

# Destined for War? Felix Tshisekedi's Security Strategies against Rwandan Aggression

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## Abstract

This article takes an in-depth look at the protracted conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since the election of President Félix Tshisekedi in 2018, focusing on the three main strategies adopted by his government. Faced with Rwandan aggression orchestrated by the March 23 Movement (M23), which is destabilizing the region, Tshisekedi has implemented a multi-dimensional approach that includes diplomatic initiatives to strengthen dialogue with neighboring countries, military reforms to modernize the DRC's armed forces and an international cooperation strategy involving the UN, the African Union and sub-regional organizations. The article analyses these developments through the prism of international relations, particularly from the perspectives of offensive realism and economic interdependence, underlining the crucial importance of establishing robust security architecture at both the national and regional levels. This analysis highlights the risks of escalation in the conflict between the DRC and Rwanda, but also the need for careful management to avoid open warfare between the two countries.

## Keywords

Offensive Realism, Security Strategies, Wolf Diplomacy and Economic Interdependence

## 1. Introduction

This article delves deeply into the persistent armed conflict in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, focusing on the three strategies employed by Congolese administration since President Felix Tshisekedi's election in 2018. The

Democratic Republic of Congo has been in armed conflict for many years, especially in the eastern region, where Rwanda's aggression has been a major destabilizing force. Since taking office in 2019, President Tshisekedi has implemented three key security strategies (Military, economic and diplomatic strategies) to address this on-going threat.

First, his Administration prioritizes diplomatic contacts with Rwanda and other neighbouring countries to address the root causes of the conflict. By promoting dialogue and cooperation, it aims to ease tensions and strengthen trust between the two countries. This measure has achieved promising results, reducing cross-border attacks and improving communication between the two governments during the three first years of the first time.

Secondly, President Tshisekedi focuses on strengthening the Congolese military and security forces to resist external threats better. He invests in training, equipment, and infrastructure to enhance the armed forces' capabilities while combating corruption and human rights violations within the military. These efforts have increased the effectiveness of tackling rebel groups and protecting civilians in conflict-affected areas.

Finally, President Tshisekedi pledged to promote regional and international cooperation to address security challenges in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Through engagement with the United Nations, the African Union, and other international partners, it seeks support for peacekeeping efforts, humanitarian assistance, and regional development initiatives. This cooperative approach helps to mobilize resources and expertise to address the complex security situation in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Overall, President Felix Tshisekedi's security strategy has achieved positive results in alleviating Rwanda's aggression and improving the overall security situation in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, challenges still exist, and efforts need to continue to maintain peace and stability in the region.

Therefore, government initiated a convincing measure to use the death penalty against the military and anyone who betrays his ideologies to prevent treason within the Congolese army. This paper explores the initiatives, creativity, and innovation taken by the Congolese government for the survival of its territorial integrity. Specifically, it analyses the security measures chosen by the DRC in response to Rwandan aggression, examining the security dilemma that could potentially result in an open war between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda if not handled delicately. The eclectic analytical approach of International Relations integrates various variables and theories to capture the essence of the crucial security issue in the three provinces affected by sub-regional insecurity. For instance, it scrutinises the DRC's response to Rwanda's aggression in the context of offensive realism and economic interdependence, evaluating the associated risks for the region. The significance of this inquiry lies in the imperative to establish robust security architecture, not only at the national level but also regionally, to mitigate the risks of conflict escalation and catastrophe that could ensnare both

countries in an overall war.

## 2. An Old Conflict with New Implications

For over two decades, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been embroiled in an asymmetrical war involving internal rebel groups, foreign armed factions, and terrorist movements (*International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001*). The provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri endure a prolonged and intense conflict, significantly impacting the population, particularly women and children (*Vircoulon, 2009*). That threat surpasses the country's capacity to manage and protect its eastern borders (*Scheel, 2021*).

Despite efforts to bolster the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) and the participation of regional and multilateral forces, stabilisation initiatives have shown minimal progress. Since joining the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, regional forces (EAC and SADC) and the UN have made significant progress in addressing security challenges in the eastern part of the Congo, particularly in combating Rwandan aggression and rebel groups operating in the region. The main progress made by the regional forces includes strengthening coordination and collaboration. The regional forces, including those of Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, and other neighboring countries, are working closely with FARDC to enhance coordination and cooperation in joint military operations. They make planning and implementing security operations in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo more effective.

The military presence has increased, and the deployment of regional forces has strengthened the military presence in conflict-affected areas (*Karhakubwa, 2021*). This increased presence also helps better monitor cross-border actions of borders and armed groups.

The rebel activities have been interrupted, and regional forces have successfully taken military action against rebel groups such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Democratic Alliance Army (Democratic Alliance Army), capturing or eliminating key leaders and destroying their networks (*Lemarchand, 1998*). This significantly weakens the capabilities of these groups and reduces their threat to regional security.

To a large extent, regional forces have played a crucial role in protecting civilians from violence and human rights violations by rebel groups. By carrying out targeted actions and providing security in conflict-affected areas, they have helped create a safer environment for residents and supported the provision of humanitarian assistance.

The regional forces support peace-building initiatives in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, including efforts to promote reconciliation, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants, as well as restoring national power in conflict-affected areas. Their presence helps to establish trust and stability in the region.

Overall, the integration of regional forces and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) help to strengthen security and stability in the

eastern part of the country. Their contribution is crucial for addressing the complex security challenges in the region and promoting peace-building efforts, creating a safer and more peaceful environment for the local people (Wolters, 2023).

Despite the experience of all three generations of UN peacekeeping operations, progress remains limited (Lubeshi, 2019). Transitioning from conventional to unconventional warfare prompts a critical examination of the fundamental role of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the largest UN peacekeeping mission (third-generation) with a coercive mandate (Karkubwa, 2021). Similar scrutiny applies to the role played by specific countries in the sub-region, contributing to a conflict that has lasted nearly three decades.

