

Uganda's Chess Game in Eastern DRC: With or Without M23?

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Uganda has various economic, political and security interests in Eastern DRC. The latter is for example a vital export market for Ugandan products, and an important source of gold, Uganda's most important export product. In this situation, a careful tactical game is played, in which Kampala seeks to protect these interests in Eastern DRC – for example from Kigali. This does not only involve a clear engagement with Kinshasa, but to a lesser extent also with M23. This is particularly the case because M23 is expanding (and keeping) its territory; creating an incentive for regional actors to engage with them.

Much has been discussed about Rwanda's involvement in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) - particularly through its support of M23, which has been extensively documented. But what about Uganda? In the previous incarnation of M23 (in 2012-2013), the Ugandan support to the group was for example documented by the UN Group of Experts, which [reported](#) how the latter supported the group through "direct troop reinforcements in Congolese territory, weapons deliveries, technical assistance, joint planning, political advice and facilitation of external relations". After M23's defeat in 2013, key-M23 actors were based in Uganda, where they lived with their families. Also after the M23 fighters [left the country in 2017](#) to set up base in Eastern DRC, many families remained in Uganda.

Uganda was involved in a number of initiatives to end the current M23 crisis: it contributed troops to [the East African Community Regional Force](#), which operated from

late 2022 to late 2023 in Eastern DRC. President Museveni has consistently advocated for talks between the group and Kinshasa. At the same time, there have been [protests](#) in Eastern DRC against the Ugandan presence, with both civil society and high-level politicians accusing Uganda of 'hypocrisy'. Congolese social media has been [awash](#) with accusations of large-scale Ugandan troop presence in the DRC; something which Uganda [firmly denied](#).

In light of all this, little is known about Uganda's relation with M23. This article aims to unpack this question. It does so in two parts: it first looks at the Uganda's interests in Eastern DRC, and then specifically talks about Uganda's relation with M23. In doing so, the paper shows how Uganda has major economic, security and political interests in Eastern DRC, which it tries to protect in various ways. Concretely, Kampala walks a tightrope between on the one hand making sure its relations with Kinshasa are maintained, but on the other hand also with M23. All of this shows (i) the profoundly regional and multilayered functioning of M23, something which needs to be taken into account when understanding the rebel group; as well as (ii) the multilayered and ambiguous role of Uganda in conflict-dynamics in the wider region.

WHAT ARE UGANDA'S INTERESTS IN DRC? ECONOMICS, SECURITY AND POLITICS – ALL OF WHICH ARE INTERTWINED

Eastern DRC is important for Uganda in a number of ways: as an important market for Ugandan products, and to make sure that no negative elements attack Ugandan oil installations – all of which are deemed crucial for Uganda's political stability.

Over the last years, there have been a range of initiatives to expand the trade between Uganda and the DRC – such as a 2018 Memorandum of understanding to enhance cross-border trade, or Uganda's decision to co-finance road infrastructure in Eastern DRC. President Museveni legitimated the latter by [saying that](#) "We need to trade with Congo. It will enable us to get more resources to deal with the roads that we have not been able to do." The 2022 formal Admission of the DRC to the East African Community (EAC) further accelerated this process. The 2024 trade figures from the Bank of Uganda show how the DRC is the largest regional export market for Uganda – trading with a surplus of USD 59.67 million in January 2024, and 56.52 million in February 2024. All of this shows the large economic importance of the trade with DR Congo, which has become an important market for Ugandan industries.

Gold is a central part of this trade: it's a public secret – and much [documented](#) – that much Congolese gold is traded informally to Uganda, where the Congolese gold becomes Ugandan. As the country's biggest export product, gold is a particularly important commodity for Uganda's economy. The [last available data](#), for the financial year of 2023, shows how they bring in a revenue of 2.7 billion USD, or 37 percent of all export earnings. This has particularly increased over the last few years.¹ This is much more than Rwanda's official figures: in Rwanda, the last available official data show that the country exported [\\$654m](#) worth of gold. In comparison, Uganda exported [1.92 billion USD](#) in the same year.²

Uganda also has security interests in Eastern DRC: the region is seen as a hotbed of insecurity, posing a threat to the Uganda territory. This is particularly the case for the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), based in Eastern DRC, and which in the last years (re)started a number of attacks on Uganda territory – such as the attack on a school in Western Uganda in June 2023, in which [at least 41 were killed](#). The group is however particularly seen as a threat to the oil installations in Western Uganda, which are close to the Ugandan border. The launch of Operation Shujaa – a joint operation between the Ugandan and Congolese armed forces – in November 2021 has to [be seen in the](#)

[above perspective\(s\)](#): the military operation also has a range of economic objectives. Concretely, road works [are explicitly](#) part of the [military operation](#), which the latter intends to protect. That does not mean that military objectives are absent from operation: the Congolese population in the UPDF's areas of operation are generally positive about the latter's presence, as they are perceived to increase the security in these areas.

