

Research Paper

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Africa Programme | December 2014

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# Beyond Crisis in the DRC

## The Dilemmas of International Engagement and Sustainable Change



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## Summary

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), still emerging from decades of war and generations of pervasive misrule, may be in a position to break loose from a seemingly eternal repetition of violence and mismanagement, and move towards both a democratic transition of power and genuine post-conflict stabilization.

Despite the significant obstacles to progress that remain, a confluence of circumstances and actors has opened the way for change. President Joseph Kabila's second term in office, the maximum allowed under the constitution, comes to an end in 2016. The DRC's neighbours, regional and international partners are engaged and relatively coordinated. The threat to the Congolese government from rebels is much reduced since the defeat of the M23 in late 2013. And politics in the capital, Kinshasa, is in flux – a 'government of national unity', expected since late 2013, was finally appointed in early December 2014, but key questions around forthcoming elections and Kabila's third-term intentions remain unanswered.

This convergence of circumstances has generated three interlinked policy challenges relating to elections and alternative political voices, post-conflict challenges and international consensus. These must be addressed if the DRC is to move beyond the impasse of recurring crisis.

There are rumours of plans to revise the constitution to allow for a third term for President Kabila, or that elections may be postponed. International engagement in supporting robust, well-run and timely elections is essential if there is to be sufficient confidence in the possibility of change for alternative voices in Congolese politics to emerge as a force for political progress.

While the country's conflict-affected east may be calmer than has been typical over the last decade, a complex tangle of post-conflict challenges remains, with significant numbers of armed men still present, most importantly the Forces Democratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda (FDLR), and violence is reported from Province Orientale in the north to Katanga in the south. Demobilization, reintegration of former fighters and meaningful military reform remain enormous challenges.

Significant energy will be necessary to generate and maintain international consensus on these fundamental questions. The re-engagement of SADC states in the DRC played a critical role in opening the way for potential progress, a reality that must be understood and reflected by the traditional donor community. Sustained donor engagement in key capitals – notably Pretoria and Luanda – is essential.

But to sustain the unity and momentum necessary to address these policy challenges, the international community must resolve the dilemmas they bring. International partners will have to balance the need for political progress with the imperative of maintaining stability. It will need to reconcile the challenge of remaining armed groups with the need to reform the Congolese military and consolidate peace in the east. And it will need to maintain the fraught relationship between the DRC and its eastern neighbours.

Progress requires tough choices. The pursuit of sustainable positive change in the DRC requires clear, open and honest dialogue, both among the DRC's external partners and between the international community and Congolese interlocutors. Though the obstacles to progress are real, and daunting, they are not insurmountable.

## Introduction

For many observers, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is synonymous with violence and corruption. A seemingly endless series of conflicts has plagued the country since the early 1990s, resulting in humanitarian catastrophe, rampant human rights abuses, sexual violence and peacekeeping failures. Equally, patronage, venality and dysfunction have such deep roots that countless well-intentioned reform efforts and ambitious investments have failed, leaving generations of reformers disillusioned and disappointed.

The combination of these two perspectives generates, at best, a world-weary cynicism that permeates many conversations about the DRC. At worst, it results in fatalism, disengagement and capital flight. Donors are reluctant to commit money to reform efforts for fear that it will be wasted or stolen. Diplomats avoid spending political capital, just as businesses hold back investment, in spite of the country's manifest and enormous potential. The DRC is seen as essentially ungovernable; the 'heart of darkness' cliché lives on.

But while these assumptions are of course superficially accurate – violence and predation are daily realities for many people – they are a long way from the whole truth. In fact, the last year has seen a number of vitally important changes that have left the DRC government and neighbouring countries in a position with no precise historical precedents – and a chance to break the cycle of disappointment, cynicism and disengagement that otherwise threatens to condemn the country to repeating the past.

There is currently an opportunity for sustainable progress. It is fragile, uncertain and risky – but real. Though there are significant obstacles to overcome, and dilemmas to consider, with the right support it is possible that the next months and years will bring the beginnings of sustainable, positive change.

