



QUARTERLY PEACE AND SECURITY ANALYSIS IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

Q1 2026

JANUARY – MARCH

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This Q1 2026 analysis is prepared by Never Again Rwanda and examines critical developments in the Great Lakes Region during January through March. The analysis builds on earlier regional assessments and incorporates updated information reflecting recent diplomatic, military, and political shifts across the region.

Understanding the ongoing conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo requires engagement with perspectives and grievances that remain marginal in dominant international discourse. This analysis gives particular attention to the systematic targeting of Congolese Tutsi and Banyamulenge populations, whose protection and political inclusion remain essential to any durable peace framework. We recognize that conflict affects multiple communities and that comprehensive peace requires addressing grievances across affected populations.

A central argument of this analysis is that peace processes have consistently marginalized the ethnic persecution and dehumanizing rhetoric that sustain the AFC/M23 insurgency. Diplomatic frameworks that treat these issues as secondary rather than central to negotiation agendas are unlikely to achieve lasting resolution. Sustainable peace requires international actors, the DRC government, and regional stakeholders to place protection of persecuted communities and governance inclusion at the center of their engagement.

This analysis is designed for policymakers, development partners, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders navigating the complex security and political landscape of the Great Lakes Region. We aim to provide clarity on evolving dynamics while emphasizing that durable peace depends on addressing the root causes of conflict rather than managing symptoms through repeated diplomatic cycles.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first quarter of 2026 witnessed a critical transition from intensive military escalation toward fragile de-escalation mechanisms in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. This shift did not reflect the resolution of underlying conflicts or the achievement of strategic objectives by major belligerents. Rather, it represented a recognition by all parties that continued large-scale military operations had produced a stalemate and that marginal gains achieved through violence carried increasing international costs and decreasing military returns.

The quarter began with heightened tensions and repositioning following the December 2025 Uvira capture. Over the January to March period, all major actors involved in the conflict indicated emerging interest in confidence-building measures, ceasefire verification mechanisms, and incremental deconfliction arrangements. The United States, Qatar, and bilateral diplomatic channels all sustained mediation efforts, though these remained vulnerable to breakdown due to fundamental disagreements over territorial control, armed group integration into state structures, resource taxation and economic control, and the structural place of persecuted communities within regional governance arrangements. The AFC/M23 consolidation of territorial and administrative control in the Kivus proceeded throughout the quarter with minimal territorial reversal. The movement continued demonstrating administrative capacity through management of local governance structures, restoration of basic public services including electricity and water supply, and establishment of dispute resolution mechanisms. Simultaneously, the movement's control of key mineral extraction zones provided sustained economic resources, enabling operational autonomy and reducing dependence on external support. These developments indicated that military solutions to the conflict had exhausted their utility and that a durable peace required direct political engagement addressing the movement's core grievances regarding the protection of persecuted Congolese Tutsi populations and governance inclusion.

The DRC government's approach to mediation fragmented international leverage through simultaneous engagement with multiple competing diplomatic tracks. Rather than committing to comprehensive engagement within a single coherent framework, Kinshasa pursued selective participation in the Doha Process, bilateral negotiations, and other initiatives while resisting implementation of agreed commitments. This strategy postponed difficult political choices regarding governance reform, inclusion of persecuted communities, and acceptance of new regional security arrangements.

International mediators, despite substantial engagement, remained inadequately focused on the systematic ethnic persecution of Tutsi and Banyamulenge populations that sustains the conflict and drives AFC/M23's persistence. Instead of treating anti-Tutsi violence, dehumanizing rhetoric, and systematic discrimination as central to peace negotiations, these issues remained marginalized as secondary concerns. This fundamental gap meant that peace frameworks achieved through negotiation might secure temporary deconfliction without addressing the structural drivers that enable renewed escalation.

Across the broader Great Lakes region, significant political and security developments during the quarter shaped the operational environment and constrained diplomatic options. Rwanda faced U.S. sanctions on the Rwanda Defense Force over alleged support to AFC/M23, creating medium-term constraints on Western military cooperation while leaving external deployments and operational capacity largely unaffected. Kenya navigated rising domestic political tensions ahead of the 2027 elections while confronting sustained terrorist threats from al-Shabaab. Burundi maintained a delicate balancing act between external military deployments and internal elite tensions over defense policy and resource allocation. Tanzania continued managing post-election repercussions amid governance challenges and opposition management. Uganda consolidated political power following the January elections while navigating regional military commitments and succession questions regarding the potential transition after President Museveni.

These developments indicate that sustainable peace in eastern DRC will require a fundamental reorientation of international and regional approaches away from fragmented military and diplomatic strategies toward genuinely integrated frameworks that simultaneously address state security concerns and non-state armed group grievances rooted in identity-based persecution and political exclusion.

CONTEXT ¹

Before examining the first quarter of 2026, readers should understand the critical developments that shaped the operational environment at year's end. In December 2025, the AFC/M23 captured the strategically significant town of Uvira in South Kivu, a key cross-border trade and transport hub on the northern shore of Lake Tanganyika opposite Burundi. This offensive represented a significant advance southward and triggered heightened regional concern regarding spillover effects into neighboring countries.

Simultaneously, the United States brokered the Washington Accords between the DRC and Rwanda in December 2025, committing both parties to mutual respect for territorial sovereignty, Rwanda's disengagement of forces, and the DRC's neutralization of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). These agreements represented the primary international diplomatic framework entering 2026, though their implementation faced substantial obstacles.

The broader context also included the failure of Angola's Luanda Process as a mediating framework earlier in 2025, the consolidation of AFC/M23's control over mineral-rich areas generating estimated revenue streams of approximately \$800,000 monthly from tantalum taxation alone, and the emergence of parallel governance structures across North and South Kivu that demonstrated AFC/M23's capacity to sustain administrative functions beyond temporary military occupation.

REGIONAL OVERVIEW: Q1 2026 DEVELOPMENTS

The Diplomatic Architecture and Washington Accords Implementation

The quarter opened with the Washington Accords signed in December 2025, serving as the primary diplomatic framework for addressing the crisis in eastern DRC and broader regional tensions. These U.S.-facilitated agreements between the DRC and Rwanda contained several explicit commitments: mutual respect for territorial sovereignty; Rwanda's lifting of Defensive measures; the DRC's commitment to neutralize the FDLR; promotion of genocide ideology prevention; and enhanced civilian protection measures.

¹ For a comprehensive analysis of these developments and earlier regional dynamics, refer to NAR's Analysis of the Peace and Security Situation in the Great Lakes Region, which provides a detailed examination of the AFC/M23 origins, the 2009 peace agreement failures, and the historical context shaping the current conflict trajectory.

Rather than delivering immediate implementation, the first quarter saw both countries engage in strategic positioning while testing each other's commitment to framework principles. Rwanda maintained official denials of direct military presence in eastern DRC despite regional and international assessments indicating between 5,000 and 7,000 Rwandan soldiers operating in the region as of late 2025, according to U.S. officials and other external observers. The DRC government continued insisting on prior Rwandan force withdrawal as a precondition for progress, while Rwanda maintained that neutralization of the FDLR and lifting of defensive measures must occur first. This sequencing disagreement allowed both parties to justify inaction while attributing responsibility for non-compliance to the other side.

