



***Raison d'État* Unleashed: Understanding Rwanda's Foreign Policy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo**

***Strategic Insights*, Volume IV, Issue 7 (July 2005)**

by [Marcus Curtis](#)

[Strategic Insights](#) is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

For a PDF version of this article, click [here](#).

"I have never had any [enemies] other than those of the state."

—Cardinal de Richelieu, First Minister of France 1624-1642

Introduction

In October 1990, when a guerrilla force composed mainly of exiled Rwandan Tutsis calling itself the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda from bases in southern Uganda with the intent of overthrowing the existing, Hutu-dominated regime in Kigali (the Rwandan capital), few observers could have predicted the transformative effects the ensuing RPF victory would have on the security milieu of Africa's Great Lakes region.

After defeating a regime responsible for a genocide that saw at least 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu killed in a three-month period and successfully seizing control of Rwanda in July 1994, the newly-installed Tutsi regime felt compelled to turn outward to ensure its own security and guarantee sustainable domestic peace. In the four years after the end of its own civil war, Rwanda would militarily intervene twice in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)[[1](#)—first in 1996 and again in 1998—in operations that initially appeared to serve limited objectives, but that soon became full-scale invasions of its much larger western neighbor.

Rwanda's 1998 invasion of the DRC proved an especially destructive enterprise. The intervention provoked a continental-scale war that drew in no less than seven foreign armies and countless rebel groups and militias. The fighting exacted a particularly devastating humanitarian toll with 3.3 million deaths between 1998-2002, primarily from war-related starvation and disease.[\[2\]](#) And although the Pretoria Agreement signed by Rwandan President Paul Kagame and Congolese President Joseph Kabila in July 2002 effectively ended major hostilities and led to the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the DRC, tensions between the two countries remain high. While peace in a nominal sense does exist, a resumption of hostilities remains a real possibility. Only a

comprehensive understanding of Rwanda's long-term security interests and foreign policy goals vis-à-vis the DRC can offer insight into prospects for a definitive peace.

This article seeks to examine the underlying causes of Rwanda's successive interventions in the DRC, with particular attention given to the country's decision to invade in 1998. It will argue that while the security threat posed by the former Hutu-dominated Rwandan Armed Forces (ex-FAR) and *Interahamwe* militia based in the DRC factored prominently in Rwanda's decision to intervene in both 1996 and 1998, the 1998 campaign was unique in that Rwanda's emergence as a regional power combined with a heightened threat from Hutu insurgents to render the use of force a particularly attractive option. The article will also compare Rwanda's relative success in its 1996-1997 campaign with the shortcomings of its much longer, more recent foray, offering insight into why the country was unable to achieve a similar degree of success during its second intervention. Finally, it will assess prospects for future conflict between Rwanda and the DRC in light of the ongoing Congolese postwar transition and the April 2005 declaration by the ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* successor group, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), that it was abandoning its armed struggle against the Rwandan government and would henceforth seek repatriation.[3]

Hutu Exodus

Any understanding of Rwanda's post-1994 foreign policy in the DRC must begin with the aftereffects of the Rwandan civil war, specifically those resulting from the genocide. Of these consequences, the most critical was the influx of more than one million Hutu refugees—including political and military officials of the former regime who had perpetrated the genocide—into the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, then Zaire) and their subsequent settlement in UN-established refugee camps. This massive exodus was facilitated by direct military intervention from the French, a long-time supporter of the defeated Hutu regime. Under "Operation Turquoise," launched in the closing days of the Rwandan civil war, France established a humanitarian zone in southern Rwanda. Ostensibly aimed at providing a safe haven for refugees fleeing the genocide, in reality, the French-protected safe zone was used by tens of thousands of Hutu extremists who had perpetrated the genocide to flee the country.[4] The RPF, unwilling to risk the possibility of an increased and more aggressive French presence, chose not to directly engage French troops. When the RPF signed a ceasefire to end the civil war in July 1994, it was clear that France's intervention had denied the group the "total victory" needed to guarantee the new regime's security.

As an uninterrupted and seemingly limitless flow of Hutu refugees poured from Rwanda into the DRC, the UN and other non-governmental organizations maneuvered to establish refugee camps in hopes of mitigating a potential humanitarian disaster. As a matter of practical consideration, the majority of these camps were settled in the North and South Kivu provinces of eastern DRC, both of which are contiguous to Rwanda. The settlement of these camps so close to Rwandan territory quickly presented a challenge for the new Rwandan government as the international community proved unwilling to separate innocent civilians in the camps from those that committed genocide. Repeated calls by Rwanda for the disarmament of the *génocidaires* were treated as beyond the UN's capabilities given the enormity of the refugee population and the primacy of the humanitarian mission.[5]

The fact that virtually the entire state structure of the former Hutu-dominated regime had fled with the majority refugee population meant that the full organizational and administrative talents of an entire government remained largely intact inside the camps.[6] In this context, the ex-FAR and *Interahamwe* were able to use Congolese territory to reorganize, re-equip, train and recruit new fighters.[7] The retention of bureaucratic know-how from the former Rwandan government, coupled with a steady flow of resources from humanitarian aid agencies, allowed the *génocidaires* to preserve, if not strengthen, their military posture. By early 1995, the ex-

FAR/*Interahamwe* presence in eastern DRC totaled 50,000 fighters with combat units arranged into a highly organized, disciplined military structure that cut across refugee camps.[8]

Pretext for War

The considerable size of the reconstituted Hutu force, while cause for concern in and of itself, was only one factor in Rwanda's overall strategic calculus leading to the decision to intervene in the DRC. For (then) Rwandan Vice President and Defense Minister Paul Kagame, it was not just the size, but rather the proven ability of the ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* to launch attacks into Rwanda that was so alarming. As early as October 1994, Hutu militants based in eastern DRC were conducting raids into Rwanda's border provinces. By November 1995 their capacity to strike had enhanced to the point where they were launching medium-scale operations in Rwanda's southern provincial capital of Butare as well as on the outskirts of the capital, Kigali.[9] While Kagame repeatedly urged Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko to rein in the *génocidaires*, little was done to assuage Rwandan fears of an impending Hutu invasion. Mobutu, a strong ally of the former Rwandan regime, appeared to accept the presence of the ex-FAR in eastern DRC as an effective means of containing his own domestic opposition which had traditionally been most vociferous in the east.[10]

