

Trump in Africa: Brokering Peace Between Congo and Rwanda?

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President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America (US) claims to have ended many wars, including the conflict between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. The widely praised “Washington Accords”, signed in December 2025, promised to transform Africa’s Great Lakes region into a “model of peace, stability, and economic opportunity”. However, fighting in eastern Congo persists, as do personal hostilities between the president of the DRC, Félix Tshisekedi, and his Rwandan counterpart, Paul Kagame. This policy brief examines whether the governments of the DRC and Rwanda are any closer to achieving peace as a result of US deal-making. It finds that while Washington’s ability to keep the warring parties at the negotiating table and to sanction violations of the peace agreement, particularly by the Rwandan side, has been welcomed by many observers, it is doubtful, given the relations between the US, the DRC and Rwanda, whether any party is truly committed to the idea of peace mediation. As a third party, Washington seems to disregard all dimensions of the conflict that do not directly concern US business interests in the DRC. For their parts, the Rwandan and Congolese sides accuse each other of engaging in the negotiations in bad faith. Bolstered by the backing of the US, Tshisekedi is likely to favour a military solution to the conflict in eastern Congo over negotiations with his opponents. Against this backdrop, the policy brief concludes that the Washington Accords offer little evidence that US deal-making is an effective peace-making tool. Rather, Washington’s current approach risks undermining the prospects of future mediation efforts in the region.

Among the many wars that Donald J. Trump claims to have ended is the decades-long conflict between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. In early December 2025, the president of the United States of America (US) hosted a signing ceremony at the newly renamed Donald J. Trump Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., which was attended by several African heads of state. The president of the DRC, Félix Tshisekedi, and his Rwandan counterpart, Paul Kagame, signed a joint declaration to reconfirm the peace agreement that had been initialled six months earlier by their foreign ministers. In addition, both put their signature to a regional cooperation framework as well as bilateral deals with the US. Those deals have become known collectively as the “Washington Accords”.¹

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¹ US Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, “Joint Declaration by the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Rwanda on the Occasion of Establishing the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity”, December 4, 2025 (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this paper were last accessed on June 18, 2026).

The peace agreement was widely welcomed by regional and international actors, including the United Nations (UN), the International Contact Group for the Great Lakes Region (ICG), and the European Union (EU). However, the way in which it was reached and its potential consequences have raised concerns among observers focusing on peace and security in the region. Kagame and Tshisekedi's frosty body language and non-interaction during the signing ceremony suggested that they were acting in public on the US president's demand for a quick agreement rather than communicating that the issues between them had been resolved. Despite both presidents emphasising their commitment to peace, their continued trading of mutual accusations has cast doubt on their stated intention to abstain from confrontational practices. Moreover, just days after the signing ceremony, the rebel group M23, supported by Rwandan forces, temporarily seized control of the strategically important Congolese town of Uvira, close to the Burundian border. Although fighting in the region had been ongoing for several months, the capture of Uvira was interpreted as a blow to the peace agreement. Observers to the conflict emphasised at the time that an "alarming disconnect has emerged between peace talks and events on the ground"² and underscored the "futility of agreements that prioritise optics".³

This policy brief asks whether US involvement has brought the warring parties any closer to peace. More specifically, it examines Washington's influence on the foreign-policy calculations of the Congolese and Rwandan governments.⁴ Foreign-policy calculations are understood here as the weighing of potential risks and expected gains from various foreign-policy choices in the context of the conflict and in relation to core interests such as territorial integrity, economic benefits, and international reputation. While this focus disregards other conflict actors and drivers (i.e., other states in the region with stakes in the eastern DRC), the relationship between the DRC and Rwanda is considered a key factor – one that has a significant impact on conflict dynamics in the region. Furthermore, the discourse around the Washington Accords sheds light on the evolution of thinking on peace-making in the region.

Conflict Resolution in Africa's Great Lakes Region

Over the past decades the Great Lakes region has experienced continuous political instability and armed conflict. Conflict analysis highlights weak state institutions and governance failure, identity politics and land disputes as the main drivers of conflict. At the same time, conflict dynamics in the region are deeply interlinked with the illicit exploitation and trading of natural resources. Owing to its complexity and long duration, some observers have characterised the conflict in the region as a "conflict without trajectory",⁵ in other words, a conflict that persists and periodically flares up.

Today's conflict between the DRC and Rwanda has deep historical roots. In particular, the civil war and genocide in Rwanda in 1994, which resulted in large-scale displacements in the region, have had an impact on the relationship between the two countries. Large num-

² Crisis Group, "The M23 Offensive: Elusive Peace in the Great Lakes", December 19, 2025.