Parallel mediation efforts continued under Qatari facilitation following the collapse of the Angola-led Luanda Process in early 2025. The Doha Process engaged all parties, including AFC/M23, the DRC government, Rwanda, and supporting regional actors, in preliminary discussions regarding deconfliction, prisoner transfers, and humanitarian access. These negotiations proceeded without major breakthroughs but sustained incremental momentum through the quarter, creating an alternative channel to the bilateral Washington Accords framework. The existence of competing tracks created operational complications, as each party could selectively invoke different frameworks to justify positions or delay concessions.

AFC/M23 Consolidation and Territorial Control

The AFC/M23 maintained a clear posture throughout Q1 2026 regarding territorial control and governance consolidation. In late January, the movement issued an explicit communiqué through spokesperson Lawrence Kanyuka stating that the movement "will not withdraw from any entity within the liberated territories," citing gains achieved in security, governance, and an unwavering commitment to defend and protect civilian populations. This public statement reflected an internal strategic assessment that previous withdrawals, particularly in 2012-2013, had resulted in the government's failure to implement agreed measures and subsequent resumed persecution of the Congolese Tutsi populations.

The movement retained operational control of strategic locations, including Goma and Bukavu, the provincial capitals of North and South Kivu, respectively, along with key supply routes and two operational airports. This territorial control encompassed areas containing significant mineral wealth, particularly the Rubaya region, which produces approximately fifteen to twenty percent of the world's coltan. According to available intelligence assessments, AFC/M23 collected taxes on mining operations at approximately fifteen percent on tantalum, generating estimated revenue of \$800,000 monthly through taxing the extraction and trade of coltan alone. Beyond coltan, the movement dominated mining zones producing gold, tin, and other 3T minerals in areas such as Lumbishi, Numbi, and Kamanyola, moving these resources across borders and significantly funding its operations.

This economic control translated into operational autonomy that reduced dependency on external support and enabled sustained military operations without reliance on regular supply flows from supporting states. The movement's access to border areas facilitated trade and movement of goods, providing logistical depth that strengthened operational resilience. Internally, AFC/M23 controlled key taxation points and trade routes, generating additional revenue streams beyond mineral extraction.

AFC/M23 Governance Consolidation and Administrative Reach

Beyond military control and resource extraction, AFC/M23 demonstrated increasing capacity to consolidate governance functions across occupied territories. The movement systematically replaced state and customary authorities with loyalists, converting traditional jurisdictions into formal administrative units and assuming functions normally associated with government, including land management, education oversight, basic public administration, and control over population movement, returns, and transit centers.

In multiple occupied areas, AFC/M23 demonstrated the capacity to reduce opportunistic criminality, regulate movement, and enforce public order more predictably than state forces had managed in preceding years. This security performance had significant political consequences: populations that experienced fewer daily threats, less predation, and more predictable rules gradually recalibrated expectations regarding who could govern. The restoration and normalization of essential public services provided additional political advantage. In areas under AFC/M23 control, reported improvements included reliability of electricity and water supply, reopening of schools and health facilities, and more regular functioning of markets. These visible service outcomes translated into powerful political messaging that normal life was possible under the movement's authority.

However, critical governance deficiencies remained unresolved. Most fundamentally, the absence of a conventional, credible justice system created a governance ceiling limiting the movement's capacity to consolidate permanent political authority. While AFC/M23 had established arbitration mechanisms to handle disputes and discipline, these were not rooted in the national legal framework, lacked procedural safeguards, and remained vulnerable to politicization and arbitrariness. Justice represents not merely dispute resolution, but the institutional mechanism through which rights are protected, abuses are checked, and social trust is rebuilt. The lack of an independent and conventional justice system limited legal predictability for land rights and commercial activity, undermined accountability for abuses, and entrenched rule by discretion rather than the rule of law.

Additionally, the suspension of banking and formal financial services remained a critical fault line that AFC/M23 could not independently resolve. Unlike policing or local administration, banking access depends on national and international financial infrastructure remaining controlled directly or indirectly by Kinshasa. Without banks, salaries, business liquidity, remittances, and formal commercial transactions were constrained, creating long-term economic bottlenecks and limiting investment confidence. Yet the political effect proved double-edged: while the banking shutdown damaged the local economy, it also contributed to the perceived isolation of the Kinshasa government in occupied areas. Civilians relying on banking services increasingly interpreted prolonged suspension as collective punishment or neglect, reinforcing narratives that the central government was indifferent to basic needs.

U.S. Sanctions and International Pressure

On 2 March 2026, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control announced comprehensive sanctions targeting the Rwanda Defense Force and four senior military officials over alleged support to AFC/M23. Those sanctioned included Vincent Nyakarundi, Army Chief of Staff of the RDF; Major General Ruki Karusisi, commander of the 5th Infantry Division; Mubarakh Muganga, Chief of Defense Staff; and Stanislas Gashugi. Accusations included provision of training, operational assistance, and advanced military equipment such as GPS jamming systems, air defense assets, drones, and other materiel.

The sanctions represented a significant escalation of U.S. policy pressure on Rwanda and signaled declining American tolerance for continued support to AFC/M23. Washington justified the measures as a response to continued conflict and reported violations of the U.S.-brokered peace process in the region. The announcement coincided with broader international pressure regarding Rwanda's role in eastern DRC, though Kigali had consistently denied direct military presence until the Rwandan Ambassador to the United States acknowledged security coordination with AFC/M23, partially validating international allegations.

Internally, the sanctions carried limited immediate impact on Rwanda, given the absence of large-scale security threats and the continued stability of domestic institutions. However, the measures created medium-term complications for Rwanda's defense modernization and Western security partnerships. The sanctions constrained RDF access to external military cooperation, including potential limits on U.S. training programs and reduced opportunities for placements in Western institutions. These constraints created a broader reassessment of defense procurement from the U.S. and potentially some European partners, particularly for sensitive systems and advanced equipment, while slowing acquisition timelines and increasing uncertainty in long-term modernization planning.

The measures also restricted access to U.S.-linked financial and logistical systems and exposed third-country actors, particularly banks and suppliers, to secondary sanctions risk and ownership-linked designation rules, which indirectly complicated procurement and payment channels tied to defense activities. Rwanda responded by accelerating diversification of defense partnerships with alternative suppliers, a response demonstrating institutional flexibility despite sanctions pressure.

Externally, the sanctions did not materially disrupt Rwanda's UN-mandated deployments or its external operations. Rwanda's Central African Republic deployment operated within multilateral financing and command structures insulated from bilateral sanctions. Rwanda's deployment in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado Province, where over 5,000 Rwandan troops conducted operations against Islamic State Mozambique, remained supported by the European Union despite some hesitation regarding continued funding. The strategic importance of the TotalEnergies Liquefied Natural Gas project to European energy diversification ensured that EU support continued or remained likely to be restructured despite sanctions pressure on Rwanda.

FDLR Disarmament Campaign and Structural Challenges

In late March 2026, the DRC government launched a renewed offensive against the FDLR, initially emphasizing voluntary surrender and repatriation to Rwanda. This campaign represented partial implementation of the Washington Accords commitments to neutralize the group. The operation targeted FDLR command structures and fighting positions across eastern DRC, though success remained limited due to the group's integration into Congolese military forces and its dispersal across multiple locations.