## The DRC's changing circumstances

### Regional realignments and international diplomacy

This opportunity stems from two parallel factors. The first has been a realignment of regional influence and engagement, backed by effective international diplomacy. The DRC sits at the heart of Africa, with economic, social and political links into central, southern and eastern regions. But while this could be a significant strength, in terms of access to trade markets for the DRC's wildly abundant resources, for instance, it has in recent years meant the country has lacked a bloc of coherent regional support; it remains part of the near-abroad for many neighbours, but the overriding priority of none. More widely, while all major donors have been active in the DRC and it remains the home of a huge UN peacekeeping operation, it has lacked a 'lead donor', able to shape international engagement. Donor policies have as a result been piecemeal, poorly coordinated and tentative.

This was not always the case. Under Mobutu Sese Seko, Zaire was itself a regional heavyweight. And when Zaire collapsed, ultimately drawing nine African states into the second Congo war (1998–2003), it was an intervention by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), most importantly Zimbabwe and Angola, that prevented the fall of the Kinshasa government. But once these forces had withdrawn – damaged, in some cases, by allegations of profiteering and corruption – these southern neighbours seemed largely content to remain only partially engaged in the country's recurrent crises.

Instead, the most important external actors in the DRC have been its eastern neighbours, Uganda and, more notoriously, Rwanda. They have both directly and indirectly shaped the evolution of the DRC's

transition and post-war history, not least as parties to the conflict in the Kivu provinces that has drawn in so much international attention and support. The latest iteration of this process erupted in 2012 and was centred on a rebel group, the M23, widely reported to have had strong Rwandan support.

### *Changes in 2013 – SADC reasserts itself*

This established pattern seems to have shifted decisively in late 2013. Though there are many reasons for the defeat of the M23, perhaps the most important factor was the revitalized engagement in the DRC by the SADC, notably the cutting edge provided by the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), led and staffed by SADC forces. Though the FIB is formally part of MONUSCO (the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC), its existence is most accurately understood as an expression of SADC political will, backed by South African, Tanzanian and Malawian troops.

The FIB's impact was twofold. Most obviously, it had a military role, both in supporting the Congolese military (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, or FARDC) and in taking the fight directly to the M23, deploying sophisticated technology such as South African attack helicopters. But perhaps more importantly, it changed the dynamics of regional politics. In raising the political stakes for the M23 and its putative backers, particularly Rwanda, it forced them into a choice between allowing the group to be defeated or – in essence – declaring open war on the SADC.

**The result is that the east of the DRC, for the first time in many years, is no longer held hostage by rebel groups with significant links to neighbouring governments, though these undoubtedly remain.**

It was a high-risk move, and one that could have led the region back into inter-state conflict. But M23's backers instead chose to disengage, allowing the group to fragment, signing a series of agreements known as the Nairobi Declaration in December 2013. Though it has not faded entirely – former M23 combatants, many of whom are currently in Uganda and Rwanda, represent a latent threat of re-mobilization that urgently needs to be addressed – the group is no longer able to directly shape events in eastern DRC.

Angola, too, has played a more central role in this abrupt rebalancing of regional power politics. Though it has not sent military forces to the FIB, it has offered leadership in driving regional diplomacy through its long-serving President José Dos Santos, most visibly as current chair of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). Angola also hosted a meeting with the DRC and South Africa in August 2013 that set up a tripartite Mechanism on Dialogue and Cooperation, which provides further foundations for this regional realignment.

The result is that the east of the DRC, for the first time in many years, is no longer held hostage by rebel groups with significant links to neighbouring governments, though these undoubtedly remain. Numerous armed groups are still active – DRC government sources recently placed the number at 20,<sup>1</sup> including some, most importantly the Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda (FDLR), of significant size, capacity and political sensitivity – but there may finally be a little space available for tackling the root causes of recurrent conflict, for the stabilization embodied in the UN-led International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy to take root, and perhaps over time normalizing the troubled relationship between the DRC and its eastern neighbours.