³ Kelly E. Stone, "Deal-making trumps democratic principles in US approach to Africa", Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Africa, January 15, 2026.

⁴ The analysis draws on some 30 anonymised background discussions, which were conducted in person in Nairobi (where many regional observers are based) in February and March 2026 and remotely with respondents in Kinshasa, Goma, Kampala, Kigali, and elsewhere. It also incorporates insights from official government statements, research reports, media articles, and statements made at public events.

⁵ International expert, remote conversation, February 13, 2026.

bers of refugees, among them perpetrators of the genocide, fled across the border into what is now eastern Congo. Since then, the governments of the DRC and Rwanda have been engaged in political and, at times, military conflict, which culminated in the Congo Wars (1996-2003).⁶ Different narratives about these events continue to cause social and political tensions.⁷ Both sides cite security concerns stemming from the other country's alleged ill intentions or continued support for rebel groups considered a security threat.

The eastern DRC provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri are the conflict's centre of gravity. At least 120 armed groups are reportedly active in these areas, and some receive support from neighbouring countries.⁸ Since 2021, the Tutsi-led rebel group M23 has made territorial advances, seizing a swathe of territory in the eastern provinces along the border with Rwanda and thereby challenging the authority of the Congolese government. UN reports have confirmed that the M23 is supported by the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF). The eastern provinces are also the operational base of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR).⁹ The FDLR is a Hutu-led rebel group that Kigali accuses of harbouring perpetrators of the 1994 genocide and thus sees as posing a security threat to the country as well as to citizens identifying themselves as Tutsi in the region.

Several armed groups and local militias, including the M23, depend financially on the exploitation and taxation of mineral resources in the areas under their control. There are numerous artisanal and small-scale mining sites in eastern Congo, including those that extract gold and the "3T" minerals (tin, tungsten, and tantalum), all of which are in high demand on the global market. That demand is met by illegal economies involving the mining and smuggling of the minerals.¹⁰ Because these activities fuel violence and armed conflict, gold and the 3Ts are considered the main conflict minerals in the eastern DRC.

UN resolutions have condemned both the RDF's support for the M23 offensive in eastern Congo and the backing provided to the FDLR by the Congolese military forces. Over the decades, several initiatives and frameworks for conflict resolution and peace have been established, including by regional states and multilateral organisations such as the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), the African Union (AU), the East African Community (EAC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). A UN mission (MONUSCO) has been deployed to support the protection of civilians and contribute to stabilisation efforts.

On paper, all the ingredients exist for lasting and comprehensive peace in the region. They include ceasefire efforts, respect for the DRC's sovereignty, and the non-interference in neighbouring countries' internal affairs. And in the longer term, there are plans for, among other things, regional cooperation in exploiting natural resources and demobilising armed groups.

⁶ Center for Preventive Action, Global Conflict Tracker, "Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo", February 18, 2026.

