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The Mirage of Peace in the Great Lakes: Why International Interventions Fail and Why Enforcement Matters

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A – Research concept and design, B – Collection and/or assembly of data, C – Data analysis and interpretation, D – Writing the article, E – Critical revision of the article, F – Final approval of article

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Abstract

Objectives: This study seeks to:

- Examine the historical trajectory of peace processes and international interventions in the Great Lakes region.
- Evaluate the limitations of the liberal peace paradigm in contexts characterized by state fragility, regionalized conflict, and persistent insecurity.
- Investigate how armed spoilers, proxy warfare, institutional weakness, and conflict economies undermine the implementation and durability of peace agreements.
- Analyze the processes through which armed groups reproduce, adapt, and re-emerge across successive cycles of conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Assess the potential and limitations of military enforcement as a strategy for supporting peace implementation and regional stability.

Methods: This study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design. The research combines documentary analysis with 43 semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis and process tracing. Triangulation of interview, documentary, and secondary-source evidence was used to strengthen validity and reliability. Ethical standards were observed through informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Results: The study finds that peace processes in the Great Lakes region consistently fail due to spoilers, proxy warfare, fragile institutions, and conflict economies. Enforcement, not negotiation, emerges as the missing ingredient. Military coercion—exemplified by the Force Intervention Brigade—proves essential for deterring spoilers and enabling sustainable stability.

Conclusions: Peacebuilding in the Great Lakes region has repeatedly failed because accords relied on fragile institutions, voluntary compliance, and ignored spoilers. Comparative lessons show enforcement is the missing ingredient. Military coercion—exemplified by the Force Intervention Brigade—remains indispensable to deter proxy warfare, dismantle conflict economies, and protect civilians. Without enforcement, peace remains aspirational; with enforcement, it becomes attainable.

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1. Introduction

The Great Lakes region of Africa has long been synonymous with protracted instability, violent conflict, and failed peace initiatives. From the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda to the successive wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the region has endured cycles of violence that have drawn in neighboring states, international organizations, and global powers (Autesserre, 2010; Prunier, 2009). Each intervention, whether through peace agreements, United Nations missions, or regional security initiatives, has been heralded as a turning point, only to collapse under the weight of entrenched structural contradictions. The persistence of armed groups, the fragility of state institutions, and the logic of proxy warfare have repeatedly undermined efforts to stabilize the region, leaving a trail of failed accords and disillusioned populations (Igba, 2025; Rotberg, 2004). Previous peace initiatives, including Arusha, Lusaka, and Nairobi, demonstrate recurring implementation failures that reflect deeper structural constraints rather than isolated shortcomings. The Washington Accords, signed with considerable international attention, represent the latest attempt to impose negotiated peace in the Great Lakes region. By centering their success on the dismantling of the FDLR and requiring mutual trust between adversarial states, the accords replicate the contradictions that doomed earlier agreements (Barabanov et al., 2025). The expectation that fragile states can dismantle entrenched armed groups, while simultaneously building trust with regional rivals, is structurally unrealistic. Moreover, the accords underestimate the resilience of the conflict economy, which continues to incentivize violence and undermine peacebuilding efforts (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; United Nations DDR Section, 2025).

This article argues that the Washington Accords are unlikely to succeed because they reproduce the very dynamics that have historically undermined international interventions in the region. More importantly, it contends that only military enforcement offers a viable pathway to peace. Unlike diplomatic formalism, enforcement directly confronts spoilers, deters proxy warfare, and disrupts the conflict economy (Manara, 2026; Stearns, 2012). This article uses the experience of the Force Intervention Brigade as an empirical reference point for assessing the contribution of enforcement mechanisms. By situating the Washington Accords within the broader trajectory of failed peace processes, it argues that peace is unlikely to endure in the absence of credible enforcement mechanisms. By emphasizing enforcement, this study contributes to broader debates on the limits of international peacebuilding and highlights the need for approaches that move beyond voluntary compliance toward credible coercion. It challenges the prevailing orthodoxy that peace can be negotiated in contexts where spoilers thrive, institutions collapse, and war economies flourish (Igba, 2025; Paris, 2010).

2. Literature Review: Negotiated Settlements, Enforcement, and Conflict Reproduction

Peacebuilding scholarship has long debated the relative merits of negotiated settlements and coercive enforcement in ending armed conflict. While the dominant post-Cold War approach has emphasized negotiated agreements, institutional reforms, and international mediation, a growing body of literature questions whether such strategies can succeed in contexts characterized by entrenched armed groups, weak state institutions, regionalized conflict dynamics, and persistent insecurity (Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2011). These debates are

particularly relevant to the Great Lakes region, where successive peace agreements have struggled to translate diplomatic achievements into durable political orders. Understanding these competing perspectives is essential for evaluating the relationship between peace agreements, enforcement mechanisms, and the persistence of armed conflict.

2.1. The Liberal Peace Paradigm and Its Critics

The dominant framework guiding international peacebuilding since the 1990s has been the liberal peace paradigm. Liberal peacebuilding assumes that armed conflict can be transformed through negotiated settlements, democratization, institution-building, the rule of law, and economic liberalization (Paris, 2004). Under this model, peace agreements provide the foundation for political transition, while international actors assist states in rebuilding institutions capable of managing conflict peacefully. Proponents of liberal peacebuilding argue that negotiated settlements provide opportunities to address grievances, establish inclusive governance arrangements, and reduce the incentives for violence (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; Walter, 2002). Post-conflict reconstruction, therefore, depends not primarily on coercion but on creating legitimate political institutions capable of managing societal divisions.

However, scholars have increasingly questioned the assumptions underpinning liberal peacebuilding. Richmond (2011) argues that externally designed peace projects often fail to reflect local realities and frequently produce fragile political settlements lacking legitimacy among affected populations. Similarly, Mac Ginty (2010, 2011) contends that peacebuilding interventions generate hybrid outcomes in which international and local actors pursue competing visions of order. More recent scholarship has further questioned whether liberal peacebuilding adequately addresses the realities of fragmented political authority, transnational armed groups, and regionalized conflicts (de Coning, 2018; Kurtenbach & Rettberg, 2018). These critiques suggest that negotiated settlements may struggle to endure where coercive capacities remain concentrated in the hands of actors who are not committed to peace.

2.2. Spoiler Theory and the Limits of Negotiated Settlements

One of the most influential critiques of negotiated peace processes emerges from spoiler theory. Stedman (1997) defines spoilers as actors who perceive peace agreements as threats to their interests and consequently seek to undermine their implementation. Spoiler behaviour presents a particular challenge because negotiated settlements require at least minimal compliance from actors who often retain both the means and incentives to return to violence. Subsequent scholarship has expanded this argument by demonstrating how armed groups frequently adapt to changing political circumstances rather than disappearing following peace agreements (Nilsson & Söderberg Kovacs, 2011). Research on insurgent fragmentation further suggests that peace agreements may unintentionally encourage the emergence of splinter groups opposed to compromise, thereby complicating implementation and post-conflict stabilization (Staniland, 2014). The spoiler literature therefore highlights a fundamental dilemma in peacebuilding. While negotiation may reduce violence among some actors, agreements remain vulnerable when armed organizations maintain sufficient coercive capacity to resist implementation. This challenge is particularly acute in

environments where state institutions lack the capacity to enforce compliance or protect political settlements.