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<sup>1</sup> Others cite some 30–40 armed groups. Many groups are so fluid and short-lived as to make a definitive count impossible.

### *Wider international engagement – the Envoys Group and the PSCF*

The most obvious vehicle for such an improvement is the Peace and Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF), which was signed in early 2013 in Addis Ababa by the DRC, all nine of its immediate neighbours and South Africa. It was witnessed by the UN, African Union (AU), SADC and ICGLR. The PSCF enshrines vitally important principles of non-interference between the signatories, and as such is a powerful reference point for defining the future of regional relationships. It also mandates a collective oversight mechanism, including all signatories and witnesses, and explicitly validates the continued engagement of the wider international community.

But it also lays out an ambitious set of obligations for the DRC itself, including security-sector reform, the consolidation of state authority, decentralization and the structural reform of government. While most observers would agree that these are the most important issues facing the DRC, they are also extremely difficult to accomplish and will take time. It is therefore important that the signatories of the PSCF do not allow the breakthrough on regional peace and security that it represents to become a hostage to progress on DRC's internal reforms – the PSCF is important, but is not a panacea.

It is this tension that will perhaps offer the greatest challenge to the traditional international community. As noted, there is an established group of Special Envoys at UN, EU, US and AU levels, clustered into an informal 'Envoys Group' that is able to drive engagement with the Kinshasa government, its neighbours and allies, across the policy spectrum. The envoys have played an important role in shaping and supporting the regional response to headline issues of conflict, notably around the aftermath of the FIB intervention and the fall of the M23. They have also been able to offer much-needed leadership in Kinshasa, particularly through the offices of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), Martin Koebler, on technical issues, most importantly on demobilization and security-sector reform, as well as framing the emerging conversation about elections. The July 2014 appointment of Said Djinnat as UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region provides a vastly experienced additional voice.

But it is manifestly obvious that progress across the range of internal issues highlighted by the PSCF will be neither quick nor straightforward. It will be particularly important for the envoys, and the wider international community that they lead, to manage expectations across the region and avoid the diplomatic gains of the last months trickling away into the shifting sands of the DRC's byzantine and dysfunctional politics.

### Changing dynamics in Kinshasa

The second root of today's opening is the uncertain nature of Kinshasa politics. The period following the 2006 elections saw President Joseph Kabila and his supporters able to dominate national and provincial politics, installing compliant governors across the country and controlling – or overriding – dysfunctional or weak Kinshasa institutions. This period perhaps came to its peak during the widely criticized 2011 elections, which saw Kabila returned for a second term in the face of widespread accusations of fraud, malpractice and intimidation.

But though President Kabila and those around him rode out the storm of criticism, this survival did not come without cost. Kabila's reputation and popularity have taken a significant blow, he has lost key advisers, popular discontent has grown, and internal and external partners alike have lost patience with the lack of progress across nearly all policy areas. The DRC's already weak institutions – notably parliament – have been further undermined.

Thus although the fiasco of the 2011 elections was not fatal to Kabila, it may have marked the end of the era in which he could largely override Congolese politics without generating significant resistance – resistance that could be beyond his ability to control. There is some evidence that Kabila and his advisers have recognized this. In the immediate aftermath of 2011 he appointed technocrats rather than political insiders to key positions, most famously Prime Minister Matata Ponyo. In October 2013, Kabila convened ‘National Consultations’, intended to bring together a broad range of voices from across the political spectrum under a banner of unity and national cohesion.

But rather than refreshing the stagnant pool of Kinshasa politics, the National Consultations had limited impact, beyond temporarily tangling much of the opposition in wrangles over status and unrealistic policy recommendations. The opposition figures who attended grouped into a ‘Republican Opposition’ led by veteran Kinshasa insider and Senate head Kengo wa Dondo. Some members of the opposition boycotted the consultations, most importantly the Union pour la Nation Congolaise (UNC) of Vital Kamerhe and the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS) of Etienne Tshisekedi, but they remain relatively weak and fragmented. The most important opposition party at the 2006 elections, the Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo (MLC), has been hamstrung by the continued detention at the International Criminal Court (ICC) of its leader, Jean-Pierre Bemba.