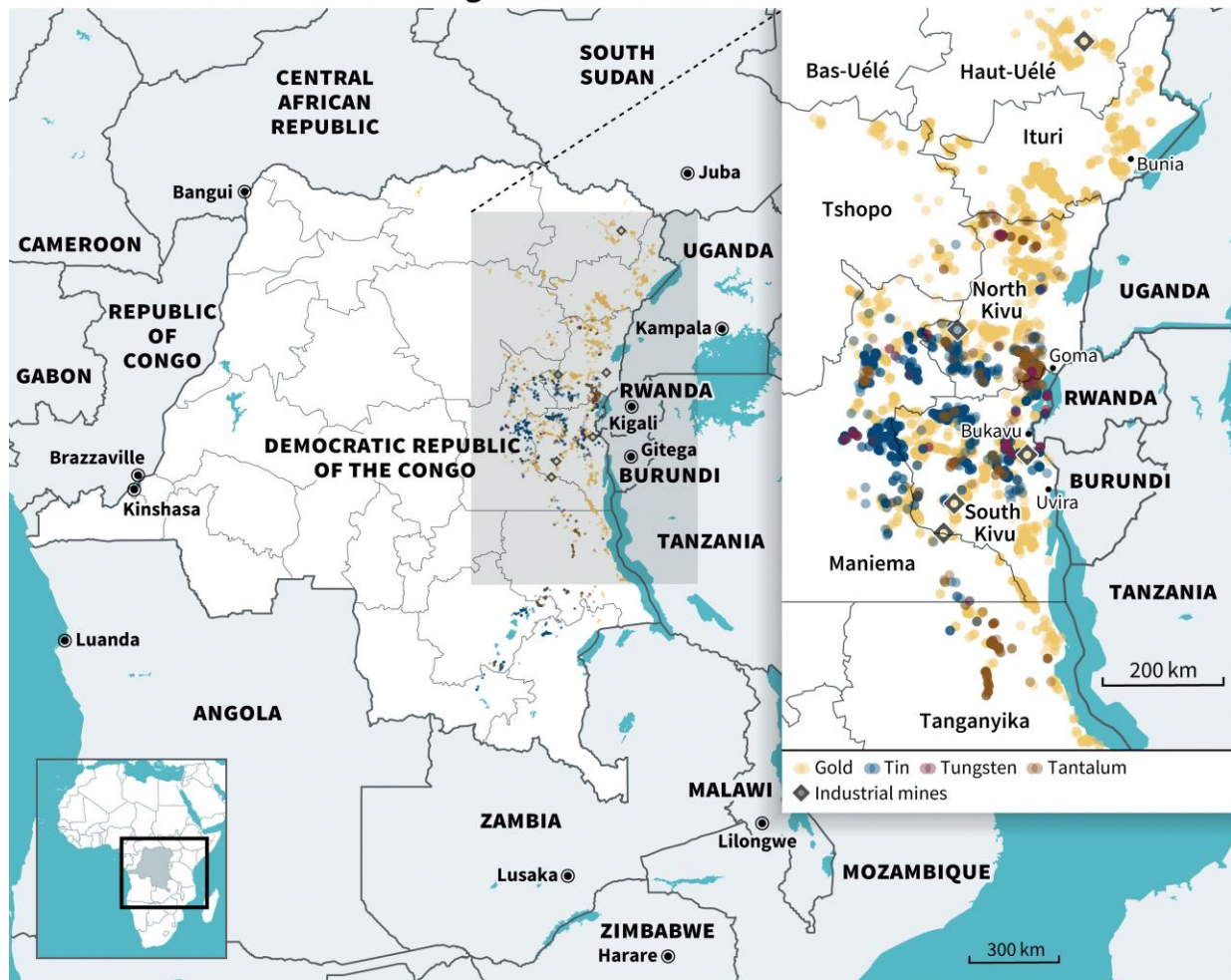
⁷ Fridah Njoki and Kizito Sabala, "Competing narratives, exclusions and perspectives on the conflict in eastern DRC and implications for conflict resolution", *African Security Review* (2026), 1-16, DOI:10.1080/10246029.2026.2671274.

⁸ Kivu Security Tracker, "The Landscape of Armed Groups in Eastern Congo: Missed Opportunities, Protracted Insecurity and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies", February 2021.

⁹ Nicolas Florquin and Claudia Seymour, "Down, but Not Out: The FDLR and the Democratic Republic of Congo", *Small Arms Survey*, January 16, 2026.

¹⁰ Clarkson Kamurai, Brad Handler, and Morgan Bazilian, "Illicit mineral supply chains fuel the DRC's M23 insurgency", Atlantic Council, April 23, 2025.

Artisanal and Small-scale Mining in Eastern DRC



Note: The map shows the main mineral produced at each site. For optimal readability, the infographic should be viewed in colour. The map is for illustrative purposes only.
Source: International Peace Information Service (IPIS) Open Data Dashboard (data collected between 2009 and 2025).
Megatrends Afrika, 2026 | © CC BY 4.0

However, there has not yet been a major breakthrough in the persistent DRC-Rwanda conflict. The heads of state continue to disagree about the significance of historical events, accuse each other of violating agreements and have strong mutual perceptions of disrespect towards the other party and dishonesty. So far, no one has been able to significantly influence the parties' foreign-policy calculations regarding the conflict. Against this backdrop, Washington stepped in as a third party to broker a peace agreement.

The Washington Accords

In early 2025, the US launched efforts to broker a peace agreement between the governments of the DRC and Rwanda. The initiative came as a surprise to many organisations and governments working on peace and security matters in the region, as few had expected the US administration to devote foreign-policy attention to conflict resolution in Africa. The initiative involved months of "quiet diplomacy"¹¹ by Massad Boulos, Trump's senior adviser for Arab and African affairs, as well as meetings in Washington D.C. hosted by US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio and, later, by President Trump. These high-level meetings – both in the region and in Washington D.C. – gave the impression that the conflict was receiving the greatest attention, not least as Boulos is a member of President Trump's inner family circle.

¹¹ Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, "Critical Minerals, Fragile Peace: The DRC-Rwanda Deal and the Cost of Ignoring Root causes", Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 25, 2025.

