Armed Non-State Actors in Eastern DRC and Diplomatic Relations in the Great Lakes Region

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Abstract

Armed non-state actors (ANSAs) are one of the most consistent threats to peace, security and diplomacy in weak states, although their influence on interstate relations is a debated phenomenon. This paper discusses the implications of ANSAs on the diplomatic relations in the Great Lakes Region (GLR), especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the other neighbours, Uganda and Rwanda. Even though the activities of such groups as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Democratic Forces to Liberation of Rwanda (DFLR), the March 23 Movement (M23) and the Mai-Mai militias are commonly associated with the destabilisation of the region, it is not clear how much the actions of these groups cause diplomatic tensions rather than are merely an instrument of the states. The study uses the mixed-methods design; survey data, interviews and secondary sources to question these dynamics. The results have shown that ANSAs are politically, economically, ethnically and ideologically oriented, and the economic factors, especially illegal mining and smuggling, have become prevailing. However, not only are their cross-border movement, territorial domination and violent operations a challenge to the sovereignty; they also expose deeper structural vulnerabilities in regional governance and immoral trust processes. The regional and international organisations are still involved, but limited by a lack of vigorous enforcement and conflicting interests of the member states, which creates doubts about the efficiency of multilateral responses. Civil society may seem to be the most important in the mediation of tensions; however, it does not necessarily participate in formal diplomacy. The conclusion part of the study is terminated with recommendations, which include collaboration of the regions, intelligence sharing, collective military approaches, dialogue with the community and external assistance as possible solutions to sustainable diplomatic relations within the GLR.

Keywords: *Armed Non-State Actors, Eastern DR, Great Lakes Region, regional Diplomacy, Security Cooperation.*

Introduction

Armed non-state actors (ANSAs) have become one of the most consistent peace, security and diplomatic destroyers in the modern world. Nevertheless, as these groups are commonly recognised as opposing the state power, scholarly and policy discussions are still inconclusive as to whether such groups are direct sources of autonomous security risks or a proxy used by states to pursue national interests. ANSAs exploit the gaps in governance, cross-border networks and illicit economies, which continue to create fragility, population displacement and make interstate relations complicated, weakening sovereignty and stability in the area (Gleditsch, 2021). The Great Lakes Region of Africa (GLR) is a vital location to study these intricacies. The country of the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has long been suffering because of the existence of certain groups, including the March 23 Movement (M23), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Democratic Forces of Liberation of Rwanda (DFLR) and the local militias, like the Mai Mai. Whereas these actors commit armed violence, resource exploitation and displacement, thus weakening the sovereignty of DRC and stoking tensions with neighbours such as Rwanda and Uganda (Stearns, 2019), the implication of supporting some ANSAs covertly (Mukherjee, 2019) does not allow for separating the role of the state and non-state actors in such a clean way. Their operations across borders undermine trust, but they also can show how permeable borders, past hostilities and national security interests influence regional politics.

In spite of all the conflict resolution activities, such as structures developed by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), the African Union (AU) and United Nations peacekeeping operations, ANSAs are still strong. The 2013 Nairobi Declaration has made attempts, an agreement between the M23 and the government of DRC to stop hostilities, signed by the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (SADC, 2013), to demobilise militias and to enter into dialogue. Nevertheless, in most cases, these mechanisms are limited by their lack of vigorous enforcement and conflicting state interests, as well as by their inability to effectively incorporate local grievances into regional policies (Niyongabo, 2021). This is a paradox of having fancy institutional arrangements in place. However, the results are still weak, which highlights the challenge of dealing with ANSAs through the use of formal diplomacy.

It is on this background that this research study aims to focus on the impact of ANSAs in the GLR and may be wondering to what extent these groups influence cooperation, mistrust and security provisions among states and to what extent they are agents of their own actions and not state policy. Second, it assesses the strategic frameworks that are set to deal with these issues, questioning the success, as well as the failures, of regional and international mechanisms. Through pre-empting these queries, the research identifies the duality of ANSAs' insecurity threats and diplomatic variables.