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Given the weakness of the opposition, it is thus even more striking that Kabila took more than a year to nominate a long-awaited government of national unity, finally named on 8 December 2014. Kabila faced an exquisitely complex equation of balancing a vast range of competing individuals, networks and regional groups, all demanding opportunity and representation – and jobs in government.

The formation of a new government indicates that an answer has been found, at least for now. Though billed as a government of national unity, it remains largely populated by Kabila loyalists, notably in the key portfolios of defence, finance and vice-prime minister in charge of interior and security. Matata Ponyo is retained as prime minister, a sign of continuity and continued commitment to economic stability, and opposition figures have been brought in, from both republican and radical wings,<sup>2</sup> along with well-known political operators such as Eugene Serafuli, a key power-broker in North Kivu. But it falls short of the broad-based unity government many hoped for before the National Consultations.

In combination with a reshuffle of senior military positions announced in September 2014, interpreted by some observers as rewarding loyal officers and strengthening central control, indications are of a regime marshalling its strength. This was underlined by Kabila’s emphasis on national sovereignty in his state-of-the-nation address on 15 December 2014, a warning shot to head off international criticism.

#### *Towards the 2016 elections*

The next electoral cycle is of historic importance. Under the current constitutional dispensation, it will mark the end of President Kabila’s second and final mandate. The peaceful transition of power through electoral democracy would be a remarkable step forward for the DRC.

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<sup>2</sup> Including three from the MLC and one from the UDPS. MLC appointments, in particular, can be understood as a move to weaken MLC cohesion – the three appointees have already been expelled from the party – and an insurance policy against any return to the DRC of Jean-Pierre Bemba.

The central questions, therefore, are whether elections will happen on time, and whether Kabila will seek to stand for a third term. A full electoral cycle will include polls at multiple levels, across a vast country with limited infrastructure – their organization will demand enormous resources. Provincial elections were delayed during the previous electoral cycle in 2011; local elections, currently slated for 2015, have never taken place. A definitive electoral timetable has yet to be agreed, Kabila decreed a national census in October 2015 – perhaps necessary for robust polls, but which would potentially take years, and cost hundreds of millions of dollars – and further delays would weaken an already degraded constitutional rule, and perhaps facilitate any attempt to lift the limit on Kabila seeking a third term in office.

To do so, he would need to build and maintain a strong political coalition to push through a constitutional or procedural change sufficient to legitimize his candidacy in the face of opposition from civil society, churches, the vocal – if fractured – opposition, and external partners, and to deliver sufficient votes to win any subsequent poll.

This would be a serious challenge. Kabila has announced a new government, and made clear in his 15 December address that he intends to push ahead with elections – though answers to the key questions of timetables and his candidacy remain elusive. Kabila's popularity across much of the country is likely to have withered from a relatively low base, and those excluded from the newly announced government of national unity constitute a large pool of disaffected individuals who now have less to lose from overt opposition. Even if he can overcome the legal obstacles to standing again, it is by no means clear that Kabila would be able to deliver sufficient votes to win, or the necessary financial or coercive weight to take victory.

### Implications for international policy

These two factors – realigned regional dynamics and political uncertainty in Kinshasa – open a window for change in the DRC. But it is less clear what action the DRC's external partners should take. There are three key policy challenges for the international community: calibrating effective support to electoral processes and democracy; supporting demobilization of former combatants and effective military reform; and strengthening recent improvements in regional relations.

### Elections and the importance of confidence

The central lesson from electoral uncertainty in Kinshasa is that – for a short moment – the international community could have a disproportionate influence on long-term outcomes. The Congolese political system is adept at drawing in and subverting possible opponents. The population is deeply cynical about politics and politicians, and the country lacks a significantly developed urban middle class. Pressure for political change – let alone the 'Arab Spring' type of uprising that some have foreseen – is unlikely to arise spontaneously. In fact, the country seems close to reverting to the resignation of the Mobutu era.

