



Resource Sovereignty, Regional Security, and Political Economy of Violence in Eastern DRC

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Abstract

The conflict in the eastern part of the DRC has been recognised as a result of failed interventions and compromised sovereignty; therefore, it requires an integrated analysis to understand the complex relationship among resource management, regional security, and historical narrative. The research methodology used for this study is qualitative, employing interpretive analysis of journals, United Nations Group of Experts Reports, MONUSCO Reports, International Crisis Group Reports, and an audit of the mineral supply chain from 2000 to 2025. The analysis has revealed that the conflict in the region is not a result of the minerals; however, conflict has been institutionalised in the region with the complex relationship between compromised sovereignty, regional security, and historical narrative on the management of resources, which is evident with the resurgence of M23 rebellion; therefore, it is clear that a regional security complex is present in the region. Recent interventions, including the Luanda Process, the Nairobi Process, and the SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC), reveal the formation of a new security complex in the region. However, the failure of these interventions also reflects the lingering trust deficit among the regions. The humanitarian consequences of the political economy of violence are significant, as instability in the Goma region reveals. The study concludes that, for stabilisation to be achieved, there is a need to reclaim resource sovereignty through mineral governance that is both transparent and accountable, as well as through regional diplomacy and security assurances to address inter-state insecurity and reorganise the underlying politics of conflict.

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Introduction

The persistence of conflict in Eastern DRC is a paradox that continues to puzzle both scholarship and policy. While decades of international intervention, peace agreements, and resource governance reforms have been undertaken in the DRC, conflict in North and South Kivu appears to be structurally embedded. While existing literature on the DRC conflict has offered plausible explanations based on specific factors such as resource competition, ethnic conflict, and regional geopolitics, these factors have failed to capture how they interact within a changing global political economy (Ross, 2004; Autesserre, 2010; Reyntjens, 2009). This has led to intervention efforts that treat only symptoms rather than the underlying configuration of authority, extraction, and insecurity that fuels conflict (International Crisis Group, 2012; World Bank, 2023).

The present study aims to fill this gap by proposing a more integrated analytical model based on resource sovereignty, defined here as "the ability of the state and local institutions to regulate, control, and benefit equitably from resource extraction in an environment of both internal divisions and



external influences." In the case of Eastern DRC, resource sovereignty is not only threatened but also challenged by armed actors, regional forces, and globalised economic interests (Global Witness, 2017 & Stearns, 2012). What are the relationships between struggles for resource sovereignty, regional security challenges, and global demand for strategic minerals in maintaining conflict in Eastern DRC?

The article claims that although these studies have provided valuable insights, they have failed to sufficiently explain how the global green energy shift and the rising demand for cobalt and lithium have reconfigured the political economy of conflict in the post-conflict regions in ways that extend beyond 'coltan-era' patterns seen in the 2000s. While these studies have tended to focus on patterns of resource predation and war economies (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Ross, 2004), recent patterns have seen a more embedded role in global supply chains related to global electric vehicle and renewable energy markets (World Bank, 2020; SIPRI, 2025), which has heightened the importance of the Eastern DRC and the fragmentation in the regions processes.

The importance of this research lies in its role in bridging African conflict studies and global debates on the energy transition. Thus, by focusing on the Eastern DRC, the article offers a new perspective on the emergence of transnational supply chains, linking regional instability to global structural changes. The article reveals that, through the green energy transition, perceived as a global solution to sustainability problems, instability might inadvertently re-emerge, especially in resource-abundant regions with unstable political systems (World Bank, 2023 & SIPRI, 2025).

The rest of the article will follow this format: Section Two will review the literature, followed by an explanation of the theoretical framework, including the political economy of conflict, regional security complex theory, and postcolonial state formation theory. Section Three explains the methodology used. Section Four presents the study's findings, while the final section addresses its implications.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Literature Review

The eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has, for three decades, occupied a strategic yet volatile position in Africa's security politics. Since the fall of Mobutu's regime in 1997 and the regional wars that followed in the Great Lakes Region (GLR), the provinces of North and South Kivu in Eastern Congo have witnessed repeated armed mobilisations, temporary ceasefires, and shifting alliances among actors. Although periods of relative calm have been noted in this region, they have not been followed by political stabilisation. Instead, conflicts have persisted in different forms, suggesting that they have not just persisted but have actually been entrenched (Prunier, 2009; Stearns, 2012; SIPRI, 2025).