The influx of Rwandan Hutu into the North and South Kivu provinces of eastern DRC upset the region's ethno-communal balance and ultimately provided a "humanitarian" pretext for Rwanda's subsequent intervention. Seeking to exploit the newfound strength in numbers that accompanied the arrival of the *génocidaires*, Congolese Hutu in the region openly aligned with the exiled militants and helped mobilize attacks against local Congolese Tutsi. The situation deteriorated in September 1996 when the ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* (with encouragement from Mobutu and sanctioning from local Hutu government officials) instigated an ethnic cleansing campaign that led to the displacement of the entire Congolese Tutsi population of North Kivu, estimated to have been tens of thousands of Tutsi.[11] The majority of these Tutsi refugees fled to Rwanda. In early October, the *génocidaires*, who were now more or less formally allied with Mobutu's Zairian Armed Forces (FAZ), sought to replicate this ethnic cleansing campaign in South Kivu. Before they could do so, however, Congolese Tutsi native to the province (called Banyamulenge) launched a "preemptive" attack against ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* and FAZ positions.[12] Rwanda immediately intervened on the side of the Banyamulenge rebels, a decision soon revealed as the opening gambit of the first Congolese war.

Within a month of the initial uprising, Congolese rebels and the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) troops that fought alongside them had captured the cities of Uvira, Goma, and Bukavu (the last two being the capitals of North and South Kivu respectively).[13] Rwandan Defense Minister Paul Kagame, encouraged by the offensive momentum established early on, also knew that carrying the rebellion further would require the involvement of a broader cross-section of Congolese opposition groups beyond the Tutsi. The result was the formation of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo/DRC (ADFL), a loose coalition of various anti-Mobutu groups of which Laurent Kabila—a Luba from Katanga province—would emerge the leader. In December 1996, as Mobutu's troops prepared to launch a counteroffensive to "liberate" eastern DRC, it would be Kabila's ADFL that provided the legitimacy necessary to galvanize the Congolese masses on the side of rebels, and by extension, their Rwandan backers. Kabila, who was no stranger to rebellion in the Congo, exploited the coincidence of interest with Rwanda to the fullest extent.[14] Kagame, for his part, was fully aware that Mobutu would never countenance a long-term Rwandan presence on Congolese soil, and thus welcomed the prospect of regime change and embraced Kabila's ADFL as an indispensable ally. A campaign that appeared to begin as a mere proxy border war by Rwanda thus turned into a full-fledged civil war to oust Mobutu.[15] Notably, even as the overall number of Rwandan troops participating in the fighting declined as the conflict spread from east to west, Rwanda's role in orchestrating the rebellion and dictating overall military strategy increased as the rebels closed in on the capital, Kinshasa.

The fall of Kinshasa on May 17, 1997 to Kabila's ADFL and the RPA troops that backed them was above all else a victory for Rwanda. Not only did Rwanda succeed in dismantling a large number of Hutu refugee camps and igniting a massive repatriation of more than half a million refugees back to Rwanda, it also secured a powerful role in the internal affairs of its neighbor. After the war, Rwandan officers were awarded prominent posts in Kabila's new Congolese Armed Forces (FAC), including the appointment of Rwandan general James Kabare to head Kabila's army as chief of staff. Responsibility for the organization, training, and even the deployment of many FAC units was given to Rwandan commanders allowing the country free rein in eastern Congo to root out remaining Hutu militants.[16] In the months after Kabila's assumption of power, Rwanda also deployed thousands of its own troops to eastern DRC creating a substantial buffer zone in North and South Kivu from which to repel potential ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* attacks.[17] Rwanda's role as Kabila's benefactor thus had practical strategic benefits that the country would not forfeit lightly under any terms. As Rwanda increasingly came to view its dominant role in Congolese affairs as essential to securing its national security interests, any developments that appeared to undermine this position were bound to provoke a response.

Declining Rwandese-Congolese Relations In the Kabila Era

The Rwanda-DRC alliance lasted just fourteen months before Rwanda, in a dramatic *volte face*, launched a second campaign in the Congo—this time to topple former ally Laurent Kabila. Again the intervention began as a military operation to support an “indigenous” rebellion, this time instigated by mutinous Banyamulenge units of the elite 10th and 12th army brigades of the FAC, headquartered in North and South Kivu respectively.[18] The Banyamulenge troops were protesting the increased marginalization of Congolese Tutsi in the FAC command structure as well as Kabila's decision to integrate former soldiers of Mobutu's FAZ within Banyamulenge units.[19] On August 2, 1998, these developments combined with an overall growing dissatisfaction with Kabila's rule to trigger the desertion of “nearly all 10,000 Banyamulenge troops” from the FAC.[20] Rwanda, seeking to exploit such an open and massive split in Kabila's army, intervened shortly thereafter.

Given the ties forged between Rwanda and Kabila during the previous Congo war, what factors contributed to the abrupt deterioration in the Rwanda-DRC relationship and prompted Rwanda's second intervention? First, it must be emphasized that the alliance between Rwanda and Kabila had been a relationship of convenience rather than a genuine partnership based on agreed ideological principles. Cooperation between Rwanda and the ADFL had been based exclusively on a common interest in overthrowing Mobutu, not a shared vision of regional security.[21] Beyond this agreed anti-Mobutu agenda (the motives of which had been different for Rwanda and the ADFL rebels), there was little philosophical basis from which to build and sustain a long-term strategic relationship.

