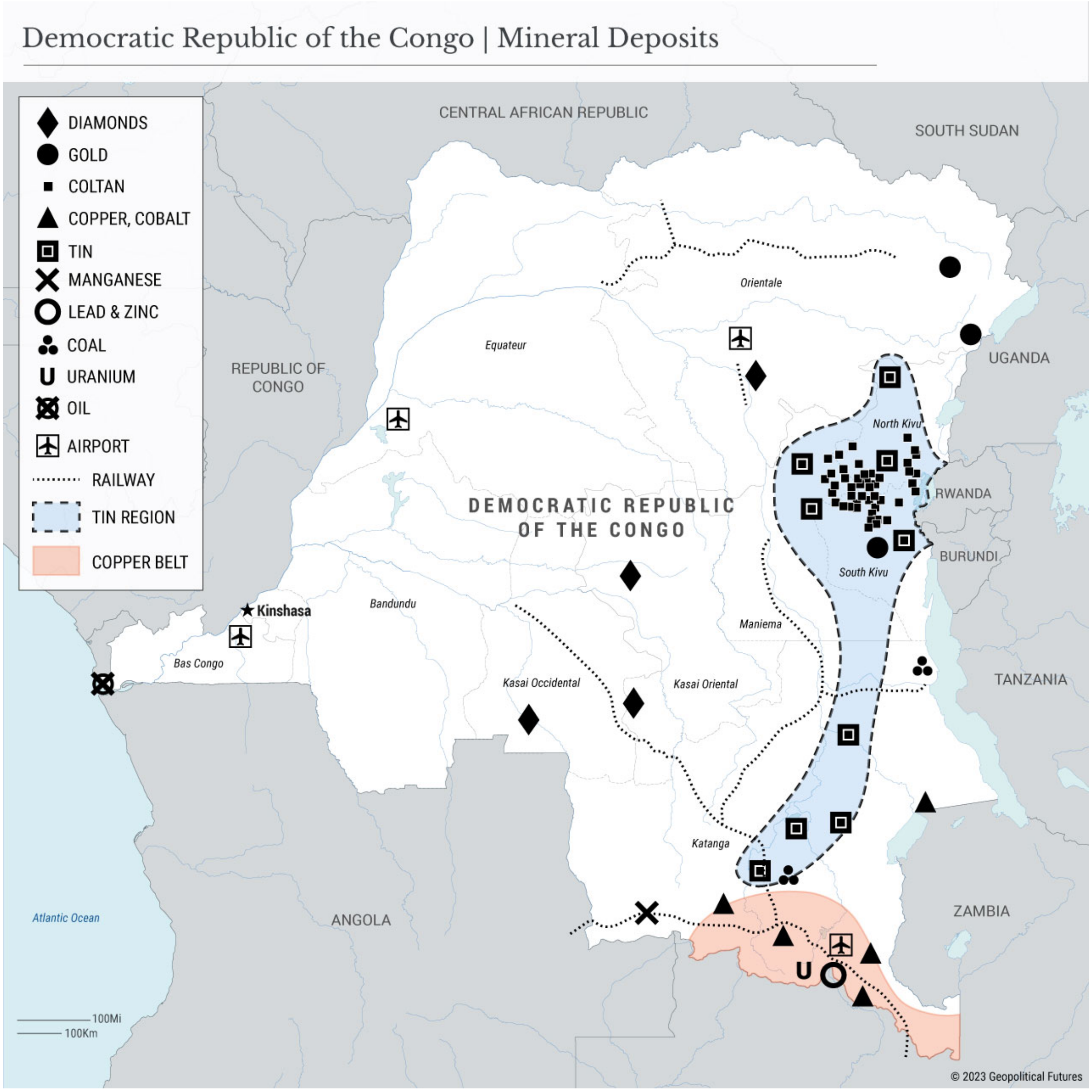
Why the Conflict in the Congo Can’t Stop

by Ronan Wordsworth - October 23, 2025

This week, the United States hosted a third round of talks to broker peace between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and M23, a rebel group that has taken over much of the mineral-rich eastern portion of the country. The ultimate purpose of Washington’s involvement is to obtain mining licenses for critical minerals. Standing in its way is China, which maintains a dominant position in the country and thus has reason to impede U.S. mediation efforts. Meanwhile, Rwanda – the other principal in the conflict in the Congo – benefits from the status quo. Without a major (and unlikely) commitment of U.S. troops, there is little reason to believe the conflict will end anytime soon.