In this intricate pursuit of peace, numerous international organisations engage in mediation, monitoring, and activities such as disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (Kimball & Lewis, 2011). Notably, armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo continually evolve towards new paradigms, a concept that Sylvain Munger calls “war within populations” (Munger, 2011).

At times, the modus operandi of certain rebel groups in the east mirrors guerrilla tactics (Khadiagala, 2017). Most of them pursue economic motivations, particularly the struggle to access underground wealth (Bossé, 2019). Others perceive a sacred duty to protect the population, a responsibility typically assigned to the police. However, according to the International Peace Information Service, control of minerals is not the primary motivation behind armed conflict (Matthysen et al., 2020). The complexity of the situation is compounded by the threat of terrorism, rebel groups, criminal organisations, and foreign military forces from neighbouring countries.

Moreover, the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda resulted in a state of anarchy, particularly in the three eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri) (Arieff & Coen, 2014). A chaotic strategy necessitated a paradigm shift and a geopolitical software overhaul for response measures. The sub-region and the international community remain entangled in the implications of presumed guilt linked to that genocide, sustaining Rwanda’s apparent hegemony under the historical weight of the Tutsi ethnic cleansing.

According to some opinions, the influx of millions of Rwandan refugees into Congolese territory is in no way the result of an unfortunate accident or “collateral damage” of the Rwandan genocide. On the contrary, it would be a carefully prepared military action with a view to invading and occupying eastern Congo in order to exploit its minerals. The objective would be to encourage the indigenous populations of Eastern Congo to abandon their lands to foreign populations in order to better organize mining (Onana, 2023).

Nevertheless, since the election of President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi on December 20, 2018 the region has witnessed significant geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic upheavals. The enduring conflict between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda has contributed to considerable instability in the Great Lakes region over several decades. This article aims to scrutinize the defence and security strategies adopted by the Democratic Republic of Congo and advo-

cate for establishing regional security architecture to alleviate tensions and conflicts between the two nations for ensuring sub-regional stability.

To achieve this objective, the article begins with a historical overview of the conflict between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. It subsequently analyses the security measures employed by both nations from military, diplomatic, and economic perspectives. The article also explores the role of regional and international actors in the conflict, including the United Nations and Congolese neighbouring countries.

Furthermore, the article examines on-going armed conflicts using offensive realism as an analytical framework, elucidating the behaviour of the involved actors. This perspective, influenced by scholars like John Mearsheimer, posits that states primarily focus on their security, striving to maximize power and influence for survival (Mearsheimer, 2018). While this theory aptly explains the logic of Rwandan political actions, it prompts an exploration of its applicability to the Democratic Republic of Congo in seeking conflict solutions.

Additionally, the article delves into the risk of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda succumbing to Thucydides' trap. This concept, developed by Graham Allison, warns that conflict becomes imminent when a rising power threatens an established one (Allison, 2017). The article explores the possibility of Rwanda reacting out of fear to the military and economic emergence of the Democratic Republic of Congo, potentially supporting rebel movements and perpetuating conflicts in the eastern provinces.

In conclusion, the article advocates for establishing genuine regional security architecture to mitigate regional tensions and conflicts. This necessitates collaboration among all stakeholders, including the DRC, Rwanda, neighbouring countries, and the international community, to foster lasting peace. It addresses several pertinent questions, such as the risks of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo succumbing to Thucydides' trap, and explores potential scenarios in the event of a head-on conflict, including the consideration of a border wall.

### 3. Methodology

To conduct a consistent study, we designed a questionnaire that we submitted to 52 subjects from the Democratic Republic of Congo, some of whom are outside the country. 65.38% men and 34.61% women. In order to ensure a rigorous analysis, we developed a questionnaire designed to gather a range of perspectives on the crises affecting the sub-region, as well as potential solutions to them. Participants were selected according to two main criteria: their province of origin in the DRC and the impact of the conflicts on their daily lives. Our sample, which is representative of the Congolese population, is made up of three distinct groups: firstly, people from provinces directly affected by the hostilities; secondly, people from areas not directly affected by the conflicts; and thirdly, members of the Congolese diaspora interviewed from their countries of residence. This stratification of the sample enabled us to gather a diversity of perspectives and experiences, enriching our understanding of the dynamics at play and possible solutions to the current crises.

Ten questions were submitted, and the answers enabled us to understand how the population views the actions of Congolese political decision-makers.

Before starting our investigation, we carried out extensive research, consulting several books and documents dealing with the security situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo in particular and the Great Lakes region in general. We also examined significant theoretical currently in International Relations, such as offensive realism and economic interdependence. This combined approach has enabled us to take a comprehensive view of the security situation in this part of the world and to avoid any subjective or uncertain language.

#### 4. Analytical Framework

The Democratic Republic of Congo is a vast country with a surface area of around 2,345,410 km<sup>2</sup>, subdivided into 26 provinces. This research focuses on the eastern part of the country, more precisely on three provinces: Nord-Kivu, Sud-Kivu and Ituri, a geographical area of around 189,932 km<sup>2</sup>. In addition to their proximity and geographical position, these three provinces share a natural border with neighbouring countries (Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi) in the form of lakes. Furthermore, the Capital Cities of these provinces are among the areas closest to international borders, where stability, security and peace are threatened (Shultz & Dew, 2009).

**The Province of Ituri**, whose capital city is Bunia, is located at northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo. It covers an area of 65,658 km<sup>2</sup> and shares part of its border with Uganda via Lake Albert (ANAPI-Guide-de-linvestisseur-Novembre-2020.pdf, n.d.). The province is renowned for its natural resources, including gold, oil and diamond deposits. It also produces crops such as beans, oil palms, coffee, sugar cane, mangoes, avocados, cinchona, cocoa, cow farming, and fishing. These natural resources offer numerous economic and development opportunities for the region.