Second, the inherent tenuousness of the partnership was exacerbated by Kabila's decision to distance himself from his Rwandan sponsors. While Rwandan support had been critical to Kabila's victory during the first Congolese war, it had since become a liability for the new Congolese ruler seeking to “legitimize himself” as a true nationalist.[22] Continued foreign support, particularly the presence of Rwandan officers in the FAC, reinforced a perception among the Congolese public that Kabila was overly dependent on external backing and undermined his credibility as a ruler. Sensing that his reliance on Rwanda had reached a point of diminishing returns, in July 1998 Kabila ordered all foreign troops out of the DRC, a decision that included the dismissal of Rwandan general James Kabare as head of the FAC.[23] Such a move directly threatened not only Rwanda's continued ability to eliminate the *génocidaires* remaining in the Congo, but also its emergence as a regional power. Keen on protecting the extensive regional political-military influence it had amassed during the first Congolese war and its aftermath, Rwanda viewed a second military intervention as necessary to secure its advantageous strategic position in the region. The relative ease with which Rwanda had effected Mobutu's overthrow less

than two years before strengthened the country's belief that Kabila could be defeated in similar fashion.

Finally, an escalating threat from Hutu militants also contributed to the collapse of the Rwanda-DRC relationship. The massive repatriation of Hutu refugees back to Rwanda during the 1996 war had included an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* who immediately began to organize and launch attacks upon their return, creating an insurgency in the northwest that also drew support from ex-FAR/*Interhamwe* forces still based in the DRC.[24] The insurgents aimed to wipe out the small Tutsi population of the area, seize control of all local government offices, and mobilize ordinary Hutu to take up arms against the RPF regime.[25] While it is unlikely Kabila directly supported the northwest insurgency, Rwanda drew a direct connection between his indifference to the Hutu militants who remained in the DRC and the strength of the Hutu insurgents based in Rwanda. Like Mobutu before him, Kabila made no attempt to demobilize ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* forces that had survived Rwanda's 1996 campaign in the Congo and resisted repatriation. Analysts estimate that at least 5,000 remained in bases around North Kivu even while Rwanda established a military presence throughout the Congo in the early days of Kabila's rule.[26] Now, with the preponderance of the Hutu force based inside Rwanda, the thousands of Hutu militants that remained in the eastern DRC served as a critical rear base of support for the northwest insurgency.

The security threat for Rwanda was, at a minimum, just as immediate as it had been preceding the country's first intervention in the Congo. The potency of the northwest insurgency—which Timothy Longman contends was tantamount to a “virtual civil war”[27]—heightened Rwanda's sense of vulnerability and reinforced the siege mentality that had underpinned the regime's view of national security since it came to power after ending the 1994 genocide. Given Kabila's apparent complicity—or at least insufficient concern for Rwanda's interests—a second invasion of the Congo came to be viewed as the only means of confronting an escalating threat from Hutu militants who had progressed from launching cross-border raids to being capable of fomenting large-scale civil unrest. For Rwanda, national security could only be guaranteed by taking the fight to the *génocidaires*, just as it had in 1996.

Rwanda's Second Campaign

Within days of the August 1998 uprising by Banyamulenge units of Kabila's FAC, Rwanda had not only intervened, but had opened up two fronts against Kabila's army. In the east, Banyamulenge rebels and RPA troops focused on securing North and South Kivu and then advancing towards Kisangani in the north and Katanga in the south. An RPA contingent in the West opened up a second front by mobilizing tens of thousands of former FAZ soldiers being held by Kabila for eventual integration into the FAC,[28] placing anti-Kabila forces some 150 miles outside of Kinshasa by the end of August. On both fronts, the offensive was initially reminiscent of the 1996 campaign in its quickness and precision. As the war continued, the difference that emerged was not in the intensity of the fighting, but rather the scale of the military commitment. At the height of the war in 1999, Rwanda not only had the support of Burundi and Uganda, it also had an estimated 24,000 troops deployed to the DRC, a number that dwarfed its previous commitment.[29]

It soon became clear, however, that Rwanda's second invasion of the Congo would prove much more difficult than the first. After the Rwandan-led advance toward Kinshasa was repelled by Angolan troops coming to Kabila's defense, the conflict gradually reached an impasse. This inability to secure a military victory was due to a myriad of factors. First, when the rebellion began the military strategy was tied to no other political objective than the overthrow of Kabila. The 10,000 Banyamulenge troops of the FAC that mutinied in August fought against other units in the area that remained loyal to Kabila, but pronounced no broader sociopolitical goal than pushing loyalist troops out of the Kivus and retaining Congolese Tutsi influence in the region. The political face of the rebellion did not emerge until three weeks after the initial uprising when, at the behest

of Rwanda, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) was founded by an eclectic mix of Congolese politicians opposed to Kabila.^[30] Only when the initial assault on Kinshasa failed did Rwanda recognize the necessity of establishing a political front.

Second, the RCD did not enjoy nearly the same degree of domestic support as had Kabila's ADFL in the campaign to oust Mobutu. Rwandan and Ugandan involvement in Congolese affairs during the previous year and a half and the instantaneous deployment of Rwandan troops to the DRC after the rebellion began created the perception among ordinary Congolese that the RCD was little more than a foreign creation dominated by outside (and internal) Tutsi influence. From its inception, the group was roundly condemned as an "instrument of neighboring countries created to serve their interests."^[31] This widespread suspicion of the RCD was reinforced by Kabila's success in stoking anti-Tutsi sentiment both before the war and during its early stages, making it particularly difficult for the group to generate indigenous support to carry the rebellion forward.

A third reason Rwanda failed to achieve definitive success during the second Congolese war was Uganda's decision to withdraw its support and wage its own war effort separate from Rwanda. The breakdown in the relationship was surprising in the sense that the two ruling regimes (not the countries per se) share a rather complex regional history. The RPF rebels that came to power in Rwanda in 1994 had spent much of their adult lives in Uganda as refugees. Many of them had fought with Yoweri Museveni's National Revolutionary Movement (NRM) during the Ugandan civil war and were awarded prominent positions in the Ugandan army after Museveni came to power in 1986.^[32] During the 1990-1994 Rwandan civil war, the RPF received critical support from Uganda, especially during the first year of the conflict when the group suffered early defeats at the hands of the Rwandan Hutu army.