Literature Review

Eastern DRC Armed Non-State Actors

ANSAs have several groups within the Eastern DRC; however, the four more significant groups reflect the sophistication of ANSAs in contrast to Uganda, Rwanda and the DRC. The Allied Democratic Forces *(*ADF) was founded in the early 90s as an insurgent Ugandan Islamist organisation that consisted of different anti-government constituents. Under severe counterinsurgency pressure in Uganda, the group moved to Eastern DRC, where there was weak control of the state and poor borders (Titeca & Vlassenroot, 2012). ADF has undertaken many attacks in Uganda and the DRC border, attacking civilians and security forces. Kampala has long considered the ADF a constant security threat originating from the Congolese soil and has repeatedly exerted pressure on Kinshasa to crack down on the group (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2023). In November 2021, the new stage in the cooperation between Uganda and the DRC, based on neutralising ADF, was a new operation, Shujaa (ICG, 2023). Although the operation is a sign of improvement in bilateral security cooperation, it also revealed some tensions over sovereignty and governance. Some Congolese actors condemned the presence of Uganda troops as an abuse of national sovereignty, as it had been in the past when Uganda intervened in the Congo wars. As a result, the ADF problem promotes collaboration and conflict

within Uganda-DRC relations at the same time, which demonstrates the fragility of the balance between the necessity to protect the region and national independence.

The Allied Democratic Forces of Liberation Rwanda (DFLR) was organised in the late 1990s and it was mostly comprised of the remnants of the former Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and Interahamwe militias that perpetrated the 1994 genocide (Stearns, 2012). These groups escaped to Eastern DRC and took their bases in North and South Kivu after their defeat. With time, the group became entrenched in local political and economic networks and used the mineral resources to interact with the local communities to survive.

Rwanda also considers the DFLR a threat to existential security, as it has genocidal roots and hostility against Kigali continues (Oakland Institute, 2025). Rwanda, on the other hand, has frequently accused the DRC of condoning the presence of the group or not crushing it with authority. This has created distrust and animosity between Kigali and Kinshasa, with Rwanda using the operations of the DFLR as a reason to support proxy forces or carry out operations across the border. The unsettled DFLR issue is at the core of the Rwanda-DRC diplomatic issues. A new wave or occurrence of DFLR in Eastern Congo strengthens the security concerns of Rwanda and elicits a military or diplomatic response. Interventions by Kigali can be characterised as pre-emptive self-defence, whether directly or by allied groups, whereas to Kinshasa, they can be a violation of sovereignty. This blame game erodes regional security structures, especially those of ICGLR and EAC.

The March 23 (M23) was founded in 2012 by the Congolese Tutsi soldiers who previously served in the Congolese army as a part of the peace accord with the National Congress of the Defence of the People (CNDP) signed in 2009 (Okello, 2025). The cause of the rebellion was the resentment of the inability of the government of the DRC to fulfil the significant provisions of the agreement, such as political integration and security of the communities of Tutsi in the Kivus. The first M23 insurgency was amplified by the capturing of Goma in 2012, but it was temporarily defeated in 2013. The group, however, re-emerged in late 2021 and quickly took over strategic portions of North Kivu. According to the accusations of the DRC government, Rwanda supports M23 militarily and logistically, which is supported by numerous reports of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (UNSC, 2022). Rwanda constantly rejects such allegations and attempts to frame M23 as a domestic Congolese problem that is closely associated with the failure of governance and ethnic conflicts. Diplomatic ties between Rwanda and DRC have been harshly damaged by the M23 rebels, forcing ambassadors to be recalled, borders to be shut and bilateral collaboration to be stopped. This war has also required the use of regional mediation by EAC and ICGLR with mixed outcomes (Karuhanga, 2023). The continued existence of M23 highlights the overlap of ethnic politics and regional security and rivalry over geopolitical interests.