The Washington Accords, which were eventually signed by the Rwandan and Congolese presidents in Washington, D.C. in December 2025, comprise several agreements. First, they endorsed a peace deal between the two countries that was initialled by their foreign ministers in June 2025. The document sets out obligations for both sides: essentially, the DRC is to “neutralise” the FDLR while Rwanda is to lift its “defensive measures” and withdraw its forces from eastern Congo.¹² To these ends, a joint security coordination mechanism has been established. The accords also include a commitment by the two sides to a Regional Economic Integration Framework (REIF), which is envisaged to curb illicit economic activities related to mineral resources and to build regional energy and infrastructure in close cooperation with the US. Implementation of the security aspects of the peace agreement is a prerequisite for the implementation of the economic cooperation measures foreseen by the REIF.

In addition, Tshisekedi and Kagame concluded bilateral deals with Washington. The Congolese side signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement,¹³ which aims to increase the level of US private-sector investment in the Congolese mining sector. The agreement emphasises that the Lobito Corridor is to become an essential element of the DRC’s industrialisation and trade strategy. Furthermore, Kinshasa promised to submit a preliminary list of critical mineral and gold assets as well as unlicensed exploration areas for consideration by US investors. The DRC and the US also signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on an expanded security partnership, which has not been published. For its part, Rwanda signed a Framework for Shared Economic Prosperity with the US, which has not been published either.

Following the signing ceremony, the US State Department issued a statement to the press highlighting the conflict-resolution dimension of the Washington Accords: it claimed that the peace agreement represented an “internationally shared commitment to transforming the Great Lakes region into a model of peace, stability, and economic opportunity”.¹⁴ It also noted that the accord addressed the root causes of the conflict and fostered trust. The underlying “theory of change” – the anticipated path from conflict to peace – seems simple. As third party, the US offers the prospect of external investment in exchange for the conflict parties complying with the peace agreement. Once the two parties begin to recognise the economic advantages of compliance, so the assumption, their foreign-policy calculations towards each other will change, as cooperation proves more profitable than war.¹⁵ Observers have drawn parallels with the economic integration plans that followed World War II in Europe.¹⁶ For his part, Trump quipped during the signing ceremony that “everybody’s going to make a lot of money”, while Tshisekedi and Kagame confirmed their commitment to and sole responsibility for implementing the peace agreement.

Compared with previous peace initiatives, the Washington Accords have little to offer that is new in terms of the steps expected to be taken by the conflict parties. What is new, however, is that US economic interests have been prominently written into the deals, making the US a party with vested interests rather than merely a mediating third party. Notably, the strategic partnership with the DRC is expected to provide US companies with significant

¹² US Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, “Peace Agreement Between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Rwanda”, June 27, 2025 (accessed June 19, 2026).

¹³ US Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, “Strategic Partnership Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo”, December 4, 2025 (accessed June 19, 2026).

¹⁴ US Department of State, “Signing of the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity Between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. Media Note”, December 4, 2025.

¹⁵ Erik Kennes, “DRC National Inclusive Dialogue: Fake News? Or Not?”, Egmont Institute, March 30, 2026.

¹⁶ Yale Ford et al “DRC and Rwanda Sign US Economic Framework: Africa File, November 13, 2025”, Critical Threats, November 13, 2025.

access to Congolese minerals, thereby reducing their reliance on Chinese-controlled supply chains. Moreover, after having presided over the signing ceremony, Trump's personal reputation as peace broker is on the line. Thus, in many respects, the Washington Accords have become a yardstick for the effectiveness of US foreign policy in Africa and Trump's peace-making approach. At a minimum, Washington requires parts of the DRC to stabilise to a degree that enables US companies to do business in their areas of interest. In the eastern provinces, this hinges on the DRC and Rwandan governments implementing the agreed steps.

US Involvement: Carrot and Stick

The US government is relying on incentives and penalties to encourage the DRC and Rwanda to meet their commitments. As well as offering investment prospects to both sides (the "carrot"), US officials have announced that anyone who undermines the peace agreement will be held to account (the "stick"). So far, the stick has been used mostly against the Rwandan side, which marks a significant change in US foreign policy. While previous administrations were sympathetic to the Rwandan government, the tone has now changed. Despite US officials emphasising the responsibility borne by both sides, the practical steps taken so far have been aimed at putting pressure on Rwanda to follow through on its part of the deal, i.e., to stop supporting the M23 and withdraw its armed forces from Congolese territory.