However, since the 1990s, the province has been plagued by inter-community conflicts between the Hema and Lendu communities in the Djugu, Mahagi and Irumu territories (Reyntjens, 2013). These acts of violence have devastating consequences for the local population, destroying social cohesion and peace. The causes of conflict include control of mining areas, political issues and foreign interference, particularly from Uganda (Daley, 2006).

**The province of North Kivu**, whose capital city is Goma, covers an area of 59,483 km<sup>2</sup> (ANAPI-Guide-de-linvestisseur-Novembre-2020.pdf, n.d.). It lies along the shores of Lake Kivu, which forms part of the border with Rwanda. According to the Agence Nationale pour la Promotion des Investissements, this province is rich in natural resources such as gold, cassiterite, wolfram, colombo-tantalite, niobium, sapphire, monazite, beryl and the methane gas found on Lake Kivu. Unfortunately, despite the opportunities offered by this province to improve the well-being of the population, North Kivu has been plunged for over two decades into a spiral of armed violence. These conflicts not only inflict untold suffering on the people but also threaten the territorial integrity of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Since the 1990s, militias, foreign armed groups and, more recently, terrorist groups with rear bases in neighbouring countries, particularly Rwanda, have operated with impunity in the territories of Beni, Lubero, Rutshuru, Masisi and Walikale (Paffenholz, 2010). Several UN reports have mentioned the military support provided by the Rwandan army to armed groups operating in this region. The UN Experts' December 20, 2022 report claims to possess substantial evidence demonstrating "the direct intervention of the Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF) on the territory of the DRC, in particular by supplying arms, ammunition and uniforms" to the M23 rebel group. This report was corroborated by a press release from the US State Department, calling on Rwanda to stop supporting the M23, a ruthless rebel group active in North Kivu province, and to withdraw its soldiers from the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (Security Council, 2022).

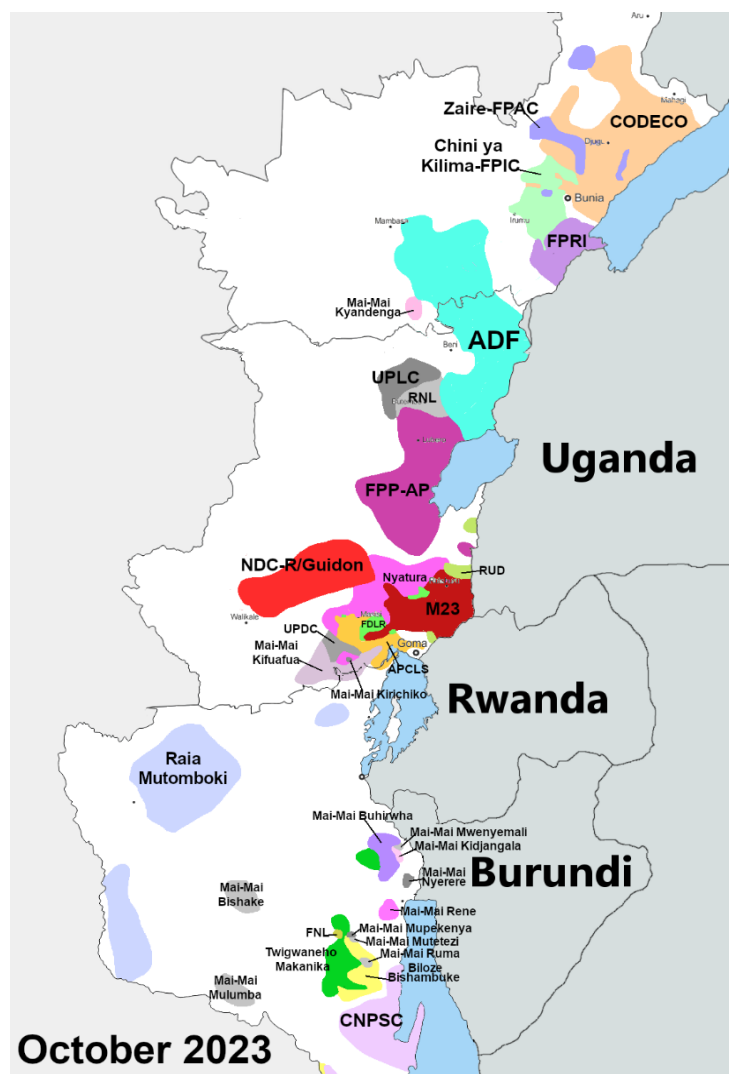


Figure 1. Areas of conflicts.

Figure 1 shows the areas of tension, the location of active armed groups, their areas of influence, and the cross-border nature of these rebel groups with neigh-

boring countries (Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi).

**The province of Sud-Kivu**, whose capital city is Bukavu, covers an area of 64,791 km<sup>2</sup> along the shores of Lake Kivu and shares a border with Rwanda ([ANAPI-Guide-de-linvestisseur-Novembre-2020.pdf](#), n.d.). According to the same Agence Nationale pour la Promotion des Investissements (ANAPI), this province is as rich as the first two regarding natural resources. It contains gold, cassiterite, coltan, mobilgorite, silver, diamonds and methane gas. Unfortunately, South Kivu has also been the scene of violent conflict for over two decades. A state of anarchy marks the situation in this province without equality. Numerous armed groups are fighting each other or the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC), particularly in the Fizi, Uvira, and Mwenga territories ([Jones, 2021](#)).

An analysis of the security situation in these provinces reveals three distinct factors: the geopolitical factor (1), the international factor (2) and the historical factor (3).

**1) Geopolitical factor.** Firstly, as mentioned above, the capital cities of the three provinces are geographically very close to international borders and share a lake border with a neighbouring country ([Boucher, 2015](#)). In addition, control of the supply sources of mineral resources plays a crucial role. Terror and disinformation are used subtly to gain control of strategic minerals needed not only for the arms and telephony industries but, above all, to support the energy transition ([Onana, 2023](#)).