2.3. Fragile States, State Capacity, and Security Provision

A related body of literature focuses on the relationship between state fragility and conflict persistence. Rotberg (2004) argues that failed and fragile states are characterized by limited territorial control, weak institutions, and an inability to provide security and public services. Under such conditions, governments often struggle to implement peace agreements, enforce legal authority, or manage armed challengers. Call (2008) similarly argues that state-building and peacebuilding are deeply interconnected processes. Sustainable peace depends upon institutions capable of monopolizing the legitimate use of force, managing political competition, and delivering public goods. Where these capacities are absent, peace agreements frequently remain aspirational rather than transformative. Recent scholarship has reinforced the importance of state capacity in determining peacebuilding outcomes. de Coning and Peter (2019) note that international interventions increasingly operate in contexts characterized by fragmented authority and limited state legitimacy, making implementation considerably more complex than earlier peacebuilding models assumed. The challenge is therefore not simply reaching political settlements but ensuring that institutions possess the capacity to sustain them.

2.4. Proxy Warfare and Regionalized Conflict Systems

The literature on proxy warfare provides an additional lens for understanding why peace agreements often struggle in regional conflict environments. Reno (1998) and Clapham (1998) demonstrate that African conflicts frequently transcend national borders and involve multiple state and non-state actors pursuing overlapping political, security, and economic objectives. More recent scholarship has conceptualized such conflicts as regionalized security systems characterized by interconnected armed actors, transnational networks, and cross-border intervention (Mumford, 2013; Salehyan, 2009). Proxy warfare allows states to pursue strategic objectives while minimizing the costs of direct military engagement, often prolonging conflicts and undermining peace initiatives.

Within this perspective, armed groups cannot be understood solely as domestic actors. Instead, they frequently occupy positions within broader regional networks through which governments project influence, manage security threats, or pursue geopolitical objectives. Consequently, peace agreements focused primarily on domestic political arrangements may fail to address the wider regional dynamics sustaining conflict.

2.5. Conflict Economies and Armed-Group Resilience

Another important strand of scholarship examines the relationship between economic incentives and conflict persistence. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) argue that access to lucrative resources may create incentives for armed mobilization independent of political grievances. Subsequent research has demonstrated that conflict economies often sustain armed organizations by providing resources necessary for recruitment, military operations, and local patronage networks (Le Billon, 2012). Resource-rich conflict zones are particularly vulnerable to this dynamic because armed groups frequently develop economic relationships that survive peace agreements and political transitions. As a result, violence may remain

profitable for certain actors even when formal hostilities decline. Recent studies of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo continue to emphasize the role of illicit economic networks in sustaining insecurity and limiting the effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions (Vlassenroot et al., 2020). The conflict-economy literature therefore suggests that peace agreements that focus exclusively on political settlements may leave intact many of the material incentives that sustain armed violence.

2.6. Enforcement, Peace Operations, and the Use of Force

The literature on peace enforcement challenges assumptions that negotiation alone is sufficient to secure peace in highly violent environments. While traditional peacekeeping emphasizes neutrality, consent, and impartiality, peace-enforcement approaches recognize that some actors may need to be compelled to comply with political settlements (Bellamy et al., 2010). Studies of peace operations suggest that robust mandates can contribute to reducing violence under certain conditions by increasing the costs associated with non-compliance (Fortna, 2008; Howard, 2008). Rather than replacing political peace processes, enforcement mechanisms can provide security guarantees that enable agreements to survive during vulnerable implementation periods.

At the same time, scholars caution against overestimating the effectiveness of military approaches. Enforcement may suppress violence temporarily without resolving underlying political disputes, and excessive reliance on coercion risks undermining local legitimacy and civilian protection (Newman, 2010; Richmond, 2011). Recent debates therefore increasingly emphasize the need to integrate security provision, political dialogue, institutional reform, and regional diplomacy rather than treating them as competing strategies (de Coning, 2018).

2.7. Critiques of Militarization

While this article argues that military enforcement constitutes a necessary foundation for sustainable peace in the Great Lakes region, this position remains contested within peacebuilding scholarship. A substantial body of literature cautions against the excessive reliance on coercive approaches, arguing that military enforcement may generate unintended political, humanitarian, and institutional consequences. These critiques emerge primarily from liberal peace, critical peacebuilding, and human security traditions, which emphasize local ownership, legitimacy, and civilian protection as essential components of durable peace (Mac Ginty, 2011; Paris, 2010; Richmond, 2011). From the perspective of liberal peacebuilding, externally imposed enforcement mechanisms risk undermining local ownership of peace processes. Scholars argue that durable peace cannot be achieved solely through coercion but must emerge from political arrangements that enjoy legitimacy among local populations and political actors (Richmond, 2011). External military interventions may therefore weaken rather than strengthen peacebuilding efforts if they marginalize local stakeholders or substitute international priorities for local political realities. Mac Ginty (2011) further contends that peacebuilding often encounters resistance when external actors prioritize security objectives over local agency and societal reconciliation. From this perspective, military enforcement may create short-term stability while failing to address the political grievances, governance failures, and social divisions that sustain violent conflict.

Related critiques focus on the question of legitimacy. Paris (2010) cautions that peace imposed through force may struggle to generate lasting political consent, particularly when local communities perceive enforcement measures as externally driven or politically biased. While coercive measures may suppress violence temporarily, they do not automatically produce legitimate institutions or inclusive political settlements. Critics therefore argue that an overreliance on enforcement risks confusing the cessation of hostilities with sustainable peace and state legitimacy. Human security scholars raise additional concerns regarding the humanitarian consequences of military enforcement. Coercive operations may result in civilian casualties, population displacement, and the destruction of livelihoods, particularly when armed groups operate within densely populated areas or rely on local communities for logistical support (Newman, 2010). Even when military campaigns achieve their immediate objectives, they may increase insecurity in the short term by disrupting existing social and economic structures. These scholars therefore argue that the protection of civilians should remain the primary benchmark against which enforcement strategies are evaluated.

Empirical evidence from other conflict zones further complicates claims regarding the effectiveness of military solutions. The experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that battlefield superiority does not necessarily translate into political stability or effective governance. In both cases, military interventions succeeded in defeating or weakening immediate adversaries but struggled to establish durable political orders capable of addressing the underlying drivers of conflict. Similarly, Somalia illustrates the limitations of coercive approaches in the absence of effective institutions and inclusive political settlements. These cases suggest that military force alone cannot resolve deeply rooted political conflicts and may, under certain circumstances, contribute to prolonged instability. These critiques identify important limitations and should not be dismissed. They highlight the risks associated with excessive militarization, the humanitarian costs of coercive interventions, and the difficulties of translating military success into sustainable political outcomes. Nevertheless, the argument advanced in this article differs from advocating military victory as an end in itself. Rather, it views enforcement as a limited and targeted instrument designed to neutralize spoilers, deter proxy warfare, protect civilians, and create the minimum security conditions necessary for political processes and institutional reforms to take root. The Great Lakes region presents a context in which the primary obstacle to peace has not been the excessive use of coercion but the persistent absence of credible enforcement mechanisms. Successive agreements, including Arusha, Lusaka, Nairobi, and more recently Washington, have relied heavily on voluntary compliance despite the continued operation of armed spoilers, regional proxy networks, and weak state institutions. In such circumstances, negotiation and institution-building are unlikely to succeed unless they are supported by credible mechanisms capable of deterring non-compliance and protecting political settlements from violent disruption. Military enforcement should therefore be understood not as an alternative to peacebuilding but as a precondition for effective peacebuilding in contexts where armed actors retain both the capability and incentive to undermine negotiated agreements.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine the recurring failure of international peace initiatives in the Great Lakes region and to assess whether military enforcement constitutes a necessary precondition for sustainable peace. Qualitative case studies are particularly suitable for investigating complex political and security processes because they allow researchers to explore causal mechanisms, actor perceptions, and institutional dynamics within their historical contexts (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018). The study focuses on four major peace initiatives that have significantly shaped regional peacebuilding efforts: the Arusha Peace Agreement (1993), the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement (1999), the Nairobi Communiqué (2007), and the Washington peace process (2025), comprising the Peace Agreement between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Rwanda, signed on 27 June 2025, and the subsequent Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity, established on 4 December 2025. These cases were selected purposively because they represent significant internationally supported efforts to address insecurity in the Great Lakes region over the past three decades.