Addressing the DRC's deep crisis of legitimacy will demand the emergence of broad-based politics, engaging the population in peaceful competition between government and a range of credible opposition voices. For a meaningful political alternative to emerge, potential opponents would need to have confidence that the elections themselves would be fair, timely and robust – that they would have at least a chance of victory. And this in turn would demand significant support from the DRC's external partners, in terms both of large-scale and swift logistical and financial backing, and of high-

level diplomatic engagement to minimize any subversion of the process, as well as strengthened engagement with Congolese voices calling for change, from civil society to the churches.

Early and strong backing for a robust electoral process that respects the constitution could generate momentum among the opposition and electorate, and change the calculation being made among Kabila's supporters as to the timetable and legal basis for forthcoming polls. Conversely, caution risks a self-fulfilling prophecy – without external backing, it would simply be more sensible for potential opposition leaders to allow themselves to be subverted, weakening the opposition and allowing those in power to present the Congolese population with a *fait accompli*.

### Demobilization and security-sector reform

Addressing the most acute conflict policy questions facing the DRC – demobilization and military reform – raises similar questions. Burnt by past failures, the international community has yet to implement the large-scale demobilization programme necessary to solidify the progressive pacification of the east, despite the publication of a new Global Plan for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration ('DDR III') by the DRC government in June 2014. Many former combatants have been left living in appalling conditions in poorly supported camps.

This caution is understandable, but risks missing a historic opportunity for progress, linked again to a misreading of the country's history and current circumstances. The central cause of the failure of previous attempts to achieve sustainable demobilization in the east has not been related to the removal of weapons from ex-combatants, or from the ranks of armed groups – hundreds of thousands have been processed across multiple programmes. Rather, the problem has been a failure to reintegrate former fighters into their communities, and to keep them there.

The two most significant drivers of this have been fear and unemployment. Despite some attempts to provide ex-combatants with the support and tools to start businesses, these have not been well adapted to local markets, and in the context of on-going conflict and a severely disrupted local economy have not generated sufficient income to build resistance to the livelihoods that membership of armed groups provides. Just as importantly, the communities rejoined by former fighters have felt under significant threat – from remaining armed groups, other communities or the Congolese security forces themselves.

The fall of the M23 offers the opportunity to begin to disentangle these factors. The remaining armed groups, while important, do not bring the same level of political threat to Kinshasa – they are more concerned with local issues, profit or, in the case of the FDLR, following an agenda with its roots in Rwanda, not the DRC. The post-M23 de-escalation has reduced the pervasive sense of fear – though manifestly has not removed it entirely – thus removing some of the logic for community mobilization and increasing the chances that demobilization might be made to stick this time.

Of course, the issue of economic under-development will remain, as will the question of poorly controlled mineral resources, long a lure to conflict entrepreneurs of all types. Though relative peace should bring with it a small-scale upturn in economic activity, and thus offer more opportunities for employment, it will be vital for a virtuous circle to be created and maintained – where economic growth drives employment and removes some of the incentives for violence. A well-funded DDR programme is a necessary part of this but is not sufficient on its own. It will take time for the economy of the east to grow, and for a peace dividend to be palpable.

Security-sector reform is therefore a vital element in the calculation. Meeting the basic challenges of discipline, payment and living conditions for the FARDC would improve the lives of the civilians who are all too frequently the victims of harassment and abuse, and in so doing remove one of the key sources of insecurity for the population, and thus a driver for re-mobilization – it will need to go hand-in-glove with DDR and economic recovery, not least if significant numbers of former rebels are integrated into the FARDC as part of the process.

Meeting the basic challenges of discipline, payment and living conditions for the FARDC would improve the lives of the civilians who are all too frequently the victims of harassment and abuse, and in so doing remove one of the key sources of insecurity for the population, and thus a driver for re-mobilization.