The Mai-Mai militias are a heterogeneous association of local defence community-based armed groups. They can be traced back to the Congo wars when local leaders recruited fighters to defend their communities against the foreign and internal armed groups (Vlassenroot, 2002). With time, most of these militia groups developed into semi-autonomous warlord organisations that involved themselves in the exploitation of resources, taxation and intra-community violence. Although the Mai-Mai were initially viewed as self-defence movements, they have turned out to be the main perpetrators of insecurity and human rights violations in Eastern DRC. They engage in civilian attacks, control of mining sites and confrontations with the national forces. The fact that the groups are fragmented and that they alternate alliances with other armed actors makes them especially hard to neutralise. Even though not directly associated with Uganda or Rwanda, the spreading of Mai-Mai militias is a cause of the increasing insecurity of the region. They are also present and this provides a lax environment to transnational actors such as the ADF, DFLR and M23 to conduct themselves with ease. The fact that the DRC lacks the capacity to disarm or integrate these militias supports the views of its neighbours that the country is a weak state that is not able to control its territory, which is frequently used as an excuse to intervene (Vlassenroot et al., 2020). Therefore, the continuation of Mai-Mai militias is a symptom of the regional security dilemma and a cause of it in the GLR.

Armed Non-State Actors' Effect on Diplomatic Relations

According to literature, ANSAs affect the diplomatic relations significantly, especially in unstable areas such as the GLR. Globally, ANSAs are destabilising actors, which redefine state relationships and make a peacebuilding process more difficult. For instance, separatist movements in Catalonia put a strain on the relations of Spain inside the EU, which is another example of how domestic ANSAs can spill over into the broader issue of diplomacy (Sanchez, 2020). On the same note, the Taliban's comeback in Afghanistan altered the U.S. and regional politics, as some states were interested in cooperation and others feared terrorism (Rafiq & Zainab, 2023). The ANSAs, including LRA in the Uganda-DRC relations and Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, led to a decline in the trust of neighbours and focused on military rather than diplomatic reactions in Africa (Nwokolo, 2021). In the East DRC, the M23 and ADF have raised allegations of foreign interference, cooling the relationship between Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC (Huggins & Kazadi, 2020). Altogether, these studies indicate that ANSAs not only contribute to insecurity but also to the transformation of the diplomatic landscape, promoting the lack of trust, sovereignty conflicts and hesitant partnerships.

On the second objective, the literature gives prominence to editorial endeavours as well as failures of strategic frameworks aimed at alleviating the influence of ANSAs on diplomacy. Interventions by regional organisations like the ICGLR and the AU have been tried, but this is militarised chiefly, where the long-term diplomatic engagements are not considered (Mokiri, 2023). The experiences of the FARC peace process in Colombia show that agreements are to be accompanied by continuous dialogue to prevent the country from returning to war (Krause & Chaskel, 2022). On the same note, the reaction to Al-Shabaab in Somalia demonstrated that military achievements with no political systems did not result in providing stability (Getachew, 2019). In general, researchers agree upon the necessity to have coordinated strategies that can balance between security and diplomacy, combating the causes of conflicts and involving the local communities in the sustainable development of peace in the GLR.

Theoretical Framework

The conflict theory is the foundation of the current study and it puts its focus on Structural violence as the source of violence: the harm that is constructed in social, political and economic systems (Galtung, 1969). This theory has been extended by other scholars like Dahrendorf (1959) and Collins (2000), who have further identified issues of identity and political influence as other causes of conflicts. Extended to the GLR, the conflict theory will give us an understanding of how ANSAs take advantage of grievances and economic inequalities and use them to destabilise societies and disrupt diplomatic relations. It further describes the way these groups build mistrust and tensions in the cooperation between states (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). Although it is relevant, critics believe that the conflict theory may be too deterministic and reductionist as it lays more emphasis on the economic aspects without considering the culture and the historical contexts (Ramsbotham et al., 2011). However, it will still be helpful in the context of examining the mechanisms of ANSAs destabilising diplomacy in the GLR.

