

Enemies to Allies: The Dynamics of Rwanda-Congo Military, Economic and Diplomatic Relations

by

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Since 1994, the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been beset by prolonged instability and violence. Triggered by the events in neighbouring Rwanda – specifically, the war that was launched in 1990 in the north which ended with the genocide in 1994 – eastern Congo’s provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu have suffered greatly at the hands of armed forces, be they regional armies, rebel surrogates, or ethnic militias. From 1996 onwards, the bilateral relationship between the Rwandese and Congolese governments has played a critical role in shaping the situation in eastern Congo. After facilitating the installation of a friendly regime in Congo, Rwanda and Congo soon broke ties, creating a bitter and bloody enmity between the two countries that would endure for the next 10 years, marked by military confrontations, the pillaging of the Congo’s natural resources, and the deaths of over 6 million people. In an unexpected twist in regional dynamics, in January 2009, Rwanda and Congo suddenly normalized their relations, becoming ostensible allies and jointly participating in military operations on Congolese soil, only weeks after being indirectly at war through the use of proxy rebels. This development was particularly puzzling, considering that in international relations friendly countries can often abruptly become enemies and go to war. The inverse – unfriendly countries suddenly becoming allies – typically takes several years. This paper analyzes the events that very quickly turned these enemies into partners and the implications for the Great Lakes region of Africa, as well as an overview of Rwanda-Congo bilateral relations since 1996.

Following the cataclysm of the Rwandese genocide, an estimated 2 million Rwandese Hutu fled westward into neighbouring Congo (then named Zaire) as the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Force (RPF) rebels swept into the capital, Kigali. Among the fleeing refugees were perpetrators of the genocide, including much of the Rwandese army and its militias, which were given safe haven and support by Zaire’s head of state, Mobutu Sese Seko, souring relations between the new RPF government in Rwanda and the old regime in Zaire.

In 1996, Rwanda launched its first of many subsequent invasions of eastern Zaire/Congo, under the guise of a local rebellion, using the pretext that the presence of the Hutu forces directly across the border was an existential threat to Kigali's post-genocide regime. With support from Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe and other regional powers, Rwanda overthrew Mobutu and replaced him with a sympathetic puppet, Laurent Kabila in 1997.¹ Within a year, Kabila had distanced himself from his former regional backers, firing his Rwandese Army Chief of Staff² and ordering all Rwandese troops out of the Congo.

In August 1998, Rwanda along with Uganda launched a second invasion, again using the façade of local rebels and Congolese army mutineers. This second and wider war would engulf most of the major countries of the regime, including the military participation of Angola, Namibia, Chad, Sudan and Zimbabwe to defend the nascent Congolese regime, with Burundi joining the invaders.³ The regional conflict would soon be known as 'Africa's World War,' characterized by the "systematic and systemic exploitation" of the Congo's natural resources by all parties, but particularly Rwanda and Uganda,⁴ hundreds of thousands of women, girls, men and boys brutally raped, and the deaths of millions of civilians – the highest war-related death-toll since World War II.⁵

Relations between Rwanda and the Congo reached an all-time low. The two countries were directly and indirectly at war, with Rwanda using local rebel proxies to fight some of its battles, while Congo armed, trained and supported the Hutu *genocidaires*, who, for simplicity, can be grouped into the FDLR rebels.⁶ Hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of cash and minerals would be exploited by Rwandese troops and its rebels, and used to enrich Rwandese businessmen and the state; without exaggerating, Paul Kagame, the head of the RPF and current president of Rwanda, described the conflict as a "self-financing war."⁷ Finally, in 2002, Rwanda agreed to pull its army out of the Congo, raising hopes that regional stability, peace and development would be restored. Sadly, this euphoria would be short-lived, as the provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu would continue to be racked by violence at the hands of roaming armed groups supported by Congo, Rwanda, and the sale of the Congo's abundant minerals. While Rwanda would briefly re-invade the Congo in 2004, relations between the two countries after 2002 could best be classified as a proxy war, a continuation of Rwanda and the Congo's politico-military strategy of using rebel and militia surrogates rather than directly pitting their armed forces against each other.