After the RPF victory in Rwanda, relations between the new Tutsi-led regime and Uganda remained positive. In 1996, Uganda lent both moral and military support to the Rwanda-ADFL campaign to overthrow Mobutu whose failure to address the continued presence of Ugandan rebels in northeastern DRC was having an increasingly deleterious impact on that country's own security.^[33] When Rwanda re-entered the DRC in August 1998, Uganda's decision to commit troops in support of the anti-Kabila rebellion was entirely consistent with the history of cooperation between the two countries.

But it quickly became clear that the two allies had fundamentally different conceptions of how the second rebellion should proceed. During the first six months of fighting, Uganda repeatedly voiced its displeasure toward Rwanda's "unilateral" creation of the RCD.^[34] Rwanda's dominant influence and Uganda's belief that it had to assert more control over the direction of the rebellion to increase its political-military clout in any post-Kabila order prompted the latter to encourage splits in the rebel movement. In early 1999 the RCD-Liberation Movement (RCD-ML) broke away from the larger, Rwandan-backed RCD-Goma "core" rebel group and aligned with Uganda. At roughly the same time as the RCD-ML split, Uganda also sponsored the creation of a northern-based rebel group called the Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC), which soon after its formation emerged as the most cohesive of the anti-Kabila rebel movements. These divisions allowed Uganda to open its own front in the war against Kabila, focusing military operations in the north and northwest where its rebel proxies were based. Open conflict between Rwandan and Ugandan troops in the northeastern city of Kisangani in August 1999 and early 2000 further revealed the extent to which relations between the prior allies had deteriorated.^[35] As a result of this fallout, Rwanda was forced to fight much of the second Congolese war without the support of its central regional ally.

The final factor contributing to Rwanda's failure to duplicate the success of its 1996 campaign against Mobutu was the decisive role played by Kabila's regional allies during the war. At least four countries—Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Chad—committed troops to defend Kabila and help stem the rebel advance, particularly against Rwanda-RCD-Goma operations in central and

southeastern DRC. The military commitment of Kabila's allies dramatically altered the balance of forces in the DRC, a shift made more important since Rwanda and Uganda were no longer fighting a united front, and even were clashing with each other. Angola deployed 3,000 to 5,000 troops during the course of the conflict, Namibia 2,000, and Zimbabwe an estimated 11,000 to 13,000.[36] These foreign forces augmented Kabila's FAC with artillery and tank support, air power (Angola), and generally better-trained soldiers. Moreover, Kabila's foreign allies achieved decisive tactical victories early in the war that helped thwart Rwanda's attempts to secure a quick, blitzkrieg-like victory. For example, in late August 1998 Angola attacked and defeated Rwanda-RCD positions in the DRC's Lower Congo province as they were preparing to march on Kinshasa. This intervention is widely believed to have "saved" Kabila from what otherwise appeared to be certain defeat by Rwandan-led forces. When the focus of the rebellion shifted back east after the first few months of fighting, Zimbabwean and Namibian troops (together with Angolan air power) proved vital to the defense of Mbuji-Mayi—a strategic diamond-producing town considered the "gateway to both the west and south of Congo"[37]—and Mbandaka, another strategically important city located along one of the Congo River's main tributaries in northwest Equateur province and home to one of DRC's regional airports.

Since Uganda had suspended its support as early as August 1999 and Burundi's modest military contribution never exceeded 1,000 troops, Rwanda was forced to engage an adversary that enjoyed extensive and steadfast regional backing, essentially alone. For Rwanda, this reality was a stark contrast to the "utterly isolated" Mobutist state it had defeated only two years before.[38] During the second Congolese war, it would be Rwanda that found itself isolated. While Rwanda and its foreign and rebel allies were able to conquer and consolidate control over one-third of the DRC within two years of war, the intervention of Kabila's regional backers stemmed any further advance and helped produce the military stalemate that would eventually force Kabila's adversaries to the negotiating table.

A Diminished Threat?

Rwanda's willingness to sign the Pretoria Agreement on July 31, 2002 and withdraw nearly all of its troops from the DRC three months later was not based solely on general wartime exhaustion. During the course of the war, Rwanda scored a number of victories against the ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* that helped reduce the threat emanating from Hutu bases in the DRC. In 2001 alone, Rwandan troops killed or captured more than 4,000 ex-FAR/*Interahamwe* fighters (now called the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, or FDLR), critically weakening the group's capacity to conduct military operations.[39] By assuming the offensive and engaging the *génocidaires* on Congolese soil, Rwanda limited their ability to wage war directly on Rwandan territory. Since it was this fear that had been the country's preeminent security concern since 1994 (a fear that was reinforced by the 1997-1998 northwest insurgency), Rwanda's military occupation of both North and South Kivu as well as other strategic areas in central and southeastern DRC during the war were important successes, even in the absence of regime change in the Congo.