Effective security-sector reform will clearly be extremely difficult. It will need real leadership from Kinshasa, not hitherto forthcoming. A large-scale restructuring of the military was ordered in September 2014, a move which should at least clarify chains of command, but coming as it did at the same time as the promotion of several officers close to the president, it may do little to aid the development of a neutral, Republican military. Fundamental ground-level problems of discipline, effectiveness and motivation will remain.

Root-and-branch change will be expensive, both in training and equipping effective units and in supporting the removal of tens of thousands of old, infirm or unsuitable soldiers currently in uniform – including vetting for human rights abuses – as well as ensuring that newly integrated fighters are firmly implanted in formal chains of command. A more coordinated approach from the international community, embodied in the working group established in Kinshasa, is a positive start, and MONUSCO has been explicitly tasked with providing leadership on these issues.

### Harmonizing international voices

Finally, it is imperative that the donor community maintain and deepen a constructive engagement with African regional actors – notably Angola, South Africa and Rwanda, as well as regional organizations such as the ICGLR, SADC and Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL). The ad hoc coordination structures in place – from the international contact group to a forum of ambassadors convened by the SRSR in Kinshasa – are positive, but need to ensure that they systematically include African actors.

For this engagement to be effective, it is incumbent on the donor community to recognize the limitations of its reach and resources. The fundamental shift in regional relations that took place at the end of 2013 happened through African leadership, via African regional organizations, and although the role of the international community was vital, it is important to recognize that it was secondary to that of regional big hitters such as South Africa, Angola, Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda. It is these actors that have vital national security issues at stake, and thus have the motivation to put real resources into play, including – as seen with the FIB – combat troops. The financial, political and technical support offered by the wider international community will remain extremely significant, but is unlikely to be formative.

This is not to say that the traditional donor community should allow its views and objectives to be subsumed into those of the region. In fact, building an open dialogue on issues of key mutual importance is the only way in which donors will be able to influence the emerging thinking of the key

states. South Africa, Angola and Rwanda are unlikely to react positively to high-handed demands, or to any hint of being issued with instructions by donors. Conversely, an honest statement of the goals and interests of the donor community, and a clear, realistic explanation of how they might be met, would allow a genuine conversation to develop.

In order to do so, however, the international community will first need to clarify exactly what it is seeking to achieve. All too often, policy is reduced to a simple restatement of a long list of aspirations – from peace and security to economic growth and an effective state – without a clear-headed appreciation of the dilemmas that might emerge; put simply, it may not be possible to achieve everything at the same time, and in fact there may be unavoidable compromises between mutually incompatible goals.

### Policy dilemmas

#### Elections: stability and change

Of course, investing in elections would bring risks. The most obvious is that competitive politics could lead to violence. This will perhaps be even more acute for local elections than national ones. The country's history – both its colonial past and memories of international stewardship during the post-war transition (2003–06) – has left a deep reservoir of resentment and suspicion of international intentions in the DRC. President Kabila, as noted, has already made clear that perceived infringement on its sovereignty will be rejected; heavy-handed international demands could bring diplomatic costs. The temptation of prioritizing short-term stability over long-term progress may be difficult to resist, notably for senior officials and leaders with little time to engage in the complex realities of the DRC, and for neighbours who would risk immediate and pressing security threats as a result of any unrest, or with much to lose from damaging their relationship with Kinshasa.

This is precisely what happened in 2011, when the majority of major international players decided to turn a blind eye to electoral malpractice, preferring a coronation of the incumbent to the difficult and uncertain outcomes of a real election. This was understandable, but a serious error. The political stagnation and slow progress of reform experienced in the years since is the unwelcome harvest of this short-termism.