Conceptual Framework

ANSAs like the M23, ADF, DFLR and local militias (independent variable) have been used on multiple occasions to destabilise Eastern DRC and create mistrust and mutual suspicion between states (Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC). The cross-border activities of these groups have caused poor diplomatic relations (dependent variable), such as diplomatic standoffs and a failure of bilateral cooperation (Huggins & Kazadi, 2020). Meanwhile, in the form of moderating variables, the behaviour of the neighbouring states and regional organisations has influenced both positively and negatively. As an example, the work of the ICGLR and the AU aimed at peace dialogues and peace missions of states like Uganda and Rwanda has sometimes led to cooperation, whereas unilateral military actions of some states like Uganda and Rwanda have sometimes resulted in heightened suspicions and aggravation of diplomatic tensions (Nwokolo, 2021; Mokiri, 2023). These observances reveal that, although ANSAs are destabilising agents, the level of their influence on diplomacy is greatly determined by the reaction of the actors on the ground. Where the use of inclusive

dialogue and joint approaches has been given priority, the possibilities of better diplomatic relationships grow; where unilateralism is the way of doing things, the relationships degenerate.

Methodology

This paper adopted a mixed methods approach, which involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research on the role of ANSAs in the Eastern DRC and the influence of their work on the diplomatic relationship in the GLR. The study was based on a descriptive research design, which allows for collecting and analysing data systematically without variations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was focused on a heterogeneous group of stakeholders who were purposely recruited due to their direct interest, knowledge, or experience in the field of regional security and diplomacy, including the government, diplomats, military personnel, local leaders, academics and NGO representatives. Data was collected by use of Structured questionnaires, which collected measurable data among the officials and the institutions that participated in the security of the region and through semi-structured interviews, which offered in-depth information about policymakers, diplomats and experts. The primary data was complemented by secondary data in the form of policy reports, peace agreements, UN and MONUSCO reports, as well as academic data. This triangulation method increased the reliability and validity of the results as to the impact of ANSA activities in Eastern DRC on the diplomatic relations in the GLR.

Findings

The researcher established that ANSAs produce significant impacts on the diplomatic relations in the GLR. Their activities, which usually involve transboundary raids, smuggling and assaults on civilians, cause tension among neighbouring states. An example is that the existence of ADF in the Eastern DRC has caused a series of diplomatic tensions between the DRC and Uganda (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The participants also reported that the allegations of state support or even complicity in ANSAs were frequent, which resulted in diplomatic standoffs and decreased cooperation. Such tensions interfere with the process of building trust and establishing joint security programs. Respondents have listed some of the most important activities of ANSAs and analysed their impact in the GLR. These groups are very active in the exploitation of resources, in the illegal mining, timber trade and smuggling in a bid to raise funds for the operations. They also invade with armed attacks and carry out territorial control and this is commonly done by raiding villages, checkpoints and military installations, which weakens the state authority. The other notable characteristic of their activities is the cross-border activity, where they enter and exit countries to avoid national security agencies and exploit lax border control and regulatory policies. Also, ANSAs are actively involved in the recruitment and mobilisation processes, taking advantage of ethnic separations, domestic grievances and ideological discourses to recruit new members and enhance their influence and power throughout the region.

The M23 Rebels (66%), ADF (53%) and Mai-Mai Militia (47%) and other forces such as the LRA and DFLR (33) were described as most influential ANSAs (Table 2).

Table 1

Influential ANSAs in the GLR (%)

ANSA	NGO Workers	Govt Officials	Military/Defence	Academics	Community Leaders	Journalists	Total
M23 Rebels	60	71	64	65	59	51	66
ADF	50	62	50	40	47	32	53
Mai-Mai	40	53	43	47	35	45	47
Other (LRA, FDLR)	30	40	29	25	24	19	33

Source: (Researcher, 2025)

The M23 has a force supported by territorial dominance, ethnic mobilisation and economic exploitation and the ADF funds its activities using gold and timber smuggling. Local insurgency and community defence activities, the Mai-Mai participate in at times in cooperation with larger entities, particularly with strategic consideration (Global Initiative, 2024). These groups were identified through an interview process as adaptive and opportunistic.

Effects of ANSAs on Diplomatic Relations

Respondents were able to test the ANSAs' impacts on diplomatic relations with the help of a Likert scale (1-5) (Table 2).

Table 2

How do ANSAs affect state Relations in the GLR?

