortcomings and limitations in its execution. The failure of the EAC intervention also underscores the challenges associated with regional approaches to conflict resolution in Africa. While regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of Central African States [ECCAS] have increasingly taken on peace and security responsibilities on the continent, their effectiveness remains constrained by a range of factors, including limited resources, capacity gaps, and political divisions among member states. In the case of the EACRF intervention in the DRC, these challenges were exacerbated by the complex nature of the conflict and divergent interests among regional actors, hindering collective action and undermining the prospects for a durable peace settlement.

The DRC government, citing ineffectiveness and potential collusion with rebels, declined to renew the East African Community Regional Force's mandate beyond its December 8, 2023 expiration date. This decision comes after over a year of the force's presence in the country.

4.4. Critical Analysis and Implications

This article critically analyses the failure of the East African Community's intervention in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC] to thwart the M23 rebels, exploring the underlying factors, dynamics, and implications for regional security and conflict resolution. By examining the

intervention's political, military, and socio-economic dimensions, this study seeks to provide insights into the challenges and complexities of regional interventions in conflict-affected environments. Furthermore, it offers recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of future interventions, with implications for regional cooperation, peacebuilding, and security governance in the Great Lakes region.

Furthermore, the failure of the EAC intervention has implications for broader debates within the international community regarding the responsibility to protect [R2P] and the use of force in addressing humanitarian crises and mass atrocities. The intervention in the DRC was framed, in part, as a response to the M23 rebels' egregious human rights abuses and threats to civilian populations.

However, its failure raises questions about the feasibility and legitimacy of external military interventions in complex conflicts, particularly in contexts where regional actors have vested interests and divergent interpretations of the crisis.

The failure of the East African Community's intervention in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to thwart the M23 rebels highlights the complexities and challenges associated with regional approaches to conflict resolution in Africa. Internal dynamics within the EAC, geopolitical rivalries, and broader debates regarding using force and R2P all shaped the intervention's outcomes. Addressing these challenges will require greater coherence and coordination among regional actors and a nuanced understanding of the political, economic, and social dynamics driving conflicts in the Great Lakes region.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The failure of the East African Community [EAC] intervention to thwart the M23 rebels in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC] underscores the complexities and challenges associated with regional interventions in conflict-ridden environments. Despite the EAC's mandate to promote peace, stability, and economic integration among its member states, the intervention failed to achieve its objectives, highlighting critical shortcomings in its execution. The emergence and dynamics of the M23 rebellion further complicated efforts to restore stability to the region, as the rebels capitalised on grievances related to governance, ethnicity, and resource exploitation. Additionally, the intervention faced challenges such as limited coordination, inadequate resources, and divergent interests among regional actors, undermining its effectiveness. Moving forward, it is imperative for regional organisations like the EAC to critically assess lessons learned from failed interventions and implement measures to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of future peacekeeping efforts. This includes improving coordination mechanisms, strengthening institutional capacity, and fostering greater cooperation among member states. Furthermore, the failure of the EAC intervention has broader implications for regional security and conflict resolution in Africa. It highlights the need for enhanced collaboration between regional organisations, international partners, and local stakeholders in addressing complex and protracted conflicts. Moreover, it underscores the importance of adopting a multifaceted approach to peacebuilding that incorporates political, economic, and social dimensions. By addressing the underlying drivers of conflict and building inclusive and resilient societies, regional actors can contribute to sustainable peace and development in the region. While the failure of the EAC intervention in the DRC to thwart the M23 rebels represents a setback in regional peace efforts, it also presents an opportunity for reflection, learning, and adaptation. By drawing on lessons learned and leveraging regional cooperation, stakeholders can work towards addressing the root causes of conflict, promoting inclusive governance, and building a more peaceful and prosperous future for the Great Lakes region.

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