In February 2025, the US Treasury Department imposed financial sanctions on James Kabarebe, Rwanda's minister of state for regional integration, for his alleged central role in supporting the M23.¹⁷ At a UN Security Council meeting in December, Mike Waltz, the US ambassador to the UN, accused Rwanda of "leading the region towards increased instability and war", adding that Rwanda had been closely involved in planning and carrying out the war in eastern Congo. And in early March 2026, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on senior RDF officials and the force as a whole for violating the Washington Accords and introduced visa restrictions.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Washington has expanded its security cooperation with the Congolese government. Although operational details of the MoU have not been released, news reports suggest that the Trump administration agreed to intensify intelligence sharing and lift some restrictions on the provision of military assistance and training programmes to the DRC. In recent months, US-linked private contractors have stepped up the provision of security services to the Congolese armed forces. For example, Vectus Global, a private security firm founded by Erik Prince, whom the media describe as a "Trump ally", allegedly rendered assistance to the Congolese security forces in the recapture of Uvira and in other operations against the M23.¹⁹ Public information on these activities is scarce, and their relationship to the Strategic Partnership Agreement has not been officially clarified.

Furthermore, in May 2026, the OFAC imposed sanctions on former DRC President Joseph Kabila for destabilising the Congolese government through his alleged support for the M23 and the Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), which is opposed to President Tshisekedi's rule. According to the statement issued at the time by the US Treasury, Kabila has "worked to put

¹⁷ US Department of the Treasury, "Press Release: Treasury Sanctions Rwandan Minister and Senior Militant for Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo", February 20, 2025.

¹⁸ US Department of State, "Sanctioning Rwandan Violators of the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity", March 2, 2026 (accessed June 19, 2026).

¹⁹ Jessica Donati and Clement Bonnerot, "Exclusive: Trump ally Prince sent men, drones to help Congo's army secure strategic town", Reuters, February 10, 2026.

in place a candidate opposed to the current President of the DRC with the intent to regain influence over the DRC government”.²⁰ The fact that the sanctions target an individual who did not sign the Washington Accords suggests that Washington is prepared to back the Congolese government's domestic political position. As the next section shows, the “carrots and sticks” employed by Washington have had an impact on the foreign-policy calculations of both Rwanda and the DRC.

Foreign-Policy Calculations of the Democratic Republic of Congo

The government of Félix Tshisekedi has engaged in the Washington process under political strain. It has been plagued by accusations of electoral irregularities, weak governance, and corruption scandals.²¹ The state security forces are structurally dysfunctional,²² while relying heavily on their associated militias as well as foreign contractors to carry out military operations targeting the M23. Against this backdrop, the M23's military advances in the eastern provinces have been a major concern for the Congolese government, as they undermine its ability to protect the country's territorial sovereignty in the eyes of the Congolese population. Meanwhile, the M23 is taking steps to govern the eastern provinces as an autonomous region and has repeatedly declared its intentions to advance towards the capital, Kinshasa.

For their part, Congolese government officials maintain that the main security concern in the country is the M23 along with the presence of Rwandan troops, who provide support to the rebel group. Members of the Congolese government have signed several lobbying contracts²³ to seek to persuade members of the Trump administration and Congress to “reinforce US support for the DRC against Rwandan aggression and promote a US-DRC partnership in mineral mining”.²⁴ It is notable that Congolese officials originally sought security support from Washington in exchange for preferential access to the country's minerals, not peace mediation. The resulting strategic partnership with the US appears to be an “all-in” bargain. Many observers regard the deal as significantly reducing the DRC's sovereignty over Congolese mining, as it grants Washington a say in the governance and oversight of that sector, which some critics consider unconstitutional. For its part, the government has been telling the domestic population that the US is the only actor that can help the DRC in its current security predicament.

Several observers judge the US-DRC economic partnership to be the only part of the Washington Accords in which there is any progress being made. In early February 2026, DRC officials provided the US side with the promised list of state-owned assets (value undisclosed), to which US companies will have the right of first look. According to US State Department officials, Washington is currently soliciting private-sector feedback on the listed assets. Press statements indicate that there are ongoing talks with US-backed investment firms and consortiums. News reports have cited two senior Congolese officials suggesting that the list includes Kisenge's manganese, gold, and cassiterite licences,

²⁰ US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Former Democratic Republic of the Congo President for Ties to Armed Conflict”, April 30, 2026 (accessed June 29, 2026).

²¹ Erik Kennes, “DRC National Inclusive Dialogue”, 4 (see note 15).

²² Stanis Bujakera Tshiamala, “DRC army in crisis: Leaked report reveals deep disfunction”, *The Africa Report*, April 30, 2026.

²³ Julian Pecquet and Romain Gras, “Washington gets ‘Congo fatigue’ as DRC's political dysfunction threatens minerals deal”, *The Africa Report*, March 13, 2025.

²⁴ US Department of Justice, “Exhibit A to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as amended”, December 3, 2025 (accessed June 29, 2026), 7.