Statement	Mean	SD
Do ANSAs significantly influence diplomatic relations?	3.62	1.22
Do ANSAs undermine state sovereignty?	3.71	1.18
Do Regional organisations respond effectively?	2.85	1.21
Do diplomatic strategies mitigate impacts?	3.16	1.25
Do ANSAs foster interstate conflict?	3.66	1.19
Are Diplomatic relations strained due to ANSAs?	3.78	1.14
Is international support sufficient?	2.95	1.20
Does Civil society mediate effectively?	3.95	1.10

Source: Researcher (2025)

Respondents thought that ANSAs influence diplomatic relations significantly (mean=3.62) and deteriorate state sovereignty (mean=3.71) by dominating the territory, assaulting state troops and disrupting transnational security (Clapham, 2021). Regional organisations are perceived to be ineffective (mean=2.85) and, in most cases, they are incapable of dealing with the transnational character of ANSA operations (Handy, 2025). Informal dialogue as the primary mediating factor (mean = 3.95) through the civil society helps to soften the

situation between the state and non-state actors (Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, 2021). Qualitative information also supported the fact that ANSA operations, including cross-border raids, village attacks and illegal trade, make diplomatic relationships more complicated, resulting in mistrust between states (Security Council Report, 2022). The presence of armed groups such as M23 and ADF is another tool of influence among regional powers that increases interstate conflicts (Mugenzi, 2020).

Respondents perceive ANSAs primarily as violent actors working towards political and economic gains, and M23, ADF and Mai-Mai are the strongest of them. Their operations, incidents, control of resources and overlapping of borders have a direct impact on the diplomatic relations that weaken the sovereignty, develop inter-state tensions and disrupt regional coordination. The civil society is known to be very critical in the mediation of conflicts and dialogue. The results underline the importance of adaptive, combined diplomacy approaches that can be used to respond to the multidimensionality of ANSAs in the GLR.

The Strategic Framework for Enhancing Diplomatic Relations

There are a number of obstacles to practical diplomatic activities in the GLR. To begin with, the intelligence sharing among the states has a huge gap due to mistrust and fear of jeopardising national security. Second, foreign ministries and regional organisations have limited capacity to manage ANSA-related crises due to their limited ability to respond promptly and efficiently. The latter is made more difficult by the fact that the region is characterised by complicated security features, where various armed formations with international connections operate within porous borders, making diplomatic and military actions challenging (ACLED, 2024).

The results of the study underline the importance of the collaborative, inclusive and multidimensional approach. The respondents emphasised that ANSAs, cross-boundary, exploiting economic resources and helping to generate socio-political tensions, pose complex challenges to be addressed through coordinated regional, nationwide and community-based approaches (Stearns, 2013). Some of the strategies that were identified by the respondents as important are enhancing regional cooperation, intelligence sharing, community engagement and dialogue, joint military development and exploitation of external support to build capacity among states. Enhancing regional cooperation became one of the priorities. The respondents strongly responded that ANSAs have transnational threats that require coordinated action among states to manage the problem. The consolidation of resources, uniting of policy and coordination of diplomatic and security efforts, produces a single face against destabilising elements. Respondents pointed out that collective strategies enable states to be proactive in dealing with conflicts, minimise duplication of efforts and create confidence in negotiations.

Intelligence sharing was also mentioned as a necessity since timely, correct information is paramount to the proactive reaction to the activities of ANSAs (United Nations, 2022). Combined intelligence systems prevent the use of security loopholes and enable the states to monitor the movements, finances and intentions of the armed groups. The paper has found that formalised intelligence-sharing agreements do increase the operational capacity and diplomatic capacity and thus, states will be more capable of dealing with complicated security issues. Community involvement and communication were also highlighted as important. Respondents emphasised that successful sustainability of peace cannot be achieved without the active involvement of local populations, the dissatisfaction with which is often the underlying cause of an ANSA development and maintenance (Paffenholz, 2015). Traditional diplomacy is enhanced by efforts to deal with the socio-economic and political marginalisation, ethnic tensions and resource conflicts to ensure that the local issues are taken into consideration in the formulation of the conflict resolution plans. This view goes together with the Conflict Theory, which focuses on resolving conflict through solving the causes of the conflict to ensure a long-term solution (Fischer, 2019).