The FDLR disarmament campaign highlighted fundamental challenges in regional peace efforts. Rather than operating as a unified, territorially concentrated force, FDLR remnants had become embedded within armed structures of the DRC military. FDLR fighters who had integrated into the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo retained their ideological orientation and combat effectiveness while operating under the formal institutional umbrella of state military forces. This integration meant that distinguishing combatants for disarmament purposes proved extraordinarily difficult.

The success of the disarmament campaign depended on the willingness among fighters to surrender, a factor that remained limited throughout the quarter. Many FDLR personnel remained committed to combating what they viewed as Tutsi dominance in the region and harbored deep fears regarding personal safety if disarmed and exposed to Rwandan custody. Simultaneously, the Congolese military itself lacked interest in forcibly disarming units containing experienced and battle-hardened personnel. This created de facto impediment to implementation and meant that disarmament required broader institutional reform of the Congolese military rather than a discrete counterinsurgency operation.

The FDLR's ideological anti-Tutsi positioning and continued integration into state military structures created an enabling environment for violence against Congolese Tutsi and Banyamulenge populations. The group had historically engaged in systematic killings, sexual violence, and dehumanizing rhetoric targeting these populations. The failure to definitively disarm and neutralize the FDLR meant that one of the core grievances driving AFC/M23's emergence and persistence remained unaddressed throughout the quarter.

COUNTRY ANALYSIS

BURUNDI

Geopolitical Position and Military Redeployment Signals

Burundi entered Q1 2026 in a complex geopolitical position. Reports in mid-April indicated that Burundi had redeployed an unspecified number of troops to South Kivu, initially concentrated in Baraka town. Although Burundi had reduced its troop presence in eastern DRC over the preceding year, it subsequently redeployed forces via Lake Tanganyika following AFC/M23's capture of Uvira in late 2025. Estimates suggested that approximately 4,000 to 5,000 Burundian troops were concentrated in the Fizi and Mwenga highlands, areas where the AFC/M23 offensives had recently been focused.

The redeployment indicated continued support for the DRC government and Burundi's attempt to re-establish a forward operating posture in South Kivu to contain cross-border security risks. President Évariste Ndayishimiye's decision to maintain and subsequently increase forward presence reflected his continued support for the DRC in the AFC/M23 conflict while also signaling Burundi's intent, despite limited military capacity, to maintain a forward posture in South Kivu, particularly around Fizi near its border. This positioning attempted to create a buffer zone against cross-border groups and deter loss of frontier areas, thereby reducing cross-border security risks.

The strategic rationale for redeployment reflected lessons from December 2025, when AFC/M23 briefly captured Uvira, a strategically located town on the northern shore of Lake Tanganyika opposite Burundi, serving as a key cross-border trade and transport hub. A similar scenario or loss of additional border areas could increase the risk of AFC/M23 enabling cross-border incursions by groups such as Red Tabara, an armed opposition movement composed largely of Burundian dissidents accused of launching attacks against Burundian security forces and previously alleged by Bujumbura to have received support from Rwanda.

Domestic Political Strain and Military Discipline Issues

Internally, Burundi faced emerging tensions within the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy–Forces for the Defense of Democracy regarding defense policy. The redeployment generated pushback from ruling party hardliners and military elements who questioned the strategic rationale for sustained external deployments given Burundi's limited military capacity and competing domestic resource needs. These tensions intersected with existing friction between President Ndayishimiye and the ruling party Secretary-General Révérien Ndikuriyo, with alleged disagreements regarding troop deployments to the DRC.

The quarter witnessed severe institutional manifestations of this resistance. Military courts had sentenced over 270 soldiers to substantial prison terms ranging from 22 to 30 years for refusing to participate in joint operations with DRC forces against AFC/M23. These disciplinary measures represented extreme hardening of enforcement mechanisms and signaled deep institutional resistance to sustained external deployment. Such extensive sentencing of military personnel revealed fundamental fractures within the security establishment regarding deployment strategy and indicated that forced compliance mechanisms were required to maintain operational commitments.

These internal tensions were likely to resurface ahead of the 2027 election cycle as security policy became increasingly politicized within the ruling elite. Sustained pressure against Ndayishimiye within the party and military could increase risks of internal unrest, including isolated disciplinary breakdowns or even attempted but likely unsuccessful mutiny scenarios, alongside potential leadership purges should he perceive rising dissent.

Infrastructure Vulnerabilities and Regional Tensions

Separate from military deployment questions, Burundi's security infrastructure faced significant vulnerabilities. In early April, explosions at a military ammunition depot in the Musaga suburb of Bujumbura killed at least 13 civilians and injured 57. The army attributed the blasts to an electrical fault, but the incident highlighted significant weaknesses in ammunition storage, infrastructure, and safety oversight, compounded by limited resources and institutional capacity constraints. Further infrastructure-related accidents and safety incidents remained likely, posing recurring risks to civilian populations and military readiness while underscoring broader structural vulnerabilities within Burundi's security apparatus.

On a regional scale, the reported redeployment strained relations with Rwanda, particularly if clashes occurred between Burundian forces and AFC/M23, which Burundi accused Rwanda of supporting. This assessment aligned with broader international estimates of the Rwandan military presence in eastern DRC. The risk was compounded by Ndayishimiye's new role as African Union Chairperson, which constrained his ability to publicly distance himself from the conflict while simultaneously increasing expectations for mediation, creating dual-track pressure that could deepen diplomatic friction with Rwanda.

Informal and low-profile communication channels between senior Burundian and Rwandan officials reportedly continued throughout the quarter, serving as mechanisms for clarifying intentions and exchanging security assessments. Over time, these contacts could potentially evolve into more structured dialogue focused on border security, verification of Red Tabara activity, and de-escalation measures. A reduction of Burundi's direct involvement in joint operations with FARDC against AFC/M23 would likely lower risks of confrontation, including cross-border incidents with Rwanda.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Transition from Military Escalation to Fragile De-escalation

The DRC entered Q1 2026 following months of intensive military conflict, resulting in significant territorial losses to the AFC/M23. The quarter represented a marked shift toward dialogue and deconfliction mechanisms, though these remained reversible and subject to breakdown given profound underlying mistrust between all parties.

Multiple factors contributed to this shift. The balance of military power on the ground increasingly favored AFC/M23, while DRC forces demonstrated limited capacity for sustained offensive operations against the movement's consolidated positions. The FARDC continued to face organizational challenges, including weak logistics, limited capacity for complex operations, and insufficient resources for simultaneous multi-front operations. Wazalendo militias allied with Kinshasa, while sometimes effective in localized contexts, could not mount sustained challenges to the AFC/M23's military capabilities. International pressure regarding Rwanda's alleged support for the AFC/M23, culminating in March sanctions, created complications for the conflict's management within regional frameworks.

De-escalation efforts proceeded through multiple channels. On 19 April 2026, AFC/M23 and the DRC government announced an agreement in Montreux, Switzerland, to facilitate unhindered humanitarian access and prisoner releases. This arrangement represented significant confidence-building, requiring AFC/M23 to demonstrate good faith by enabling humanitarian organizations to operate in controlled territories. Simultaneously, AFC/M23 agreed to release approximately 2,000 to 3,000 captured DRC soldiers to the International Committee of the Red Cross within 10 days, a commitment signaling willingness to reduce tensions through reciprocal gestures.