**2) International factor.** In one way or another, the three provinces are subject to foreign interference, notably through foreign or Congolese supported by foreign countries. A rebel movement largely drawn from Congolese communities of Rwandan origin, took place in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in areas close to the Rwandan and Ugandan borders between early 2012 and late 2013. ([Reid, 2018](#)) rebel groups supported by neighbouring countries who use them as rear bases. This configuration is inherited from the pre-transition period of 1 + 4 (an unequalled regime consisting of a president and four vice presidents). At that time, each neighbouring country had its rebel group governing part of the DRC.

**3) Historical factor.** The outbreak of armed conflict in the three provinces is attributed to the same period. In other words, in their current configurations, those three provinces hosted and sheltered camps of armed refugees fleeing the Rwandan genocide in 1994, more specifically in the localities or towns of Katale, Kahindo, Kibumba, Mugunga, Goma, Kabira, Kalehe, Bukavu, Nyamirangue and Chimengue ([Binet, 2014](#)). These conflicts are, therefore, rooted in the Rwandan genocide. Thus, the historical factor behind the instability has become chronic in the sub-region.

## 5. Defence Strategies of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Congolese peace strategy is based on three simultaneous and coordinated actions: economic interdependence, wolf-warrior diplomacy, and offensive military strategy whose harsh realism is the key to understanding.

### 5.1. Congo-Rwanda, Impossible Economic Interdependence?

Economic interdependence is a phenomenon that dates back to the multifaceted international crisis of the 1930s, which illustrated the need for coordinated management of the global economy (Jacquet, 1988). The debate between economic interdependence and war provides a framework for understanding Rwandan-Congolese relations since the fifth President of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Felix-Antoine Tshisekedi, came to power. While the liberal postulate holds that economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of recourse to war by increasing trade value over the alternative of aggression (commercial peace), the realist postulate considers that increased interdependence increases the possibility of aggression. In other words, in their constant quest for security, states easily choose the war hypothesis to guarantee long-term access to the goods and materials vital to their survival.

What if the resurgence of the March 23 rebel movement (M23) in 2021 had been the sword that stabbed economic interdependence between the DRC and Rwanda?

International relations theory offers two contradictory interpretations of economic interdependence. On the one hand, the liberal postulate, defended by theorists such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, maintains that economic interdependence reduces the risks of war by favouring trade (Keohane & Nye, 1973). On the other hand, the realist postulate, supported by John Mearsheimer, asserts that strong interdependence can paradoxically encourage aggression, with states preferring to secure their vital interests by force (Mearsheimer, 2003).

The case of relations between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda illustrates the manifest failure of the liberal postulate. Since November 2021, the resurgence of the M23, with the proven support of Rwanda (OMS, 2024), has demonstrated the limits of economic cooperation as a guarantee of peace. The rebel group currently occupies vast territories rich in mineral resources in the province of North Kivu, resources considered vital for the Rwandan economy.

This situation stems mainly from two factors: the strategic marginalization felt by Kigali following an economic and security rapprochement between the DRC and Uganda in 2021, and fear of Rwanda's economic interests in the region (Fearon, 2012).

Faced with this perceived threat, Rwanda adopted an alternative strategy by re-activating the M23: first used as a vehicle for regional power projection, then as a means of controlling Congolese mineral resources by force, despite cooperation efforts, and finally as an instrument for achieving its economic objectives.

This situation validates the realist thesis developed by Kenneth Waltz, who believes that economic interdependence can become a catalyst for conflict (Neuss, 2007). According to Waltz, Rwanda has perceived a threat to its access to strategic resources.

The latter approach appears to have steered Rwanda's foreign policy, with its paramount focus on securing access to the economic resources of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which is integrated to Rwanda's national economy (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004). Essentially, the economic interdepend-

ence proposals initiated by the Kinshasa regime under Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi's leadership did not resonate similarly with Rwanda. While Congolese government perceived trade cooperation as a means to ensure stability in the sub-region, Rwandan administration viewed it through comparative advantage. For Rwanda, the aggression or destabilisation of the DRC by its M23 supporters presented a more lucrative prospect in the long run compared to the benefits of peaceful cooperation. This vividly underscores the limitations of institutional liberalism, which asserts the positive outcomes of a world characterised by peace, prosperity, and freedom in terms of security, well-being, and human liberty (Keohane, 2012). Rwanda's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Democratic Republic of Congo diverges from the ideals advocated by Robert Keohane, who contends that liberalism strives to enhance the human condition and justifies cooperative systems for the betterment of humanity, a stance sharply contrasting with the evident suffering of the Congolese population in areas occupied by Rwandan proxies, thereby contradicting liberal aspirations.

The economic future of the Great Lakes region hinges significantly on the interdependence of national economies, carrying profound political, social, and geostrategic implications. Acknowledging the burgeoning importance of the Democratic Republic of Congo's strategic minerals, the Congolese President advocates for enhanced cooperation within a bilateral framework to harness the potential roles of both nations. Amidst the global economic cycle and contagion effects scrutinised by the IMF, the imperative for a coordinated macroeconomic policy on an international scale is emphasised by Derviş (2012). While Africa promises increased multipolarity with growing interdependent economies and sub-regional markets, this potential remains underexploited. The cooperative model between Rwanda and the DRC and their adeptness in enhancing the effectiveness of macroeconomic policies, considering spillover effects and promoting balanced benefit distribution play a pivotal role. The analytical approach aligns with an eclectic perspective in international relations, incorporating Dale Copeland's theory of trade expectations as a novel variable shaping the understanding of the situation.

Fortunat Biselele, a former private advisor to President Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi, underscores the Democratic Republic of Congo's political philosophy toward Rwanda in 2019, emphasising the need for sincere and mutually beneficial cooperation. Despite the liberal perspective adopted by Tshisekedi Administration for enduring peace, Rwandan government perceived a threat to its long-term interests, prompting a shift in its stance. The focus transitioned from promoting economic interdependence to implementing strategies to cut off Rwanda's access to Congolese mineral sources, revealing Rwanda's involvement in the transnational smuggling of mining products. Statistics from September 2023<sup>1</sup> indicate a significant drop in legal gold exports from North Kivu, attributing the loss to smuggling, aligning with the analysis of Alexander Wendt.