Gecamines' Mutoshi copper-cobalt project and germanium-processing venture, Sokimo's four gold permits, Cominiere's lithium licences, and Sakima's coltan, gold, and wolframite assets. Several news outlets reported that the list also includes exploration rights around the Rubaya coltan mines, which are located in M23-controlled territory in North Kivu and are a major source of funding for the rebel group. As one respondent characterised the Congolese government's calculation: "You can dig there, but you must [first] manage to get there."²⁵ The proposed investment in M23-controlled territory shows that there is a clear link between the selected assets and the government's plans to address its security concerns with US backing. Since Kinshasa, as a key contributor to US plans to build a strategic stockpile of critical minerals, is making itself strategically important for the national security interest of the US, "alignment with Washington becomes a strategy for regime survival".²⁶ Some respondents speculated that Tshisekedi could expect the US to back any future attempts to postpone the national elections or to remove presidential term limits.

In the short-term, Kinshasa's calculations seem to pay off. US sanctions against Rwanda have given the impression that the government is on the right track and can proceed with its military operations in eastern Congo. At the same time, the Congolese government has welcomed the US sanctions against Kabila, which suggest that Washington backs the domestic agenda of the Tshisekedi government. However, by relying heavily on US support in the security sector – a sensitive domain of state authority – the government has left itself at the whim of the Trump administration and the latter's interest-driven agenda. Observers have noted that US officials have had the upper hand in talks with the DRC side, with Congolese officials folding under pressure and accepting suboptimal terms.²⁷ This was evident from Kinshasa's decision to meet Washington's request that the DRC accept third-country deportees from the US and Afghans for whom US resettlement programmes have been terminated. Media reports of public protests in the Congolese capital against that decision suggest that, in the longer run, Tshisekedi's rule could be subject to greater controversy if Kinshasa continues to bow to US requests in exchange for ongoing support.

Foreign-Policy Calculations of Rwanda

While a degree of consensus exists among observers regarding the foreign-policy calculations of the Congolese government, opinions are more mixed about Rwanda's foreign-policy environment. Observers emphasise that the interests driving the "opaque regime"²⁸ in Kigali are difficult to ascertain. The country has systematically sought to establish itself as a constructive regional actor and as a responsible contributor to UN peacekeeping.²⁹ At the same time, the Rwandan government has been described as adept at using military diplomacy to promote the "brand Rwanda" across the continent and elsewhere.³⁰ And, like Kinshasa, it has promoted its positions through personal contacts and lobbying firms in Washington D.C. However, its military involvement in the DRC has polarised international and regional opinion of the country.

²⁵ Regional expert, personal conversation in Nairobi, February 28, 2026.

²⁶ Jacques Mukena and Kristof Titeca, "How Trump's diplomacy is shaping the war in the eastern Congo", *Responsible Statecraft*, May 4, 2026.

²⁷ Jacques Mukena and Kristof Titeca, "Trump's diplomacy" (see note 26).

²⁸ Jason K. Stearns and Kristof Titeca, "Rwanda's Attack on Congo Could Plunge Africa into War", *Foreign Policy*, February 28, 2025.

²⁹ David E. Kiuwua, "Rwanda's image abroad: how western countries are beginning to turn their backs", *The Conversation*, April 8, 2025.

³⁰ Paul S. Handy, "Rwanda: a 'smart power' without a regional peace strategy", *ISS Africa*, January 27, 2026.

Research suggests that there are three widely shared perceptions among the Rwandan elite: a sense of abandonment by the international community, the need for self-reliance, and what is seen as the government's responsibility for the safety of people who identify as Rwandan.³¹ These perceptions are reflected in Rwanda's foreign-policy positions regarding its neighbours. Since the 1994 genocide, the government under Paul Kagame has prioritised the deterrence of alleged security threats both to Rwanda and to people living in the region who identify themselves as being of Rwandan origin. This includes communities in the DRC.

Government statements suggest that the security situation in eastern Congo is of particular concern to Kigali. The Rwandan government maintains that perpetrators of the genocide – in particular, the FDLR – remain active in the region.³² Kigali has declared that the Congolese security forces are neither willing nor able to remove the security threat and alleges that the Congolese military is harbouring the rebel group and collaborating with it in the context of military operations against the M23. Furthermore, Kagame has declared the border with Rwanda to have become more secure since the AFC and the M23 have been present in eastern Congo, arguing that “it is a better situation for us as far as the security is concerned”.³³ Although the FDLR has reportedly lost strength, the UN still considers it a relevant military actor in eastern Congo.