Over the past year, Qatar, the U.S., Kenya and Angola have all hosted peace talks between the Congo and M23. The group has said its end goal is to overthrow President Felix Tshisekedi, but geography and military capability will almost certainly prevent it from doing so. Similar constraints prevent the government in Kinshasa from dislodging M23. The government alternates between negotiating and exploiting market leverage, while M23 continues to control areas surrounding key mining zones, including Goma and Bukavu. There is no evidence to suggest the group is willing or politically able to roll back its gains.

The situation in the Congo is hardly a local affair. As cobalt and copper become more essential to things like battery technologies, electric vehicles and high-performance jet engines, global powers are recalibrating their strategies to secure supply chains. The EU’s Critical Raw Materials Act and the U.S.’s Critical Minerals Security Act of 2024 evince as much. Shoring up supply lines for critical minerals is not just a matter of economics; over-relying on the production and refining capacity of potentially adversarial states exposes foundational (and exploitable) weakness, so it is also a matter of national security. And because the Congo is home to 70 percent of the world’s cobalt production, supplies 40 percent of its coltan, and meets around 13 percent of global copper demand, the country has become one of the more important arenas in the competition between the U.S. and China.



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Naturally, the competition complicates, and is complicated by, the conflict in the east. On Oct. 14, the government and M23 signed an agreement to create a body to monitor a ceasefire – one of two conditions needed for formal peace talks to take place. But whatever progress this seems to convey should be taken with a grain of salt. Financially, M23 is sustained by a resource-driven war economy and by cross-border material backing from Rwanda, with which it shares an ethnic Tutsi identity. Rwanda benefits from M23's illicit mineral trade, while the government in Kigali supplies arms and ammunition to M23. A military mission launched by the Southern African Development Community ended last summer, so one of the few things that actually constrained M23 is gone. A U.N. mission has also failed to bring peace.

In light of these failures, Kinshasa has experimented with economic policies to change the status quo. It has, for example, banned cobalt exports, set new quotas and offered certain mining concessions to attract other foreign actors. China's copper-cobalt machine, meanwhile, has continued to operate virtually unimpeded through the partially state-owned Sicomines and CMOC, even as diplomats try again to separate security dilemmas from supply chains. And the U.S. has become increasingly involved in an attempt to mediate in a resources-for-security transaction.