<sup>1</sup>Debriefing du gouvernement congolais par Nicolas Kazadi (Ministre des Finances) et Patrick Muyaya (Ministre des Médias), sur le dossier Primera Gold, Kinshasa, le 29 août 2023.

According to Wendt, achieving lasting peace in the eastern part of the DRC and between the two countries necessitates a combination of influential variables such as interdependence, shared destiny, homogeneity, and self-control. The Kinshasa regime's initial approach during Felix Antoine Tshisekedi's first term sought to build a peaceful transnational community conducive to joint development based on these principles (Wendt, 1999).

In recent years, Rwanda has become a hub for the illicit trade in minerals. This is particularly true for strategic minerals from the Democratic Republic of Congo, especially coltan. Rwanda's strategy is to establish a privileged transit system based on a flexible tax regime. In other words, the introduction of deliberate under-taxation is to capture minerals from eastern DRC. This ultimately conceals and obscures any possibility of tracing the origin of the minerals.

Over the past decade, the volume of coltan exports has been the subject of intense controversy, even at the United Nations. As far as the UN report is concerned, Rwanda has very few coltan mines on its territory (Ojewale, 2022). However, Rwanda's share of global coltan exports has surprised observers. In 2013, the country accounted for 28% of global coltan production, while the following year (2014) and in 2023, its coltan exports broke records, becoming the world's largest exporter for the fifth-time in ten years (Ojewale, 2022). This situation illustrates a classic case of the "paradox of plenty", where a resource-rich nation (the DRC) sees its wealth benefit its neighbors more than its own population. Consequently, the foregoing leaves the field open to anyone wishing to draw lessons from the efficiency and effectiveness of the DRC's economy strategy.

## 5.2. Military Strategy for Restoring Peace

The peace and security concerns in North, South Kivu, and Ituri were central to all candidates during the provincial and presidential elections on December 20, 2018. Five years later, precisely, during the general elections in the December 20th 2023, the same issues resurface, prompting the question of how to swiftly end the armed conflicts spanning over two decades in the three provinces. President Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi's choice of a military strategy becomes crucial, and we turn to Thomas C. Schelling's theory of conflict games to explain. Schelling's game theory introduces the term "strategy," distinguishing between games of skill, games of chance, and strategy, highlighting the interdependence of players' decisions and mutual expectations. Referencing James D. Fearon's work, it appears that the DRC and Rwanda lack a credible commitment to respect agreements for a peaceful solution (Fearon, 2012).

Our analysis leads to three hypotheses for the security situation: first, the DRC's superior military resources lead to peace by defeating rebel groups (offensive realism); second, proportional military capabilities maintain the status quo; third, the adversary imposes its will, risking the DRC's balkanisation. Given the Congolese government's determination and commitment to enhancing military capabilities, the first hypothesis seems most plausible. In his inaugural speech of the first

term, President Tshisekedi expressed the willingness to eliminate threats in the east through a military strategy, acknowledged as effective with combined efforts.

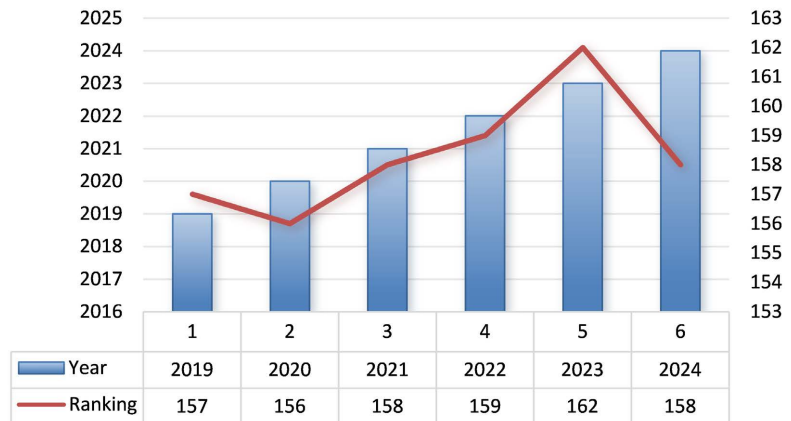
To restore peace, Tshisekedi declared a *état de Siège* in May 2021, transferring civilian assignment to the military, establishing military courts, and extending police powers in Ituri, North, and South Kivu (Willis, 2024). Despite incomplete results, positive outcomes include a reduction in mining smuggling. As an East African Community member, the DRC implements the 2013 Protocol on Peace and Security. Facing instability, Tshisekedi called on the East African Community Force, mainly comprising soldiers from seven member countries, excluding Rwanda. The force acts as an interposition force rather than engaging rebels.

The East African Community Regional Force's use as a complementary military strategy responds to the M23 rebels' advance, but its presence raises questions due to limited results and public dissatisfaction. Considering the challenges, the DRC must explore alternative strategies to protect its population and territorial integrity, re-examining national defence policy for a more effective global approach to restore peace.

The motivation for regional forces to contribute for peace and security maintenance in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo includes: In terms of regional stability strategy, the motivation of regional forces is to promote stability and security in the Great Lakes region, which has been historically affected by cross-border conflicts and ethnic tensions. By helping to maintain peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo, these forces seek to prevent the spread of conflict and create a peaceful and secure environment in the region (Reid, 2018).

In terms of economic benefits, the motivation behind these regional forces is financial benefits, such as obtaining natural resources from the Democratic Republic of Congo or promoting cross-border trade (Voix Du Congo, 2019). By fostering stability and security in the Democratic Republic of Congo, these forces seek to create a favourable environment for economic and commercial activities in the region (Westerkamp & Houdret, 2010). In terms of international pressure these regional forces face international pressure, especially from the international community (both sides), the United Nations, or regional organizations, to assist in the peacekeeping efforts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These pressures stem from commitments made within regional or international security and peace agreements (Bara & Hultman, 2020). In terms of strengthening bilateral relations, by assisting in maintaining peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo, regional forces are helping to strengthen bilateral relations with the Congolese government and promote regional security cooperation. This cooperation brings political and strategic benefits to donor countries.