The first three cases are examined retrospectively to identify recurring patterns of implementation difficulties and the structural factors associated with the limited durability of peace agreements. The Washington peace process is treated as an ongoing case and is assessed prospectively, with particular attention to implementation risks, enforcement mechanisms, and institutional constraints. Its ultimate effectiveness cannot yet be evaluated on the same basis as the earlier agreements. This comparative approach enables the study to assess whether the structural challenges identified in previous peace processes also pose risks to the implementation of the 2025 Washington agreements (George & Bennett, 2005).

The research adopts a triangulation strategy that combines documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews. Documentary sources include peace agreements, United Nations Security Council resolutions, reports produced by regional and international organizations, policy documents, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature on peacebuilding, state fragility, proxy warfare, conflict economies, and spoiler management (Autesserre, 2010; Paris, 2004; Rotberg, 2004; Stedman, 1997). The use of multiple documentary sources enables the cross-validation of findings and strengthens analytical reliability. To complement documentary evidence, the study draws on 43 semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals possessing direct knowledge and experience of peacebuilding, security governance, and conflict management in the Great Lakes region. Respondents comprised policymakers, United Nations officials, members of regional organizations, security practitioners, civil-society representatives, local community leaders, humanitarian actors, and researchers specializing in regional peace and security issues. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that respondents possessed substantial professional experience relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2016). Snowball sampling was subsequently employed to identify additional participants with specialized knowledge of peace negotiations, armed-group dynamics, and regional security cooperation. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide a balance between consistency and flexibility in data collection (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). An interview guide was used to ensure that all respondents addressed comparable themes, including the effectiveness of peace agreements, the role of spoilers, proxy warfare, regional interventions, military enforcement, and obstacles to

sustainable peace. At the same time, the format allowed respondents to elaborate on emerging issues and provide context-specific insights based on their professional experiences. This approach was particularly important given the sensitive and evolving nature of conflict dynamics in the Great Lakes region. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well suited for identifying recurring patterns and explanatory themes across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts, notes, and documentary materials were coded inductively and deductively, allowing both theoretically informed and emergent themes to be identified. Particular attention was given to recurring themes related to spoiler behaviour, proxy warfare, institutional fragility, civilian protection, conflict economies, regional security arrangements, and peace-enforcement mechanisms. These themes were subsequently compared across the selected case studies to identify common causal patterns and structural constraints affecting peacebuilding outcomes.

In addition to thematic analysis, the study employs process tracing to investigate the relationship between peace agreements, implementation mechanisms, and conflict outcomes (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Process tracing enables the identification of causal pathways linking the presence or absence of enforcement mechanisms to the success or failure of peace initiatives. This methodological approach is particularly relevant to the article's central argument that negotiated settlements lacking credible enforcement mechanisms remain vulnerable to spoiler activity, proxy intervention, and institutional weakness. To strengthen validity and minimize potential bias, evidence from interviews was systematically triangulated with documentary and secondary sources. Comparative insights from Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Somalia were also incorporated to assess broader debates regarding peace enforcement and post-conflict stabilization (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; Fortna, 2008; Paris, 2010). The objective was not to establish direct equivalence between these cases and the Great Lakes region but to identify broader lessons concerning the relationship between enforcement mechanisms and peacebuilding outcomes.

Ethical considerations informed all stages of the research process. Participation in interviews was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Given the political sensitivity of the issues discussed, respondents were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Consequently, interviewees are identified only by professional category rather than by name or institutional affiliation. Interview data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic research purposes in accordance with established ethical principles governing social science research (Bryman, 2016).

The study acknowledges several limitations. Access to some high-level political and military actors was restricted due to the sensitive nature of ongoing conflicts and diplomatic processes. Moreover, perceptions expressed during interviews may reflect institutional perspectives and individual experiences. To mitigate these limitations, interview findings were systematically cross-checked against documentary evidence and existing scholarship. Despite these constraints, the combination of documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, process tracing, and comparative case-study methods provides a robust foundation for examining the structural limitations of peacebuilding interventions and the role of enforcement mechanisms in the Great Lakes region.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Why Peace Agreements Repeatedly Fail in the Great Lakes Region

The comparative analysis of the Arusha Peace Agreement (1993), the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement (1999), and the Nairobi Communiqué (2007), supplemented by semi-structured interviews, reveals recurring patterns of implementation difficulties across successive peace initiatives. Although these agreements emerged in different historical contexts and pursued different objectives, they encountered similar structural constraints that undermined their capacity to establish sustainable peace.

Four interrelated factors emerged from the documentary and interview evidence: the persistence of armed spoilers, regional proxy warfare, institutional fragility, and conflict-economy incentives. These factors provide an analytical framework for assessing the ongoing Washington peace process, including the Peace Agreement signed on 27 June 2025 and the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity established on 4 December 2025. Unlike the earlier cases, the Washington agreements are examined in terms of prospective implementation risks rather than as examples of established failure. The analysis therefore assesses whether the structural constraints identified in previous peace initiatives may also undermine the implementation and long-term effectiveness of the Washington agreements.

4.1.1. Armed Spoilers and the Breakdown of Peace Agreements

The findings indicate that armed spoilers remain among the most significant obstacles to the successful implementation of peace agreements in the Great Lakes region. Across the forty-three interviews conducted for this study, respondents consistently identified the continued presence of non-state armed actors as a central factor explaining the collapse or stagnation of successive peace initiatives. This finding aligns closely with Stedman's (1997) spoiler theory, which argues that certain actors perceive peace agreements as threats to their political influence, military relevance, or economic interests and consequently seek to undermine implementation efforts. The experience of the Arusha Peace Agreement provides an early illustration of this dynamic. Although the agreement represented an ambitious attempt to end the Rwandan civil war through power sharing and political integration, extremist factions opposed to compromise viewed implementation as incompatible with their interests. The subsequent genocide demonstrated the inability of existing institutions and international actors to deter actors determined to destroy the peace process (Prunier, 2009; Stedman, 1997). Interview respondents frequently referred to Arusha as an example of how formal agreements can collapse when enforcement mechanisms are incapable of constraining actors willing to employ violence to achieve political objectives.

Similar patterns emerged during the implementation of the Lusaka Agreement and the Nairobi Communiqué. Both initiatives sought to reduce armed violence through negotiated arrangements and commitments to disarmament. Yet armed organizations repeatedly adapted to changing political circumstances rather than disappearing. Several respondents observed that peace agreements have often been based upon the assumption that armed actors would voluntarily relinquish military power once political arrangements were established. Empirical evidence from the region suggests otherwise. Organizations frequently fragmented, reconstituted themselves under new leadership structures, or shifted operational strategies in response to political pressure and military campaigns. The persistence of the Democratic

Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) is particularly instructive. Despite numerous military operations, disarmament initiatives, and diplomatic efforts, the organization has demonstrated remarkable resilience over nearly three decades. Several interview participants argued that the FDLR's survival cannot be understood solely in military terms. Rather, it reflects the interaction of security concerns, local political networks, economic interests, and regional rivalries. The group's continued existence has reinforced Rwandan security concerns while simultaneously providing justification for a range of regional interventions.

