

## REGIONAL COLLECTIVE SECURITY IN EAST AFRICA: BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION AND GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRIES: ANALYSIS OF THE EAC SECURITY PARADOX IN EASTERN DRC

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the security paradox that characterizes the action of the East African Community (EAC) in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A member of this regional organization since March 2022, the DRC expected a significant improvement in its security situation. However, the persistence of armed violence and the resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) reveal the limits of regional integration as an instrument of stabilization. Through the theories of regional security complexes and neoclassical realism, this research demonstrates that the collective security objectives of the EAC clash with the geopolitical, economic and strategic interests of some member states. The analysis reveals that the coexistence between institutional mechanisms of cooperation and the pursuit of contradictory national agendas generates a security paradox where the regional organization simultaneously becomes a space for cooperation and a theater of geopolitical rivalries. The study concludes that effective collective security in East Africa requires overcoming diverging interests and strengthening regional security governance mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Collective security, regional integration, security paradox, East African Community, Democratic Republic of Congo, regional security complexes.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the major transformations of the international order following the end of the Cold War, issues of peace and security have occupied a central place in international relations. Contemporary armed conflicts, mostly internal but with cross-border repercussions, have highlighted the limits of the state as the sole guarantor of security. In this context, regional organizations have gradually become essential actors in crisis management, complementing the action of international organizations, in particular the United Nations, which recognizes their role through Chapter VIII of its Charter<sup>1</sup>.

In Africa, the dynamic of security regionalization has developed in a context marked by the fragility of States and the persistence of armed conflicts. However, in East and Central Africa,

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<sup>1</sup> Buzan, B., & Waever, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge University Press. , p. 45.

security challenges take on a particular dimension because of porous borders, the movement of armed groups and the illicit exploitation of natural resources<sup>2</sup>.

It is in this context that the East African Community (EAC) has established itself as one of the most dynamic regional organizations on the continent. Created in 1999 and entered into force in 2000, the EAC has gradually expanded its space from three founding members (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda) to eight member states joining in 2024, including Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and more recently, Somalia<sup>3</sup>.

The accession of the Democratic Republic of Congo to the East African Community on 29 March 2022 was seen as a major opportunity to strengthen regional cooperation and contribute to the stabilization of the east of the country, a region marked by decades of inscribed status. Nevertheless, the persistence of armed violence and the inadequacy of concrete results on the ground quickly highlighted a security paradox between the region's stated ambitions and the reality experienced by the population<sup>4</sup>.

This research focuses precisely on this security paradox by analyzing the effectiveness and limits of the EAC's security action in the Congolese context. It seeks to highlight the gaps between the objectives pursued by the organization and the persistent security dynamics on the ground.

## 2.0 PROBLEM

Regional integration has become one of the main mechanisms for promoting peace, security and development on the African continent. Through its common market, its political cooperation mechanisms and its security initiatives, the EAC pursues the objective of building an honest, stable and prosperous regional space. The Treaty establishing the EAC also provides for close cooperation between the Member States in the fields of peace, security and defence, which are considered to be essential conditions for the success of the regional integration project<sup>5</sup>. The DRC's membership of this organization was part of this logic. For the Congolese authorities, this integration was intended to strengthen cooperation with neighbouring countries, facilitate economic exchanges, but above all benefit from a regional framework capable of contributing to the resolution of the persistent insecurity in the eastern part of the country<sup>6</sup>. However, the evolution of the security situation since 2022 reveals a much more complex reality. While regional integration was supposed to promote security cooperation, armed violence continues in several territories in eastern DRC. Moreover, some regional initiatives have sometimes given rise to controversy as to their real effectiveness. The resurgence of the M23, the aggravation of diplomatic tensions between Kinshasa and Kigali,

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<sup>2</sup> Reyntjens, F. (2009). *The Great African War: Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996-2006*. Cambridge University Press, p.128.

<sup>3</sup> EAC. (2022). *Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community (as amended)*. East African Community Secretariat, Arusha.

<sup>4</sup> Prunier, G. (2009). *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*. Oxford University Press., p. 312.

<sup>5</sup> EAC. (1999). *Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community (as amended)*. East African Community Secretariat, Arusha, Article 124.

<sup>6</sup> Kabuya Kalala, L., & Tshiunza Mbiye, J. (2022). *Regional Economic Communities: what integration strategy in the DRC?* *Revue Congolaise de Droit et des Affaires*, p.45.

as well as the criticism directed at the EAC Regional Force (EACRF) by the Congolese authorities have gradually highlighted the limits of regional action<sup>7</sup>.

This situation highlights a fundamental contradiction between the official collective security objectives pursued by the EAC and the geopolitical practices observed in the region. While regional integration should theoretically reduce security threats, it appears to coexist with persistent, if not worsening, insecurity in parts of Congolese territory.

### 3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present research is based on two complementary theories that allow us to understand the security paradox observed in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo despite its membership of the East African Community: the theory of regional security complexes of Barry Busan and Olé Weaver, as well as the theory of neoclassical realism developed in particular by Gédéon Rose.

#### 3.1 The theory of regional security complexes

The theory of regional security complexes was developed by Barry Busan and Olé Weaver in their book *Regions and Power: The Structure of International Security* published in 2003. According to these authors, a regional security complex refers to a group of states whose security concerns are so interlinked that they cannot be analysed separately. Geographical proximity creates an interdependence of threats, conflicts and defence strategies<sup>8</sup>. This theory is part of the Copenhagen School and combines realist and constructivist elements. It considers that threats are not only military but can also be political, economic, societal or environmental. In the context of this research, it allows to analyze the security interactions between the DRC and the EAC member states, in particular the cross-border movements of armed groups, regional military interventions, and diplomatic tensions between states<sup>9</sup>.