The international community, most visibly US Secretary of State John Kerry, has made its wish to see a timely, constitutional and well-run election very clear. But this is not necessarily a view that is widely shared. Continued discussion with interlocutors across the range of engaged states, notably the DRC's most important regional allies, will be vital. Angola – which has itself been run by the same party and president since the 1970s – has a long-standing need for an ally in Kinshasa, and has hitherto seen Kabila in such a light. It has therefore been content to prioritize continuity and short-term stability over participatory politics; refugees, cross-border communities and the imperative of maintaining stability in the strategically vital oil-producing regions that border the DRC all pull in the same direction.

South Africa has provided vital support to previous electoral cycles and is committed to entrenching democracy, but also has huge economic equities tied up in deals done with the current administration. Both states will feel a temptation to ignore electoral malpractice.

But the fact remains that both Angola and South Africa have an overriding interest in long-term stability in the DRC – and that stability that will ultimately depend on building a responsive and capable state, able to construct a social contract with its people and guarantee clean contracts for

nervous external investors. This will need elections that are free, fair and responsive. Engaging Luanda and Pretoria in a genuine conversation around these issues, and negotiating Congolese political sensitivities, will demand careful, committed and harmonized diplomacy.

### Military reform, stabilization and regional diplomacy

It is extremely difficult to reform a military that is deployed on active duty. The chaos of combat prevents servicemen from accessing support, a proper head-count being carried out, and the implementation of the long process of removing the old, infirm, and guilty from their ranks. A progressive demilitarization of life in eastern DRC would also allow more space for stabilization activity to gain traction, building a virtuous circle of improving quality of life and the reduction of some of the factors that push former combatants into reaching for their guns.

Yet there are simultaneously loud demands for further military action against remaining armed groups. The most difficult is the FDLR. Though the FIB of MONUSCO could provide leadership, support and a kinetic edge, there would inevitably be significant demands on the FARDC in the event of any attack on the FDLR. The latter, in contrast to the M23, is spread out, located in remote areas that are difficult to access, knows the ground intimately and is deeply embedded in local communities.

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There is a possibility that the FDLR will, finally, lay down its arms without violence. Its leadership announced a partial disarmament in May, followed by the surrender of perhaps 200 combatants, out of a total estimated strength of 1,500–2,000. It is the hope that the FDLR will read the writing on the wall – with the example of the M23's defeat by the FIB relatively fresh in the memory – and lay down its arms voluntarily. This was likely to have been the logic behind the decision of a joint meeting of the ICGLR and SADC to give the FDLR six additional months in which to do so. This deadline expires in January 2015. It is understandable that regional actors, particularly those such as South Africa whose forces would be in the front line of any fighting, want to give a peaceful solution every chance, though it currently seems unlikely to be achieved. So there will be a renewed crescendo of calls for action against the FDLR in early 2015. This poses a very clear dilemma. Attacks on the FDLR would be an effective way of demonstrating to Kigali that its interests will not be overridden, strengthening confidence and diplomatic relations between Rwanda and the DRC, and would help to cement the principle of non-intervention by removing any reason – or pretext – for Rwanda to re-enter eastern DRC. It would also be hugely encouraging for the Congolese civilians who have lived for decades under the threat of violence from the FDLR.

But such action would also come with significant costs. Taking on the FDLR would need significant manpower, and would pull more FARDC troops into the east, risking increased abuses and threats against local communities, as well as putting enormous pressure on the UN. It would risk almost inevitable FDLR reprisal attacks on civilians and large-scale population displacement, could trigger remobilization by local defence groups, and, at worst, reignite more widespread and organized violence. Reprisals carried out by the Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF) rebel group in October 2014, in reaction to FARDC operations against it, makes clear how serious the costs could be. It would also

make preparation for elections impossible across large areas of the country, and divide already stretched government and international resources that could otherwise be devoted to reform.

Attacks on the FDLR would be diplomatically expedient and eminently justified on civilian protection grounds, but would come with enormous consequences across a range of other issues. Calls for action should therefore be considered in the light of their costs as well as their benefits. Managing the diplomatic fall-out of further delay – notably in Kigali – is a task that the international community should be prepared to take on.

