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WICKED PROBLEMS: SOUTH AFRICA'S PEACE DIPLOMACY AND THE QUEST FOR PEACE IN ETHIOPIA AND EASTERN DRC

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As one of the key tenets of its foreign policy, South Africa has long prioritised its role in peace diplomacy. This has been most visible in various initiatives including mediation, contribution to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping, engagement in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction and development programmes. Given the centrality of the African agenda as a foreign policy priority, how has South Africa fared in light of its objective to stand out as a pivotal peace and security actor in its sub-region and beyond?

The cases of Ethiopia and DRC, where South Africa has played key role in one aspect or another as part of broader conflict resolution initiatives, offer critical insights with regard to South Africa's peace diplomacy and key considerations for future engagement.

Ethiopia: cessation of hostilities agreement still holds but renewed violence in Amhara and Oromia regions could upend fragile conditions of peace.

[One year after a peace deal](#) ended the war between the Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), there are growing concerns that several obstacles could derail the war-to-peace transition in the Tigray region and further inflame long-standing inter-communal tensions, and potentially set off cycles of violence in various localities across the country. The cessation of hostilities agreement – brokered in South Africa's capital, Pretoria, on 02 November 2022 – was the result of several days of African Union (AU)-led mediation talks facilitated by a team comprised of the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa: former Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo; former Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta; and former deputy president of South Africa, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

Although the Pretoria agreement ushered in renewed hope for lasting peace, the respite from conflict proved short-lived as another cycle of violence, underpinned by deep-seated political, territorial and ethnic-related grievances, resurfaced in various localities across the country. For instance, [armed clashes](#) between the federal government and an Amhara nationalist militia called the Fano, which first broke out in late July, point to a sense of spiralling mistrust between the Abiy administration and Amhara nationalists who feel threatened by the government's plan to regional forces and integrate them into the police and the military. In April 2023, the federal government announced that it would begin the process of integrating all regional paramilitaries into the federal structure, sparking protests in several major cities in the [Amhara region](#).

The grievances expressed by Amharan nationalists are also tied up with disagreements over the unresolved status of [historically-disputed territory in western and southern Tigray](#) which had been seized by Amharan forces during the war between the federal government and the TPLF. Furthermore, the [exclusion of the Amhara](#) as key stakeholders in the Pretoria agreement, contributed to further deterioration of what was an already-tenuous arrangement of convenience. Although the federal government insists that it has the situation under control following the imposition of a six-month state of emergency on 04 August, coupled with heightened security protocols in the Amhara region, there have been reports of sporadic clashes between government forces and Fano militias. Per reports on 05 November, at least 18 people were killed in clashes between Fano militias and armed residents of Artuma Fursi district in the Oromo Special Zone of the Amhara region.

Elsewhere, in the [Oromia region](#), the decades-long conflict between government forces and the Oromo Liberation Front-Oromo Liberation Army shows no signs of easing. The OLA armed group has been fighting Ethiopia's government since the 1970s for self-determination of Oromia – the most

populous and largest region in the country. The government and OLA have held [two rounds of talks in Zanzibar](#) (first in May and later in early November 2023), however, the parties have thus far been unable to reach an agreement over a number of [sticking points](#). Taken together, these micro-conflicts point to persistent fissures rooted in the controversial history and politics of Ethiopia's [ethno-federalist model](#). The climate of polarization has not only deepened negative sentiment against Abiy's administration but there also remains a heightened risk of spiralling inter-communal violence amid reports of [targeting of civilians](#) along ethnic lines and militarization of contestations over disputed territory.

Overall, the realization of the cessation of hostilities agreement stands out as a commendable achievement on the part of the AU's peacemaking credentials. Pretoria's hosting of the talks that led to its signing are a further affirmation of its diplomatic capital and good offices by virtue of its own historical experience and positive imprint on peace and security initiatives on the African continent. Looking ahead, although implementation of several provisions of the agreement are on course, critical issues such as status of contested territory and partial implementation of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process could jeopardize the compact of peace that had been fostered as a result of the nascent deal.

The crisis in eastern DRC: a combustible mix of regional tensions, geopolitical interests and internecine conflict

[Eastern DRC](#) has been embroiled in cyclical violence over many years, characterised mainly by fighting between a myriad of armed groups jostling for control over large swathes of mineral-rich territory. The most recent cycle of violence began in November 2021 when the M23 movement, a rebel group that was thought to have been incapacitated in 2013, launched a series of attacks against positions of the Congolese national army in various parts of North Kivu Province.