Another important element detected was joint military strategies because of the necessity of secure cross-border security activities. According to the responses of the respondents, non-state actors take advantage of the disunity and the lack of coordination among the states and as a result, multilateral military responses are necessary to avert attacks, destroy networks and reinforce diplomatic actions with security stabilisation

(Mugenzi, 2020). Capacity building in terms of outside assistance was also identified as a significant factor, though the answers were somewhat more diverse. Respondents highlighted that international organisations and donor states are critical in empowering governance, law enforcement and military capabilities in regions that are affected by ANSAs. This type of support guarantees that states will find it easier to cope with complicated threats and make coordinated diplomatic and security interventions (Schraeder, 2011).

In general, the results show that a viable strategic plan to improve the diplomatic relations through the improvement of ANSAs within the GLR should be based on the combination of regional collaboration, intelligence exchange, community interventions, collective military approaches and external assistance. This multi-layered approach provides a solution to immediate threats of ANSAs and social-political backgrounds that lead to instability in the region and to the development of resilient and sustainable diplomatic relations (Paffenholz, 2015).

Discussion

Notably, ANSAs are complex, multidimensional and transnational in the GLR and have significant consequences on the diplomatic relations. Results show that terror groups like M23, ADF, DFLR and Mai-Mai militias have multiple activities, which are related to cross-border attacks, local domination, exploitation of resources, socio-political manipulation, recruitment and opportunistic collaborations with local/regional forces. Not only do these activities interfere with state sovereignty, but they also generate an atmosphere of constant suspicion between neighbouring states, which damages bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. It confirms earlier studies by Stearns (2013) and Berman and Lombard (2008), who note that political and economic incentives are the focal point of ANSA operations and it also corroborates the evidence provided by Clapham (2021), according to which such actors intensify fragility in states and hamper stability in the region.

One of the most significant contributions of the given work is the empirical connection between the ANSA activities and diplomatic tensions in the GLR. Structural and relational circumstances that continue mistrust between states are produced by resource-based operations, cross-border mobility and ethnic mobilisation. An example is that the ADF cross-border raids into Uganda and Rwanda, being accused of sponsoring the M23, demonstrate how ANSAs are the instigators of friction among the states. These results can be compared to the Conflict Theory (Galtung, 1969; Dahrendorf, 1959; Collins, 2000), which holds that structural inequalities, grievances without a solution and the struggle over resources, identity, or political power are the major causes of conflict. ANSAs in the GLR use the presence of weak governance structures, porous borders, state incompetence and socio-economic marginalisation to continue their activities, thus creating structural violence that breeds local as well as interstate insecurity.

Moreover, the paper shows that ANSAs are not only security threats but also diplomatic variables shaping the process of interstate negotiations and regional cooperation. Their existence causes states to be reactive, even going as far as unilateral interventions, which undermine trust and multilateral interaction. As an illustration, the ADF operation targeted by Uganda during the operation Shujaa, although satisfying the urgent security need, also brought about the sovereign issue of the DRC and this is an example of how ANSA activity alters the diplomatic calculus. The results of the study affirm that the regional stability within the GLR is an issue that should be addressed with the help of coordinated diplomatic and security policies; independent actions and poor harmonisation of responses fuel tensions and undermine collaborative security measures.

The study has shown a significant mediating role of the civil society and the grassroots movements in conflicts related to ANSA. Contributors were also keen on mentioning that community-based discussion and involvement resolve grievances that tend to be the foundations of ANSA recruitment and domestic support. This is in line with the Conflict Theory, whereby a lasting peace involves solving issues that create violence, economic inequalities, social rejection and political alienation and not just managing the violent expressions. Mediating by civil society, with the local peace committees, community forums and informal dialogue, improves the diplomacy of the state by addressing gaps in trust and offering local grievance settlement mechanisms.