There have been two major ways in which this has been explained. The first has been relative mineral affluence, which has led to the 'resource curse,' with actors fighting over deposits of cobalt, coltan, and gold. The other has been the ethnic factors, particularly the legacy of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, where refugees ended up in the DRC. While these factors have played a major role in the conflicts, they have not entirely addressed the institutional factors. Minerals and ethnic tensions do not automatically imply conflict. Conflict arises from relative failures in territorial management, regional security dynamics, and economic systems that have normalised coercive forms of governance (Ross, 2004; Global Witness, 2017 & World Bank, 2023).

The Eastern DRC has a contradictory position in the global political economy. The region is an integral component of global supply chains in an increasingly globalised world. The DRC is one of the most important sources of global cobalt supply, a key component of batteries used in electric cars and renewable energy systems. The areas where this mining is taking place have weak state control, dual administrative control, and taxation by armed groups. The region occupies a contradictory position



in which global economic value and political insecurity reinforce each other (World Bank, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2012; World Bank, 2023).

Another layer of complexity to this situation is the regional dynamics. The GLR may be considered an integrated security environment where threats are unlikely to be contained within national boundaries. This is because, as Buzan & Wæver argue, security complexes are characterised by mutual vulnerabilities. As a result, the presence of Rwandese génocidaire militias in eastern Congo after 1994 guaranteed that security issues were integrated within the foreign policy of Rwanda. The historical presence of Uganda in Ituri District and North Kivu Province could be considered a strategic calculation of influence, strategic depth, and economic resources. As a result, the presence of the armed groups in Eastern DRC cannot be considered as being formed by internal insurgents. Instead, they are embedded in a regional environment of patronage, competition, and proxy war (SIPRI, 2025; Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The recurrence of the 23 March Movement (M23) illustrates this point. The recurrence of M23 in the early 2020s did not signal the failure of peace processes; rather, it reflected underlying tensions in the region and incomplete demobilisation. The peace processes have always failed because warring parties have not resolved the underlying causes of the war. In this case, the armed groups become integral in the local economy, collecting taxes, controlling trade routes, and settling disputes. In this case, violence has become a form of politics rather than an expression of rebellion (International Crisis Group, 2012).

The historical trajectories within the Congolese state contribute to the instability. For instance, Belgian colonial administration emphasised efficiency in extractive administration rather than integration. As a result, they built infrastructure that connected mining areas to export routes, leaving peripheral areas with poor administration. The post-independence governments had to deal with these legacies. Mobutu's regime created a centralised yet patrimonial system that undermined bureaucratic capabilities. By the onset of the Congo wars, the government in the east had already been undermined, creating space for armed groups to assume governmental functions (Autesserre, 2010, & World Bank, 2023).

It is equally important to exercise caution when dealing with identity politics. For instance, ethnic narratives revolving around Hutu and Tutsi have been evident in mobilisation processes. However, research in the area reveals that conflicts arise from land ownership, power, and population movement rather than from ethnic differences. The issue of identity arises when the grievances of the people are captured within the larger memory of the events that occurred during the colonial era, including the genocide. In essence, memory serves as a mobilising tool in the war over territory and sovereignty (Autesserre, 2010).

The humanitarian cost of this interplay is enormous, with millions dying since the late 1990s as a result of the violence, diseases, and displacement. Crops are being destroyed continuously; the financial system remains fragile, as cycles of displacement continue to take their toll on the cohesion of the local populace. Nevertheless, by characterising the crisis in this manner, even as we consider the humanitarian cost, we may be ignoring the root causes of the crisis. The constant state of flux results from a complex array of factors that extend beyond local grievances and link the Eastern DRC to the regional and global political economy. (SIPRI, 2025 & International Rescue Committee, 2020)

The article offers an integrated approach to understanding the conflict in Congo, moving beyond simplistic understandings. First, it suggests that resources are a source of conflict when fragmentation enables alternative systems of governance within armed groups. Second, it suggests that the conflict situation in Eastern DRC needs to be understood within a regional security complex characterised by



a legacy of mistrust and competition. Finally, it suggests that memory and identity are politically mobilised as part of broader conflict situations. This is significant because it brings together three approaches to conflict: political economy, regional security, and postcolonial approaches to state formation. This allows for a rethinking of Eastern DRC as a geopolitical space, rather than an exceptional case of endemic instability. (SIPRI, 2025 & World Bank, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

