



Qatar's Mediation in the DRC-Rwanda Conflict: Reimagining African Agency

by Desirée Custers and Hubert Kinkoh

Qatar's mediation of the protracted conflict between the DRC and Rwanda since March 2025 has achieved preliminary breakthroughs where previous African-led efforts faltered. But the significance of the combination of diplomatic initiatives extends beyond the immediate Great Lakes crisis. It highlights a potential shift in the landscape of African-led crisis diplomacy, where non-traditional external actors, driven by a confluence of economic interests and geopolitical ambitions, are playing increasingly influential roles that challenge the "African solutions to African problems" paradigm.

Why does it matter?

For decades, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Great Lakes region have been afflicted by cycles of violence fueled by historical grievances, competition over mineral resources, regional power plays and actions of armed factions, with the M23 armed rebel group assuming prominence in recent escalations. Accusations, notably from Kinshasa and the United Nations (UN), have consistently pointed to Rwandan backing for the M23. Kigali has denied this charge while citing its own security concerns, including the presence of hostile groups like the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) on Congolese soil. The escalation of violence since January 2025 has led to extensive loss of lives and pervasive human rights abuses, including sexual violence and summary executions. Mass displacement affecting millions makes it one of the most complex humanitarian crises in the world.

Established peace initiatives, including the Luanda Process (mediated by Angola) and the Nairobi Process (led by the East African Community, EAC¹), have struggled to yield tangible outcomes. After over two years of efforts, the Luanda Process still failed to normalize relations between DRC and Rwanda, and the government of Angola has recently stepped back from its mediating role. The Nairobi process also stalled following the DRC's expulsion of the forces for allegedly failing to attack and disarm insurgents, including the M23, and owing to strained relations between Kenya and the DRC.

Military interventions by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Southern African Development Community Mission in the Democratic Republic of

¹ The EAC is a regional intergovernmental organization consisting of Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Tanzania.

Congo, SAMIDRC) and the EAC (East African Community Regional Force, EACRF) also struggled: SAMIDRC suffered military setbacks stemming from inadequate resources and operational and logistical limitations, while the EACRF withdrew owing to political disagreements with Kinshasa over its mandate. Even the joint EAC-SADC initiative established in February 2025 by the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU) has not achieved a ceasefire. The April 2025 appointment of Togolese President Faure Gnassingbé as AU mediator in the crisis, while intended to inject new impetus, added another layer of complexity to a crowded and fragmented landscape which has complicated a coordinated mediation approach to the crisis.

This context, in addition to mounting international pressure for a resolution, made external intervention even more urgent. Here Qatar came to play an important role, as it had already established itself as a credible mediator. Previously, it helped broker the Jeddah peace agreement, which after two decades restored diplomatic ties between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and quelled tensions between Kenya and Somalia after ties had been severed for six months from December 2021. Qatar also facilitated a 2023 agreement between the United States and Rwanda, leading to the release of opposition leader Paul Rusesabagina. Beyond Africa, it has also hosted talks between the US and the Taliban and its direct communication channels with Hamas point to its long-standing reputation as a platform for dialogue.

The Qatari-led process achieved preliminary breakthroughs in a relatively short period. On 18 March 2025, Qatar facilitated historic direct talks between DRC President Félix Tshisekedi and Rwandan President Paul Kagame – the first since the escalation of the M23 rebellion – marking a crucial de-escalation at the highest political level. This breakthrough was helped by the close relationships of Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin

Hamad Al Thani to both leaders, which lent significant weight to the talks. Support from the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Al-Khulaifi, further bolstered efforts, culminating in recent discussions with the AU Commission Chairperson, Mahamoud Ali Youssouf, where both sides committed to regional stability. Qatar also brokered ceasefire agreements between the DRC and Rwanda, and, notably, between the DRC government and M23. This shift – where Kinshasa moved from outright refusal to negotiate to direct engagement – was facilitated by Qatar's ability to bring all key parties to the table, overcoming previous accusations of bias in African-led mediation tracks. The significant concessions by the DRC were likely influenced by the introduction of new incentives and leverage, including active backing from the US and the promise of a substantial minerals deal with both DRC and Rwanda. These efforts culminated in the signing of the "Declaration of Principles" in Washington D.C. on 25 April 2025, establishing a framework for peace, security cooperation, and economic integration. Following this, representatives from the DRC, France, Qatar, Rwanda, Togo, and the US convened in Qatar to develop a draft peace agreement which further indicated broad international support.

What is the big picture?

The series of talks and agreements do not take place within a geopolitical vacuum. The mediation efforts combine Qatar's pursuit of strategic national interests and US strategic competition with China within a broader context, where access to critical raw materials is a key geostrategic objective.