In addition to civilian casualties, mass displacement and worsening insecurity, the M23's resurgence has inflamed tensions across the region, with diplomatic relations between Kinshasa and Kigali tumbling to a historic low. Given the heightened risk of spill-over conflict and instability, it is hardly surprising that regional stakeholders have been at the forefront in putting forward various initiatives to address the crisis. Most notably, the East African Community (EAC) deployed a regional force (comprised of troops from Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda) in April 2022 with a mandate to contain, defeat and eradicate negative forces in eastern DRC. On the diplomatic front, the EAC initiated rounds of talks between armed groups and Congolese officials, known as the [Nairobi Process](#) which mostly focused on demobilisation. Complementary to this initiative is the [Luanda process](#), held under the auspices of the International Conference on Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) which

addresses the row between Kinshasa and Kigali, as well as tracking implementation of provisions under the 2013 PSC framework for DRC and the region.

On 03 March 2023, the Angolan government brokered a [ceasefire](#) between the M23 and a coalition of troops led by the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC). This ceasefire failed to hold as fighting resumed in a matter of hours. Subsequently, [Angola](#) decided to deploy 500 troops in North Kivu for 12 months to secure areas where the M23 is supposed to be stationed after a ceasefire and to protect members of the Ad-Hoc Verification Mechanism established under the Luanda process.

After months of a lull in fighting, reports in early October indicated the [resumption of hostilities](#) in North Kivu province between the M23 and the FARDC, with the fighting centred around Kitshanga, a strategic town 80 kilometres north-west of the provincial capital Goma. According to [UN reports](#), the spiralling violence has resulted in the internal displacement of 6.9 million people across the country and [more than 2,750 civilians](#) are estimated to have been killed since the beginning of 2023 in the eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu.

The cycles of violence and instability in eastern DRC underscore the shortcomings of a securitized approach that is delinked from structural drivers and political dynamics of the crisis. The repetitive patterns of failed ceasefires and proliferation of armed groups are symptoms of enduring issues, including state weakness (displayed most acutely in the security sector); conflicting interests of states in the Great Lakes region which have fostered politics of mutual destabilization and proxy warfare centred around the DRC, competition for access and control over the country's mineral wealth, and local struggles over land, resources, and identity – especially over the status of groups speaking Rwandan languages.

In addition to the EACRF deployment, [the Southern Africa Development Community \(SADC\) Troika](#) – consisting of the chairperson (Namibia), the incoming chairperson (Zambia), and the previous chairperson (South Africa) of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence, and Security – held its extraordinary summit virtually on 11 July and approved the mandate for deploying the SADC Mission in DRC (SAMIDRC). This decision has prompted questions about the real objectives of the EACRF in light of its composition and the implicit notion that some of the contributing countries were there to rout out their own rebel enemies hiding out in eastern DRC. [In October](#), the Congolese government announced it wants the EACRF out of the country by 08 December, citing failure to fulfil its mandate of offensively engaging with the M23, implying a sympathetic approach towards Rwandan interests, which is closely affiliated with the M23.

Speculation is rife that South Africa's ambition to regain lost influence in the region could be behind the planned SADC deployment to DRC. Indeed, [SADC and South Africa](#) have played key peacemaking and peacekeeping roles in the DRC since the establishment of the UN Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) in 1998, which later evolved into the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC

(MONUSCO) in 2010. South Africa provided significant logistical and financial support for peacemaking and peacekeeping efforts in the DRC culminating in the Global and All-Inclusive Agreement of 2002. Pretoria continues to support a range of post-conflict and reconstruction activities in the DRC, in addition to its role as a key intermediary, facilitator, and guarantor of the DRC's peace process. Furthermore, South African National Defence Force has a contingent of about 1000 troops deployed as part of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) – a small military unit operating under MONUSCO with a more robust mandate to neutralize and disarm armed groups that threaten state authority and civilian security in eastern DRC and to make space for stabilization activities.