However, this fragmentation of literature, in many ways, mirrors the complexities of the issue itself. The economic literature helps to shed light on the incentive structures that, in many ways, may not fully address the regional geopolitics, the geopolitical literature helps to shed light on the regional geopolitics that may not fully address the issues of local governance structures, while the local governance structures shed light on land and identity that may not fully address the issues of the global markets (Reyntjens, 2009; Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004; Tull, 2003; Stearns, 2022). The key, of course, is to integrate the literature in a way that does not lose sight of the individual contributions that the authors have made, but rather the way that they intersect with one another in a structural environment. In Eastern DRC, mineral governance cannot be understood in isolation from cross-border security dynamics, and identity issues cannot be understood in isolation from territorial governance. The literature offers us the pieces to create a unifying framework that understands interdependence (Autesserre, 2010; Stearns, 2013; Reyntjens, 2009; SIPRI, 2025; World Bank, 2023).

The conflict in the Eastern DRC has produced a vast and sometimes disjointed body of literature. Over time, the literature has begun to shift away from simplistic causal arguments towards more complex understandings, even as it continues to distinguish between economic, regional, and local factors as separate areas of analysis. A more nuanced reading of the literature, however, reveals that the key to understanding the longevity of conflict in the Eastern DRC lies in the interplay among these areas, not in any single factor. More recent literature has begun to focus on the continuity and evolution of conflict in the post-2010 period (Jaensch, 2025; Young, 2012; SIPRI, 2025).

While such studies provide rich empirical detail, they generally do not go beyond this point to integrate such factors into a cohesive theory of conflict. The fact that conflict endures in the Eastern region of the DRC suggests that instability is not merely the result of individual triggers but rather stems from a structural configuration of factors. To this end, this article utilises three related theoretical perspectives to address this issue: the political economy of conflict, regional security complex theory, and postcolonial theory of state formation (SIPRI, 2025).

The political economy of conflict offers a starting point for understanding the role of economic control. Collier and Hoeffler argue that civil conflict can be categorised as driven by either "greed" or "grievance" factors. However, such an analysis is limited within the context of DRC. Conflict groups seek to control both economic assets and political legitimacy. Minerals are essential to alternative systems of governance in which the state does not control the population. Such conflict integrates economics into every facet of violence (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Ross, 2004; SIPRI, 2025; World Bank, 2023)

The theory of regional security complex explains why conflicts always have a cross-border dimension. The security situation in the Great Lakes region is interdependent, as evidenced by mutual threat perceptions and interventions. The armed groups also have a regional patronage system, which means that conflicts in the region can never be isolated from the region's geopolitics (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; SIPRI, 2025).

The third pillar, postcolonial state formation, focuses on the historical underpinnings of the fragmented state. The colonial and postcolonial governance systems were only interested in resource



extraction, not in state-building. Therefore, the peripheral regions were not well governed. Sovereignty in the Eastern DRC is not held by the state but is fragmented among many actors (Autesserre, 2010; World Bank, 2023).

The idea of 'fragmented sovereignty' is more accurate in describing this situation than 'state failure' because it suggests that sovereignty is negotiated through intersecting systems of economics, region, and memory, creating a complex political system in which violence is institutionalised (SIPRI, 2025).

The value of these different views is that they are synthesised in this study to provide a synthetic framework that explains how wealth influences incentives, regional insecurity influences alliances, and fragmentation influences governance. The persistence of violence is the result of the interaction of these different influences rather than any single factor (SIPRI, 2025, & World Bank, 2023)

Methodology

The methodology employed in this article is appropriate to the complex and multi-layered nature of conflict in Eastern DRC. Quantitative data, such as battle-related deaths or export values, provide valuable information but are insufficient to inform us about the structures in which authority is constructed and negotiated across multiple layers (Prunier 2009 & Stearns 2012). Therefore, qualitative synthesis is employed to identify recurring relationships rather than events.

Research Design

The article uses a qualitative case design that focuses on Eastern DRC, with particular attention to North and South Kivu. The case is of particular analytical interest because of the richness of the region's natural resources, porous borders, and strategic location within the GLR security complex. The study focuses more on analytical integration than on hypothesis testing; this is beneficial, as it links the politics of the region's economy, regional geopolitics, and institutional fragmentation within a single framework (Reyntjens, 2009; Stearns, 2013).