Lastly, all of the above also has important political significance, particularly in order to provide economic stability to Uganda – which is much needed for the Museveni regime. Concretely, President Museveni has been in power for nearly 40 years (since 1986), and his political legitimacy has been strongly reduced. His main claim to legitimacy has always been [the 'liberation argument'](#), i.e. that he brought peace to a country ravaged by decades of civil war. The largest part of the population has been born under his rule – almost half of the current population is under 15 years. The 'liberation argument' has [little value to these 'Museveni babies'](#): they want jobs and services; which are largely absent or inaccessible. Economic stability is therefore crucial to the Museveni government: its major fear is an Arab spring scenario, in which youth start to protest, something which could be triggered by an economic downturn. A taster of this was offered by the [2011 'walk to work' protests](#), which happened in the context of spiraling food prices.

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF M23 IN THE CONTEXT OF FLUCTUATING REGIONAL RELATIONS

The next sections unpack how Uganda's relation with Eastern DRC, as well as M23, have to be seen along the same lines, in which economic, security and political interests are intertwined. In order to do so, it's important to understand the re-emergence of M23 both in terms of its relationship with the Congolese government and its broader regional context. As with regards to the former, [confidential negotiations](#) between Kinshasa and an M23 delegation started in September 2020, but stalled fourteen months later – a situation in which they felt they had little other option than to take up arms. Second, and more directly relevant to this piece; the group's re-emergence

was seen as an outcome of increasing regional tensions, in [which Rwanda felt sidelined](#): Rwanda had expressed its disdain that Uganda and Burundi had been able to conduct military operations in the DRC. In early 2021, DRC concluded bilateral military cooperation agreements with Burundi and Uganda. This was not the case for Rwanda. Given the history of hostile relations between the DRC and Rwanda, any rumour of Rwandan deployment led to [protests](#) in the DRC. This created large frustrations in Kigali, which President Kagame [openly voiced](#) on a number of occasions. Moreover, the Ugandan presence, and particularly the planned roadworks through Operation Shujaa, were seen as a direct threat to Rwanda's zone of interest in the Kivu provinces.

In other words, the re-emergence of M23 also has to be understood as a result of tense regional relations, including between Rwanda and Uganda. The consequent evolution of these regional relations is therefore equally important: when M23 (re-)emerged, the relation between Uganda and Rwanda had been tense for a number of years - something which in 2019 had led to the [closure of the main border point](#) between both countries. In January 2022, the relations between both countries had improved, which was most visibly manifested in the re-opening of their common border – a move in which Uganda's First Son Muhoozi Kainerugaba was seen to have played a major role through his [shuttle diplomacy between both capitals](#). What did these improved relations mean for Uganda's relation with M23?

RWANDA AND UGANDA'S COMMON INTERESTS – AND COMPETITION – IN EASTERN DRC

Rwanda and Uganda have common interests in Eastern DRC. Both countries see Eastern DRC as a source of insecurity – Rwanda with regards to the FDLR, Uganda with regards to the ADF; and both countries in varying degrees perceive the Congolese state as incapable and/or unwilling to eliminate these threats. Both countries also have a major interest in natural resources. As shown above, gold is for both countries their most important export product. This means both countries strive for a degree of control in the area, but at the same time compete for resources.³

In this context, both Ugandan and Rwandan officials hold the view that – as one Ugandan analyst summarized it: 'as long as Eastern DRC is not properly organized, we need another form of influence over it.'⁴ The way in which this influence should be operationalized ranges from limited mitigation strategies, to looking at Eastern DRC as a 'buffer zone', or even a 'Kivu Republic', as [some discussions](#) suggest. In this worldview, a situation of control and influence in Eastern DRC through actors such as M23 is therefore seen as – in the words of one analyst - 'the best option among all bad options'⁵

Added to this is the difficult history of the Uganda-Rwanda relation: Uganda cannot leave its 'frenemy for life' Rwanda – or better, President Museveni can never leave his '[frenemy for life](#)' President Kagame – to have the upper hand in Eastern DRC. Therefore, the more M23 expanded its territory and control, the more difficult it became for Kampala to ignore the rebel group, for two reasons: first, to make sure that Kigali alone does not have the monopoly of foreign influence over Eastern DRC; and second, to guarantee Uganda's economic interests in Eastern DRC.