Yet despite the weakened state of the newly named FDLR in the aftermath of the second Congolese war and an acknowledgement by Rwanda that the group "no longer constitutes an immediate threat to [the Rwandan] government," Rwanda maintains that the 8,000 to 10,000 Hutu rebels in the DRC pose a security "problem" that will only grow worse if not decisively addressed.[40] In its view, little has been done in the postwar period by those responsible to achieve this aim. Since Rwanda withdrew its troops in late 2002, it has continually expressed its dissatisfaction with DRC President Joseph Kabila's lack of commitment to disarm remaining FDLR fighters—a disregard which it feels constitutes a direct violation of the Pretoria Agreement, specifically the clause obligating the DRC government to "continue with the process of tracking down and disarming the *Interahamwe* and ex-FAR within its territory." [41] Rwanda has been similarly critical of the United Nations Organization Mission in the DRC (MONUC) disarmament effort, lamenting the operation's "leniency" and the lack of will within the UN to "disarm this force

[FDLR] that committed genocide in Rwanda.”^[42] A glaring disparity between MONUC’s current troop strength (16,000 in May 2005) with that of past peacekeeping operations confronting less pressing security demands and much less territory to cover (the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone fielded more than 17,000 peacekeepers at its peak in 2002) has reinforced a feeling of cynicism and impatience on the part of Rwanda. The country’s leaders have also exhorted the UN to grant more explicit enforcement authority to MONUC peacekeepers, emphasizing that increased troop strength alone would mean little without a clear mandate outlining what “[peacekeepers] can do when they are actually on the ground.”^[43]

Bukavu: Playing with Fire

In this context, Rwanda remains poised to re-enter the DRC. In late May 2004, when 3,000 dissident ex-RCD-Goma troops of the newly integrated Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) clashed with loyalist troops and temporarily seized control of Bukavu, the prospect of Rwandan intervention to back its former rebel ally appeared likely. The fact that the mutiny was being justified partly on the grounds that Congolese troops were committing “genocide” against the Banyamulenge made the situation particularly tense, given that Rwanda’s two previous interventions had been preceded by similar circumstances. Although Rwandan troops did not physically intervene and take part in the attack on Bukavu, a United Nations Panel of Experts report released in July 2004 concluded that Rwanda had supported the rebellion both “directly and indirectly” and that the country even “exerted a degree of command and control over [the renegade] forces.”^[44] The report affirmed that Rwandan government officials helped General Laurent Nkunda—one of two dissident commanders who spearheaded the attack on Bukavu—recruit additional fighters from inside Rwanda prior to the attack. Rwanda also provided sanctuary for Colonel Jules Mutebusi (General Nkunda’s co-conspirator) and an estimated 300 dissident soldiers when they withdrew from Bukavu in mid-June 2004 following increased pressure from MONUC officials.

Unsurprisingly, Rwanda’s role in the Bukavu crisis further antagonized its relationship with the DRC. In late June 2004 when DRC President Joseph Kabila announced that he was deploying 10,000 Congolese soldiers to eastern DRC to facilitate the “integration of former rivals into a national army,” Rwanda sternly denounced the move as an unwarranted act of aggression and “offensive posturing.”^[45] Rwandan Foreign Minister Charles Murigande declared that his country would not “sit back and watch” while Congolese troops deployed en masse along the Rwandan border. Having relinquished its buffer zone in the Kivus after withdrawing its troops in late 2002, Rwanda feared that a large-scale deployment of FARDC troops to eastern DRC would immediately place it on the defensive in any future conflict. A reinforced Congolese troop presence in the area would also impede Rwanda’s ability to maintain influence over ex-RCD-Goma elements, the utility of which was made palpably clear during the seizure of Bukavu.

Searching for a Casus Belli?

Despite the increasingly rancorous war of words between Rwanda and the DRC in the wake of Bukavu, Rwanda soon recognized that no future military intervention could be justified solely on the basis of countering would-be aggression from Congolese troops or pre-empting a threat of invasion from the DRC. Nor did it need to settle for such crude, balance-of-power justifications. Since its first campaign in the Congo, Rwanda had successfully invoked the threat posed by Hutu insurgents using Congolese territory to strike Rwanda as an acceptable pretext for war. The fact that many of these militants had taken part in the 1994 genocide had further legitimized Rwanda’s successive interventions and allowed it to assume a significant degree of moral authority in its dealings with the Congo, particularly since the international community had done woefully little to stop the genocide or mitigate its pernicious aftereffects. Rwanda’s ability to launch repeated interventions into the Congo since 1996 had thus been linked directly to the enhanced freedom of

action it enjoyed as a result of widespread deference to its security concerns and the perceived credibility of the Hutu threat.

Accordingly, in late 2004 Rwanda abandoned its focus on condemning Congolese “aggression” and instead returned to the Hutu insurgent threat as its primary rationale for possible military action in the DRC. On 30 November, Rwandan President Paul Kagame told the Rwandan Senate that the failure of “the UN and other countries” to disarm the FDLR would force Rwanda to re-enter the Congo.[46] In December, Rwandan Foreign Minister Charles Murigande emphasized that the “problem of ex-FAR/*Interahamwe*” required a decisive solution.[47] That same month Richard Sezibera, Rwanda’s Special Envoy to the Great Lakes, claimed that DRC-based FDLR fighters had been responsible for eleven attacks on Rwandan territory in the previous three months. All of these public remarks were intended to convince would-be detractors that Rwanda had an inherent right to intervene in the Congo just as it had done in 1996 and 1998.

For many observers this sudden blitz of explanations and statements regarding the “imperative” of Rwandan intervention seemed more an effort to provide *ex post facto* justification for an incursion that had already occurred than it was to build a case for future military action. In a particularly ambiguous segment of his November speech to the Rwandan Senate, Kagame suggested that operations to search out and “disarm” Hutu militants in the DRC may already have started, saying “it could even be happening now.”[48] But while speculation abounded as to whether or not Rwandan troops had actually crossed the border into the DRC—in December, MONUC reportedly sighted 100 Rwandan troops in North Kivu[49]—it soon became clear that no large-scale troop movement across the border had occurred. While Rwanda had almost certainly begun preparations for another intervention, by late 2004 it had not yet re-entered the DRC in full force.