Sources of Evidence and Selection Criteria

To ensure transparency and prevent potential bias in selecting the literature on the chosen topic, the present research is guided by clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. First and foremost, the criterion of relevance: only the literature that specifically dealt with at least one of the primary analytical concerns of the present research was considered:

1. Mineral governance and extraction
2. Regional security dynamics
3. Local conflict and institutional authority

Secondly, there is the aspect of credibility. This means the literature reviewed for this research was expected to be peer-reviewed and authored by various institutional actors, including the United Nations Group of Experts on the DRC, MONUSCO, and the International Crisis Group, among others. Thirdly, there is the aspect of diversity, particularly in terms of perspective. To avoid Western centrism in this research, it was essential to ensure that it was based on different local and regional perspectives. This means it was essential to review literature by various local actors, including the Groupe d'étude sur le Congo (GEC/Ebuteli), based in the DRC, as well as civil society movements, including LUCHA.

Timeframe Justification (2000–2025)

The study period is 2000 to 2025. This period has been chosen for the study to understand the evolution of conflict patterns in DRC. The early 2000s saw the emergence of small-scale conflicts that are part of the economy. This was first noted in the early 2000s (Prunier, 2009). The chosen period for the study also allows us to understand the recent changes in the region. This includes the revival of



M23 and the interest in strategic minerals for green energy. This was first noted by the World Bank in 2020 and by SIPRI in 2025.

Analytical Approach (Qualitative Content Analysis)

The article used Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to identify patterns across different sources of information. The analysis process consists of three steps that are important for the transparency and reproducibility of the research. The first step involved performing an open coding of the selected texts, which helped identify common concepts related to governance, security, resources, and identities. The second step involved developing analytical categories, which included mineral governance, regionalised insecurity, identity mobilisation, and fragmented sovereignty. The third step involved a relational interpretation of the data, which helped to understand the relationships among the analytical categories and thereby reproduced the patterns of violence

Validity and Reliability

This is achieved through triangulation methods that incorporate academic, institutional, and local sources. This enables the study to cross-check. Reliability is ensured by using explicit criteria for selecting sources. In cases of ambiguity or doubt, especially regarding cross-border involvement, this is reflected rather than claims made (Stearns, 2022).

Limitations

The use of secondary data may not capture some of the more localised or undocumented experiences, especially in more remote regions. However, incorporating Congolese civil society perspectives somewhat alleviates this potential drawback. Future research could incorporate ethnographic methods to supplement the structural analysis presented.

Findings and Analytical Discussion

Across all the evidence discussed, it is clear that there is a pattern in how Eastern DRC is governed, with negotiations conducted at formal and informal levels. In the absence of formal administrative structures, alternative forms of regulation emerged, which, though forceful, have shown logic, continuity, and legitimacy in their operations. This is perhaps why there is a sense of repetition in the processes of demobilisation and remobilisation, with the same patterns recurring over time. The reason is that even when armed groups change their names, the environment in which they operate has remained relatively intact. A synthesis of literature and institutional evidence suggests that no single factor causes the instabilities in the Eastern DRC; rather, they result from a combination of extractive systems, regional insecurity, and a lack of centralised power. In a sense, the violence is not separate from the governance, but rather embedded in it. (SIPRI, 2025).

Extraction as a Mode of Authority

In Eastern DRC, mineral production operates under a hybrid form of governance that is neither completely state-led nor chaotic. The armed groups have established a system of control over mineral production. This not only gives them economic gains but also political legitimacy. The receipt of revenues from checkpoints and production points is not merely an act of opportunistic exploitation; rather, it represents a system of governance. The armed groups are, in fact, acting as arbiters in this context, marking a significant shift in which control over the economy confers political legitimacy, especially in the absence of the state. (SIPRI, 2025 & World Bank, 2023).