Additional arrangements included ceasefire verification mechanisms and agreement on Congolese prisoner transfers by M23. These measures indicated emerging willingness among belligerents to manage escalation risks and reduce large-scale military operations. However, the confidence-building measures remained fragile for multiple reasons. Mutual mistrust between the DRC government and AFC/M23 remained profound, rooted in decades of failed agreements and unimplemented commitments dating from the 2009 peace accord and earlier efforts. The agreements did not address fundamental disagreements regarding territorial control, with the DRC insisting on the complete withdrawal of AFC/M23 from occupied areas while the movement viewed the territories as rightfully liberated and requiring protection from renewed persecution.

Confidence-building measures occurred within a military context of continued low-intensity clashes, suggesting that while parties sought de-escalation, neither side was willing to forgo military advantage or relinquish control of strategic positions. FARDC continued attempting incursions into AFC/M23-held areas to reassert state authority, thereby sustaining elevated violence risks across both North and South Kivu. However, FARDC's limited resources and weak organizational capacity meant it was unlikely to mount a sustained direct challenge, focusing instead on disrupting AFC/M23's logistics and operational networks through asymmetric tactics, including drone strikes on strategic targets.

Emerging Security Gaps and Armed Group Proliferation

While the AFC/M23 insurgency dominated international attention and resource allocation, the conflict significantly widened security gaps in eastern DRC beyond the Kivu provinces. Monitoring capacity, trained troops, and available resources had been redirected toward the eastern DRC frontline, leaving other regions vulnerable to emerging armed groups and intensifying militant activities.

In late March, officials reported the emergence of a new armed group in Haut-Katanga: the Stand Up Katanga Movement for the Liberation of the Congo. This group carried out attacks, including the killing of park rangers, using military-grade weapons. Its emergence appeared driven by existing weak state presence, with some speculation linking it to former President Joseph Kabila, who had been accused by President Félix Tshisekedi's government of supporting AFC/M23 and subsequently sentenced in absentia. However, the group's origins remained unclear, and it was equally possible that it reflected separatist grievances, including perceptions of political and economic marginalization from Kinshasa, demands for greater regional autonomy, and resentment over centralized control of revenues from the province's vast mineral wealth.

Although the government was likely to maintain security around key copper and cobalt mining zones, risks remained of further armed group formation and capability expansion, potentially weighing on investor confidence amid broader plans to develop the region as a major mining center. These developments highlighted how the DRC's security crisis extended beyond the Kivu provinces and threatened to fragment the state's capacity to exercise authority across its territory.

Simultaneously, the Islamic State-linked Allied Democratic Forces escalated attacks in Ituri province in recent months. The ADF conducted large-scale kidnappings for ransom, village looting, and mass displacement, signaling growing reliance on mobile raids and resource extraction to sustain operations. The group adopted enhanced tactical tools, including surveillance drones and GPS trackers, improving targeting, mobility, and coordination. As FARDC forces remained overstretched, dealing with AFC/M23, the ADF expanded operational scope and refined tactical capabilities, creating sustained terrorism risk in Ituri and demonstrating how the primary conflict created cascading security effects across the DRC.

DRC Government Mediation Fragmentation and Strategic Manipulation

A critical but underappreciated obstacle to achieving peace in the Great Lakes region involved the DRC government's deliberate manipulation of mediation processes. Rather than committing to comprehensive engagement within a single coherent framework, Kinshasa pursued a strategy of mediation shopping, selectively engaging with multiple competing diplomatic initiatives while resisting implementation of agreed commitments or undertaking substantive concessions.

Multiple peace processes proceeded in parallel, ostensibly presented as complementary yet generating complex contradictions that belligerent parties exploited to advance domestic narratives and political objectives. These contradictions were particularly evident in the sequencing of security commitments. The DRC consistently insisted on prior Rwandan force withdrawal from its territory as a precondition for progress, while Rwanda maintained that neutralization of the FDLR and lifting of defensive measures must occur first. The absence of a shared and enforceable sequencing framework allowed each party to selectively invoke different mediation tracks to justify inaction, reinforce hardened positions, and shift responsibility.

This strategic ambiguity fragmented international diplomatic efforts and prevented the consolidation of coordinated pressure necessary for sustainable peace. The Congolese government exploited differing priorities, mandates, and leverage of mediators and regional actors, projecting an image of diplomatic engagement while effectively postponing the difficult political choices that peace required. The result was a proliferation of talks without traction, agreements without implementation, and a peace architecture that managed tensions rhetorically but failed to resolve them structurally.

These dynamics manifested through multiple episodes. In late 2023, the Southern African Development Community deployed a regional force to eastern DRC comprising troops from South Africa, Malawi, and Tanzania. However, subsequent capture of Goma by AFC/M23 and increasingly complex, regionalized nature of the conflict altered the operational environment fundamentally. These developments undermined the mission's viability and contributed to SADC's decision to withdraw forces and end the mission in 2025. The DRC government's refusal to provide clear mandates or consistent support to regional forces reflected its broader unwillingness to coordinate coherently around peace efforts.

Similarly, the East African Community Regional Force, deployed in November 2022 to support peace amid the AFC/M23 insurgency, faced DRC obstruction. The initial six-month mandate was extended through December 2023, before the DRC refused renewal and the force began withdrawing after criticism that it had failed to combat the AFC/M23 militarily. The DRC's decision to refuse renewal reflected not a reasoned security assessment but rather Kinshasa's strategic preference for maintaining conditions that would blame external actors rather than address underlying governance failures.

Angola's mediation through the Luanda Process collapsed in early 2025. After months of negotiations aimed at bringing Kinshasa, Kigali, and AFC/M23 to the table, including planned direct talks in Luanda on March 18, 2025, AFC/M23 withdrew at the last minute, citing international sanctions and other grievances, preventing talks from proceeding. However, deeper analysis revealed that Kinshasa's unrealistic demands and refusal to engage with AFC/M23's legitimate grievances, particularly regarding protection of Congolese Tutsi populations and implementation of past agreements, made the Luanda Process ineffective long before it formally collapsed. In March 2025, Angola announced it was ending its role as mediator, citing repeated setbacks and its obligations as African Union chair.

These diplomatic collapses shifted African-led diplomacy to U.S. and Qatar-mediated efforts, leading to subsequent agreements such as the June 2025 peace deal and the Washington Accords negotiated outside the Angola-led framework. The shift to extra-African mediation reflected both the limitations of regional mechanisms and the influence of great power interests in shaping conflict trajectories in the Great Lakes.

Recent Diplomatic Signals and Mineral Diplomacy

Recent diplomatic signals in Q1 2026 pointed to a declining level of Kinshasa government engagement with the Doha Process. This apparent disengagement did not reflect abandonment of peace efforts altogether, but rather strategic recalibration toward bilateral engagement with the United States. Kinshasa appeared to prioritize a diplomatic track offering political backing, security cooperation, and economic leverage, particularly through mineral deals, over a mediation framework requiring direct or indirect engagement with M23, a group the government had consistently branded as a terrorist organization backed by Rwanda.

