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**Author** Professor T. Mandrup (SIGLA/RDDC)

**Series Editor:** Professor F. Vreÿ (SIGLA)

**SAMDIRC and the evolving conflict in the Eastern DRC – avoiding a regional conflict whilst fighting an advancing enemy.**

**Background**

More than three months after the first elements of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) intervention force, the SAMIDRC, arrived in Goma, Northern Kivu, a combination of intensive diplomatic activity and worrying information emerged from the frontlines. Diplomatic meetings took place between President Tshisekedi and the current Chairperson of the East African Community (EAC), South Sudanese President Salva Kiir, on 25 March 2024, where Kiir stressed the need for peace and made an ["urgent adherence to the Nairobi and Luanda peace processes in order to restore peace and stability in the region"](#). He then travelled to Angola to meet with his Angolan counterpart about the situation in the Eastern DRC following Angola's dialogue with Rwanda on 21 March 2024. [In early April 2024, South African President Ramaphosa met with Rwandan President Kagame to address the frosty relationship](#) that exists between the two countries, which is key to solving the situation in Eastern DRC. The embarrassment experienced by SADC in Mozambique, where its force is being replaced by an expanded Rwandan military presence in an area considered strategically important to South Africa, had not improved the relationship.

In the Eastern DRC, the main rebel group, the M23, is edging closer to the regional capital, Goma. The SAMIDRC force has [experienced various problems](#), including the lack of proper logistical support in securing equipment supply lines, ammunition, and foodstuff. However, much more worrying is that the mission is yet to be fully operational in terms of equipment and personnel and has started to experience casualties on the ground. The early April 2024 statement that the M23 has taken South African National Defence Force (SANDF) personnel, prisoners just added to the uncertainty. The SANDF has yet to deploy the promised 2900 soldiers while those on the ground are experiencing a lack of access to basic supplies and logistics, e.g. sanitary facilities, munitions, camp and transport

facilities, let alone air assets, extraction capabilities, surveillance systems and proper protection equipment for the deployed capabilities. As described in a previous SIGLA brief, the risk is that the SAMIDRC, led by South Africa, is confronted with a capable M23, but does not have the essential military tools to execute the mission as mandated.

### **Rwanda: the key to creating sustainable peace and security in Eastern DRC.**

The security situation in the Eastern DRC is closely interlinked with Rwanda and the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Rwanda has rightly pointed out that it had legitimate security and justice concerns over the sanctuary given by changing Zairaein and Congolese governments to the presence of many individuals responsible for genocide in Eastern DRC. The relatively strong anti-Kigali insurgency movement, the Forces Democratiques de Liberation du Rwanda ([FDLR](#)), has continued to control sections of territory in the Eastern DRC and consequently provided Rwanda with an excuse to interfere.

The neutralisation of the threat posed by the FDLR and its alliance partners in the Congolese Patriotic Resistance (CPR) is central to solving the continued Rwandan interference. [The UN group of experts have documented that the CPR operates alongside, in cooperation with and with the logistical support of the DRC army, the FARDC.](#) The DRC government must show a genuine willingness to disarm and disband the FDLR, which is yet to happen. The DRC government has, even at times, worked with FDLR against the Rwanda-supported militias. In addition, the DRC authorities must agree to implement the principles of [previous peace agreements](#), including providing security and minority rights and protection for the Kinyarwanda-speaking minorities in Eastern DRC. The lack of will to implement and guarantee security for [Kinyarwanda-speaking minorities](#) over the years is key to understanding the continued security problems facing the region. However, it has been [documented](#) repeatedly that Rwanda, for security and economic purposes, continues to play a central negative role in the continued instability of Eastern DRC.

[The accelerated drawdown for the UN mission, MONUSCO, started in South Kivu, where bases have been handed over to the Congolese army, the FARDC.](#) The drawdown had previously been tied to the capacity of the DRC security forces to provide stability in the Eastern part of the country. In the original transition plan, the UN and the DR Congo government agreed on various criteria to be fulfilled before the mission could withdraw. However, according to the [current drawdown schedule](#), a full withdrawal is still interlinked with the security situation on the ground. The sentiment is that the mission cannot leave the civilian population without MONUSCO's protection if the FARDC is not ready to take over that responsibility. The current security situation does not make that possible in North Kivu and Ituri and, to a certain extent, in South Kivu.

### **The security situation and actors in North Kivu.**

The clashes between the M23 and the FARDC, with support from the SAMIDRC, continue and have resulted in new waves of displacement in North Kivu. In addition, the Jihadi insurgent group, the Allied Democratic Front (ADF), has attacked local communities on several occasions in the Northeastern part of the North Kivu province. [The attacks have resulted in scores of civilians being killed and targeted.](#) In another recent incident, the insurgent group the Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO) allegedly attacked and killed 25 people in Ituri. So, while the SAMIDRC and the international focus have given priority to the advances of the M23, the Eastern DRC remains plagued by a plethora of armed, violent insurgent groups. The M23 constitute a problem

for the local population and the stability of the DRC, but it is only one of the many security challenges facing the local population on the [ground living in a sea of estimated 120 different non-government armed groups](#). For many local people, the departing MONUSCO has, despite its limitations, been the main security provider shielding them from the security void created by the absence of a functional state.