The rising global consumption of cobalt adds to this phenomenon, as the Eastern DRC becomes critical to global energy networks and external economic forces increasingly intersect with internal governance crises. Concomitantly, formal economic arrangements are accompanied by informal economic networks. The result is not merely competition over resources, but competition over regulatory control of economic flows. (SIPRI, 2025). Thus, violence is not limited to conflict. Rather, it



is embedded within the fabric of everyday governance, fragmented sovereignty and everyday coercion. Possibly the most significant trend to emerge from this analysis is the diffusion of sovereignty. The Congolese government formally exercises sovereignty in the Eastern Provinces. However, sovereignty is not shared equally (Autesserre, 2010)

In some locations, state actors, militia groups, traditional leaders, and individuals have formed relationships with one another. These are not always static, and state and non-state actors can engage in violence that is not always easily distinguishable. Militia checkpoints can coexist with state army checkpoints, and taxation can coexist with formal taxation systems (International Crisis Group, 2012). In this environment, violence is normalised. Individuals live in an environment where they must pay taxes to various actors to ensure safe passage. Violence is not always attention-grabbing, but can be found in the most ordinary forms of interaction. The normalisation of violence is what sustains the entire conflict system. While large-scale violence can be controlled, the basic patterns of fragmented authority remain unchanged.

Regional Security Logics and Cross-Border Entanglement

However, domestic governance fragmentation alone does not account for the continuation of armed mobilisation in Eastern DRC. The region is part of a larger geopolitical environment in which security extends beyond borders. The GRL is a regional security complex in which security issues in one state are inextricably linked to those in another (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; SIPRI, 2025). An integral part of this is the legacy of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the presence of Rwandan armed groups in Eastern Congo, such as the FDLR. These ongoing security concerns for Rwanda and integral part of its security doctrine, justifying its intervention in Eastern Congo as a defensive measure (Prunier, 2009; Stearns, 2012). However, this intervention is ultimately to neutralise security threats but inadvertently contributes to militarisation.

Uganda's involvement in eastern Congo is similar to other instances of cross-border dynamics, though it is influenced by a wider array of security, economic, and geopolitical interests (Reyntjens, 2009; Stearns, 2012). This demonstrates that conflict in Eastern DRC cannot be seen as limited to the national arena; rather, it is being played in a dynamic regional arena of interactive state and non-state actors. (SIPRI, 2025). This is problematic for conflict resolution, since they often operate within a transnational arena of support structures that provide access to transnational logistics, economic networks, and even indirect political patronage. The return of non-state actors such as M23 should not be considered in isolation; rather, it should be considered in the context of strategic rivalry (International Crisis Group, 2012). This is because the ceasefires have not been sustainable. The peace agreements, while aimed at creating peace in the region, have failed to address the real issue: the regional security dilemma, a situation in which a country's desire to feel secure makes the region insecure (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In this case, the actors are strategically important in the local and regional arenas. The conflict in the Eastern DRC should therefore not be considered in isolation; rather, it should also be considered in the context of regional insecurity. Without addressing regional insecurity, it is impossible to create peace in the region (SIPRI, 2025).

Memory, Territory, and Political Mobilisation

The aspect of identity in Eastern DRC cannot be considered in simplistic terms. Even though the issue of ethnic identity, which is a result of the Rwandan genocide, is evident in the case of the DRC, there is a possibility that identity may not always be a mobilising factor in isolation; rather, it may often be mobilised in already existing conflicts over land, power, and population. In research by Autesserre, conflicts in the DRC tend to start with disputes over land and power, which are then framed in terms of ethnic identity (Autesserre, 2010; Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004).



In this way, historical memory is less a driver than a means to an end. Elites and groups utilise discourses on victimisation, protection, and historical injustice to garner support and legitimise claims to territory (Reyntjens, 2009; Stearns, 2013). Such discourses have considerable potential as a means to mobilise support, especially in environments where violence is endemic. Additionally, identity discourses are often closely connected to material issues. Issues on ethnicity often overlap with issues on land, mining, and local governance. These resources have considerable material implications, and identity often becomes a means to express underlying material conflicts. This is especially true for issues on resource extraction (Ross, 2004; Global Witness, 2017).