In summary, we have assessed the results of the military strategy in line with the evolution of the peace and security situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) over the last six years (since Félix Tshisekedi came to power on 30 December 2018). This analysis is based exclusively on annual data and on the Global Peace Index rankings.



**Figure 2.** Democratic Republic of the Congo GPI ranking.

Thus, of the 163 countries ranked in the Global Peace Index 2024, the Democratic Republic of Congo ranks 158<sup>th</sup> while Rwanda ranks 92<sup>nd</sup>. In 2024, the DRC was among the six lowest-rated countries in the world in terms of peace and security (Global Peace Index). In other words, as shown in **Figure 2**, the country ranks among the six most unstable countries in the world in terms of peace and security. Compared with the GPI 2023, where the DRC was ranked second to last, the peace and security situation in the DRC has improved according to the GPI 2024. The country has moved up 4 places in one year. However, over the last five years, the peace and security situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo has not changed much and is as follows: GPI 2020: ranked 156<sup>th</sup>, GPI 2021: 158<sup>th</sup>, GPI 2022: 159<sup>th</sup>, GPI 2023: 162<sup>nd</sup> and GPI 2024: 158<sup>th</sup> again. The year 2023 was the most unstable during the period under review (*Global Peace Index, 2024*).

The year 2023 was the one in which the situation was most unstable during the period under review. It was the spike in instability caused by the resurgence of the M23 terrorist movement, supported in logistics and intelligence by Rwanda. Two factors can explain this improvement in the ranking over the last two years: the first factor is the strong diplomatic “wolf diplomacy” led by the administration of Félix Tshisekedi, which is based on a strong determination to strengthen the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (adoption of the military programming law, modernization of military equipment and recruitment). The second factor is the inertia of the theatre of operations, which is characterized by a relatively balanced situation between the forces present, with none of them managing to gain a significant advantage to move the military situation forward (*Papliński & Stachowicz, 2011*).

If no offensive is carried out, the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo will be unable to liberate the occupied territories (Bunagana, Masisi, Walikale, etc.) just as the rebel forces were unable to make progress.

### 5.3. From “Warrior Government” to “Warrior Wolf” Diplomacy

“*Wolf diplomacy*” emerged prominently in April 2020, drawing inspiration from

the film *Wolf Warrior 2*, China's blockbuster released in 2017 (Julienne & Hanck, 2021). The warrior-wolf metaphor reflects the belief that the international system consists of wolves, necessitating a warrior-like stance to prevent being devoured.

This diplomatic approach responds to increasing external pressure, signaling a determination to safeguard national interests (Martin, 2021). Ryan Hass observes it as a shift toward a more assertive foreign policy and a change in diplomatic style, becoming more vehement and less inclined to compromise (Huang, 2022). Xie Tao contextualizes it as a natural evolution in country foreign policy, signifying assertive defence of its interests and a departure from being perceived as a developing country (Wu, 2021).

Indeed, the "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" concept reflects the evolving Chinese foreign policy doctrine over the last three decades (Duan, 2024). Initially, Deng Xiaoping advocated a "low profile," while Hu Jintao promoted "peaceful emergence." Under President Xi Jinping, "fighting wolf diplomacy" asserts China's "confident rise" as a leading global power (Sullivan & Wang, 2023).

Applying the "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" framework helps analyse Félix Antoine Tshisekedi's government's vigorous foreign policy rhetoric amid Rwandan aggression. Unprecedentedly combative, from the United Nations General Assembly to sub-regional summits, the DRC denounces Rwandan aggression, seeks sanctions, and rallies allies.

Tayebi Oussama views this as the DRC adopting a more ambitious policy within sub-regional and international organisations, leveraging its demographic weight, vast natural resources, and geostrategic position (Oussama, 2022).

At the XVIII Francophonie Summit in Gerba, Tunisia, in November 2022, Congolese former Prime Minister Jean Michel Sama Lukonde boycotted a photo with Paul Kagame, denouncing Rwandan aggression. Jean-Lucien Bussa, Minister of Foreign Trade, urged African countries to condemn Rwanda at an African Union summit, highlighting the impact of insecurity on continental under-industrialisation.

The government communicates DRC's stance globally, seeking allies, sanctions, and condemnation of Rwandan acts. In June 2023, at the Confederation of Indian Industry Conclave in New Delhi, Deputy Prime Minister Vital Kamerhe vehemently countered Rwandan falsehoods about Eastern DRC, illustrating the government's commitment to truth. Charles Onana argues that the international community's silence on Rwanda's violations prompted Tshisekedi to adopt "warrior wolf" diplomacy (Onana, 2023). This combative approach has yielded results, including condemnation of Rwandan acts and lifting of restrictions on Congolese weapon purchases (Paulin, 2021).

So, wolf diplomacy is used in this paper to describe the intense diplomatic activity deployed by the DRC since the advent of Félix Tshisekedi. Indeed, this diplomatic strategy draws its foundation from Pillar 5 of his 2018 electoral programme, focusing on "*rehabilitating and restoring the image of diplomacy*", and from the third pillar of the government's 2021-2023 Action Plan, entitled "*reinvigorating diplomacy and rehabilitating the country's brand image*", and reaf-

firmed in his speech.

This strategic redefinition has not only enabled the DRC to break out of the diplomatic isolation in which it has found itself since 2016 and to re-establish cooperation with several key partners, but above all to revitalize its presence within international organizations and regional economic communities. One of the merits of this strategy has been to denounce Rwandan aggression through international organizations, governments and the media. It should be noted that this vigorous stance is unprecedented in the last three decades.