Participation in the Doha process confronted the Congolese government with a fundamental political dilemma. Meaningful progress would necessitate dialogue with M23, undermining central pillars of President Tshisekedi's domestic and international narrative that externalized responsibility for the conflict and securitized political dialogue. Deepening bilateral relations with Washington, particularly under an administration associated with Donald Trump, offered a more permissive, transactional environment. Mineral diplomacy allowed Kinshasa to secure international legitimacy and support without incurring the political cost of negotiating with an actor it had delegitimized at home.

This strategic shift reflected deliberate exploitation of parallel diplomatic tracks. By oscillating between multilateral mediation and bilateral power-based diplomacy, Kinshasa preserved flexibility while weakening the authority of the Doha process. The broader implication was a peace architecture marked by fragmentation and strategic ambiguity: mediation became optional, sequencing broke down, and incentives for compromise eroded. While this approach might deliver short-term diplomatic gains, it risks hollowing out negotiated frameworks and prolonging the conflict by substituting transactional leverage for inclusive political settlement.

KENYA

Domestic Security Threats and Anti-Government Sentiment

Kenya entered Q1 2026 with elevated domestic security risks driven by persistent opposition to President William Ruto's government and widening socio-economic grievances. Rising fuel prices, exacerbated by global fallout from tensions between Iran and its regional adversaries, reached near three-year highs despite government subsidies. These price increases directly affected transportation costs, feeding into broader inflation and cost-of-living pressures affecting ordinary Kenyans.

Opposition movements, led by Robert Kyagulanyi (alias Bobi Wine), issued ultimatums demanding government action on fuel prices and broader economic grievances. Opposition campaigns mobilized constituencies and prepared for planned demonstrations. The government demonstrated willingness to deploy security forces with intensity, creating a substantial risk that demonstrations would escalate into violence. Historical precedent, particularly the July 2023 Saba Saba (7 July) protests and associated government crackdowns, suggested elevated risks of police intervention resulting in casualties and further escalation.

These developments occurred within a context of low-intensity but persistent opposition pressure and continued restrictions on political mobilization. Violent incidents targeting opposition figures, including assassination attempts and dispersal of political gatherings in churches and other venues, persisted amid an increasingly hostile pre-election environment ahead of the August 2027 general election. Allegations of intimidation and state-linked pressure continued despite official government denials of involvement. The pre-electoral environment reflected preparations for elections occurring approximately 16 months away. Early campaigning by opposition and ruling party actors created opportunities for political disputes to escalate into violence. Kenya's fragmented and politicized security environment increased the likelihood of rogue actors or politically aligned networks independently escalating incidents beyond official policy frameworks. This raised risks of retaliatory violence, ethnic mobilization, particularly in regions such as Mount Kenya, and further erosion of perceived law enforcement neutrality amid intensifying electoral competition.

Counter-Terrorism and International Partnerships

Kenya's security environment continued to include sustained threats from al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab. In mid-February 2026, the Kenyan Counter-Terrorism Policing Unit foiled an al-Shabaab attack planned for Nairobi during Ramadan, demonstrating the group's continued intent to conduct symbolic urban operations against the capital. While such attacks remained low probability given al-Shabaab's primary concentration in Somalia, where it controlled large areas of territory in southern and central regions, their high-impact nature and Nairobi's dense urban environment created significant concern.

Al-Shabaab continued demonstrating sustained intent to target Nairobi, though core insurgency remained concentrated in Somalia. The group maintained in-country small cells linked to recruitment of Kenyan and foreign nationals, including in Uganda and Tanzania, as well as financial facilitation networks. Simultaneously, al-Shabaab sustained lower-level attacks in northeastern border counties and Lamu, reflecting continued operational footprint in these areas.

To enhance counterterrorism capacity, Kenya signed a five-year defense cooperation agreement with France in October 2025, with parliament approving the arrangement on 13 April 2026. The agreement encompassed training, intelligence sharing, joint exercises, maritime security, and crisis response, with no permanent troop deployments but rather a rotational French presence for training and advisory roles. In mid-March 2026, approximately 800 French personnel arrived in Kenya at the port of Mombasa to participate in joint training and security cooperation exercises under the framework. The agreement could enhance Kenya's counterterrorism capabilities, particularly against al-Shabaab.

For France, the deal formed part of a broader effort to rebuild its standing in Africa amid declining influence and reputational challenges in West Africa following recent coups in the Sahel (Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso), which led to the withdrawal of French forces amid perceptions of limited effectiveness in addressing increasingly complex and evolving jihadist insurgencies. Anti-French sentiment rose in these regions, with military-led governments leveraging these sentiments to consolidate domestic legitimacy and strengthen political control following seizures of power.

Russia Recruitment Agreement and Underlying Drivers

In mid-March, Kenya and Russia agreed to halt the recruitment of Kenyan nationals for the Ukraine war following domestic outcry from families of individuals recruited to fight alongside Russian forces. The move proved politically beneficial for President Ruto in the near term, easing domestic pressure by reducing external exposure linked to the recruitment controversy and associated reputational risks. Repatriation of some Kenyan recruits could further mitigate public backlash and limit political fallout.

However, the agreement was unlikely to materially alter domestic security dynamics because underlying recruitment drivers remained largely unchanged. Persistent economic pressure, high youth unemployment, and entrenched criminal facilitation networks sustained the structural conditions enabling recruitment in the first place. The diplomatic achievement addressed symptoms rather than structural causes of recruitment vulnerability.

RWANDA

Sanctions Implementation and Defense Modernization Constraints

The March 2 U.S. sanctions targeting the RDF represented a significant diplomatic gesture regarding alleged AFC/M23 support, yet carried a limited immediate domestic impact within Rwanda. The country maintained institutional stability and the absence of large-scale security threats, minimizing disruption from sanctions-driven constraints on military cooperation. However, the sanctions created medium-term challenges for Rwanda's defense modernization and Western security partnerships.

The measures constrained RDF access to external military cooperation, including potential limits on U.S. training programs and reduced opportunities for placements in Western institutions. These constraints created a broader reassessment of defense procurement from the U.S. and potentially some European partners, particularly for sensitive systems and advanced equipment. Sanctions slowed acquisition timelines and increased uncertainty in long-term modernization planning.

The measures also restricted access to U.S.-linked financial and logistical systems and exposed third-country actors, particularly banks and suppliers, to secondary sanctions risk and ownership-linked designation rules, indirectly complicating procurement and payment channels tied to defense activities. Rwanda responded by accelerating diversification of defense partnerships with alternative suppliers, demonstrating institutional flexibility despite sanctions pressure.

Regional Deployment Continuity and Strategic Positioning

Rwanda's external deployments continued without material disruption from U.S. sanctions. The Central African Republic deployment operated within multilateral financing and command structures insulated from bilateral sanctions. Rwanda's deployment in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado Province, where approximately 5,000 troops conducted operations against the Islamic State of Mozambique, remained supported by the European Union despite hesitation regarding continued funding.

The strategic importance of the TotalEnergies Liquefied Natural Gas project to European energy diversification ensured that EU support continued or remained likely to be restructured despite sanctions pressure. EU could act independently of the U.S. where strategic interests aligned, and while sanctions dynamics might introduce delays or political friction, full suspension remained unlikely. In worst-case scenarios, it might increase secondary sanctions exposure within EU-linked financial and procurement channels. U.S.-based investors and stakeholders linked to the LNG project could also exert behind-the-scenes pressure on Washington to carve out exemptions or flexibility in sanctions implementation.

