

The Trouble with M23

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The UN crossed a new threshold in moving towards the authorization of offensive force by its troops. While initial results are positive, the US should respect and support international efforts and help in any way possible, thus helping to establish a healthy multi-lateral option to tackle international security concerns, and that can be used as a model in years to come.



Combatants in the Congo. Image from Associated Press.

With the United Nations authorization of the use of offensive force by creating a special brigade tasked with the disarming of the Congolese rebel group M23, the international community has raised the stakes for peace in the Great Lakes region of Africa. This is a surprising and bold move on behalf of the international community that came about because of the embarrassing failure of UN troops to protect civilians when M23 took control of the city of Goma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in November. This involvement has not come without its share of critique.

MONUSCO, the UN mission tasked with protecting civilians has unequivocally established itself on the side of the DRC's government, which itself has a tarnished reputation for having committed war crimes against its own people.

Up until now, both the UN and the government forces of the DRC have lost the trust of local populations because of their inability to protect citizens from M23. Compounding the local populations lack

of trust is the disillusionment with their national government that stems from the participation in some of the worst crimes against the inhabitants of area surrounding Goma by the armed forces of the DRC. Reports of rape and extra-judicial killings were rampant after the loss of Goma by the armed forces. Because of this, peacekeeping operations are tense, with the overall public reaction being understandably skeptic. Nevertheless, International and DRC attacks against the positions of M23 have led to the brief withdrawal of rebel forces, which in turn establishes a certain level of credibility for both UN and DRC troops. Yet, a recent cross border shelling into Rwanda threatens the perilous security gains, and also highlights the historical complexities of the relationship between Rwanda and the DRC.

The complexities of the current security situation are underscored by the ethnic regional tensions between the Hutus and Tutsis. The current conflict dates to before the Rwandan Genocide. Historically the Hutu majority had been ruled by a minority Tutsi population. After Hutu militias had gained control of Rwanda, the Rwandan Genocide pushed an expatriate community of ousted Tutsi rebels led by Paul Kagame, to invade from the Eastern DRC and overthrow the Hutu government.

In the last week of August, reports of artillery fire landing in Rwanda initially placed the blame with the DRC. As a result of the history of tension and conflict, both political and ethnic, between Rwanda and the DRC, Rwanda responded by mobilizing troops to its western border with the DRC. UN reports later indicated that M23 positions were seen firing into the Rwandan countryside. Presently there has been no verification of either side being guilty of shelling Rwandan territory. The current security situation in the Great Lakes region of Africa is convoluted and dangerous, with the US accusing Rwanda of supporting M23. If this is the case, one may interpret the recent firing into Rwanda as an excuse engineered to justify another incursion into the DRC by Rwandan troops.



UN forces pushing back M23 rebels. Image from Reuters.

Clearly the creation of the new UN intervention brigade was not the panacea that proponents of the option presented. However, the success which accompanied the change in UN policy argues for a potentially new way for the international community to handle humanitarian crises on the continent. While multi-lateral operations in the past have worked when based around regions (take ECOWAS's intervention during the Liberian civil war, for example), this would mark the first truly successful international effort. The change has the potential of creating long-lasting stability and commitment

from the international community because the combination of African troops backed by western money is politically digestible and suits both the West – who has no stomach for military ventures in Africa—and the Africans – who rarely have the capacity to maintain foreign military operations without Western aid.

One of the main questions looming in the minds of the American political system is the growth of UN

authority and power from this measure. With the creation of the new intervention brigade, the UN has crossed the boundaries previously established of strictly limited international involvement from the organization. While unprecedented in its implications, the use of the UN as a shield and excuse to tackle delicate security concerns is an excellent financial option for Western nations that have moral obligations and commitments to the region, but that do not have the financial resources or the political will to send their own troops to help the situation. While this model does go against historical UN policy, it will have a much greater impact in the immediate future as the international community has increasingly found it difficult to support and maintain UN conventions on human rights, and the modish “right to protect” or R2P, wherein the international community has come to an agreement that it has the responsibility to protect civilians from the excesses of armed conflicts when possible.

With the increasing security costs associated with the deployment of troops overseas, this is a very attractive option for the US who has a stake in the peace and stability in the region. In protecting international norms and underwriting the credibility of international organizations, the US will be adding to the much needed soft power necessary to successfully operate in the new world order. In this instance, the US should continue to provide financial aid to the MONUSCO mission. In effect there are fewer costs associated with this kind of deployment and enforcement of international mandates, which in turn assist in strengthening the potency of future commitments and declarations made at the UN. One observer has noted that this will put enough pressure on Rwanda to stop supporting M23. If this occurs, there will be a greater impetus for the DRC to cease supporting FDLR operatives that have been fighting against the Rwandan government since the conclusion of the Rwandan Genocide. This would certainly allow for a more stable peace to be established while supporting the vital US security interests of stabilizing the bloody battlefields that have halted economic progress and social progress on the continent.

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