In this context, it also needs to be emphasized how the M23 is not a direct mirror of Kigali's interests: there are for example differences among the M23 leadership in their level of alignment with Kigali - both on a thematic and personal level - based on their past experiences and relations with the Rwandan regime. M23 is therefore looking for a [degree of independence](#): it does not want to be completely dependent on external forces such as Kigali. Key in this is that the group was severely pressured by Kigali and Kampala to stop its rebellion in 2013 but felt that 'the job wasn't done yet'⁶: many in M23 wanted to continue the rebellion. The group wants to avoid a similar scenario, by trying to make sure it's not completely dependent on particular external sources. It remains however unclear if it has succeeded in doing so.

In this overall context, various sources therefore report on increasing contacts between Kampala and the group. In doing so, it is key that Uganda is careful not to offend the Tshisekedi government, as this could mean an end to

Operation Shujaa (and the associated roadworks). This could potentially also create difficulties for its trade with Eastern DRC. Kampala therefore does not want to become too involved in the M23 conflict as any open engagement – e.g. through direct military support – would endanger its interests in the area.

UGANDA'S (LIMITED?) ENGAGEMENT WITH M23

In the above context, what do we actually know about Uganda's relation with M23? First, it has been [documented](#) – for example by the December 2022 report of the UN Group of Experts – that M23 combatants are able to cross the Ugandan border unhindered. There are also reports of M23 [reprovisioning itself](#) in Uganda, something which is tolerated by Kampala. Similarly, it has been reported – also by the various Group of Expert reports – that M23 continues its recruitment in Uganda. Most significantly, whereas in late March 2022 the UPDF had [supported the Congolese army](#) to prevent M23 from seizing the crucial Congolese border town Bunagana, this was different on the 12th June 2022. On that day, the UPDF allowed M23 combatants into the DRC to attack Bunagana, with additional [reports](#) accusing the UPDF of crossing into the village with the rebels– something which [Kampala denied](#).

Second, in this overall situation, a number of sources talk about a small number of Ugandan non-combat troops 'keeping an eye' on the situation, but not participating in any operations or providing any military direct support.

Thirdly, there's the Alliance Fleuve Congo. This politico-military coalition, founded by the former head of the Congolese electoral commission, Corneille Nanga, in December 2023, holds the M23 among its members. Some consider it the de facto political wing of the M23. At the minimum, this coalition has 'traces' of Ugandan involvement. Over the last year, various sources talked of Ugandan pressure on M23 to broaden the coalition of the group, both in terms of ethnic composition (i.e. the narrow Tutsi identity of the group), support from Kigali, as well as its political agenda. Doing so would allow it to dilute the Rwandan influence, open the possibility for potential future support from Uganda, but also allow it

to push for future negotiations. Many observers see the creation of the Alliance Fleuve Congo in the light of these demands: the AFC is a politico-military alliance which wants to 'save' and 'bring peace' in the DRC. M23 is part of the coalition, with [at least 8 other](#) armed groups. It also has been [reported](#) how Uganda and Kenya were involved in the formation of AFC, with meetings in November in both countries. Moreover, it has been [reported](#) how Corneille Nanga travels in and out of Uganda, and is suspected of living part-time in Kampala.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE ROLE OF UGANDA'S FIRST SON MUHOOZI KAINERUGABA?