The heightened tensions between Rwanda and the DRC in late 2004 were defused by a number of subsequent events that served to slow the momentum towards open conflict. In February 2005 the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs, Theresa Whelan, traveled to Rwanda and met with Rwandan President Paul Kagame, presumably to discuss Rwanda’s ongoing security concerns and temper the country’s increasingly aggressive stance. From February to April 2005 successive meetings of the Tripartite Commission established in 2004 between Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC resulted in an agreement to “put an end to the threat posed to the security of these three countries by the presence and activities of negative forces” in the eastern DRC.[50] The FDLR was explicitly mentioned in the agreement, suggesting a deliberate effort to recognize and promote Rwandan security interests as fundamental to peace in the region. Finally, on April 15, 2005, approximately two weeks after a watershed announcement by the FDLR renouncing the use of force against Rwanda and condemning the 1994 genocide, Rwandan President Paul Kagame traveled to the U.S. and met with President George W. Bush who expressed hope that Rwanda would proceed in its “efforts to move forward” with reconciliation and reintegration.[51] In just four months, the looming prospect of a third Rwandan incursion that had arisen in the wake of the Bukavu crisis had diminished to the point where a future Rwanda-DRC conflict seemed unlikely.

Prospects for Peace

The FDLR announcement on March 31, 2005 that it was abandoning its armed struggle and would henceforth “refrain from any offensive operation against Rwanda”[52] certainly has the potential to be a breakthrough for peace in the region. All previous Rwandan interventions in the Congo (and near-interventions for that matter) had been based principally on the security threat posed by Hutu insurgents in the DRC which had consistently planned and launched attacks into Rwanda from bases on Congolese territory since late 1994. If the estimated 8,000 to 10,000 FDLR fighters remaining in the Congo were to voluntarily disarm and repatriate, Rwandan security concerns would presumably be addressed and the underlying rationale for its foreign policy since 1994 rendered irrelevant. Having repeatedly stressed that the primary reason for war with the

DRC was a failure by that country to rein in Hutu militants, Rwanda would be obliged to moderate its behavior and assume a less aggressive stance towards its neighbor, lest it be viewed as an obstructionist to peace. Without an “enemy” to point to as justification for military action, Rwanda would have less latitude than it enjoyed in the past to pursue its foreign policy objectives in the DRC.

Even though the FDLR “declaration of peace” has removed one of Rwanda’s primary rationales for intervening in the DRC, the prospects for an enduring peace between the two countries remains relatively dim. The first reason relates to Rwanda’s skepticism of FDLR intentions. After nearly ten years of being subjected to destabilizing cross-border incursions by an insurgent force whose members had perpetrated or otherwise identified themselves with the 1994 genocide, Rwanda’s reaction to the FDLR’s newfound desire for peace has been tepid at best. Upon learning of the FDLR’s decision to disarm, Rwanda’s Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Richard Sezibera remarked, “If they [the FDLR] said it, it’s a good thing.”^[53] Other Rwandan officials have stressed that while the decision is welcome, they believe it has more to do with increased pressure from the DRC government (the “Rome negotiations” that led to the FDLR declaration were initiated by DRC President Joseph Kabila) and the threat of Rwandan military action than a genuine desire for peace on the part of the FDLR. This suspicion of FDLR motives has been deepened by the myriad political conditions the group seeks to demand from Rwanda, including status as a legitimate political party, general amnesty from prosecution for crimes committed during the genocide, and a formal recognition by the Rwandan government of a “second” genocide against the Hutu.^[54]

Since Rwanda is unlikely to negotiate directly with the FDLR and insists the group will receive no concessions for laying down its arms and repatriating, the actual disarmament and repatriation of the FDLR is likely to remain stalled. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that all FDLR commanders will be as amenable to peace as the movement’s leader, Ignace Murwanashyaka, has been thus far. On May 12, 2005, Murwanashyaka began traveling throughout eastern Congo to “educate” FDLR combatants about the peace declaration,^[55] a process that may take a considerable amount of time and effort and definitely a degree of coaxing and cajoling. Rwandan impatience will surely grow if hardline FDLR commanders stonewall progress toward disarmament.

Moreover, a partial repatriation of the more moderate members of the group could actually *increase* prospects for conflict by encouraging Rwanda to place more pressure on FDLR fighters choosing to remain in the DRC. In the event a portion of the FDLR does reject peace with Rwanda, the onus would again be on the DRC to forcibly disarm the remaining fighters. If the DRC government is too slow (or unwilling) to do so, Rwanda could conceivably launch a third military intervention in the Congo aimed at extirpating remaining FDLR fighters. Such a move would provoke a strong response from the DRC sending the two countries down a lamentably familiar road toward war.

Beyond the FDLR “problem,” two other interrelated factors could significantly increase prospects of a third Congolese war. The first is Rwanda’s expanded conception of “national interest” developed during the 1998 war and plainly demonstrated during the June 2004 Bukavu crisis. While Hutu insurgents operating from the Congo have been the mainstay of Rwandan security strategy since 1994, the country has come to regard the DRC provinces of North and South Kivu as a sort of *chasse gardée* to be maintained regardless of a Hutu threat. After four years of occupying this region during the second Congolese war, Rwanda retained strong links to former RCD-Goma elements (both military and political officials) even after it withdrew in late 2002. These links have allowed it to exert a significant degree of influence over local developments and ultimately undermine the Congolese government’s efforts to establish authority over the region.

Rwanda’s support for ex-RCD-Goma commanders General Laurent Nkunda and Colonel Jules Mutebusi during the seizure of Bukavu was illustrative of the country’s broader security agenda.

Rwanda helped organize the “revolt,” likely in response to DRC President Joseph Kabila’s attempts to reduce RCD-Goma’s political and military predominance in South Kivu, not as a means of directly countering FDLR aggression or confronting the Hutu insurgent threat. Should Rwanda continue to insist on maintaining a sphere of influence in the Kivus—a likely possibility even if the FDLR does disarm—war could result from the DRC’s attempts to disrupt what it perceives as undue interference in its internal affairs.