This is not to suggest that identity is less important, but rather that it is relational and contextual. Identity politics is powerful when it is articulated with issues of concrete territorial and political control. Memory and interest intersect, each reinforcing the other in the broader power struggle. In this sense, identity politics in Eastern DRC is less a product of identity than of a political process in which memory, territoriality, and institutional vulnerability intersect. (SIPRI, 2025)

Fragmented Sovereignty and Everyday Coercion

One of the main findings is the phenomenon of fragmented sovereignty in Eastern DRC. Although sovereignty is technically in the hands of the Congolese state, its exercise is not uniform. Rather, it is fragmented among several actors. The phenomenon of a lack of governance is not really a lack of governance, but a system of governance in which multiple systems of authority coexist at the local, national, and regional levels (Autesserre, 2010; Tull, 2003). This phenomenon results from a system of fragmented sovereignty in which power is distributed among state actors, armed groups, customary authorities, and external actors (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004; Stearns, 2013; SIPRI, 2025)

In most cases, these armed groups have taken on quasi-governmental responsibilities, such as controlling access to resources, settling disputes, and establishing taxation schemes related to mining and transportation routes (International Crisis Group, 2012; Global Witness, 2017). In this sense, therefore, coercion is not limited to violence but has become an integral part of the government. This is reflected in the creation of checkpoints and taxation schemes, which have led to a sense of a multi-layered government, whereby citizens experience different levels of government (Raeymaekers, 2010). In some cases, even government actors have been involved.

The historical legacies may be the cause of this phenomenon. The colonial and postcolonial regimes' emphasis on exploitation rather than institution-building may have resulted in weak institutional control over the peripheral regions. This environment may be conducive to the creation of alternative power structures that may persist. Fragmented sovereignty may not be chaotic; it may be the existence of several systems of power at one time. There may be no violence outside this order, only within it. As recent research suggests, these power structures persist because they are supported by economic and regional politics.

Interlocking Structures of Persistence

When considered as a whole, these results demonstrate why conflict in the Eastern DRC appears so intractable. Not only are economic extraction, regional insecurity, remembrance of the past, and divided sovereignty exclusive ideas, but they are, in fact, part of a system that not only provides armed actors with resources but also with a form of legitimacy as controllers of the flow of minerals, as well as the regional economy as a whole, thus becoming part of a system rather than existing in isolation from it (Ross, 2004; Global Witness, 2017). At the same time, regional security conditions confer a certain level of strategic importance on them. The Eastern DRC exists as part of a larger security complex, as the Great Lakes region of Africa has experienced a state of regional insecurity, a state of affairs perennial threat for decades (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Prunier, 2009; SIPRI, 2025; World Bank, 2023).



Historical memory is also an important element in this regard, as it offers narratives that, in turn, offer legitimacy to mobilisation. Previously, violence, displacement, and insecurity have been used by elites and armed groups to define contemporary conflicts and thereby establish a link between identity, territory, and economic competition (Autesserre, 2010; Reyntjens, 2009; Stearns, 2013). The mobilisation of these historical memories has some traction due to their connection to experiences of insecurity and mobilisation in the region. Fragmented sovereignty offers the institutional foundation for this complex interplay. The sovereignty in Eastern DRC is fragmented among state institutions, armed groups, customary groups, and international actors and thereby offers a system of governance that has normalised the use of coercion in the form of taxation, protection, and control (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004; Tull, 2003; ICG, 2012). This does not suggest a lack of order; rather, this suggests the presence of multiple orders that have not been consolidated (SIPRI, 2025).

The message is clear: an intervention aimed at solving only one part of the puzzle will not suffice to achieve a lasting solution. In other words, mineral certification schemes may solve the puzzle of transparency, but security patterns will still be the same. Similarly, military intervention may displace the actors of violence, but the governance structures remain the same; they will only be displaced. The same can be said for reconciliation strategies at the local level, which may be limited by the regional context (Autesserre, 2010; World Bank, 2020). In conclusion, it can be argued that the violence observed in the Eastern DRC is structurally reproduced through the interplay among economic governance structures, regional security patterns, and the state's fragmentation. In other words, stability cannot be achieved through a fragmented approach but rather through a more holistic approach that understands the interlinked nature of power structures, security structures, and resource control. In this regard, it can be argued that coercion is not a failure of the system but rather a part of it (Stearns, 2022; SIPRI, 2025; World Bank, 2023).

Conclusion

The persistence of the conflict in Eastern DRC cannot be understood through a one-variable approach; rather, it is the result of the complex interplay among fragmented sovereignty, extractive political economies, and the entrenched regional security complex. This study has shown that the conflict in Eastern DRC persists because sovereignty, political economies, and security mutually constitute one another within a complex and contested system of governance. Not only are armed groups spoilers of peace, but they are also integral components of the governance system. The difficulty lies not merely in a failing state, but also in multiple regimes of sovereignty.