A similar pattern can be observed in the evolution of the CNDP and subsequently M23. Rather than representing entirely new insurgencies, several respondents described these organizations as manifestations of a broader process of armed-group adaptation and reproduction. Military setbacks did not eliminate the underlying grievances, security concerns, and organizational networks that facilitated continued mobilization. Instead, these factors contributed to the emergence of successor organizations capable of sustaining conflict despite repeated peace initiatives.

These findings suggest that armed spoilers should not be understood merely as obstacles to peace implementation but as embedded components of a wider conflict system. Their capacity to adapt, reorganize, and exploit institutional weaknesses helps explain why peace agreements frequently struggle to achieve durable outcomes. The problem is therefore not simply the existence of individual armed groups but the broader conditions that allow armed mobilization to persist over time.

4.1.2. Regional Proxy Warfare and Interstate Rivalries

A second major finding concerns the role of regional security dynamics in shaping peacebuilding outcomes. While international interventions have often approached conflict in eastern Congo as primarily a domestic governance challenge, both documentary and interview evidence indicate that regional rivalries remain central to understanding the persistence of violent conflict. Interview respondents repeatedly emphasized that the security concerns of neighbouring states have profoundly influenced conflict trajectories since the mid-1990s. For Rwanda, the continued presence of the FDLR represents an enduring security concern linked to the legacy of the 1994 genocide.

For the Democratic Republic of Congo, recurrent allegations of external support for insurgent movements have generated persistent perceptions of interference and territorial insecurity. These competing security narratives have repeatedly complicated efforts to establish trust between regional actors. The Lusaka Agreement sought to address these challenges by incorporating multiple regional governments into a common peace framework. Although the agreement succeeded in establishing a diplomatic process, it failed to fundamentally alter the strategic calculations of participating states. Proxy warfare continued, armed groups remained active, and regional competition persisted despite formal commitments to peace. Similar challenges emerged during implementation of the Nairobi Communiqué, which explicitly sought to address regional security concerns but produced limited long-term changes in state behaviour. Several respondents argued that peace agreements have consistently underestimated the degree to which regional actors view armed groups as strategic instruments. In this interpretation, insurgent organizations are not merely security threats but also serve as tools through which governments seek influence, leverage, or

protection against perceived adversaries. Such calculations create significant incentives to maintain relationships with armed actors even while publicly endorsing peace initiatives.

The findings therefore support broader arguments advanced by scholars such as Reno (1998), Clapham (1998), and Stearns (2012), who characterize conflict in Central Africa as deeply regionalized. Rather than operating exclusively within national borders, armed groups and security threats are embedded within wider networks of interstate competition. Consequently, agreements focusing primarily on domestic reforms often struggle to address the transnational dimensions of insecurity that sustain conflict. The continued tensions between Rwanda and the DRC illustrate this challenge. Almost every major agreement examined in this study included provisions designed to improve bilateral cooperation and confidence building. Nevertheless, mutual suspicion has remained a defining feature of regional politics. Respondents repeatedly argued that trust-building mechanisms have often proven insufficient because they fail to address the underlying security dilemmas driving state behaviour. As a result, periods of diplomatic progress have frequently been followed by renewed accusations, military confrontations, or support for proxy actors.

These findings suggest that peacebuilding initiatives are unlikely to succeed if they treat regional rivalry as a secondary issue. Interstate security concerns are not peripheral to the conflict; they are among its principal drivers.

4.1.3. Institutional Weakness and Implementation Deficits

The findings also reveal a significant gap between the commitments contained in peace agreements and the institutional capacity available to implement them. This gap emerged consistently across all four case studies and was frequently highlighted by interview participants as a fundamental obstacle to sustainable peace. Respondents generally agreed that the Congolese state faces persistent challenges in extending authority across its territory. Large areas of eastern Congo remain characterized by limited state presence, weak administrative capacity, and competing forms of local governance. Under such conditions, implementing ambitious peace agreements becomes extremely difficult. Many of the responsibilities assigned to state institutions, including protection of civilians, border security, disarmament, reintegration, and stabilization, exceed the capacities available to local authorities.

The limitations of DDR and SSR programmes provide particularly clear examples. Although these initiatives have featured prominently in successive peace agreements, interview respondents frequently described implementation as inconsistent and under-resourced. In many cases, disarmament initiatives struggled to provide viable alternatives for combatants, while security-sector reforms failed to address deeper problems of institutional accountability and effectiveness. As a result, some former combatants returned to armed activity while others integrated into networks that continued to undermine state authority. Respondents also noted that international peacebuilding interventions have often been based upon optimistic assumptions regarding institutional capacity. Several argued that agreements routinely assign responsibilities to state actors without adequately addressing the structural constraints affecting implementation. This creates a situation in which formal commitments exist on paper but remain difficult to operationalize in practice.

The findings reinforce broader arguments within the fragile-state literature. As Rotberg (2004) and Call and Wyeth (2008) observe, state fragility creates significant challenges for conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction. The evidence presented here suggests that institutional weakness has been both a cause and a consequence of protracted conflict, limiting the effectiveness of peace agreements while simultaneously being reinforced by ongoing insecurity.

4.1.4. Conflict Economies and Incentives for Continued Violence

A fourth recurring finding concerns the role of conflict economies in sustaining violence. Across both documentary sources and interview data, respondents consistently emphasized the importance of economic incentives in explaining the resilience of armed conflict. The eastern DRC possesses substantial mineral resources, including gold, coltan, cassiterite, and other strategically valuable commodities. These resources have generated opportunities for armed groups, local elites, cross-border networks, and other actors to derive material benefits from conditions of instability. Several respondents argued that peace negotiations have frequently focused on political and security arrangements while paying insufficient attention to the economic structures underpinning conflict. The findings indicate that conflict economies operate through highly complex networks rather than through isolated armed groups. Respondents described systems involving local authorities, business actors, military officials, transport operators, and regional intermediaries. These networks generate incentives that can survive even when individual armed organizations are weakened or dismantled. Consequently, the removal of one armed actor does not necessarily eliminate the broader economic dynamics driving violence.

Interview participants frequently noted that continued access to economic resources enables armed groups to recruit fighters, acquire weapons, establish local alliances, and sustain operations over extended periods. These economic foundations help explain why certain organizations survive despite repeated military defeats and peace initiatives. They also contribute to the emergence of new armed groups that seek to exploit similar opportunities. The findings therefore support arguments advanced by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) and Autesserre (2010), who emphasize the relationship between resource exploitation and conflict persistence. Peace agreements that fail to address conflict economies risk leaving intact many of the incentives that sustain violence

The preceding findings highlight the structural obstacles that have repeatedly undermined peace agreements in the Great Lakes region. However, identifying the factors associated with peace-process failure does not fully explain why insecurity persists despite successive diplomatic interventions, military operations, and disarmament initiatives. While spoilers, proxy warfare, institutional fragility, and conflict economies create an environment hostile to peace implementation, the persistence of conflict also suggests a capacity for armed mobilization to regenerate over time. Understanding this process requires moving beyond the failure of individual agreements to examine how armed organizations evolve, adapt, and re-emerge across successive phases of conflict. The next section therefore explores the mechanisms through which conflict is reproduced from one generation of armed groups to the next.