Secondly, the fragility of the DRC’s postwar transition seems to suggest that one or two domestic crises could trigger the collapse of the peace process and a reversion to war. In this respect, the government’s ongoing effort to integrate ex-RCD-Goma units into the Congolese national army (the FARDC) is of particular importance. While many of RCD-Goma’s rank-and-file political officials have proved willing to participate in the DRC’s transitional government, the group’s military commanders have proved much less cooperative. Although their recalcitrance is partly a function of the lost of power integration into the national army would entail, it is probably more so a reflection of Rwanda’s continued influence over RCD-Goma hardliners, especially in the Kivus. General Laurent Nkunda, presumably with assurances from Rwanda, refused his appointment in the new national army as regional commander of the 8th military region in Goma months before his involvement in the May-June 2004 seizure of Bukavu.^[56] Other former RCD-Goma officers have turned down similarly high-ranking posts and opted to retain independent control of their troops. If DRC President Joseph Kabila is unable to induce these former rebel commanders to join the FARDC, he may seek to do so by force, particularly if the December 2005 Congolese elections result in a stronger consensus among his party and RCD-Goma moderates. The upshot of such an effort would likely be a virtual replay of the August 1998 rebellion by the Banyamulenge—this time by dissident RCD-Goma troops—providing an opening for yet another Rwandan intervention.

Conclusion

Since 1994, Rwanda’s foreign policy in the DRC has been a response to the continued presence of Hutu militants on Congolese territory, many of whom perpetrated the Rwandan genocide. In 1996, Rwanda invaded the Congo to dismantle Hutu refugee camps used by the *génocidaires* as staging grounds for launching attacks into Rwanda. The campaign was partly successful, but the Hutu threat persisted. In 1998, after suppressing an insurgency in the northwest provoked by Hutu militants that had infiltrated Rwanda from the DRC, Rwanda entered the Congo a second time, this time to defeat its ally in the 1996 war, Laurent Kabila, and root out remaining Hutu forces.

Rwanda’s second intervention marked an important shift in the country’s mode of thinking regarding its foreign policy goals in the DRC. While the 1997-1998 Hutu insurgency revealed the persistent lethality of the Hutu threat, Rwanda’s growing confidence as a regional power and dominance of Congolese affairs in the interwar period added another dimension to the country’s national security interest. This was starkly revealed during the course of the second Congolese war in which Rwanda established significant influence over North and South Kivu, including links with RCD-Goma commanders in the area. These ties have allowed Rwanda to play a decisive role in shaping local developments to advance its own objectives, as witnessed by the Bukavu crisis. Reluctant to encourage its former proxies to accept integration into the Congolese national army (which, ironically, would probably strengthen the DRC’s capacity to deal with the remaining Hutu insurgents on its territory) Rwanda has attempted to undermine the transition process in hopes of maintaining a sphere of influence in eastern Congo.

Thus the threat of future conflict between Rwanda and the DRC remains real. Rwanda’s continuing sense of vulnerability, a belief in its own moral self-righteousness stemming from the current regime’s role in ending the 1994 genocide, and its growing regional aspirations make the country particularly disposed to intervening in the Congo once again. While a complete and non-negotiable disarmament and repatriation by the FDLR or a successful effort by DRC President

Joseph Kabila and MONUC forces to forcibly disarm remaining Hutu fighters would certainly reduce the likelihood of future conflict, even such optimistic scenarios would not guarantee an enduring peace. Ultimately, it will be the interplay between the DRC's attempts to consolidate power in the midst of a postwar transition and Rwanda's efforts to maintain influence in North and South Kivu that will determine prospects for war. Since these goals are in many ways irreconcilable, the question might not be whether a third showdown between Rwanda and the DRC will occur, but rather when.

About the Author

Marcus Curtis is currently a First Lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps. He has served as a policy analyst intern at the Pentagon's Office of the Secretary of Defense for African Affairs where he conducted research on the impact of private military companies in African civil conflicts. He earned his B.S. in Political Science (Comparative Politics) from the U.S. Naval Academy, and an M.A. in National Security Studies from American Military University where he focused on conflict and security in sub-Saharan Africa.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page.

To have new issues of *Strategic Insights* delivered to your Inbox at the beginning of each month, email ccc@nps.edu with subject line "Subscribe". There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

References

1. In 1971, Mobutu Sese Seko changed the name of the country historically known as Congo, to Zaire. Upon ousting Mobutu in 1997, Laurent Kabila renamed the country the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). For the purposes of this article, "Zaire" is used to refer to Congo during Mobutu's reign, while "DRC" is used in reference to post-Mobutu Congo.
2. See the mortality study conducted by the [International Rescue Committee](#) in late 2002.
3. The FDLR was founded in 2000, bringing together remaining ex-FAR and *Interahamwe* forces in eastern Congo with other Hutu refugees who had since decided to wage war against Rwanda.
4. Norrie MacQueen, *United Nations Peacekeeping in Africa since 1960* (London: Pearson Education, 2002), 79.
5. The term *génocidaires* was used by the Tutsi-dominated RPF regime in the aftermath of the genocide to refer to ex-FAR and *Interahamwe* militia that had fled to neighboring Zaire. For a discussion of the UN failure to disarm the *génocidaires* see Tatiana Carayannis and Herbert F. Weiss, "The Democratic Republic of Congo, 1996-2002," in Jane Boulden ed., *Dealing with Conflict in Africa: The United Nations and Regional Organizations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).
6. Wm Cyrus Reed, "Guerillas in the Midst: The Former Government of Rwanda and the Alliances of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire in Eastern Zaire," in Christopher Clapham, ed., *African Guerillas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 139.
7. Tatiana Carayannis and Herbert F. Weiss, *Op Cit.*, 256-259.