As shown above, Muhoozi was crucial in the rekindling of relations with Rwanda. At the same time, this also means that he is seen as very close with Kigali, and supportive of M23 – an image which Muhoozi, through his tweets, has helped to confirm. At times when hostility between Kinshasa and Kigali was particularly strong, he consistently showed his support for Kigali – for example by [tweeting](#) his strong support for his 'uncle' Paul Kagame ("I really feel sorry for all those who think they can defeat me and my uncle militarily. It will be a disaster for them. (...) Let them come we are more than ready."). On several [occasions](#), he tweeted his support for M23, calling them ['our brothers'](#) (20 November 2022 and 31 March 2023); and warning anyone who wants to attack them. With various tweets he defended the [Tutsi](#) community and M23: "As for M23, I think it is [very, very dangerous for anybody](#) to fight those brothers of ours. They are NOT terrorists! They are fighting for the rights of Tutsi in DRC."; or "It [is not a crime](#) to be a Mututsi or a Muhima or Muhema or a Munyamulenge! M23 has been seeking dialogue for years. The East African Community should help solve this problem." (27 May 2022).

All of this didn't go unnoticed in the DRC. [On the 14th of June](#), DRC's speaker of parliament Christopher Mboso accused Muhoozi of ['having signed a pact' with Kagame](#); and announced the suspension of the ratification process of all agreements with Uganda. Similarly, the speaker "denounced the complicity and implication of Uganda" in the takeover of Bunagana; and later on accused Uganda

of being a 'hypocrite'. There were equally protests against foreign occupations – including Uganda – in Eastern DRC, in June and December 2022.

The question is not only what Muhoozi's statements mean for the DRC, but also for Uganda. Whereas Uganda's relation with M23 is based on a careful calculation of interests, Muhoozi's above statements seem less so. In March 2024, Muhoozi was appointed as Chief of Defence Forces (after having been taken out of the formal command structure in October 2022). While the Museveni government's official position is to stay out of the conflict, will Muhoozi, as the Chief of Defence Forces, follow this line?

This does seem the case for now, but the question is for how long. Muhoozi has previously tweeted that after the defeat of the ADF, they might become involved in M23's struggle: "we shall focus on the Interahamwe in Eastern DRC. Criminals who massacred our brothers and sisters in 1994. The time for chatting is soon coming to an end." It remains to be seen what will happen after Operation Shujaa, and how this will change the calculus of Kampala. Moreover, Uganda has a fragmented security sector, with various actors and agencies having independent operational capacities – which means that particular security actors can do things independent of the formal command chain, on the personal command of higher-level officers.

CONCLUSIONS

The above briefing explains how the M23 conflict has to be understood in its regional context. In doing so, it shows how not only Rwanda needs attention, but also Uganda which has strong interests in Eastern DRC, both economic, security and political – all of which are strongly interlinked. This does not mean we have a repetition of 2012 and 2013, during which time there was relatively clear support from Kampala. Instead, a careful tactical game is being played, in which Kampala seeks to protect its interests in Eastern DRC, and which involves clear engagement with Kinshasa, but to a lesser extent also with M23. This is particularly the case because M23 is

expanding (and keeping) its territory, creating an incentive for regional actors to engage with them. This also shows the volatility of the situation: the longer the M23 crisis lingers on, the higher the chance for escalation, as other regional countries are drawn into the conflict.

It has been reported how Kinshasa is aware of this tactical game played by Kampala, and that Congolese representatives have been sent to Kampala to discuss this. In the current context, President Tshisekedi however seems reticent to go public with these accusations and open a second diplomatic front - at a time of already very fraught diplomatic relations with Kigali.

All of the above shows the need for a multi-layered and regional analysis of M23. This means a further analysis of the various regional influences at play in the M23 crisis, beyond Rwanda (but without downplaying the latter's role). At the same time, an understanding of the ways in which M23 relates to these various dynamics is necessary, in which there is a tension between its dependence on external support and internal pressure for independence. And lastly, it also shows the need for a further understanding of the ambiguous role which Uganda plays in regional conflict dynamics, including, but not limited to, M23.

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Endnotes

- 1 In comparison: in [2018, this was 890 million USD](#) or 15.54% of exports.
- 2 Uganda has more diverse sources and networks of gold supplies (both within and outside of DRC); and a more liberal gold market. Ugandan politico-military networks historically played an important role for the Ugandan gold trade, and continue to do so, it overall has a more open market in the country. Rwanda's interest in gold is more recent, it has more limited gold supply networks, and the trade is more firmly state controlled.
- 3 Other commentators have the view that both countries have a similar interest in perpetuating insecurity, rather than security, as it allows easier access to natural resources.
- 4 Interview Ugandan analyst, 1 May 2024.
- 5 Interview analyst, 8 May 2024.
- 6 Interview journalist, 20 March 2024.





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