4.2. Armed-Group Persistence and Conflict Reproduction: From the FDLR to M23

The preceding analysis demonstrated that peace initiatives in the Great Lakes region have repeatedly been undermined by spoilers, proxy warfare, institutional fragility, and conflict-economy incentives. Yet these factors alone do not fully explain why armed conflict continues to reappear despite successive peace agreements, military operations, and disarmament programmes. The findings suggest that conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo should be understood not as a sequence of isolated rebellions but as a regional conflict system capable of reproducing armed organizations across successive generations of violence. Rather than disappearing following negotiated settlements, armed groups frequently adapt, fragment, reorganize, and re-emerge under new names and leadership structures. This pattern was repeatedly emphasized by interview respondents, many of whom argued that peacebuilding interventions often focus on ending specific rebellions while leaving intact the underlying political, security, and economic conditions that generate new forms of armed mobilization.

4.2.1. The FDLR and the Persistence of Historical Grievances

One of the clearest examples of armed-group persistence is provided by FDLR. Emerging from elements of the former Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and Interahamwe militias that fled into eastern Congo following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis, the FDLR has remained a significant actor in regional security dynamics for nearly three decades (Prunier, 2009; Stearns, 2012). Despite military offensives, disarmament initiatives, and diplomatic pressure, the organization has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Interview respondents consistently identified the FDLR as more than a conventional insurgent movement. Several participants described the group as a symbol of unresolved regional security dilemmas linking Rwanda's security concerns to instability in eastern Congo. In this respect, the FDLR's importance extends beyond its military capabilities. Its continued existence has repeatedly shaped the strategic calculations of both state and non-state actors, influencing security policies, diplomatic initiatives, and military interventions throughout the region.

The findings indicate that the organization's survival cannot be explained solely by military factors. Rather, the FDLR has benefited from a combination of difficult terrain, weak state authority, cross-border economic networks, and periodic alliances with local actors including the Government forces. Several respondents noted that military operations frequently weakened the group without eliminating its operational capacity. This pattern allowed the organization to decentralize its structures, disperse fighters, and maintain influence within certain localities even after suffering significant losses. The persistence of the FDLR also illustrates the limitations of many disarmament initiatives. Numerous programmes assumed that military pressure combined with reintegration incentives would gradually reduce the organization's capacity. While some fighters participated in demobilization programmes both in DRC and in Rwanda, others remained active, often reintegrating into local armed networks or relocating to different operational areas. As a result, military and diplomatic interventions frequently produced temporary reductions in violence without resolving the broader security issues that sustained the group's existence.

These findings support broader scholarship emphasizing the importance of historical grievances in sustaining armed mobilization (Kalyvas, 2006; Staniland, 2014). The FDLR's resilience cannot be understood solely through military analysis. Its persistence reflects the interaction of historical narratives, regional security concerns, local political dynamics, and economic incentives. Consequently, efforts aimed exclusively at military neutralization have struggled to achieve lasting outcomes.

4.2.2. From the RCD to the CNDP: The Evolution of Armed Mobilization

The findings further reveal that armed-group persistence in eastern Congo often occurs through processes of organizational transformation rather than simple continuity. The evolution from the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) to the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) illustrates how armed organizations adapt to changing political environments while retaining important elements of their predecessor networks. The RCD emerged during the Second Congo War as one of the principal rebel movements challenging the Congolese government. Although the movement formally participated in subsequent peace arrangements, many of the conditions that had facilitated its emergence remained unresolved. Interview participants repeatedly emphasized that political integration agreements often failed to address deeper security concerns, local power struggles, and questions of representation. As a result, former combatants and commanders frequently retained organizational cohesion and continued to function as distinct political and military networks.

The emergence of the CNDP under the leadership of Laurent Nkunda reflected these unresolved tensions. Several respondents argued that the CNDP should not be viewed as an entirely new organization but as a reconfiguration of pre-existing networks that adapted to changing political circumstances at that time. The movement inherited personnel, local relationships, command structures, and security narratives that had previously shaped the RCD. At the same time, it developed a distinct political identity centred on the protection of Congolese Tutsi communities and opposition to the continued presence of the FDLR. The findings suggest that this process of organizational adaptation represents a recurring feature of conflict in the region. Rather than disappearing following peace agreements, armed networks frequently survive in transformed forms, preserving relationships, grievances, and military capacities that facilitate future mobilization. Several respondents described this phenomenon as a cycle of "integration, fragmentation, and remobilization" through which peace agreements temporarily absorb armed actors without fundamentally dismantling the structures that sustain conflict.

This pattern reinforces arguments advanced by Weinstein (2007) and Staniland (2014), who emphasize the importance of organizational networks in shaping the durability of armed groups. In eastern Congo, these networks have often outlasted the organizations through which they initially emerged. Consequently, the apparent disappearance of one armed movement has frequently created conditions for the emergence of another.

4.2.3. From the CNDP to M23: Rebellion Through Reconfiguration

The transition from the CNDP to the March 23 Movement (M23) provides further evidence of conflict reproduction within the regionalized conflict system. Officially, the CNDP was integrated into the Congolese armed forces through the 23 March 2009 peace

agreement. Yet many of the concerns that motivated the movement's mobilization remained unresolved. The subsequent emergence of M23 in 2012 reflected the fragility of political settlements built upon incomplete implementation and contested security guarantees. Interview respondents frequently cited M23 as an example of the limitations of military integration strategies. Although integration formally reduced armed confrontation in the short term, it did not eliminate existing command networks, nor did it resolve disputes regarding political representation, local governance, security arrangements, and implementation of agreements. As tensions mounted, former CNDP networks provided the organizational foundation upon which M23 was able to mobilize. Several respondents noted that M23 differed from many previous insurgent movements because it combined local grievances with regional geopolitical dynamics. The movement's military effectiveness reflected not only internal organization but also its position within broader regional security competition. As a result, M23 quickly emerged as one of the most significant security challenges facing the Congolese state.

The movement's defeat in 2013 by the Force Intervention Brigade and Congolese forces was widely regarded as a significant achievement. However, interview findings indicate that the military defeat of M23 did not eliminate the broader conditions that facilitated its emergence. Several respondents emphasized that underlying disputes concerning governance, security, representation, and regional relations remained largely unresolved following the group's military setback. These observations challenge interpretations that equate military defeat with conflict resolution. While military operations may reduce the operational capacity of armed groups, they do not necessarily eliminate the structural conditions sustaining armed mobilization. Consequently, periods of apparent stabilization may conceal unresolved tensions capable of generating future violence.

4.2.4. M23's Resurgence and the Reproduction of Conflict

The resurgence of M23 after 2021 provides perhaps the clearest evidence supporting the argument that eastern Congo operates as a regionalized conflict system characterized by the reproduction of armed groups. Nearly a decade after its apparent defeat, the movement re-emerged as a significant military and political actor, rapidly altering security dynamics across North and South Kivu. Interview participants repeatedly emphasized that the resurgence should not be viewed as an isolated event. Instead, it reflected the cumulative effects of unresolved grievances, weak implementation of previous agreements, persistent regional mistrust, and the continued existence of armed networks. Several respondents argued that the movement's return demonstrated the limitations of approaches that prioritize short-term stabilization while neglecting longer-term political and institutional challenges.

The findings indicate that M23's resurgence was facilitated by many of the same structural conditions identified in previous sections of this study. Weak state authority, incomplete security-sector reform, contested local governance arrangements, and regional rivalries continued to create opportunities for armed mobilization. In addition, conflict economy incentives and ongoing insecurity maintained conditions favourable to the survival and adaptation of armed actors. Several interviewees drew attention to the symbolic significance of M23's return. For many observers, the resurgence highlighted the extent to which previous interventions had addressed the symptoms rather than the causes of conflict.