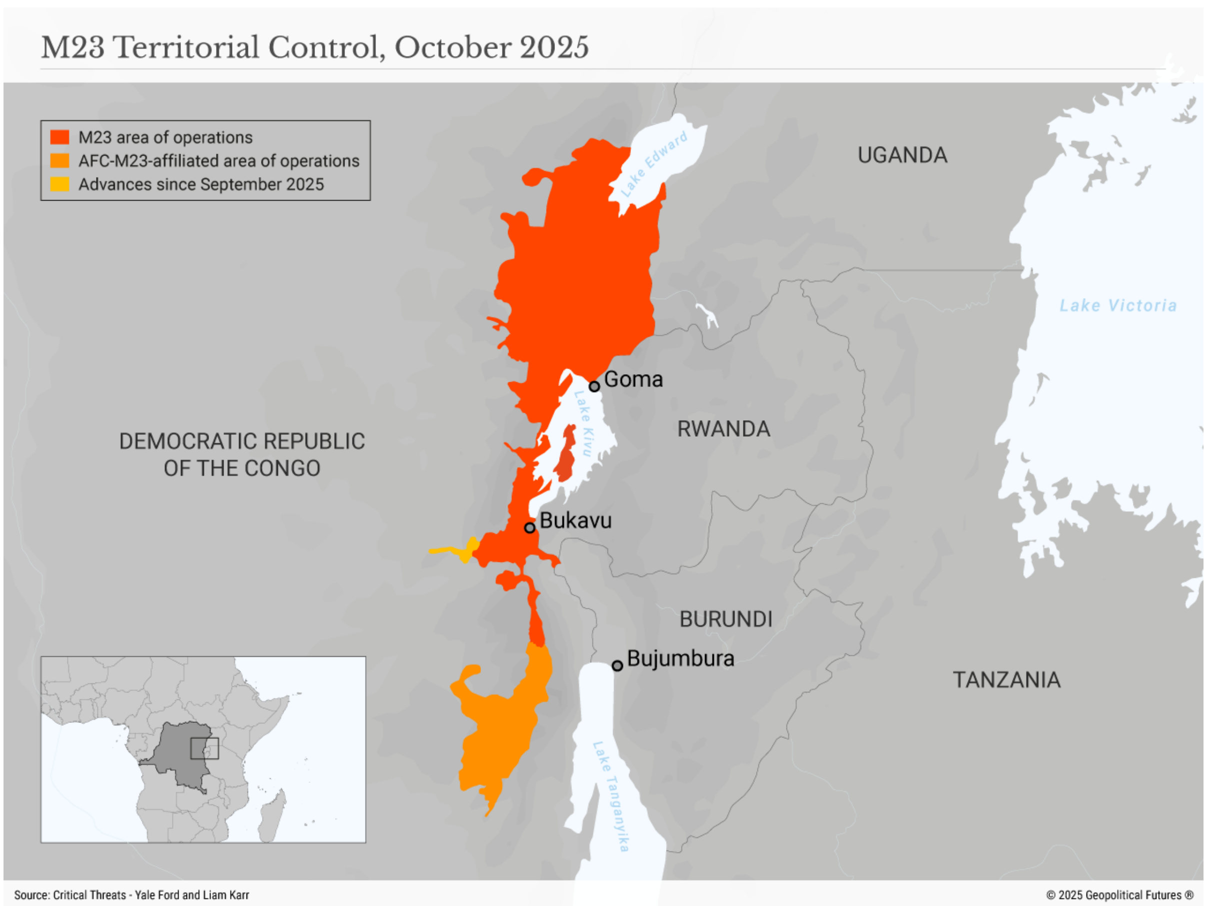
U.S. involvement has prompted China to renovate the TAZARA railway, which links eastern Congo to the Indian Ocean ports, via a $1.4 billion agreement. In direct competition, the European Union and the U.S. have tapped into Global Gateway funds to reconstruct and expand the Lobito railway corridor that connects the cooper belt in Zambia and the Congo to the Atlantic Ocean in Angola. (The Global Gateway is a framework for cooperation that also includes the African Development Bank and Africa Finance Corp.)

The bigger issues that will bedevil peace efforts are systemic and immutable. The first is an extremely frustrating and variegated geography. The Congo's vast territory is marked by extensive rainforests that stymie central control over its farther reaches. Indeed, the country's state capacity and security deficiencies are profound. The military is fragmented, poorly organized and struggles with difficult logistical constraints. Very little infrastructure connects one part of the country to another, so equipment and personnel need to be airlifted across the country – a costly and, with M23 in control of eastern airports, dangerous prospect.

Corruption, inconsistent training and competing loyalties, meanwhile, undermine coherent command and control. It's not unheard of for soldiers who feel they are cut off from reinforcements to flee the frontlines or surrender in the face of fighting. Armed groups operate relatively freely not because they are especially strong but because the state is underrepresented in peripheral areas. Local governance structures are similarly fractured, with overlapping claims of authority and legitimacy.

The second issue is the role played by Rwanda. Rwanda has long seen the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda – an armed Hutu group operating in eastern Congo – as an existential threat. (The country is ruled by the Tutsis, which comprise just 15 percent of the population.) It's little surprise, then, that the Rwandan government overtly supports the Tutsi rebels of M23. By sustaining a friendly force in Congolese territory, Rwanda insulates itself from threats and extends its influence into a region rich in minerals in exchange for finance and continued arms supply. Illicit minerals, especially gold and coltan, pour into Rwanda to feed the domestic refining and re-export industries that have buoyed its economic growth. This relationship also gives Rwanda geopolitical leverage: By sustaining the conflict at a manageable, low-intensity level, Kigali retains bargaining power with international actors who want stability for commercial or humanitarian reasons.