As the suffering and poverty in North and South Kivu continued for the following several years – with an estimated 45,000 people *still* dying every month from war-related disease and malnutrition⁸ – the crisis would peak in the fall of 2008. A Rwanda-backed Tutsi rebel force known as the CNDP⁹ routed the Congolese army on several fronts as it expanded its fiefdom in North Kivu. With Kabila's successor at the helm – his son, Joseph Kabila – the Congolese army used the FDLR *genocidaires* and Mai-Mai militias to attack the CNDP, while Rwanda secretly sent troops, including child soldiers, and fired on Congolese army positions from tanks inside Rwanda to bolster the CNDP's advances.¹⁰

In January 2009, Rwanda directly sent troops into Congo once again. What distinguishes this most recent deployment, however, is that the Congolese army *invited* Rwandese forces into Congo. In a complete reversal of their recent bilateral relations, Rwanda and Congo, to the surprise of many, were suddenly allies, only weeks after being indirectly at war. Within days, the CNDP's leader was double-crossed and arrested by Rwandese forces, and the Congolese army turned on the FDLR. For a few weeks, Rwandese and Congolese soldiers and commanders fought side-by-side against the FDLR in North and South Kivu,¹¹ a particularly injurious situation given the years of suffering endured by the people of the Kivus during Rwanda's occupation and destabilization. While Rwanda has since officially pulled its forces out, the Congo continues to chase the FDLR, and Rwanda-Congo relations are beginning to normalize, an exchange of ambassadors included.¹²

In the region, as in elsewhere, friendly countries have seen their bilateral relationship collapse leading to war in a matter of weeks or even days. In fact, this happened between Rwanda and Congo in 1998, which led to Africa's World War. This had also occurred with Rwanda and Uganda. Their current presidents fought alongside as rebels against President Obote's regime in Uganda in the 1980s, and Uganda helped Kagame's RPF come into power in Rwanda in 1994. During the war in the Congo, however, competition for control over the diamond-trading city of Kisangani led to bloody battles between Ugandan and Rwandese troops several times between 1999 and 2000, negatively affecting their bilateral relations for several years.¹³ In the Horn of Africa, the presidents of Ethiopia and Eritrea fought together to defeat Mengistu's military regime of the Derg in Ethiopia in the 1980s. A few years after taking power in Ethiopia and creating Eritrea, the two countries went to war in the late 1990s for unclear reasons.¹⁴

The potential reasons for Rwanda and Congo's exceedingly rapid rapprochement, however, are more clear. As the proxy war in North and South Kivu reached its brutal apogee in late 2008, the United Nations Group of Experts on the Congo completed their research findings on the conflict. The results were deeply embarrassing for both countries, as the research team documented what had long been suspected.

Namely, it found evidence that Rwanda was destabilizing eastern Congo through the CNDP rebels, and that the Congo was supporting the FDLR.¹⁵ Rwanda's international credibility was badly shaken – a government that had enjoyed significant support from western powers since the RPF had taken power in 1994 and been heralded as a model of economic revival. One result was that Sweden and the Netherlands cut their foreign aid to Rwanda, and its relations with other supporting powers suffered.¹⁶ Rwanda and the Congo realized that they could either keep the proxy war going – with all of its opportunities for the Rwandese and Congolese armies to enrich themselves by exploiting the Kivus' minerals – or agree to work jointly to eliminate the CNDP and FDLR.

Sadly, the end of the proxy war and the new Rwanda-Congo alliance has not ended conflict in North and South Kivu. While the CNDP's chief, Laurent Nkunda, was arrested, a portion of the rebel rank and file were integrated into the army, where they have committed countless atrocities against civilians in their new Congolese army uniforms.¹⁷ The FDLR, however, have refused to be integrated or lay down their arms. Fighting between the Congolese army and the FDLR has led to the deaths of thousands, countless rapes, and the displacement of nearly one million people.