### Political will and the security paradox

Finally, it is important to note that the twin imperatives of political legitimacy and internal security are also interrelated. First, as noted, it is extremely difficult to conduct elections amid the chaos of conflict – and elections themselves could generate unrest, particularly at the local level.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, it has long been argued that one of the key obstacles to achieving an effective security sector in the DRC has been a lack of political will at the centre. Put simply, an effective military – and, to a lesser extent, police and judiciary – would constitute a threat to a regime lacking a foundation in meaningful popular legitimacy. Thus investing in praetorian units and individuals whose loyalty can be ensured is preferred to building a cohesive, republican military, and a coordinated multilateral approach to security-sector reform is rejected in favour of piecemeal bilateral reforms.

This generates a self-fulfilling cycle. Instability prevents the growth of a mature political culture, based on the competition of ideas and policy rather than power and patronage. Successive regimes lack the firm foundation of a legitimate mandate, and thus feel compelled to subvert the coercive functions of the state – most importantly the military – for fear that they will turn against them.

This is not to argue that popular legitimacy and meaningful security are incompatible; in fact, in the long term, they are inevitably symbiotic. But for a state with the history of the DRC, it is simply not sufficient to decry the lack of ‘political will’ from the centre in repeated failures to achieve the reform agenda expected by the DRC’s international partners, most obviously around security-sector reform. Instead, there needs to be a recognition that Kinshasa’s reticence in pursuing effective military reform is a product of its history, and an entrenched political dynamic whose longevity belies the common perception of the DRC as a fragile state.

Changing this pattern will, above all, require leadership and courage from Congolese actors. But the international community can help – or, at least, not hinder – through calibrating its interventions with a nuanced assessment of the perverse incentives acting on Congolese leaders, as well as careful sequencing, the management of fears as well as expectations, and – again – coordinated and even-handed communication.

### Conclusion

Elections are vital for legitimacy and long-term progress, but could bring violence. Action against the FDLR is necessary to protect Congolese civilians and reinforce regional relations, but could spark renewed insecurity in the east, making disarmament and military reform more difficult – and may jeopardize elections. These are genuine dilemmas, with no easy answers. Solutions will only emerge from dialogue and negotiation.

It is therefore vital that space for meaningful conversation is opened and protected. The ICGLR and SADC have broken new ground in bringing together regional actors. The international envoys have offered a powerful lead in open and frank communication, both with the principal Congolese and regional actors, and with the wider international community.

The DRC has long been a blank slate for the agendas of external actors, and frequently their graveyard. The current circumstances offer the opportunity to help the DRC take meaningful steps towards the sustainable, positive change so desperately needed by its people. Doing so will demand not only continued commitment from the region and wider international community, in diplomatic energy, goodwill and material support, as well as a long-overdue evolution in the way the DRC is framed in policy conversations.

The DRC is neither an irredeemable quagmire, captured and condemned by its history, nor a victim to be rescued and reformed. Rather, it is a vast and complex country, facing a wide range of challenges. As in any state, change will require understanding, compromise and patience – the fundamentals of politics and diplomacy. It is therefore incumbent on the DRC's external partners to step beyond the short-term imperatives of crisis management, or the imposition of aspirational goals, and instead to begin from a clear-eyed recognition of the dilemmas posed by the pursuit of sustainable change.

## About the Author

Ben Shepherd is an Associate Fellow of the Africa Programme. From 2004 to 2011 he worked as a senior research analyst for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Africa Research Group. He has also been a research fellow at the London School of Economics and the coordinator of the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Great Lakes. His research focuses on the UK's Africa policy and conflict, state-building and post-conflict policy relating to the Great Lakes region, Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire. His recent publications have examined issues including elections in the DRC and Uganda's growing oil sector.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank all participants at a 2014 Chatham House roundtable for their invaluable insight and expertise, and three anonymous peer reviewers for immensely helpful comments and criticisms. Particular thanks are also due to the staff of the Chatham House Africa Programme for their unstinting support, and to the Norwegian Refugee Council for its generous assistance in funding this publication. All errors are of course the author's own.

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