The movement's reappearance challenged assumptions that earlier peace agreements and military operations had produced durable solutions. Instead, it suggested that conflict remained embedded within broader regional structures capable of generating recurring cycles of violence. These findings are consistent with broader scholarship emphasizing the cyclical nature of armed conflict in fragile states (Autesserre, 2010; Stearns, 2012). Conflict reproduction occurs not simply because agreements fail but because the underlying mechanisms sustaining violence remain largely intact.

4.2.5. Conflict Economies and Organizational Survival

The analysis also reveals the importance of conflict economies in sustaining processes of armed-group reproduction. Throughout the interviews, respondents consistently emphasized the role of economic incentives in enabling armed organizations to survive periods of military pressure and political transition. Control over mining activities, taxation systems, transport routes, and cross-border trade has provided armed groups with access to resources necessary for recruitment, logistics, and military operations. More importantly, these economic activities frequently outlive particular organizations. When one armed group declines, another may emerge to exploit the same economic networks. Several respondents described conflict economies as functioning independently of individual peace agreements. While political settlements may alter formal governance arrangements, they often fail to dismantle informal economic structures sustaining violence. Consequently, armed actors continue to possess incentives for mobilization even when political compromises are achieved. The findings therefore suggest that conflict economies contribute not only to armed-group survival but also to armed-group reproduction. Economic opportunities created by instability generate incentives for the continued emergence of new organizations capable of exploiting existing networks

The findings presented in this section suggest that the persistence of conflict in eastern Congo cannot be explained solely through the actions of individual armed organizations or the failure of particular peace agreements. Rather, the trajectories of the FDLR, RCD, CNDP, and M23 point to the existence of a broader regional conflict system in which armed groups are able to adapt, fragment, and reconstitute themselves in response to changing political and security environments. This capacity for organizational reproduction helps explain why successive peace initiatives have struggled to generate durable stability despite repeated diplomatic and military interventions.

4.3. Evaluating the Effectiveness and Limits of Military Enforcement

The preceding sections demonstrated that peace agreements in the Great Lakes region have repeatedly struggled to neutralize armed spoilers, prevent the reproduction of insurgent organizations, and address the regional dynamics sustaining conflict. These findings raise an important analytical question: if negotiated settlements have proven insufficient to prevent the recurrence of violence, to what extent can military enforcement alter the incentives and structural conditions that sustain armed conflict? The interview data and documentary evidence provide qualified support for the proposition that enforcement can enhance peacebuilding outcomes under specific conditions. At the same time, they reveal important limitations that caution against viewing military intervention as a comprehensive solution to complex political conflicts.

4.3.1. The Force Intervention Brigade and the Evolution of Peace Enforcement

The establishment of the United Nations Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in 2013 represented a significant departure from traditional peacekeeping doctrine. Unlike previous UN operations in the DRC, which largely emphasized neutrality, consent, and civilian protection, the FIB was explicitly mandated to conduct offensive operations against armed groups threatening regional stability (Autesserre, 2010; United Nations, 2013). The decision reflected growing frustration among regional and international actors regarding the inability of conventional peacekeeping approaches to halt recurring cycles of violence. Interview respondents consistently identified the FIB as one of the most significant innovations in international intervention within the Great Lakes region. Many contrasted the Brigade's approach with earlier phases of MONUC and MONUSCO, arguing that previous missions often lacked the operational flexibility and political mandate necessary to confront armed groups directly. Several participants emphasized that the FIB altered perceptions among both armed actors and civilian populations by signalling a willingness to move beyond passive monitoring toward active enforcement. The military campaign against M23 in 2013 was frequently cited as evidence of the Brigade's effectiveness. Supported by the Congolese armed forces, the Brigade succeeded in degrading the military capabilities of M23 and contributed to the movement's withdrawal from major population centres (United Nations Security Council, 2013). Interview participants generally agreed that these operations created a period of relative stability and significantly reduced the movement's immediate threat to state authority. Importantly, respondents emphasized that the significance of the FIB extended beyond its battlefield accomplishments. Several argued that the intervention demonstrated that armed groups, even with external support, were not immune to military pressure and that international missions could exercise a deterrent function when equipped with appropriate mandates and capabilities. From this perspective, the Brigade challenged longstanding assumptions regarding the limitations of peacekeeping in highly volatile environments.

These findings support broader arguments within the peace-enforcement literature, which contend that coercive measures may be necessary in situations where armed actors have little incentive to comply voluntarily with negotiated settlements (Bellamy & Williams, 2010). In the Great Lakes context, the evidence suggests that the FIB contributed to altering the strategic calculations of some armed actors and temporarily strengthened the credibility of international intervention.

4.3.2. Enforcement and the Management of Spoilers

The findings also indicate that military enforcement can play an important role in addressing spoiler behaviour. As demonstrated in previous sections, peace agreements in the Great Lakes region have repeatedly encountered resistance from actors who perceive negotiated settlements as incompatible with their political, military, or economic interests. Under such conditions, implementation mechanisms based solely on voluntary compliance often prove insufficient. Interview respondents frequently distinguished between armed actors willing to engage in negotiation and those whose objectives depended upon the continuation of conflict. Several participants argued that certain groups had repeatedly used ceasefires and negotiations as opportunities to regroup, recruit, or consolidate territorial control. From this perspective, enforcement mechanisms were necessary not because negotiation lacked value,

but because negotiation alone could not prevent opportunistic behaviour by actors committed to preserving coercive capabilities.

The findings suggest that enforcement may influence spoilers through several mechanisms. First, it increases the costs associated with non-compliance by exposing armed groups to direct military consequences. Second, it can weaken organizational capacities that enable spoilers to disrupt political processes. Third, it can strengthen confidence among civilian populations and political actors that peace agreements possess meaningful implementation mechanisms. Several respondents drew comparisons with experiences in Sierra Leone and Liberia, where enforcement operations contributed to the containment of armed groups and created opportunities for broader peacebuilding initiatives (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; Paris, 2004). In these cases, military pressure functioned not as a substitute for political settlement but as a mechanism for creating security conditions within which negotiations and institutional reforms became possible. Nevertheless, interview participants also emphasized that enforcement alone rarely eliminates spoilers permanently. Military pressure may disrupt organizational structures and reduce operational capacity, but armed groups often retain the ability to adapt or reconstitute themselves if underlying political, economic, and security drivers remain unresolved. The persistence and eventual resurgence of M23 illustrates this limitation. While the FIB achieved important military successes in 2013, subsequent developments demonstrated that enforcement did not fundamentally transform the broader conflict environment from which the movement emerged. The findings therefore suggest that military enforcement is most effective when integrated within broader political strategies rather than employed as an isolated intervention.

4.3.3. Deterring Proxy Warfare and Regional Intervention

A further contribution of enforcement concerns its potential role in influencing regional security calculations. Previous sections demonstrated that proxy warfare remains a defining characteristic of conflict in the Great Lakes region. Armed groups do not operate solely as domestic actors but frequently function within wider networks of regional competition and interstate rivalry. Several interview respondents argued that traditional peace agreements often fail because they rely on voluntary restraint by regional actors whose security concerns remain unresolved. In such circumstances, commitments to cease supporting proxy forces may prove difficult to sustain when governments continue to perceive armed actors as strategically useful. The findings indicate that enforcement can alter these calculations by increasing the costs associated with external sponsorship. Several respondents cited the 2013 campaign against M23 as an example of how credible military action can influence the behaviour of both armed groups and their potential backers. The willingness of international and regional actors to employ force signaled that support for destabilizing activities could generate significant political and military consequences.