Although the results have not been commensurate with the efforts made, there have been some notable achievements, notably the presidency of the African Union, Félix Tshisekedi's facilitation of the transition process in Chad, and the election of the Democratic Republic of Congo to the United Nations Human Rights Council. In addition, the United States denounced Rwanda's support for M23 on 8 July 2024, while the European Union included Colonel Augustin Migabo of the Rwandan Defence Forces on its sanctions list on 26 July 2024. It is also important to underline the Congolese diplomatic commitment to sub-regional issues, such as the Nairobi Process and the Luanda Process, conducted respectively under the auspices of Uhuru Kenyatta, former President of Kenya, and under the mediation of João Lourenço, President of Angola, appointed by the African Union (AU).

However, the adoption by the DRC of an assertive diplomatic position, inspired by "wolf diplomacy," raises concerns about the risk of alienating potential allies both in the region and within the international community. For example, President Kagame canceled, on just 24 hours' notice, his trip to Luanda scheduled for December 15, 2024, intended to meet with President Félix in the presence of the Angolan mediator as part of the Luanda Process. This cancellation is perceived by the Congolese government as an evasion of responsibility regarding support for the M23. This sentiment is clearly expressed by Thérèse Kayikwamba, the Congolese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Francophonie and International Cooperation, who stated: "Rwanda has chosen to prioritize the M23 and sacrifice peace." Thus, while this diplomatic approach aims to affirm the DRC's position, it could paradoxically foster distrust and alienation from other parties, thereby compromising regional cooperation, as seen in the case of President Kagame.

## 6. Congo-Rwanda Tensions, towards on Open War?

The Thucydides Trap is political concept coined by Graham Allison in his book "*Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap*," published in 2017. The theory originates from the renowned Greek historian Thucydides, who chronicled the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) involving Sparta as the dominant power and Athens as the emerging power (Allison, 2017).

The concept of the Thucydides Trap is based on the idea that when a rising power challenges an established power, it disrupts the global balance of power. The dominant power perceives the emerging power as a threat and strives to contain it, often leading to an inevitable conflict.

In the context of the growing tensions between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, the signs of a “Thucydides Trap” become evident. In recent years, Rwanda has shaped its image as a sub-regional power capable of influencing other countries, particularly the DRC, by regularly supporting rebel groups in its eastern region.

For example, in 1997, Rwanda’s support for the AFDL enabled the overthrow of Mobutu and the imposition of James Kabarebe, an officer in the Rwandan Patriotic Front, as Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the DRC. Isn’t it historic that one person holds two positions at the head of the national armies of two distinct countries simultaneously? Moreover, Rwanda is the third-largest contributor of soldiers and police to UN peacekeeping operations and has deployed a powerful lobby to attract foreign capital, boast about its economic growth, and praise its exemplary governance model in Africa. For the elite of this country, it is a privilege that must be preserved at all costs.

However, in 2019, the election of Félix Tshisekedi sparked new hope and renewed confidence in the DRC. His diplomatic actions within the framework of “good neighborliness” challenged Rwanda’s hegemonic role. Thus, at the beginning of Félix Tshisekedi’s mandate, a notable economic convergence was observed between the two countries. However, this seemingly positive trajectory has been disrupted, leading to significant diplomatic tensions, particularly regarding violations of Congolese territorial integrity in the North Kivu province. The fear of Rwanda, inspired by the DRC’s return to the international stage, has triggered conflicts through proxy groups like the M23.

The looming concern is that these tensions might escalate into armed conflict without finding a compromise to restore peace, falling prey to the ominous “Thucydides trap.”

Recent years have witnessed escalating tensions between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda, stemming from factors such as border disputes, political variances, and economic considerations. While predicting the future remains challenging, these elements could potentially escalate into a high-intensity conflict.

Crucially, it is imperative to recognise that these risks are not predetermined and can be alleviated through diplomatic channels, mediation, and dialogues between the involved nations, coupled with regional and international collaboration. Encouraging efforts to resolve differences and build mutual trust becomes pivotal in preventing escalation and fostering the peaceful resolution of tensions. Through such proactive measures, the looming spectre of Thucydides’ trap can be averted.

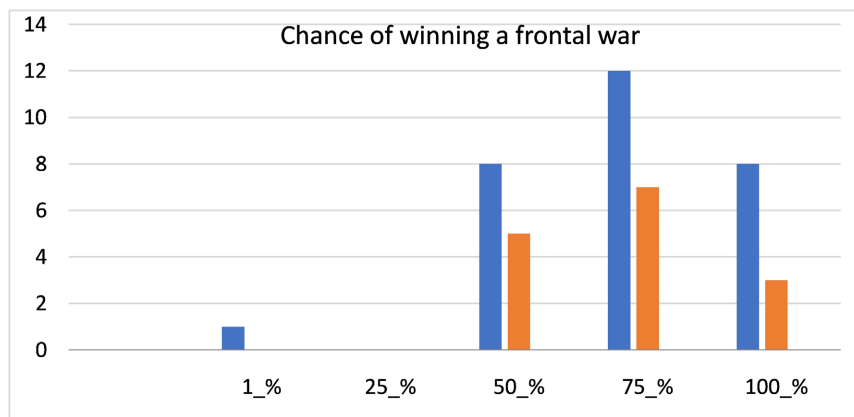
The Thucydides trap refers to a theory that war is more likely to occur when the rise of an emerging great power creates tension with an established great power. In Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the relationship between the two countries has historically been characterized by tension and conflict, particularly on security, border, and natural resource issues (Hanania, 2021). It must be recognized that the relationship between Rwanda and the Democratic

Republic of the Congo is complex and influenced by various political, economic, and historical factors. Diplomacy, dialogue, and regional cooperation efforts must be crucial in preventing conflicts and promoting peace between the two countries (*Towards Legitimate Stability in CAR and the DRC, 2019*).

Regional and international actors must work together to resolve disputes and promote stability in the Great Lakes region. By fostering mutual trust, encouraging cooperation, and addressing the root causes of tension, it is possible to overcome the Thucydides trap and establish peaceful and lasting relations between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (*Buchan et al., 2023*).