On the one hand, the mediation efforts align with Qatar's aims to enhance its global standing and solidify its reputation as a key diplomatic actor in line with its Third National Development Strategy. But beyond asserting itself as an important mediator, protecting its multi-billion-dollar investments from instability serves as an additional incentive for Qatar's direct involvement in the Great Lakes. Notably, Qatar Airways has agreed to a 60% stake in Rwanda's new \$1.3 billion international airport, positioning it as a major aviation player in the region. Furthermore, Qatar has reportedly invested in renovation and management of three airports in the DRC.

On the other hand, Doha's efforts are explicitly underwritten by US promises of a minerals deal, indicating that US strategic and economic interests were pivotal to the launch and progression of the mediation. In essence, the US involvement aims to offer Kinshasa an alternative to Chinese investment and influence in the region, as Chinese companies have established a dominant presence in the Congolese mining sector, particularly in cobalt. In parallel, the US is pursuing a formal security agreement with the DRC that would allow for preferential access to the DRC's vast mineral resources. The proposed deal thus aims to generate lucrative dividends by facilitating US investment in the extraction and processing of critical minerals abundant in eastern DRC, such as coltan, tin, and tungsten – all vital for global high-tech industries. In addition to the envisaged peace deal expected to be signed next month, Rwanda and the DRC are due to sign separate bilateral economic agreements with the US government.

Qatari mediation efforts being seemingly more effective than African-led initiatives in advancing peace and stability in eastern DRC suggests that there are real benefits of mediation by non-African players who can bring different forms of leverage. It also reinforces a broader trend of shifting power and agency in global crisis diplomacy,

where mediation is no longer the prerogative of multilateral institutions like the UN and the AU, or bilateral African actors. These developments raise profound questions about the evolving nature of conflict resolution on the continent, the role of external actors, and the viability of the “African solutions to African problems” paradigm, which advocates for African countries and regional institutions to take the lead in resolving the challenges confronting them, instead of relying on external interventions.

Critical voices have noted a diminished ability of the AU and regional economic communities and mechanisms (RECs/RMs) in mediating conflicts within their spheres of influence. And although the trilateral meeting in Doha reiterated Kagame's and Tshisekedi's support to the EAC-SADC process as the primary mechanism towards a sustainable solution to the conflict, diplomatic actions along with the joint statements such as that issued on 30 April 2025 by representatives from the DRC, France, Qatar, Rwanda, Togo, and the US indicate a broader endorsement of the Qatari track and a sidelining of the AU and its RECs in the mediation of conflicts in Africa.

Additionally, the pronounced emphasis on a minerals deal as a central component of the peace process underscores a burgeoning trend of ‘resource diplomacy,’ where access to strategic raw materials becomes an explicit and transactional element of peace negotiations. While a stable DRC could boost state revenue from mining with ripple effects on human development, resource access in exchange for stability carries significant risks of retaining resource-rich African countries as arenas for proxy and great power competition. Besides, a ceasefire agreement reached too quickly and without adequately resolving the underlying issues could primarily benefit political elites and external corporate actors, exacerbating the “resource curse” dynamic that has long plagued the DRC.

What comes next?

Qatari-led mediation has led to renewed, albeit cautious, optimism that one of Africa's most protracted and complex crises could be resolved. However, its long-term viability remains uncertain as it will be challenging to translate the commitments made in agreements and declarations into tangible peace and security outcomes. Long-term success largely hinges on the ability of all parties to overcome deep-seated suspicion and resolve fundamental disagreements. Qatar and the US will also need to maintain sustained and coordinated diplomatic engagement that extends beyond the signing of initial agreements.

At the same time, Doha's approach offers potential lessons for the AU as it struggles to deal with other conflicts on the continent. First, the AU needs to adapt to a multipolar world order where external actors, driven by diverse and sometimes competing interests, will increasingly seek to play roles in conflicts across Africa. Here, developing frameworks for constructive engagement while safeguarding African agency and priorities will be essential. Second, there is a clear need to strengthen its institutional capacity for peace and security, including well delineated mandates for mediation efforts and more effective coordination within a robust AU strategy for the DRC and the Great Lakes. Lastly, perceived impartiality and inclusivity through sustained, high-level political engagement is critical in its mediation efforts.

About the Authors

Hubert Kinkoh is a Senior Researcher at CARPO, currently focusing on the Robert Bosch Stiftung-funded project on 'West Asian and Sub-Saharan African partnerships in Flux' (WASSAP). With a decade of experience, his research delves into the complex interplay between peace, security, governance, and how external influences impinge on African states and societies. Hubert's expertise is frequently sought by government agencies, research institutions, and international media for his insights on Africa's evolving relations with the Gulf States and the multifaceted challenges of peace and security governance on the continent.

Contact: kinkoh@carpo-bonn.org

Desirée Custers is Project Manager and CARPO's Representative in Brussels. She has several years of experience in the field of international relations, including track 2 and 1,5 diplomacy in the context of West Asia. Desirée has previously worked for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) programs at the Stimson Center and the EastWest Institute. She is currently involved in CARPO's West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa Partnerships in Flux (WASSAP) project.

Contact: custers@carpo-bonn.org