Here, Uganda deserves an honorable mention. It plays an important if less overt role in shaping regional dynamics. The government in Kampala has long held loose ties with rebel movements in eastern Congo, both as a patron and as an economic stakeholder in the cross-border mineral trade. Relations between Rwanda and Uganda are tense, marked by intermittent intelligence rivalries and competing influence networks among Congolese armed groups. Though Uganda's security establishment is officially aligned with Kinshasa in its counterinsurgency efforts, some elements have occasionally tolerated or indirectly benefited from M23's presence to counterbalance Rwandan dominance and secure access routes for smuggled coltan and gold. This quiet rivalry complicates regional coordination and undermines collective enforcement of ceasefire or demobilization accords.



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The third major issue preventing resolution is that the war economy has become self-perpetuating. Control over mining sites, particularly coltan deposits in areas like Rubaya, has given M23 steady revenue streams through taxation of local miners and smuggling. This financial autonomy allows the group to sustain operations even in the absence of large-scale battlefield offensives. The informal mineral trade, often laundered through cross-border networks, has created powerful economic constituencies with no incentive to see the war end.

Finally, pressures in the Kivu region continue to provide combustible material for armed mobilization. Longstanding disputes over land, ethnic ownership and political representation have imbedded themselves into the security environment, making any purely military or diplomatic solution incomplete. Moreover, a low average age, low employment rates and poor living conditions provide fertile ground for militant recruitment. The region has long played host to various armed groups with malleable allegiances and territorial control.

And this is to say nothing of the foreign actors from farther afield – namely, China and the U.S. Beijing is by far the most dominant actor in the Congo's formal mining sector. Through a combination of infrastructure-for-resources deals and direct corporate operations – notably through CMOC and the Sicomines joint venture – Chinese firms control much of the copper-cobalt extraction and export. A 2024 renegotiation raised infrastructure commitments to up to $7 billion and added a 1.2 percent royalty for the state (this follows findings that of more than $10 billion in committed funds from 2016, only approximately $700 million had been spent by Beijing). China-backed companies own or have a financial stake in 15 of the Congo's 19 cobalt-producing mines, and 100 percent of cobalt exports go to Beijing. More than 66 percent of the country's copper exports also are exported to China.

Crucially, instability in the east has not disrupted mining flows in a way that threatens Chinese interests. This gives Beijing little incentive to involve itself in mediation. Instead, its strategy appears to be one of quiet consolidation. It has, for example, secured long-term mining concessions and infrastructure control, while leaving the security question to others.

Washington, meanwhile, is trying to secure mineral extraction rights of its own. It signed a peace-for-resources deal in June, though it has failed to come to fruition. Blackwater founder Erik Prince signed a deal with the Congolese government in April to help the country secure and monetize its vast mineral reserves as part of this push, but this, too, has yielded nothing significant.

The Trump administration is interested in stabilizing the country so that it can get in on its minerals, but without any commitment to put boots on the ground, there is no practical way to force M23 to cede territory. Washington is also a strong supporter of Rwanda, and one of the biggest export markets for the country’s coltan – licitly gained or otherwise – so any deal it advances is likely more of an attempt to dislodge China than to achieve peace for peace’s sake.

Kinshasa’s efforts to leverage its mineral resources into foreign support have affected the global cobalt market. In February, it placed an export ban on cobalt to boost prices, which had dropped 75 percent between March 2022 and January 2025. The ban has now been replaced by an annual export quota system that took effect mid-October and allows for the export of 18,125 tons for the rest of 2025 and 96,600 tons per year in 2026 and 2027.

Lurking in the background is a domestic standoff between Tshisekedi and former President Joseph Kabila, whom authorities have accused of masterminding the insurgency and colluding with Rwanda and M23. A military court has sentenced him to death in absentia. This power struggle is likely to further complicate a resolution to the crisis and make it more difficult for Western actors to engage.

A managed stalemate is the most likely outcome, especially in the near term, as illicit minerals flow. Until governance and extraction are decoupled, any peace process will remain ornamental.

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