Security Threat Perception and Cross-Border Dynamics

Throughout Q1 2026, Rwanda's strategic posture toward eastern DRC continued to reflect security threat management rather than territorial ambition, per Rwandan official framing. The continued presence of the FDLR as an ideologically anti-Tutsi armed group, compounded by its partial integration into FARDC structures, maintained Rwanda's elevated threat perception regarding cross-border instability. Persistent dehumanizing rhetoric targeting Tutsi populations within segments of the Congolese political and military establishment reinforced Rwanda's assessment of cross-border security risks.

Rwanda's engagement with security actors in eastern DRC, including AFC/M23, reflected a preventive and deterrent posture aimed at averting cross-border instability. This understanding diverged sharply from the dominant narrative promoted by Kinshasa, which framed Rwanda's actions as attempts at balkanization or territorial occupation. Analysts familiar with the Great Lakes region and international politics generally viewed this Kinshasa framing as populist and instrumental, designed to consolidate domestic legitimacy by externalizing responsibility and casting Rwanda as the aggressor.

The Washington Accords reflected this logic by prioritizing territorial integrity, neutralization of armed threats, and creation of a conducive economic environment. Addressing Rwanda's security and economic concerns remained necessary but not sufficient to deliver sustainable peace. AFC/M23 possessed its own historically rooted grievances stemming from decades of systematic violence, political exclusion, and failure of past agreements, most notably the 2009 accord, to provide protection or meaningful inclusion for Congolese Tutsi communities. These grievances independently sustained the movement and could not be resolved indirectly through bilateral state-to-state arrangements.

Durable peace required a dual-track approach. While neutralizing the FDLR and addressing Rwanda's legitimate security concerns remained necessary conditions, they could not serve as ends in themselves. Continued persecution of the Tutsi and Banyamulenge communities, entrenched ethnic hostility, and unresolved political exclusion meant that peace efforts sidelining the AFC/M23's grievances were unlikely to hold. This reality underscored the critical importance of inclusive mediation frameworks such as the Doha Process. Sustainable conflict resolution depended on aligning regional security arrangements with a credible political process addressing both state-level and non-state grievances rather than treating them as separable or sequential challenges.

TANZANIA

Post-Election Commission and Governance Challenges

Tanzania's post-election commission, established in November 2025 to investigate violence surrounding the 29 October 2025 elections, missed its February 2026 deadline to release findings. In early April, the commission extended its deadline to 24 April 2026, citing unexpectedly large testimony volumes and forensic evidence processing requirements. These delays likely reflected the political sensitivity of findings regarding large-scale civilian killings during and after elections.

The government's probable effort to manage the timing and scope of disclosure suggested an intention to minimize public backlash and anti-government sentiment that could arise from detailed violence documentation. Further delays remained likely as authorities sought to control the narrative surrounding post-election events. The government's approach to the commission's findings reflected broader governance challenges and sensitivity regarding regime legitimacy questions.

Security Posture and Opposition Management

Throughout Q1 2026, Tanzania maintained heavy security deployments across major urban centers and opposition strongholds. Police and military forces conducted arrests and reported disappearances of suspected opposition supporters and activists. Simultaneously, senior government authorities promoted narratives of political renewal aimed at consolidating ruling party legitimacy, creating a dual-track approach combining repression with legitimacy messaging.

Residual unrest persisted despite these measures, with periodic crackdowns in opposition-leaning areas. Potential triggers for escalation included judicial proceedings against opposition figure Tundu Lissu, charged with treason in April 2025 for alleged incitement of political unrest and attempts to undermine state authority. Any judicial resolution of such cases carried the potential to reignite tensions, particularly if sentences appeared politically motivated.

These tensions could be further exacerbated by socio-economic pressures linked to global shocks and rising living costs. In April, fuel price hikes linked to broader Iran-related geopolitical tensions affected Tanzania alongside other regional economies, creating inflation pressures that compounded public grievances and opposition mobilization narratives.

Economic Engagement and Reputational Management

The government expanded external economic and reputational partnerships during Q1 2026, signaling a strategic effort to diversify international relationships and mitigate pressure from EU aid disruptions. Reported cooperation with the U.S. Republican Party-linked Ervin Graves Strategy Group on image management paired with resource-focused diplomacy, including discussions with the United States on graphite resources and the Panda Hill niobium project involving U.S.-linked Tremont Investment Group. This approach reflected a coordinated effort to link strategic mineral deals with targeted political outreach to mitigate reputational pressure and sustain international engagement.

The government was prioritizing internal stability through security measures and repression while simultaneously attempting to project a positive image internationally through selective engagement with strategic partners offering mineral access and political support without conditions regarding governance reform.

Regional Recruitment and Counterterrorism Gaps

Regional militant groups, including al-Shabaab and the Allied Democratic Forces, continued recruiting Tanzanian nationals despite government monitoring, particularly in southern border areas near Mozambique. Sustained domestic tensions and potential protest cycles within Tanzania created risks that security resources would shift inward toward opposition management, potentially widening counterterrorism gaps and enabling further militant group recruitment.

President Hassan and the long-serving Chama Cha Mapinduzi party faced domestic pressure for political reform, with the government prioritizing internal stability through repression. Therefore, much of Tanzania's military and security capacity would likely remain focused on monitoring potential dissent and maintaining domestic order, making sustained external security support for other countries unlikely.

UGANDA

Post-Election Consolidation and Political Stability

In power since 1986, President Yoweri Museveni, aged 81, was re-elected for a seventh term in the 15 January 2026 general election with 71.65% of the vote. His ruling National Resistance Movement also retained a parliamentary majority. The result pointed to continued short- to medium-term political stability, underpinned by entrenched incumbency advantages reinforcing government durability and preserving continuity in core areas including security, economic management, and regional military posture.

The outcome indicated a low likelihood of a near-term political transition, given the NRM's consolidated control over both the executive and the legislature, which limited the scope for abrupt policy shifts or elite-driven change. This consolidation of power ensured short- to medium-term continuity in key policy domains.

Opposition Constraints and Succession Questions

Opposition pressure persisted despite government consolidation. Opposition candidate Robert Kyagulanyi came second with 24.72% of the vote while alleging that over 100 opposition supporters were killed by security forces around the election. With limited room for significant opposition mobilization, underlying political tensions, despite overall government stability, persisted. Risks for opposition figures worsened, reinforced by the May 2025 passage of amendments to the Uganda People's Defense Force Act, expanding the scope for civilians to be tried in military courts under certain conditions.

The absence of a clear succession framework created medium-term uncertainty regarding leadership transition. Speculation regarding whether succession would favor Museveni's son, army chief Muhoozi Kainerugaba, or other entrenched elite actors generated questions about regime durability beyond the immediate period. A contested or unclear succession process could heighten the risk of elite fragmentation and political instability, including periods of unrest or disputed authority.

