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**Reflections on South Africa, SADC and the new intervention force in the DR Congo**

**Background**

While DR Congo (DRC) is once again trying to find its footing before the scheduled national elections in December 2023, with the incumbent President Tshisekedi seeking re-election, it is also timely to take stock of the state of the security legacy that he leaves after five years in power. His recent calls for the United Nations (UN) mission, [MONUSCO](#), to start leaving in December 2023, was followed up on 22 November 2023 by an accelerated plan to close and withdraw MONUSCO. The drawdown of MONUSCO was so far tied to the capability of the DRC's army and police to provide stability, especially in the eastern part of the country. In the original transition plan, the UN and the DRC government agreed on [18 criteria](#) to fulfil before a drawdown can commence. The fast drawdown of the [UN mission in Mali](#) is a warning of what can happen if the withdrawal is done uncoordinated and left to underperforming security forces.

**The security situation and the actors in the theatre.**

The discussion of a drawdown of MONUSCO has been long underway. The force numbers are down with little more than 12 000 left and are concentrated in fewer geographical areas to project force when needed. This has been part of a strategy to transfer responsibility to the Congolese security institutions. However, it is also a consequence of international pressure from dominant international actors within the UN Security Council wishing to reduce the size and cost of the MONUSCO mission. Even amongst MONUSCO personnel, it is common to meet the argument, "Why are we here when the Congolese do not want us here"? The MONUSCO mission does still, however, constitute the main source of security provision for many people living in the Eastern DRC, who need to navigate daily between armed groups and oppressive and exploiting government forces. The recent launch of [Operation Springbok](#) to curtail the advance of M23 towards Goma is a case in point. It shows MONUSCO's pivotal role in providing security locally. In November 2022, the DRC, after becoming a

member of the East African Community (EAC) earlier in 2022, requested military assistance from the regional community. EAC [deployed a Kenyan-led regional force, the East African Community Regional Force \(EACRF\)](#) to help the Congolese fight and disarm the rebel groups, predominantly the M23, and the Islamic State-linked Allied Democratic Front (ADF) in the Eastern DRC. [The EACRF has been criticised](#) both locally and by international observers for not being effective and not delivering on the set objectives. The reason for the deployment in the first place and the subsequent critical debate about its role is related to various issues, including the struggle for influence in politics and trade, especially in the Eastern DRC and the actual experiences with the EACRF as a military force. The EACRF mandate was extended until 8 December 2023, but the DRC government has asked the force to leave and confirmed at the [EAC 22<sup>nd</sup> Ordinary meeting on 24 November](#) 2023. At the meeting, the heads of state instructed the Chiefs of Defence of the EAC and SADC to coordinate the transfer of responsibility between the two regional blocks before 8 December 2023.

A SADC intervention force was 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. [EACRC and the other SADC member states](#) signed an agreement establishing the force on Friday, 17 November 2023, and now need to implement the deployment and configuration of the force that was supposed to have been deployed several months ago.

The remaining questions are linked to the deployment timelines, the capability configuration, and financing. The mandate of the force is to support the local security forces and help defeat and disarm the armed groups in Eastern DRC, [predominantly the alleged Rwandan-supported M23](#) rebel group. The mandate is similar to the existing SADC [Force Intervention Brigade \(FIB\)](#), which was integrated into MONUSCO with a separate robust mandate and deployed for the first time in 2013 to fight the M23. The decision to integrate the FIB into MONUSCO was based on financing (UN-assessed contributions) and control. The FIB serves under the leadership of the MONUSCO Force Commander, while the new SADC force will operate independently and upon invitation from the DRC government. The force will function as a replacement for the outgoing EACRF and as a modest attempt to fill the gap arising when MONUSCO is withdrawn. The SADC force will also have a training role towards the local DRC security forces, which was also part of the EACRF-mandated tasks. It is a product of the Congolese security forces' inability to take full responsibility for security provisions in Eastern DRC. Despite significant improvements in terms of operational capacity since the early years of the transition, the security institutions in the [DRC are still widely perceived to be unprofessional and incapable of taking](#) over responsibility for the security provision of the Congolese state.

### **The South African National Defence Force and the SADC force.**

The South African government wants the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to play a key role in the new SADC force, which will be South African-led and include forces from at least Tanzania and Malawi. The government insists that the force, in terms of concept, composition and mandate, will be entirely new compared to the FIB and EACRF. It is argued that this is not a re-hatting for the FIB when it is withdrawn with the rest of the MONUSCO force, even though the bulk seemingly consists of troops from the same nations, i.e. South Africa, Tanzania and Malawi. However, for political reasons and because of the Congolese population's dislike for MONUSCO, including the FIB, there is a need to signal a significant change, something new.

The SANDF is [underfunded and overburdened](#) and has suffered from a leadership unable to successfully navigate the discrepancy between the government's expectations and the military reality on the ground. If the SANDF is going to play a lead role in the new SADC force, the question arises: Where will the forces come from, given troop commitments to several international and domestic operations? There has been an ongoing disconnect between the underfunding and capacity problems of the SANDF, being increasingly used in domestic operations, and political-level decisions to cut budgets but escalating the use of the SANDF domestically. President Ramaphosa has on several occasions promised more funding for the SANDF and recently launched the Department of Defence plan for what it terms the [Journey to Greatness](#), which is the DoD's bid to turn things around. Meanwhile, government again announced additional cuts during the 2023 mid-term budget review but plans to send the SANDF into another and possibly underfunded external deployment.

The SADC deployment announced on 17 November 2023 raises many questions. If this is indeed a new force and not a re-hatting, where must the SANDF find the troops? In terms of financing, who is going to finance operations? The new mission risks facing the same problems the SADC mission in Mozambique must confront, struggling to secure funding. If SADC cannot secure funding, South Africa and SANDF must probably secure funding from the current budget or secure international donor funding as according to the [Defence Budget Vote of 2023](#), the DoD is severely underfunded. Also, who will provide strategic lift, both within and in and out of the mission area, offer sustained helicopter transport and air support, with the SAAF finding it difficult to keep even [a few platforms operational](#)? What about logistical support and sustainability of an offensive deployment in an extremely challenging terrain against an enemy that has operated in this area for years? The risk is, at best, that the envisaged SADC force will find it difficult to reach its objectives amidst a blur of tasks and timeframes. On a positive note, the FIB managed in 2013, within a relatively short time frame, to diminish and force the M23 to disarm. Given the needed capabilities and mandates, it might achieve that again, but then it must have the needed tools.

### **Conclusion**

The DRC is stepping into a crucial new post-MONUSCO phase, and the question is what role South Africa and the SANDF will play in this new phase. According to a senior South African diplomat, South Africa cannot afford not to play a key role. This view and the general perception from the policy/governmental level starkly contrast with the operational limitations faced by the SANDF. South African politicians are likely to, once again, knowingly deploy South African soldiers into a difficult operational context without a clear mandate and capabilities enabling the force to realize its full mandate. Maybe it is time for SADC and the SANDF to allow for increased international donor support and funding to help the region address the security conundrum. The security threats endanger international peace and security as well, and therefore, also an international responsibility. The South African DoD previously had a Memorandum of Understanding with individual donor countries, allowing the SANDF to play the lead role in SADC and multilateral peace missions and where the donor would help finance the costs. One central question is whether the politicians and government are willing to take responsibility if something goes wrong this time. When the SANDF lost 17 soldiers in a dangerous and distant 2013 mission in the Central African Republic, the politicians in parliament hardly 'had the time' to debate this blunder in-depth, and a repeat of soldier losses must not be tolerated.

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