However, evidence from the interviews also suggests that deterrence remains inherently fragile. Regional rivalry in the Great Lakes region is rooted in deeply embedded security concerns, historical grievances, and competing geopolitical interests. Consequently, enforcement may discourage certain forms of intervention without eliminating the strategic motivations that encourage proxy relationships in the first place. Several respondents noted that episodes of reduced interference have frequently been followed by renewed competition

once political circumstances changed. These findings indicate that while enforcement can contribute to deterrence, it cannot by itself resolve the broader security dilemmas driving regional intervention. Sustainable progress requires parallel political efforts aimed at reducing interstate mistrust and strengthening regional security cooperation.

4.3.4. Enforcement, Civilian Protection, and Humanitarian Outcomes

The findings also reveal a more complex relationship between enforcement and civilian protection than suggested by either advocates or critics of military intervention. A recurring theme within the interviews was the recognition that insecurity itself imposes severe humanitarian costs on affected populations. Respondents frequently emphasized that armed groups have been responsible for widespread displacement, human-rights violations, and restrictions on economic activity throughout eastern Congo. From this perspective, military enforcement may contribute positively to civilian protection by reducing the ability of armed groups to operate with impunity. Several respondents noted that periods during which armed actors lost territorial control were often associated with improvements in civilian security and access to basic services. The displacement of insurgent organizations from major population centres could therefore generate tangible humanitarian benefits. At the same time, respondents acknowledged significant risks associated with coercive operations. Military campaigns may generate civilian casualties, population displacement, and disruption of local livelihoods, particularly when armed groups are embedded within densely populated areas. These concerns reflect broader human-security critiques emphasizing the potential humanitarian consequences of militarized interventions (Newman, 2010).

Several interview participants therefore rejected simplistic distinctions between military and humanitarian approaches. Instead, they argued that civilian protection requires balancing the risks associated with military action against the risks associated with allowing armed actors to remain operational. In this interpretation, the relevant question is not whether enforcement creates humanitarian costs, but whether those costs are outweighed by the protection benefits generated through the reduction of armed violence. The findings suggest that enforcement can contribute to civilian protection when implemented within clear legal frameworks, accompanied by robust accountability mechanisms, and integrated with broader stabilization efforts. However, they also demonstrate that coercive measures may create new vulnerabilities if they are conducted without adequate attention to humanitarian consequences.

4.3.5. The Limits of Military Enforcement

While many respondents viewed enforcement favorably, the findings also provide substantial support for critiques of militarized peacebuilding discussed in the literature review. Interview participants repeatedly cautioned against treating military success as synonymous with conflict resolution. Several emphasized that the defeat of armed groups does not automatically produce legitimate institutions, effective governance, or political reconciliation. These observations resonate with critiques advanced by Richmond (2011), Mac Ginty (2011), and Paris (2010), who argue that externally imposed security arrangements may struggle to generate local legitimacy. Respondents acknowledged that military operations can suppress violence temporarily without resolving the grievances and structural inequalities that contribute to conflict. In some cases, coercive approaches may even generate resentment if populations perceive interventions as externally imposed or politically biased.

Comparative evidence from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia reinforces these concerns. In all three cases, military interventions achieved important battlefield successes yet faced significant difficulties translating military gains into sustainable political outcomes. Interview participants frequently referred to these examples when discussing the limitations of force as a peacebuilding instrument. Several argued that excessive reliance on military solutions risks diverting attention from political reforms, governance challenges, and socioeconomic development. The findings therefore support a more nuanced interpretation than either proponents or critics of enforcement often suggest. Military force can alter security environments and constrain violent actors, but it cannot independently resolve the underlying causes of conflict. Durable peace requires institutions capable of managing disputes, governments able to provide public goods, and political arrangements perceived as legitimate by affected populations.

The findings indicate that military enforcement can influence conflict dynamics by constraining armed spoilers, increasing the costs of non-compliance, and strengthening implementation mechanisms. At the same time, enforcement alone cannot eliminate the political, institutional, and regional factors that sustain insecurity. These observations provide an important framework for evaluating contemporary peace initiatives in the Great Lakes region. The Washington Accords represent the latest effort to address a conflict environment shaped by many of the challenges identified throughout this study. Assessing their prospects therefore requires examining whether they offer meaningful responses to the structural obstacles that have repeatedly undermined earlier agreements.

4.4. The Washington Accords in Comparative Perspective: Aspirations and Structural Constraints

The preceding analysis identified four interconnected dynamics that have repeatedly undermined peacebuilding efforts in the Great Lakes region: armed spoilers, regional proxy warfare, institutional fragility, and conflict economies. It also demonstrated that military enforcement can, under certain conditions, constrain armed actors and strengthen implementation mechanisms, while remaining insufficient on its own to secure sustainable peace. These findings provide a useful analytical framework for evaluating the Washington Accords. Rather than examining the agreement in isolation, the findings suggest that its prospects should be assessed against the historical experience of previous peace initiatives and the structural conditions that continue to shape conflict in the region.

4.4.1. Strengths and Innovations of the Washington Accords

Unlike several previous peace initiatives, the Washington Accords emerged after decades of accumulated experience with failed peace processes in the Great Lakes region. Consequently, the agreement recognized many of the factors that had undermined earlier interventions. The accord explicitly acknowledged the regional dimensions of insecurity, emphasized cooperation between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and sought to address the challenge posed by armed groups operating in eastern Congo. This emphasis on coordinated regional security reflects broader arguments that contemporary security threats increasingly require multilateral and cooperative approaches rather than purely national solutions (Marsili, 2019). In addition, it benefited from substantial diplomatic support from regional and international partners, reflecting growing recognition that unresolved insecurity

in eastern Congo represents both a national and regional challenge. Interview respondents generally welcomed the renewed diplomatic engagement surrounding the accord. Several participants argued that the agreement created an important opportunity for reducing tensions between Kigali and Kinshasa while simultaneously reinforcing ongoing regional peace initiatives. Others noted that the Washington process reflected greater awareness of the interconnected nature of security, governance, and regional cooperation than some previous agreements. The findings also suggest that the accord differs from earlier frameworks in its emphasis on regional monitoring and implementation mechanisms. Several respondents viewed these provisions positively, arguing that previous agreements frequently suffered from inadequate oversight and weak coordination among stakeholders. By creating additional platforms for dialogue and monitoring, the Washington Accords potentially improve the capacity of regional actors to identify implementation challenges before they escalate into renewed confrontation.

Furthermore, respondents generally regarded the agreement as evidence of continued political commitment to negotiated conflict resolution despite deteriorating security conditions. Even among interviewees who expressed skepticism regarding implementation prospects, there was broad recognition that the accord represented an important diplomatic achievement in a highly polarized environment. These observations suggest that the Washington process should not be dismissed simply as another iteration of previous agreements. The findings indicate that the accord incorporates several lessons derived from earlier peace initiatives and reflects evolving understandings of regional conflict dynamics.

4.4.2. Persistent Challenges Posed by the FDLR

Despite these positive features, the findings indicate that the Washington Accords continue to confront many of the structural obstacles that undermined earlier agreements. Among these, the unresolved status of the FDLR emerged as a particularly significant concern. As discussed in previous sections, the FDLR occupies a central position within regional security calculations. For Rwanda, the continued presence of the organization represents an enduring security threat rooted in the legacy of the 1994 genocide. For the Congolese government, however, efforts to dismantle the FDLR have repeatedly encountered operational, political, and institutional difficulties. Consequently, successive agreements have struggled to reconcile competing expectations regarding the group's neutralization. Interview respondents frequently identified the FDLR as one of the most significant obstacles to successful implementation of the Washington Accords. Several participants argued that expectations regarding the rapid dismantling of the organization remain unrealistic given its long history, decentralized organizational structure, and integration within local political and economic networks. Others observed that previous agreements had included similar commitments with limited success, raising questions regarding the feasibility of implementation under current conditions.