Regional Military Posture and Operational Ambiguity

Muhoozi Kainerugaba made controversial statements on Uganda's regional military posture, creating uncertainty over policy intent and heightening scrutiny of Uganda's military footprint in the region. On 25 March, he suggested that Ugandan forces could withdraw from eastern DRC, where they engaged in counterterrorism operations against the ADF, reportedly following tensions with the Ituri Province governor. Although he later retracted the remarks and was widely seen as operating outside formal policy channels, the statements nonetheless introduced uncertainty around Uganda's strategic intent.

Uganda's primary security focus in eastern DRC remained the Allied Democratic Forces rather than AFC/M23. Ugandan forces deployed approximately 5,000 troops in the region under a bilateral arrangement with the DRC government, conducting Operation Shujaa counterterrorism operations. Under this framework, Ugandan and FARDC forces pushed ADF fighters back from areas near the Uganda-DRC border in Ituri and northern North Kivu, significantly reducing attacks inside Uganda.

As the conflict shifted toward AFC/M23's resurgence and territorial gains in North and South Kivu, FARDC had been constrained in conducting joint operations against the ADF, leaving the bulk of counter-ADF efforts to Ugandan forces. Kampala had used this opportunity to expand military presence in the region, increasing troop levels and widening operational footprint, while pursuing significant economic interests. Uganda invested in tarmac road construction connecting key towns in eastern DRC, projects designed to boost trade and facilitate cross-border movement, including the informal mineral economy.

Any actual reduction or withdrawal of Ugandan forces would likely increase cross-border activity risks into Uganda by the ADF, potentially pushing Kampala to rely more on proxy actors to safeguard interests, while strong border deployments and potential periodic joint operations would likely continue but may be insufficient to fully offset the increased threat. Sustained ADF attacks against civilians carried reputational risks for Ugandan forces, as perceptions of limited protection could undermine operational credibility despite continued deployments.

This strategic positioning was further complicated by broader scrutiny of Uganda's regional military role. Uganda denied UN allegations regarding involvement in South Sudan airstrikes in March 2026, despite earlier remarks attributed to Kainerugaba suggesting participation. His January 2026 comments hinted at possible withdrawal from Somalia missions, though no formal policy shift had been confirmed, and operational patterns continued indicating near-term continuity despite such rhetoric.

CRITICAL CROSS-CUTTING THEMES AND STRATEGIC DYNAMICS

The Centrality of Ethnic Persecution as Conflict Driver

A fundamental finding across Q1 2026 developments involves the continued marginalization of systematic ethnic persecution of Congolese Tutsi and Banyamulenge populations from peace negotiation agendas. Despite the AFC/M23's emergence and persistence being fundamentally rooted in grievances regarding decades of systematic violence, political exclusion, and failed previous agreements, international mediation frameworks treated these issues as peripheral rather than central to peace processes.

AFC/M23's origins traced directly to the failure of the 2009 peace agreement between the CNDP and the Congolese government. That agreement's incomplete implementation, combined with continued violence against Congolese Tutsi and other Kinyarwanda speakers, placed former CNDP combatants within a military structure where they remained targets for harassment, exclusion from advancement, and violence. The government's refusal to address underlying ethnic persecution and dehumanizing narratives that permeated Congolese security forces meant that integration mechanisms placed vulnerable populations within hostile institutions. This betrayal of the 2009 accord transformed what should have been a pathway to security into a mechanism of continued vulnerability.

The specific grievances fueling AFC/M23's current emergence extended beyond technical failure to implement the 2009 accord. Most fundamentally, these grievances stemmed from systematic persecution of Congolese Tutsi populations within the DRC that remained almost completely ignored in international mediation frameworks and diplomatic discourse. This persecution included systematic killings of Banyamulenge and Congolese Tutsis by FARDC soldiers, pro-government militias, and extremist groups such as the FDLR. Rape and sexual violence had been weaponized against Tutsi women as instruments of systematic oppression. Dehumanizing rhetoric and ethnic scapegoating by government officials, local administrators, and militia leaders portrayed Congolese Tutsis as foreign infiltrators and enemies of the Congolese state, regardless of centuries of presence in eastern DRC. This dehumanizing speech created an enabling environment for violence and was consistently amplified in political discourse while remaining almost completely absent from peace negotiation agendas.

AFC/M23's stated commitment to protecting Tutsi communities from mass atrocities remained grounded in concrete historical experience and the precedent of genocide in the region. Yet peace agreements and diplomatic discussions consistently failed to acknowledge or address anti-Tutsi persecution, dehumanizing rhetoric, or systematic discrimination within DRC government institutions. This fundamental gap meant that agreements might achieve temporary deconfliction without addressing the structural drivers that enable renewed escalation.

Peace frameworks that did not acknowledge and address anti-Tutsi persecution, dehumanizing rhetoric, and systematic discrimination could not achieve a lasting resolution because they left underlying grievances fueling the AFC/M23 unaddressed. Sustainable peace required international and regional actors to place protection of persecuted Congolese Tutsi populations and addressing systematic discrimination at the center of negotiation agendas, rather than marginalizing these issues as secondary concerns.

Mediation, Fragmentation, and Strategic Ambiguity

Q1 2026 demonstrated continued fragmentation of international mediation efforts, with multiple competing frameworks, including the Doha Process, bilateral negotiations, and the Washington Accords, creating contradictions that belligerent parties exploited. The DRC government's continued preference for parallel processes over sustained commitment to a single comprehensive framework allowed Kinshasa to selectively invoke different tracks to justify inaction and shift responsibility.

This mediation shopping prevented consolidated international pressure and allowed strategic ambiguity regarding the sequencing of implementation measures. The DRC's insistence on prior Rwandan force withdrawal, while Rwanda maintained that FDLR neutralization must occur first, created a framework where neither side faced compulsion to move forward. Each party could claim compliance with one framework while citing violations by the other side as justification for non-implementation within another track.

Economic Dimensions of Conflict and Governance Sustainability

AFC/M23's control of mineral-rich areas and resource taxation mechanisms created economic sustainability, enabling operational autonomy and reducing vulnerability to military pressure. The movement's taxation of mining operations at approximately fifteen percent on tantalum in Rubaya, generating roughly \$800,000 monthly, provided predictable funding enabling military and governance operations.

Simultaneously, the suspension of banking and formal financial services remained a critical fault line that AFC/M23 could not independently resolve. Without conventional banking access, AFC/M23 lacked the capacity to consolidate full parallel state functions despite improved security delivery and basic service restoration. This banking crisis served a dual political purpose: limiting the movement's capacity to consolidate governance while simultaneously amplifying civilian grievances against the Kinshasa government, perceived as indifferent to basic economic needs.

AFC/M23's consolidation of territorial and administrative control increasingly depended on how economic power was exercised and distributed within occupied territories. Security gains and service restoration, while significant, would not suffice if taxation, mineral revenues, land access, and employment opportunities were managed in ways that entrenched inequality or militarized livelihoods. Economic governance represented a critical ceiling on AFC/M23's consolidation project: security and order could stabilize territory, only inclusive and predictable economic arrangements could sustain civilian consent over time.

Regional Dynamics and Great Power Engagement

Q1 2026 witnessed a significant evolution in international engagement in the region. France expanded its security footprint in Kenya through defense cooperation agreements and troop deployments, representing a broader European effort to rebuild African influence following Sahel setbacks. The United States maintained active mediation through the Doha Process and Washington Accords while simultaneously sanctioning Rwanda over alleged AFC/M23 support.