The SAMIDRC intervention force has been on the drawing board for a long time and was already mentioned as a robust option to supplement the UN forces in the Eastern DRC in 2004. (Anonymous 2, 2004) The SAMIDRC force is scheduled to replace MONUSCO and function as a robust add-on force, assisting the FARDC in its operations against the armed insurgent groups in the Eastern DRC. In its current configuration, the SAMIDRC, in theory, consist of more than 5000 troops, of which the planned South African contingent of 2900 is by far the largest. However, the SAMIDRC has yet to reach its full mandated size more than three months after the first troops arrived, and it has yet to receive the needed air and logistical assets to make it fully operational. It remains uncertain when and if SAMIDRC will reach full operational capability because of the serious underfunding, maintenance and personnel gaps experienced by especially South Africa. It was, therefore, noticeable that [former President Thabo Mbeki](#), at the margins of the recent commemorations of the Rwandan genocide in Kigali, mentioned the need to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Eastern DRC and, more importantly, that there is a need to disarm the FDLR. The statements by Mbeki came at a time when [Ramaphosa and Kagame also met bilaterally to solve the long-standing diplomatic feud at the centre of the current problems in the DRC](#).

The first months of the SAMIDRC deployment have shown that the M23 is well prepared for the South African-led forces, even more so given that the SAMIDRC force remains ill-equipped to fight and disarm the M23 without incurring heavy casualties. For South Africa, the deployment creates a range of problems given its domestic press coverage. The ANC government is under unprecedented political pressure, and [losing troops](#) because of bad political decisions is not what the ANC needs shortly before an election. A rapprochement between Kigali and Pretoria could be a key to solving the situation, but it would require the DRC government to stop its alleged alliance with the FDLR and assist in disarming this force that has been central to the conflict in the Eastern DRC since the Rwandan genocide in 1994. A second key issue here is for the DRC authorities to protect minority rights in Eastern DRC, where subsequent DRC administrations have failed to protect its citizens, including the Kinyarwanda-speaking minority.

The DRC government consequently needs to take ownership of the Congolese civil war and secure the disarmament of the FDLR, which would remove the excuse for Rwanda to be involved and support the M23. The SAMIDRC should stay as a buffer force to secure and oversee peace and security as MONUSCO withdraws.

MONUSCO and the wider international community, including South Africa, have tried for nearly 30 years to create peace, deployed a vast UN military force- more than 20.000 troops at one stage - and spent billions of US dollars on peacebuilding in the DRC. The SAMIDRC does not, in its current shape and configuration, have the military capacity to win the war by force. However, one option is to have the SAMIDRC help secure a negotiated peace deal by providing security guarantees to Rwanda and the Kinyarwanda-speaking communities. This outcome requires that the FDLR is disarmed and demobilised calling for DRC and FARDC backing and ownership. In turn, Rwanda must ensure that the M23 accepts the [Nairobi cease-fire agreement](#) and allow a political solution to gain traction. The

alternative idea of the SAMIDRC assisting the FARDC in defeating the M23 with military means remains unrealistic and costly in civilian and military casualties.

Despite the recent announcement of additional funding to get some of the SANDF's air assets operational, the SANDF, which forms the bulk of the SAMIDRC force, remains [underfunded and overburdened](#) and has long suffered from weak political leadership and a visible discrepancy between the government's expectations, and the realities on the ground. The expected UN funding for the SAMIDRC force has yet to materialise, and the question lingers: who will foot the bill for the deployed force? The DRC government is seemingly paying 30% of the cost as promised, but the Pretoria government, and therefore the DoD, still risks footing a large bill at the end of the mission, which has been the case in previous missions.

### **Conclusion**

Political pressure is mounting for the overburdened SANDF to play an increased role in [domestic security provision](#), and to provide full border protection and an ever-growing number of other domestic security duties. Brokering political solution and exercising pressure on the DRC government and Rwanda, would be a way for SADC and the Pretoria government to mitigate the dangerous military conundrum arising in the Eastern DRC. The international community and the African Union could also play a key role to encourage Rwanda and DRC to deal with the M23 and FDLR disarmament issue as primary catalysts for promoting peace in the Eastern DRC.

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Professor Thomas Mandrup is an Extra-ordinary Associate Professor with SIGLA, Stellenbosch University.

Email: [thomasm@sun.ac.za](mailto:thomasm@sun.ac.za)