The conflict theory is also supported by the study since it demonstrates that regional bodies like the ICGLR, the UN and the AU have irreplaceable roles in the process of multilateral interactions, compliance oversight and the coordination of interventions. They are, however, limited in the nature of their effectiveness due to a lack of enforcing powers, uneven distribution of funds and conflicting state interests. It is likely necessary to strengthen and combine the formal institutional frameworks with the local efforts in order to establish multi-layered approaches to conflict management. The art of good regional diplomacy will involve coordinating with the political, military and developmental approaches, where it is well understood that ANSAs are transnational.

It is important to note that the empirical evidence presented in the study points to the fact that the motivations of ANSAs are multidimensional. Although economic benefits obtained by using resources became the driving force, political, ethnic and ideological pressures are also significant in maintaining these groups. These results support the Conflict Theory argument that no single variable is likely to bring about conflicts; rather, it is a combination of structural inequalities, competition over resources, identity politics and historical grievances that bring them about. Also, the ethnic politics of various groups such as M23 and ADF depict that ANSAs capitalise on local socio-political forces to attain greater ends, thus increasing the diplomatic tension between neighbouring states.

On a pragmatic level, the study proves that ANSA management entails multi-level theory-based approaches. Structural causes of conflict, poverty, marginalisation, unequal distribution of resources and poor governance perpetuate ANSA recruitment and cross-border operations. The Interventions in the Conflict Theory perspective should focus on these structural causes. Security interventions can be supplemented with developmental initiatives, local grievance resolution programs and political inclusion programs with the aim of reducing the actual causes of instability.

Besides, the paper identifies the complex interplay between local, national and regional players. Whereas ANSAs can take advantage of a loophole in the governance and regional coordination, the states and regional organisations can use their potential to limit threats. When the civil society has been synchronised with the state policies, the civil society engagement is a crucial factor in reshaping the conflict towards dialogue and negotiation avenues. This highlights the need to have integrated conflict management models, which integrate the security, diplomacy and community-based interventions.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that ANSAs have continued to be the epicentre of derailing peace and diplomacy within the GLR. The results show that other groups, including M23, ADF, DFLR and Mai-Mai militias, have been using poor governance, permeable borders and unresolved grievances to carry on with their activities. This is because their activities, such as the exploitation of resources, raids into territories and control of borders, directly destabilise sovereignty and increase mistrust among states, thus putting a strain on diplomatic relations. The examples of the interventions of ANSAs in Uganda against the ADF, Rwanda against the DRC, which tolerates the DFLR and the accusations of Kinshasa that the DFLR receives Rwandan assistance are typical examples of the ANSAs as both a security threat and a trigger of a diplomatic crisis.

The paper also shows that regional and international responses, despite their widths, have been constrained by a lack of coordination, intelligence failures and competing state interests. The ICGLR, the AU and the UN are some of the organisations that offer good platforms, but their enforcement is also weak and there is poor trust among the member states. In comparison, civil society and localised efforts have become viable brokers and the value of an inclusive conversation in supplementing state-based diplomacy is evident. Finally, to overcome ANSAs, a response must be adaptive and collaborative as well as participatory to balance security and diplomacy, resulting in resilient and sustainable peace in the GLR.

Recommendations

Considering the results of this paper, one can highly recommend the following:

Develop a coordinated early warning system among the GLR to track ANSA flows, foresee threats across borders and avert diplomatic implications. This allows intelligence to be shared and to collaborate promptly, avoid dependence on one-sided intervention and build trust among states.

Introduce specific policies to curb poverty, unemployment and unequal access to resources in Eastern DRC and border societies. These interventions decrease the local support of ANSAs by reducing the structural causes of conflict and also lead to long-term regional stability.

Establish forums to unite civilian authorities, military actors and regional organisations to develop and actualise ANSAs' strategies together. This will make sure that the interventions on security are made to be coherent with socio-political interventions, reducing structural grievance and facilitating coordinated regional responses.

Facilitate the cross-border community-level dialogue and reconciliation efforts to solve ethnic tensions, past grievances and local disputes that ANSAs take advantage of. These programs are also used to supplement formal diplomacy, enhance inter-community trust and mitigate the chances of ANSAs adding to interstate tensions.

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