These great power engagements created complex incentive structures where regional actors navigated multiple international relationships with competing or contradictory demands. Rwanda faced U.S. sanctions while maintaining UN deployment support and EU backing for Mozambique operations. The DRC government exploited competing mediation tracks while maintaining security partnerships with both Eastern and Western actors.

OUTLOOK AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR Q2 2026

Protracted Stalemate as Most Probable Trajectory

Q1 2026 developments suggest that the conflict is unlikely to be resolved through decisive military victory or comprehensive peace settlement in the near term. Instead, a protracted stalemate characterized by periodic low-intensity clashes, localized violence, and fragile de-escalation mechanisms appears most probable. The balance of military power on the ground increasingly favors AFC/M23, while DRC forces demonstrate limited capacity for sustained offensive operations against the movement's consolidated positions.

While peace deals and external mediation may continue to reduce risks of large-scale clashes between the AFC/M23 and DRC forces, the former is expected to remain focused on consolidating control in the Kivus. The most probable outcome is a protracted stalemate characterized by ongoing localized violence, gradual weakening of central authority in eastern DRC, and continued containment of escalation through diplomacy rather than comprehensive implementation of peace settlements.

Vulnerability of Confidence-Building Measures

The prisoner transfer agreements and humanitarian access arrangements negotiated during the quarter remain vulnerable to breakdown. Any breakdown triggered by perceived violations or miscalculations could rapidly escalate tensions and undermine fragile progress. Mutual mistrust, combined with ambiguity regarding implementation details and verification mechanisms, creates substantial risks for reversal.

Confidence-building measures require sustained reciprocal compliance and verification mechanisms, neither of which exists in adequate form. Should either party perceive violations, institutional mechanisms for dispute resolution are insufficient to prevent escalation. The fragility of these arrangements means that significant portions of progress achieved during Q1 2026 could dissolve rapidly if triggers for escalation emerge.

Regional Security Implications and Cross-Border Risks

Burundi's continued military deployments, coupled with emerging elite tensions regarding defense posture, create risks of policy shifts that could destabilize border regions. Tanzania's management of post-election tensions and potential opposition mobilization could divert security resources from counterterrorism efforts. Uganda's succession questions and Kainerugaba's ambiguous statements regarding regional commitment introduce uncertainty regarding medium-term regional military posture. Kenya's pre-electoral environment and rising domestic tensions create risks of security force overstretch and potential spillover effects. The persistence of al-Shabaab as a transnational threat operating across borders ensures that instability in one country affects others. Rwanda's sanctions and medium-term defense procurement constraints could gradually affect its capacity to sustain its current operational posture in eastern DRC, though near-term continuity appears assured.

Necessity of Inclusive Political Dialogue and Addressing Root Causes

Durable peace in eastern DRC requires direct political engagement addressing AFC/M23's legitimate grievances regarding protection of Tutsi populations, past agreement failures, and governance inclusion. Confidence-building measures and military deconfliction mechanisms, while necessary, cannot substitute for comprehensive political settlements addressing the root causes of conflict.

Peace frameworks that marginalize issues of ethnic persecution and political inclusion risk remaining reversible and subject to reignition of violence. The fundamental drivers sustaining the AFC/M23 center on decades of systematic violence against the Tutsi and Banyamulenge populations, political exclusion from

governance structures, and failed previous agreements that promised protection without delivering. These issues require substantive political settlement incorporating explicit guarantees of community protection, governance participation, and accountability mechanisms addressing past violence.

International mediators must shift from approaches treating state security concerns and non-state armed group grievances as separable toward frameworks that simultaneously address both. The Doha Process, despite current tensions regarding DRC government engagement, remains the most promising vehicle for this integrated approach because it explicitly engages AFC/M23 as a political actor rather than purely a security threat.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION IMPERATIVES

For international mediators and development partners, the analysis underscores the urgent necessity to move away from fragmented and sequential approaches toward genuinely integrated frameworks. Mediation efforts treating state-level security concerns and non-state armed group grievances as separable challenges have consistently produced fragile outcomes. Durable progress requires aligning regional security arrangements with inclusive political dialogue addressing both state and non-state grievances simultaneously. In this regard, the Doha Process should not be treated as secondary or optional, but rather as structurally linked to broader regional frameworks, including those emerging from the Washington Accords.

For the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo, sustainable peace requires abandoning mediation shopping in favor of consistent engagement within a single, comprehensive process. Selective participation in multiple diplomatic tracks has weakened mediator leverage, fragmented international pressure, and delayed meaningful compromise. A credible commitment to peace requires Kinshasa to address the systematic persecution of Congolese Tutsi and Banyamulenge communities, halt dehumanizing rhetoric within state institutions, and demonstrate political willingness to engage non-state grievances through dialogue rather than exclusively through securitized responses. Without such steps, peace agreements are likely to remain declaratory and reversible.

The neutralization of the FDLR remains a central pillar of any viable settlement, requiring translation into verifiable and sequenced implementation rather than repeated political commitments. Efforts to address the FDLR must include dismantling command structures, preventing further integration of elements into state security forces, and ensuring independent monitoring. Failure to credibly address this issue will continue fueling regional insecurity perceptions and justifying external security interventions, thereby undermining trust between states.

For Rwanda, continued alignment of security posture with commitments under existing regional and international frameworks, including transparency, proportionality, and de-escalation tied to objective threat reduction, strengthens Rwanda's credibility and counters narratives portraying actions as expansionist. Demonstrable restraint and constructive engagement would further strengthen Rwanda's credibility.

As AFC/M23 consolidates territorial and administrative control, international actors engaging informally with the group for humanitarian access, civilian protection, or deconfliction purposes should do so with clear conditions emphasizing rights-based dispute resolution mechanisms. Stabilization that relies solely on arbitration or coercive order without credible justice risks entrenching grievances and reproducing future cycles of violence.

As AFC/M23 consolidates control, the sustainability of its governance project will increasingly depend on how economic power is exercised and distributed within occupied territories. International actors engaging informally with the AFC/M23 and mediators should emphasize that economic inclusion, transparency in revenue use, and protection of civilian livelihoods are central to conflict de-escalation. Failure to address the economic dimension risks transforming short-term stabilization into longer-term grievance accumulation, undermining both local legitimacy and prospects for durable political settlement.

Regional organizations and mechanisms, including those under the auspices of the African Union and subregional bodies, should prioritize coherence, enforceable sequencing, and unified political messaging. Competing frameworks with contradictory benchmarks have allowed belligerents to evade accountability and instrumentalize diplomacy. Any future regional deployment or mediation initiative must be grounded in shared threat assessments and insulated from politicization to avoid repeating past failures.

Finally, donors and development partners should recalibrate engagement away from short-term stabilization toward long-term legitimacy restoration. This includes sustained investment in protection of persecuted communities, land and citizenship rights, accountability and justice mechanisms, and social cohesion initiatives. Development and stabilization efforts that ignore identity-based persecution and political exclusion risk reinforcing the very conditions giving rise to armed mobilization.

Overall, these strategic implications point to a central conclusion: sustainable peace in eastern DRC will not emerge from partial solutions or selective engagement. It will require coordinated action addressing regional security concerns, state legitimacy deficits, and non-state grievances simultaneously within a coherent and enforceable political framework.

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