While Kigali's official positions are sharply focused on defending against a persistent security threat, observers have highlighted the importance of economic ties between Rwanda and eastern Congo. Rwanda is seeking to establish itself as a regional mineral-processing hub. UN reports suggest that minerals mined in M23-controlled territory are smuggled into Rwanda, mixed with Rwandan production, and then exported. These practices appear to have increased during 2025, when the M23 captured additional territories. Opinions differ – including among experts – on the extent to which Kigali's foreign-policy calculations are influenced by the benefits of the illicit mining and trading of minerals from eastern Congo. Some claim that Kigali's security concerns are merely a pretext. It is also difficult to ascertain the extent to which the economic incentives offered by the US have had an impact on Rwanda's foreign-policy calculations, as the terms of Rwanda's Framework for Shared Economic Prosperity with the US are not a matter of public record. However, it is widely thought that the agreement offers far less potential for US investment than the US-DRC partnership, and this has led many observers to conclude that Kigali went along with the Washington process so that it would not damage its international reputation by opposing an initiative promoting peace. Some respondents speculated that Kagame does not believe that the Congolese side will make any real progress in “neutralising” the FDLR – something that would enable Kigali to justify its continued presence in the eastern DRC.

Given the US sanctions against Rwandan senior officials and the army, it seems that Kigali has been dealt the worse hand so far. Through diplomatic backing, the US has tipped the scales in the balance of power in favour of the Congolese government. The army plays an important role in the Rwandan economy, including in the extractive and industrial sectors, and the sanctions could not only have a negative impact on military cooperation agreements and procurement but also cause lasting reputational damage to the institution. Accordingly, Kigali has rejected the sanctions as one-sided. Kagame has described them as insults, saying they are “blaming the victim and praising the perpetrator”. If the country's economic growth prospects were to be noticeably damaged by the sanctions, the Rwandan

³¹ Jonathan R. Beloff, *Foreign Policy in Post-Genocide Rwanda: Elite Perceptions of Global Engagement*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2021).

³² Embassy of Rwanda in Washington D.C., “Statement for the Record. H.E. Ambassador Mathilde Mukantabana, Ambassador of the Republic of Rwanda to the United States of America”, *Republic of Rwanda*, January 22, 2026.

³³ François Soudan, “Paul Kagame: US sanctions are ‘insults hurled at Rwanda’”, *The Africa Report*, April 3, 2026.

president would face problems domestically. So far, he has remained tight-lipped about how his government will respond. The issue is not discussed in public, but Kagame has indicated that Kigali is willing to accept the financial and reputational costs of Rwanda's presence in the eastern DRC.

Discussion of Findings: Brokering Peace or Fuelling Conflict?

The Washington Accords have received mixed reactions regarding US involvement and the future of conflict mediation in the region. Some respondents saw merit in Washington's ability to bring the conflict parties to the negotiating table; according to them, any step that kept negotiations between the DRC and Rwandan governments alive was positive, regardless of the means used to secure their participation. Indeed, many respondents regard the prospect of US investment as having been a strong incentive for the Congolese and Rwandan sides to participate in the Washington process. Amid all the high-level attention in Washington, D.C., both sides appeared eager to be seen as willing to cooperate with the US and engage constructively in conflict resolution efforts. This was interpreted by some respondents as evidence that the US approach to peace-making between the two parties is working.

What is more, the US sanctions against Rwanda were viewed as a possible turning point in the conflict. Because of Kigali's controversial role in the eastern DRC, experts have been calling on donors to suspend aid disbursements to Rwanda.³⁴ As one respondent put it: "Since 2021, we are the closest to Rwanda ending its support for the M23, which is a good thing."³⁵ In the past, international pressure prompted Rwanda to recalculate and temporarily halt its support for the M23.

If No Genuine "Theory of Change" is at Play in the Peace Process, It Cannot Be Proved Right

However, doubts remained among respondents about whether US engagement has led to any real change in the relationship between the DRC and Rwanda. While the parties continue to sit at the negotiating table, they are sticking to their red lines and show no sign of greater willingness to compromise. In what is a climate of distrust, neither side seems prepared to take the first step – or, for that matter, any step – towards fulfilling their commitments. Instead, the two parties continue to accuse each other of never having intended to comply with the peace agreement in the first place and of violating its terms.³⁶ In its December 2025 report, the UN Group of Experts on the DRC found that both sides had engaged in the peace process while simultaneously pursuing mobilisation and offensive operations, thereby violating the ceasefire agreement. For example, since the beginning of this year, fighting in South Kivu has reportedly intensified and shifted to more isolated but strategically important areas.

Against this backdrop, the "theory of change" promoted by the Trump administration has so far not delivered on its promise of peace. Instead, the Washington Accords risk yet

³⁴ Jason K. Stearns, "Rwanda's troublemaking in DRC would be easy to stop", *Financial Times*, January 26, 2025.

³⁵ International expert, personal conversation in Nairobi, March 5, 2026.