At the time of writing, it remains unclear when SADC will activate its deployment and how many troops will be committed. There is also a lack of clarity how SADC troops will work alongside the EACRF, which seems to be its on its way out if Kinshasa has its way. Tshisekedi's turn towards SADC is also occurring against the backdrop of the [planned withdrawal of MONUSCO](#) by end of 2023 – after a nearly 25-year presence. The UN peace mission has been the subject of protests in recent years, fuelled by discontent about its inability to fulfil its mandate to protect civilians against violence perpetrated by the more than 100 armed groups operating particularly in eastern DRC. Furthermore, there are mounting concerns that general [elections](#) set for December 2023 could serve as a catalyst for further violence given the potential disenfranchisement of millions of voters in the restive eastern provinces and climate of repression of certain opposition parties.

As South Africa continues to support peace and security in Africa – undergirded by the stated prioritization of African agenda at the core of its foreign policy – the afore-mentioned cases of Ethiopia and DRC offer valuable lessons about the motivations, approaches and outcomes of its involvement in peace diplomacy. Going forward, Pretoria will have to adopt a clear-eyed assessment of its resources, capacity and degree of leverage in ensuring durability of peace and security initiatives while taking into account the contextual and structural dynamics that have far-reaching implications for envisaged outcomes.

Policy recommendations

- i. As experiences across Africa have shown, elections are not a panacea for instability and conflicts that are fuelled by complex structural drivers including governance failures, weakened security sectors, deep-rooted socio-political divisions and the existence of a political economy that fosters competition and conflict. South Africa's continued engagement in DRC should be informed by an ongoing assessment of pivotal developments and dynamics in the country's political landscape and their implications for efforts aimed at strengthening the state, peacebuilding and security sector reform.

In light of concerns raised and risk factors that point to a potentially violent electoral period, South Africa and other external stakeholders should encourage compromise and dialogue between the DRC government and the opposition over disagreements relating to the preparation and conduct of free and fair polls. In the near term, regional stakeholders should be prepared to undertake mediation in the event that a contested election result gives way to widespread unrest and violence.

- ii. In addition to its endeavours in peace and security, Pretoria's foreign policy objectives extend to economic interests, which are inherently contingent on the maintenance of a stable and conducive operational business environment. For instance, South Africa is the [largest exporter](#) in goods and services to the DRC, providing over 20% of the country's total imports. Moreover, South Africa's investments in the DRC span multiple sectors including agriculture and retail, telecommunications, mining and construction, logistics, services, electricity, and infrastructure. Given the prioritization of economic diplomacy, which has seen renewed vigour under the Ramaphosa administration, there is a need for closer alignment between South Africa's political and economic engagements with key imperatives of its foreign policy. Such a view of foreign policy as a vehicle for the advancement of economic and national interests could prove beneficial in bolstering the effectiveness and coherence of engagements, especially initiatives implemented under the banner of the African agenda.
- iii. Policymakers should undertake a root-and-branch assessment of South Africa's envisaged role and attendant capabilities in advancing an integrated approach to foreign policy, economic diplomacy and peace diplomacy. The notion of an integrated approach suggests close institutional and programmatic linkages between the various policy areas in a complementary manner. In practice, however, this whole-of-government approach has come up against a range of operational and strategic constraints, compounded by South Africa's own domestic exigencies, the gradual erosion of diplomatic and political capital, and apparent tensions and contradictions in the exercise of its foreign policy and diplomatic strategies.

Consequently, in order to bridge the capacity-expectations gap, policy officials are hard-pressed to evaluate levels of engagement in various contexts and to take decisions that are commensurate with available resources and in line with broader foreign policy objectives and international obligations.

- iv. With regard to its participation in peacekeeping in the DRC, the South African government should take decisive steps in addressing disciplinary matters, especially the allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse that have been levelled against South African soldiers. These accusations of sexual violence have been reported since 2015, with the UN calling on South Africa to address the misconduct allegations which amount to a violation of the mission's code of conduct. The repeated claims of sexual abuse carried out by South African troops bode poorly for the country's reputation as an important troop contributor and could further undermine the credibility of the UN mission in the eyes of the local population among which it is deployed.



The IGD is an independent foreign policy think tank dedicated to the analysis of and dialogue on the evolving international political and economic environment, and the role of Africa and South Africa. It advances a balanced, relevant and policy-oriented analysis, debate and documentation of South Africa's role in international relations and diplomacy.

The IGD strives for a prosperous and peaceful Africa in a progressive global order through cutting edge policy research and analysis, catalytic dialogue and stakeholder interface on global dynamics that have an impact on South Africa and Africa.

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