While peace continues to elude eastern Congo, tensions in the Great Lakes region have somewhat declined. The possibility of a return to a regional conflict, as during Africa's World War, came startlingly close in late 2008, when the Congo's government reportedly asked Angola and Zimbabwe for military assistance to help fight the CNDP.¹⁸ Had they deployed troops into the Kivus, Rwanda would likely have sent its army into eastern Congo to assist the CNDP, which could have triggered other regional players to join in to defend or fight the Congolese government.

It remains to be seen, however, how long Rwanda and Congo can maintain their positive bilateral relations. Given how quickly friendly countries can go to war against each other, as between Rwanda and the Congo in 1998, it would not be surprising if their new found alliance crumbled in the coming months or years. The international community can play an important role here by helping to consolidate the gains made thus far, to support greater military, economic and diplomatic cooperation, and to act quickly when relations between the two countries appear to threaten the resurgence of war.

Notes

¹ Kevin C. Dunn. "A Survival Guide to Kinshasa: Lessons of the Father, Passed Down to the Son." The African Stakes of the Congo War. Ed. John F. Clark. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002: 55-57; Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja. The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History. London: Zed Books, 2002: 227.

² "Commander James" Kabarebe, who would become Rwanda's Army Chief of Staff soon after, and is currently Rwanda's Chief of Defense Staff. "Key Figures on U.N. List." BBC. 21 October 2002. Available from <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2346707.stm>>.

³ Mwesiga Baregu. "Congo in the Great Lakes Conflict." Security Dynamics in Africa's Great Lakes Region. Ed. Gilbert M. Khadiagala. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2006: 63; Michael Nest et al. The Democratic Republic of Congo: Economic Dimensions of War and Peace. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2006: 26; Nzongola-Ntalaja. The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History: 227.

⁴ United Nations Security Council. "Report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo." United Nations. 16 April 2001. Available from <<http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/drcongo.htm>>.

⁵ Benjamin Coghlan et al. "Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: An Ongoing Crisis." International Rescue Committee. 2008. Available from <http://www.theirc.org/resources/2007/2006-7_congomortalitysurvey.pdf>.

⁶ *Forces Democratiques de Liberation du Rwanda*.

⁷ United Nations Security Council. "Report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo." United Nations. 16 April 2001. Available from <<http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/drcongo.htm>>; Fabienne Hara. "Hollow peace hopes in shattered Congo." Observer Online. 7 July 2002. Available from: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/central-africa/dr-congo/hara-hollow-peace-hopes-in-shattered-congo.aspx>

⁸ Benjamin Coghlan et al. "Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: An Ongoing Crisis." International Rescue Committee. 2008. Available from <http://www.theirc.org/resources/2007/2006-7_congomortalitysurvey.pdf>.

⁹ *Congres National pour la Défense du Peuple*.

¹⁰ Final report of the Group of Experts on the DRC submitted in accordance with paragraph 18(d) of Security Council resolution 1807 (2008). December, 2008.

¹¹ "Rwanda troops withdraw from Congo." BBC News. February 25, 2009. Available from: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7909897.stm>>.

¹² "New DRC Ambassador Presents Copies of Credentials." Rwanda's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. December 4, 2009. Available from: <<http://www.minaffet.gov.rw/content/view/261/31/lang,english/>>.

¹³ "Rwandan, Ugandan peace talks marred." BBC News. November 6, 2001. Available from: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1640522.stm>>.

¹⁴ "Ethiopia / Eritrea War." Global Security. Available from: <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/eritrea.htm>>.

¹⁵ Final report of the Group of Experts on the DRC submitted in accordance with paragraph 18(d) of Security Council resolution 1807 (2008). December, 2008.

¹⁶ "Yesterday a victim, today an oppressor; how aid funds war in Congo." The Times Online. April 7, 2009. Available from: <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article6047744.ece>>.

¹⁷ "Congolese Army unites lose UN aid." The Washington Post. November 3, 2009.

¹⁸ "Angolan troops 'reinforcing Congo army against rebels.'" The Guardian. November 7, 2008.

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