Geopolitics has further nuanced this discussion. The SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC) intervention and mediation process under the Luanda Process can be seen as an important step towards a more regionalised approach to security intervention. This process can be seen as an important case in testing the regional security complex theory. At one level, it can be seen as reinforcing the very premise of the theory, in that the threat to security in Eastern DRC is perceived to transcend borders. The readiness to act in concert to address this perceived threat is a function of a shared vulnerability.

However, the partial nature of these initiatives' achievements points to the continued constraints on regional security cooperation. The ongoing mobilisation of conflict in the region, including the resurgence of M23, suggests these initiatives have not fundamentally altered the regional security dilemma. Instead, they point out that initiatives for security cooperation are situated within a larger structure of competition where security and influence are pursued simultaneously.

The dual nature of these initiatives thus supports the central argument of this article that regional security initiatives cannot overcome conflict instability without reference to the nature of the resource political economy and the fragmentation of sovereignty at the local level. While SAMIDRC represents



an important step toward regional ownership of security initiatives, its achievements are ultimately constrained by the same structural conditions that have long undermined externally driven initiatives in the region. Similarly, while the Luanda Process represents an important step toward highlighting the role of diplomatic efforts in regional security cooperation, its achievements remain partial.

The results also suggest an important change in the political economy of conflict. The global green energy revolution has heightened the strategic value of Congolese minerals, particularly cobalt, further integrating Eastern DRC into globalised resource flows. This represents an important difference from the "coltan era" of the 2000s. In the present day, resource extraction is not merely a localised or regional phenomenon but a global strategic issue. This has heightened external interest in Eastern DRC but also increased internal governance challenges. Accordingly, conflict in Eastern DRC is increasingly defined by the interplay between globalised economic interests and localised systems of coercive authority.

Theoretically, this study contributes to African Studies by reframing conflict in Eastern DRC as an instance of fragmented sovereignty in a regionalised and globalised political economy. It demonstrates that regional security complex theory remains an important explanatory model, but must be considered alongside political economy and historical institutional conditions. The persistence of conflict in 2026 can be understood not in terms of any single causal factor but as an interrelation of regional proxy logic and global interest in strategic minerals, with regional security dynamics taking a structurally primary position in conflict dynamics.

From a policy perspective, it is quite evident. Thus, a twofold policy strategy is a prerequisite for lasting stabilisation: on the one hand, the enhancement of resource sovereignty through transparent and accountable governance in resource exploitation; on the other hand, a restructuring of regional security relations in a credible, enforceable, and mutually trusted form of diplomatic relations. If either of the two aspects is neglected, any intervention, be it military or diplomatic, will only reinforce instability rather than solving it.

In conclusion, the sustainability of conflict in Eastern DRC is not a *fait accompli*, but rather a product of historically constructed and continuously reproduced systems of authority, insecurity, and economic control. To break from these systems, it is important to look beyond piecemeal interventions and seek more integrated approaches that account for the interrelated nature of local and regional politics and global economic change.

Analytical Weighting

In light of the synthesised evidence, this article argues that, on the logic of regional security, or proxy wars, rather than global demand for green energy minerals, is the main reason for the perpetuation of violence in Eastern DRC in 2026. However, it is the latter that fuels and sustains the conflict environment. This is because it is preeminent: it sets the environment in which armed groups come into existence, sustain themselves, and become strategically significant. The cross-border threat perceptions, especially those stemming from the legacy of the genocide of 1994 and the subsequent presence of militias, have continued to fuel interventions and militarisation of the region. As long as the neighbouring states do not feel secure, there will always be a conducive environment for armed groups in Eastern DRC.

The global demand for strategic minerals, particularly cobalt, is a critical but secondary factor in this process, as it heightens the stakes of conflict by increasing the value attached to territorial control and by integrating localised mining systems into globalised systems. However, resources alone are insufficient to sustain armed conflict in the absence of a regional security environment that enables



and legitimises it. In this sense, the green energy transition can be understood as a conflict multiplier but not a conflict driver.

Thus, while global energy transitions certainly reshaped the contemporary conflict, it is the persistence of the regional security dilemma that ultimately explains why conflict persists in 2026. Peaceful resolution will depend less on resource-demand management and more on changing the regional structures of threat perception and proxy conflict that sustain it.

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