#### 3.2 Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism is a theoretical approach developed from the 1990s onwards by Gédéon Rose, Randall Scheler, Farees Zakaria and William Wohlforth. According to Gédéon Rose (1998), the behaviour of states is determined both by the constraints of the international system and by internal factors such as the perceptions of leaders, national interests, institutional capacities and domestic political considerations<sup>10</sup>. This theory considers that states remain the main actors in international relations and that they essentially pursue their strategic interests. Thus, even when they belong to a regional organization, states continue to act according to their interests of power, security and influence. In this study, neoclassical realism will be mobilized to analyze the behaviors of EAC member states in the face of the security crisis in eastern DRC.

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<sup>7</sup> Autesserre, S. (2010). *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*. Cambridge University Press, p.178.

<sup>8</sup> Buzan, B., & Weaver, O. (2003). *Op., cit.*, pp. 43-48.

<sup>9</sup> Buzan, B. (1991). *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (2nd ed.). Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp.18-20.

<sup>10</sup> Rose, G. (1998). *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*. *World Politics*, pp. 152-154.

#### 4.0 ANALYSIS OF THE SECURITY PARADOX

The empirical analysis reveals that the security paradox observed in the east of the DRC results from the coexistence between two competing logics: an institutional logic of regional cooperation embodied by the EAC and a realistic logic based on the defense of the national interests of the Member States.

##### 4.1 Institutional mechanisms for collective security

The EAC has developed several institutional mechanisms to promote collective security in the region. The Founding Treaty provides for cooperation in the fields of defence, conflict prevention and peacekeeping. This cooperation has materialized in particular through the Nairobi Process, initiated under the mediation of former Kenyan President Hur Kenyatta, and the establishment of the EAC Regional Force (EACRF) deployed in November 2022<sup>11</sup>.

The EACRF was mandated to support stabilization efforts in eastern Congo, including facilitating the implementation of the Nairobi and Luanda agreements. It secured a de facto ceasefire around Goma, creating a buffer zone between the FARDC and the M23. However, the force soon faced major challenges related to coordination among contingents, lack of resources and divergence of interests among Member States<sup>12</sup>.

##### 4.2 Geopolitical rivalries and their manifestations

Geopolitical rivalries between EAC member states are one of the main explanations for the security paradox observed. Several international reports, including those of the United Nations Group of Experts on the DRC, report recurrent accusations concerning the direct or indirect involvement of certain Member States in the conflict dynamics affecting eastern Congo<sup>13</sup>.

The Group of Experts' December 2024 report reveals that Rwanda's military interventions and RDF-M23 joint operations in the territories of Rutshuru, Masisi and Nyiragongo went beyond mere support for the M23 to involve direct and decisive participation, allowing the RDF and M23 to achieve military dominance in the Lesser North<sup>14</sup> (United Nations, 2024, S/2024/432, para. 42). These revelations illustrate the fundamental contradiction in which the states called upon to participate in the resolution of the conflict appear simultaneously as actors suspected of contributing to its perpetuation.

On the other hand, Burundi and Uganda are also pursuing their own security agendas in the region. The involvement of the Burundi National Defence Force (BNDF) in operations against

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<sup>11</sup> ACCORD. (2024). The East African Community Regional Force in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Successes, Challenges and Prospects. African Journal of Conflict Resolution, pp. 3-5.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations. (2024). Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2024/432).

<sup>13</sup> United Nations. (2023). Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2023/431). United Nations Security Council.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations. (2024). Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo, op. cit. cit. par.

the M23 and RDF has exacerbated tensions between Rwanda and Burundi, while Uganda maintains its presence in North Kivu and Ituri as part of Operation Shujaa against the ADF<sup>15</sup>.

#### 4.3 The failure of collective security and its consequences

The withdrawal of the EACRF in December 2023, at the request of the Congolese government, illustrates the failure of this first collective security experiment of the EAC. The gains made by the regional force were not sustainable as the government decided that military operations remained the viable option to end the resurgence of armed groups, particularly the M23<sup>16</sup>.

This failure can be explained by several interrelated factors. First, the EACRF's mandate was ambiguous, oscillating between a political approach of mediation and a military approach of neutralizing armed groups. Secondly, the lack of trust between the DRC and some troop-contributing countries, particularly Rwanda, has hampered operational coordination. Third, divergent geopolitical interests have prevented unity of action in the implementation of regional decisions<sup>17</sup>.

#### 5.0 CONCLUSION

The analysis of the security paradox of the EAC in eastern DRC reveals the limits of regional integration as an automatic instrument of stabilization. The DRC's accession to the East African Community has not produced the expected security effects due to the persistence of geopolitical rivalries between member states.

The theory of regional security complexes allows us to understand that insecurity in the eastern DRC is part of a regional security system where the actions of EAC member states directly influence the stability or instability of the region. Neoclassical realism, on the other hand, explains why these same states, despite their membership in a common regional organization, continue to pursue geopolitical interests that are likely to fuel regional insecurity.

The articulation of these two approaches demonstrates that the central paradox of this research lies in the fact that the DRC belongs to a regional organization that is supposed to promote collective security, but that geopolitical rivalries between certain member states continue to weaken peace in the east of the country. For the EAC to truly contribute to the stabilization of the region, it is imperative that its members overcome their divergences of interests and strengthen regional security governance mechanisms.

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<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group. (2023). The M23 and the Crisis in Eastern DRC: A Call for Regional Solutions. Africa Report N°320, pp. 8-12)

<sup>16</sup> AGREEMENT. (2024, op. cit., pp.15.

<sup>17</sup> Intégration of the Democratic Republic of Congo into East African Community. Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies, pp. 72-75).

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