8. Wm Cyrus Reed, *Op. Cit.*, 140. By this point, the *Interahamwe* militia had been more or less formally integrated into the ex-FAR as “regular” soldiers.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 139.
11. Reed, “Guerillas in the Midst,” in *African Guerillas, Op. Cit.*, 144.
12. Herbert Weiss, “[War and Peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#),” *American Diplomacy* 5, no. 3 (2000).
13. After the RPF victory in Rwanda, the group’s military wing was renamed the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) to signify its transmutation from a guerrilla organization to a national army. For a discussion of RPA involvement in the first month of the 1996-1997 Congolese war, see Kevin C. Dunn, “A Survival Guide to Kinshasa: Lessons of the Father, Passed Down to the Son,” in John F. Clark, ed., *The African Stakes of the Congo War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 56.
14. For a brief discussion of Laurent Kabila’s involvement in the Congolese rebellions of the 1960s, see *Ibid.*, 54.
15. Thom, [Op. Cit.](#)
16. Tatiana Carayannis and Herbert F. Weiss, “The Democratic Republic of Congo, 1996-2002,” in *Dealing with Conflict in Africa, Op. Cit.*, 270.
17. Thomas Ofcansky, “Rwanda: Recent History,” in *Africa South of the Sahara 2002, 31st ed.* (London: Europa Publications, 2002), 798.
18. International Crisis Group (ICG) Africa Report No. 1, “[North Kivu: Into the Quagmire? An Overview of the Current Crisis in North Kivu](#),” August 13, 1998, 8-10.
19. ICG Africa Report No. 2, “[Congo at War: A Briefing on the Internal and External Players in the Central African Conflict](#),” November 17, 1998.
20. ICG, *Op Cit.*, 9.
21. Interview with Emmanuel Gabana, “A Question of Survival,” *Le Figaro*, September 7, 1998, 4. Translated by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, FBIS Document ID FTS19980908001020.
22. Weiss, [Op. Cit.](#)
23. “[Rwandan Soldiers in Congo Ordered to Leave Country](#),” *CNN.com*, July 29, 1998. .
24. African Rights, *Rwanda: The Insurgency in the Northwest*, September 1998, 7.
25. *Ibid.*, 7-8.
26. *Ibid.*

27. Timothy Longman, "The Complex Reasons for Rwanda's Engagement in Congo," in John F. Clark, ed., *The African Stakes of the Congo War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 133.
28. Weiss, [Op. Cit.](#) There is no official estimate for the number of Rwandan troops that participated directly in the war to oust Mobutu. Most open-source estimates are consistent with Thom's assertion that the number of Rwandan troops on Congolese soil in the 1996-1997 campaign never exceeded 5,000. See Thom, [Op. Cit.](#)
29. "[Last Foreign Troops Leave DR Congo](#)," *BBC News*, October 31, 2002.
30. [Ibid.](#)
31. African Rights, *Rwanda: The Insurgency in the Northwest*, September 1998, 25-27.
32. For example, Paul Kagame became head of Ugandan military security and Fred Rwigyema, the founder of the RPF, was briefly the chief of staff of the Ugandan armed forces. See Gerard Prunier, "The Rwandan Patriotic Front," in Christopher Clapham, ed., *African Guerrillas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 128.
33. For a discussion of Uganda's security concerns in the first Congolese war see ICG Africa Report No. 2, "[Congo at War: A Briefing on the Internal and External Players in the Central African Conflict](#)."
34. International Crisis Group Africa Report No. 14, "[Uganda and Rwanda: Friends or Enemies?](#)" May 4, 2000, 8-14.
35. See ICG Africa Briefing No. 7, "[Rwanda/Uganda: A Dangerous War of Nerves](#)," December 21, 2001.
36. International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, *The Military Balance* (2000-2001, 2001-2002, 2003-2004).
37. ICG Africa Report No. 3, "[Africa's Seven-Nation War](#)," May 21, 1999, 3.
38. René Lemarchand, "Foreign Policy Making in the Great Lakes Region," in Gilbert M. Khadiagala and Terrence Lyons, eds., *African Foreign Policies: Power and Process* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers), 103.
39. Human Rights Watch World Report 2002, "[Rwanda](#)."
40. ICG interviews conducted in Kigali, Rwanda November/December 2004. See ICG Africa Briefing No. 21, "[Back to the Brink in the Congo](#)," December 17, 2004.
41. "[Text of DR Congo-Rwanda Peace Deal](#)," *BBC News*, July 31, 2002.
42. Interview with Dr. Charles Murigande, Rwandan Minister of Foreign Affairs and Regional Cooperation, "[Conflict with DRC Inevitable Without Action From the International Community](#)," *AllAfrica.com*, December 15, 2004.
43. "[Interview with Rwandan Great Lakes Special Envoy Richard Sezibera](#)," *IRIN News*, May 13, 2004.

44. "[Letter from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee conveying the report of the Group of experts](#)," *UN Document S/2004/551*, July 15, 2004.
45. "[DR Congo Troop Move Alarms Rwanda](#)," *BBC News*, June 22, 2004.
46. "[Threat of Regionalisation Hangs over Congolese Conflict](#)," *IRIN News*, December 1, 2004.
47. [Interview with Rwandan Great Lakes Special Envoy Richard Sezibera](#), *Op. Cit.*, May 13, 2004.
48. "[Rwandans 'Making DR Congo Raids'](#)," *BBC News*, November 30, 2004.
49. "[Rwandans Seen in DR Congo](#)," *BBC News Africa*, December 1, 2004.
50. "Uganda, Rwanda, DRC Agree on Rebels," *AllAfrica.com*, April 25, 2005.
51. Stephen Kaufman, Washington File White House Correspondent, "[Bush Pledges Support for Rwanda's Efforts to Move Forward](#)," April 15, 2005.
52. Marc Lacey, "Rebels in Congo Say They'll End Cross-Border Raids in Rwanda," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2005, Section A3.
53. *Ibid.* Italics added.
54. "[The Congo: Solving the FDLR Problem Once and for All](#)," *ICG, Op. Cit.*, 2.
55. "[Hutu Rebel Leader Talks to Fighters on Ending War](#)," *IRIN News*, May12, 2005.
56. "[The Congo's Transition is Failing: Crisis in the Kivus](#)," *ICG Africa Report No. 91*, March 30, 2005, 4.