³⁶ Farouk Chothia, "Trump's 'historic' peace deal for DR Congo shattered after rebels seize key city", BBC, December 13, 2025.

another negative experience of interaction being added to the already poor track record of attempted rapprochement between the two governments. Worse still, it is likely that Tshisekedi – emboldened by the US sanctions – will see no further need for dialogue with his adversaries.³⁷ The perceived US bias towards the Congolese side, on the other hand, gives Rwanda reason to believe that its interests are not being taken into account at the negotiations. Instead of the warring parties inching closer to peace, these developments could lead to deteriorating conditions for future mediation efforts.

Moreover, when considering the relations between the US, the DRC, and Rwanda, the question inevitably arises about whether any side was truly committed to the idea of peace mediation in the first place. The Congolese government approached the US with a request for security support, not peace mediation. Although Trump’s desire for peace publicity led to high-level events in Washington, D.C., few observers, if any, doubt that Washington’s main motivation for becoming involved in the conflict is to secure US access to the region’s critical minerals. As one respondent put it: “The US government doesn't really care whether there is peace or not. The only thing that matters is the bilateral deal with the Congo. Everything else is just window dressing.”³⁸ From this perspective, any changes to the region’s conflict dynamics relating to Washington’s involvement will do little to prove the effectiveness of US deal-making as a tool for peace-making.

US Investment Risks Injecting Additional Resources into the Existing Conflict Economy

Finally, another cause for concern is the consequences of Washington and US government-backed companies becoming parties with vested interests in the conflict in eastern Congo. So far, Washington seems to be disregarding all dimensions of the conflict that do not relate directly to US business interest in the region’s mining industries. While, under the Washington Accords, some economic activities can be carried out in areas where the security situation is more stable, the Congolese government appears to expect its counterparts in Washington to contribute to paving the way for a return to rebel-controlled territory in the eastern provinces, where an illicit conflict economy involving armed groups and local militias has taken root in the absence of effective governance institutions. Military and economic elites on either side benefit from the extraction, taxation, and cross-border smuggling of minerals. These individuals and networks are not parties to the peace agreement and do not feel bound by its terms. In such an environment, the consequences of Trump’s comment that “everybody’s going to make a lot of money” are largely unpredictable.

Because there appears to have been little conflict analysis informing Washington’s initiative, the risk exists that US involvement will add another layer of external resources and assets to today’s conflict economy rather than stabilising the security situation to such a degree that enables US companies to engage in economic activity on the ground.

Outlook and Recommendations

Few observers would currently venture to make any firm predictions about the future of peace and conflict in the Great Lakes region. Amid the ongoing ceasefire violations, some believe that the ceasefire agreement will be dissolved within the next few months.³⁹ Others

³⁷ Regional expert, personal conversation in Nairobi, February 28, 2026.

³⁸ International expert, remote conversation, April 11, 2026.

expect the status quo to continue. Some hope is offered by the assumption that while many actors benefit from illicit practices and the ungoverned status of the eastern DRC, few would profit from regional escalation or outright war. However, there are many uncertainties. The impact of US sanctions on Rwanda's military presence in eastern Congo remains unclear. Similarly, there is no clarity about to what extent the M23 will risk interfering with US economic interests. Recent media reports suggest that the rebel group is seeking its own channel of communication with Washington to negotiate about the minerals and extraction sites under its control.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, on the domestic political front, Tshisekedi's plans to postpone the national elections and remove presidential term limits pose a major challenge for those organisations and governments that collaborate with the Congolese government on peace and security issues.

Because of all these uncertainties, international actors seeking to work in and with the Great Lakes region should examine the potential longer-term effects of US involvement in the DRC and how they interact with the broader political and security dynamics of the region as a whole. As international attention on this resource-rich region increases, its evolving political economy of peace and conflict should become the subject of closer examination. Although there seems to have been little movement over the past decades regarding the conflict in eastern Congo, the global value chains linked to the region's conflict economy have changed significantly during this period.⁴¹ These dynamics need to be taken into account. Joint analysis and anticipation exercises examining the changes could be an important starting point for organisations and governments that want to continue working in the region through multilateral channels.

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³⁹ Sarah Ambrose, "Drone Warfare and Violence Against Civilians Escalate Ongoing Crisis in DRC", Bloomsbury Intelligence and Security Institute, April 13, 2026.

⁴⁰ *The Economist*, "A Congolese militia wants to sell critical minerals to Donald Trump", May 10, 2026.

⁴¹ See, for example, Global Witness, "Who buys Rwanda's smuggled coltan? The global journey of conflict coltan from DRC to the world's electronics", June 18, 2026 (accessed June 28, 2026).

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