The findings further suggest that the continued existence of the FDLR contributes directly to interstate mistrust. As long as the organization remains operational, Rwanda is likely to view security guarantees provided through diplomatic agreements with caution. This dynamic creates a situation in which implementation challenges related to a single armed group have wider implications for regional peace efforts. Consistent with the broader findings

of this study, the persistence of the FDLR illustrates the limitations of approaches that rely primarily upon negotiated commitments without addressing the structural conditions that sustain armed mobilization. The challenge facing the Washington process is therefore not simply the existence of the group itself but the broader security dilemma that its continued operation reinforces.

4.4.3. M23 and the Persistence of Regionalized Conflict

The findings indicate that M23 poses a similar challenge to the implementation of the Washington Accords. While the movement differs from the FDLR in terms of origins, objectives, and organizational characteristics, its resurgence reflects many of the same structural dynamics identified throughout this study. Interview participants consistently highlighted M23 as the most immediate security challenge confronting the peace process. Several respondents noted that the movement's resurgence after 2021 undermined confidence in previous stabilization efforts and demonstrated the continuing capacity of armed organizations to re-emerge despite earlier military defeats and peace agreements. From the perspective of many interviewees, the significance of M23 extends beyond its military activities. The movement has become deeply intertwined with broader disputes concerning security, citizenship, political representation, territorial control, and regional influence. Consequently, efforts aimed solely at military containment are unlikely to produce durable outcomes unless accompanied by broader political solutions. Several participants also emphasized that differing interpretations of M23's role continue to generate tensions between regional actors. While Congolese authorities frequently portray the movement as evidence of external interference, alternative narratives emphasize local grievances and security concerns. These competing interpretations complicate efforts to establish a common understanding of both the problem and its solution. The findings therefore suggest that M23 represents not simply an armed organization but a manifestation of unresolved regional tensions. As with the FDLR, the movement's continued existence reflects deeper political and security dynamics that extend beyond the immediate provisions of the Washington Accords.

4.4.4. Institutional Constraints and Implementation Risks

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was concern regarding implementation capacity. Although respondents generally welcomed the objectives of the Washington Accords, many expressed doubts regarding the ability of existing institutions to deliver on the agreement's commitments. Several participants noted that previous agreements had frequently failed not because their objectives were inappropriate but because implementation mechanisms proved inadequate. Weak state institutions, limited administrative capacity, resource constraints, and competing political priorities repeatedly undermined efforts to translate commitments into practice. Many respondents argued that these challenges remain relevant today. The findings indicate that implementation risks are particularly pronounced in areas requiring coordination among multiple actors. Security-sector reform, disarmament initiatives, border management, and civilian protection all depend upon cooperation between institutions operating at local, national, regional, and international levels. Respondents frequently observed that such coordination has historically proven difficult to sustain over time. Furthermore, several interviewees expressed concern regarding the gap between political commitments and operational realities. While agreements may establish ambitious

objectives, implementation frequently encounters local-level challenges that are difficult to anticipate during negotiations. This observation echoes broader findings presented earlier in this study concerning the relationship between institutional weakness and peacebuilding outcomes. These findings suggest that the success of the Washington Accords will depend less upon the content of the agreement itself than upon the effectiveness of the institutions responsible for implementation.

4.4.5. Can the Washington Accords Avoid the Fate of Earlier Agreements?

The central question raised by the findings is whether the Washington Accords can overcome the structural constraints that undermined earlier peace processes. Historical experience provides reasons for caution. Comparative studies of protracted and frozen conflicts similarly demonstrate that unresolved security dilemmas can persist despite repeated diplomatic initiatives when underlying political disputes remain unaddressed (Marsili, 2024). Arusha, Lusaka, and Nairobi each sought to address violence through negotiated settlements, yet all encountered significant implementation difficulties associated with spoilers, proxy warfare, weak institutions, and conflict economies. The Washington process confronts many of these same challenges. However, the findings do not support a deterministic conclusion that failure is inevitable. Several respondents argued that important contextual differences distinguish the current environment from previous periods. Greater international attention, stronger regional engagement, and lessons learned from earlier interventions may improve implementation prospects. Moreover, increased recognition of the interconnected nature of regional security challenges potentially creates opportunities for more comprehensive responses. At the same time, interview participants consistently emphasized that optimism must be tempered by realism.

The structural drivers of conflict identified throughout this study remain largely in place. Armed groups continue to operate, regional mistrust persists, implementation capacity remains uneven, and conflict economies continue to generate incentives for instability. Unless these challenges are addressed effectively, the risk of implementation failure will remain significant. The findings therefore suggest that the Washington Accords face a critical test. Success will depend not only on diplomatic commitment but also on the existence of credible mechanisms capable of deterring violations, constraining armed spoilers, supporting institutional reform, and sustaining regional cooperation over time.

5. Conclusion

The dominant assumption underlying most international interventions in the Great Lakes region has been that violent conflict can be resolved through negotiated settlements supported by institution-building, confidence-building measures, and external mediation. Three decades of intervention suggest otherwise. Despite significant diplomatic engagement and repeated peace initiatives, stability has remained elusive while armed organizations have repeatedly adapted to changing political environments and re-emerged in new forms.

This article has argued that the central problem lies not in the absence of peace agreements, but in a mismatch between the assumptions informing those agreements and the realities of conflict on the ground. Much of the peacebuilding literature implicitly treats armed conflict as a temporary disruption that can be managed through compromise and institutional reform. The evidence examined here instead suggests that conflict in the Great Lakes region

functions as a regionalized and self-reproducing system in which violence is sustained through interconnected political, security, and economic relationships that extend beyond individual armed groups, states, and peace processes. Viewed from this perspective, the recurring failure of initiatives such as Arusha, Lusaka, Nairobi, and Washington is not primarily the result of poor implementation or insufficient political commitment. Rather, these initiatives have repeatedly sought to manage the manifestations of conflict without fundamentally altering the structures through which conflict is reproduced. As long as these structures remain intact, new armed actors are likely to emerge even when previous movements are militarily defeated, politically integrated, or formally dissolved.

The article therefore contributes to ongoing debates on peacebuilding by shifting attention from the design of individual agreements to the broader environment within which those agreements operate. The principal challenge confronting regional and international actors is not merely how to negotiate peace settlements, but how to disrupt the mechanisms through which armed mobilization continues to regenerate itself. This requires a greater focus on implementation, deterrence, regional security arrangements, and the long-term transformation of the political and economic conditions that sustain violence. Within this broader argument, military enforcement occupies an important but limited role. The findings do not support the proposition that force alone can create peace. They do, however, suggest that peace agreements lacking credible implementation and enforcement mechanisms are unlikely to withstand the pressures generated by actors capable of using violence to protect their interests. The question is therefore not whether peace should be pursued through negotiation or enforcement, but how coercive and political instruments can be combined in ways that prevent agreements from becoming vulnerable to the same dynamics that undermined their predecessors. The Washington Accords will ultimately be judged not by the ambitions they articulate but by their capacity to escape this historical pattern. Whether they become another milestone in the region's long history of incomplete peace or the foundation for a more durable political order will depend on their ability to confront, rather than merely accommodate, the structures through which conflict has reproduced itself for more than three decades.

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