## 7. In Case of a Head-On War, What Chance Does the Democratic Republic of the Congo Have?

To answer this question, we designed a questionnaire. During the survey participants were asked to assess the Democratic Republic of Congo's chances of winning a head-on war with Rwanda, and the responses revealed a high level of optimism and confidence among the Congolese population in their armed forces, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC). See **Figure 3**, a significant portion, 75%, expressed the belief that the Democratic Republic of Congo had a favorable likelihood of winning such a conflict.



**Figure 3.** Chance of winning a frontal war.

Three factors can explain the confidence of those interviewed regarding the DRC's military capabilities: Firstly, the DRC has incomparable strategic depth. Unlike Rwanda, which is a small country, the DRC has considerable geographical advantages: an immense territory of 2,345,410 km<sup>2</sup>, characterized by rugged terrain on the border with Rwanda and dense forest cover. This configuration makes for an agile military strategy, with opportunities for strategic withdrawal, asymmetric warfare and dispersal of forces. Its central geostrategic position, coupled with a population of over 107 million, including a large number of young people who can be mobilized, constitutes a decisive demographic advantage. The nine international borders offer multiple rear base options, while imposing extensive and vulnerable supply lines on the adversary.

Secondly, the FARDC's combat experience is a major asset. Three decades of conflict have forged a battle-hardened army that has a perfect command of the terrain and adapts its tactics to the local context.

Thirdly, the structural modernization of the armed forces under the presidency of Félix Tshisekedi marks a decisive turning point. The lifting of the notification regime by the United Nations Security Council has enabled significant rearmament. The FARDC were thus able to considerably strengthen their operational capabilities through the acquisition of modern equipment, intensive training of new recruits and the reorganization of their command structures. This modernization, combined with a clear numerical superiority over Rwanda, has considerably boosted confidence in the capacity of the armies of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC).

An exciting trend emerged when examining the inclination of those supporting an open military confrontation with Rwanda. Regional origins appeared to influence individuals' attitudes toward the conflict. Respondents from provinces directly affected by armed conflict showed less support for an armed confrontation between the two countries.

In contrast, individuals from other provinces leaned toward a solution involving a head-on war between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. Some even advocated for more drastic measures, suggesting the annexation of Rwanda as the twenty-seventh province of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The observed dichotomy in perspectives could be attributed to the experiences and traumas of past wars. Those from conflict-affected regions, such as North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri, who have experienced personal losses or mass displacement, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, tend to lean towards a desire for peace without further bloodshed. On the other hand, individuals distanced from the immediate consequences of war, often perceiving it as a theoretical concept akin to a movie, expressed support for the idea of a frontal war, either due to their lack of direct war experience or a belief that they would remain unaffected by its consequences.

In a head-on war, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) could face significant challenges due to its size and strategic natural resources. However, it is essential to note that the DRC could also face substantial obstacles in war, including armed rebel groups and political tensions, corruption, and widespread poverty. A head-on war would have devastating consequences for the country and its people, and it is essential to prioritize dialogue, diplomacy, and conflict prevention to avoid such a situation.

Additionally, according to the survey results, 53.8% of respondents, which is more than half, believe that a direct war against Rwanda is necessary to address the critical issue of insecurity in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Furthermore, 34.6% of those surveyed advocate for the construction of a border wall between the two countries to contain the threat from Rwanda, while 11.5% do not support either of these options. It is also noteworthy that 55.3% of partici-

pants express their willingness to contribute financially to the construction of this wall. However, the feasibility of this solution raises doubts: 59.6% of respondents think that the project is unlikely to succeed due to a lack of financial resources, while 17.3% fear potential sabotage of this initiative.

## 8. Conclusion

The analysis of events through the lens of offensive realism highlights that states, as key actors in international relations, primarily seek to maximize their security and power. In this context, the three strategies adopted by Tshisekedi in response to Rwandan aggression perfectly illustrate the principles of offensive realism, where the national security of the DRC is regarded as an absolute priority.

Indeed, these strengthening strategies illustrate the multidimensional approach adopted by Félix Tshisekedi. His goal is not only to protect the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) from external threats but also to enhance the state's capacity to exert its influence in the region, which fully aligns with the principles of offensive realism. Furthermore, the modernization and strengthening of the Armed Forces of the DRC aim to restore a balance of power in relation to Rwanda, which is seen as a hegemonic actor. This dynamic is essential to offensive realism, where states seek to avoid being dominated by their rivals.

In his efforts to neutralize the threat posed by rebel groups, whether local or foreign, the DRC has expanded its military strategies by integrating MONUSCO (the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), as well as the military forces of the East African Community and SADC. Through this collaboration, Tshisekedi aims to bolster the legitimacy of the DRC on the international stage while consolidating strategic alliances to address common threats. This approach seeks not only to maximize national security but also to establish a deterrent framework against Rwandan aggression.

This international and regional cooperation fits into a broader strategy aimed at optimizing the security of the DRC, thus illustrating the principles of offensive realism, where power and influence are crucial for navigating a complex international environment. However, the risk of escalation remains, reinforcing the idea that the competition for security and influence could lead to open conflict between the two countries.

These figures illustrate the diversity of opinions and concerns of the people questioned as to what needs to be done to resolve insecurity in the region.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

- 1) Tick your gender.
- 2) Are you in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or abroad?
- 3) How can the war between the DRC and Rwanda be brought to an end?
- 4) What is or are the reason(s) for the multiple conflicts in the east of the DRC: natural resources or lack of military capacity?
- 5) In the event of a full-scale war, how do you rate the DRC's chances of winning?
- 6) Are you prepared to pay for the construction of a border wall between the DRC and Rwanda?
- 7) What are the possible reasons for blocking the construction of a border wall?
- 8) (A) Lack of financial resources?
- 9) (B) Fear of sabotage?
- 10) What is your own opinion (comment)?