

Opinion – Rwanda and the DRC: Converging at Last?

Written by Edoardo Monaco

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EDOARDO MONACO, AUG 18 2021

On June 27, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda signed three agreements on bilateral cooperation after a meeting between the two heads of state – Rwandan President Paul Kagame and his Congolese counterpart Felix Tshisekedi – in the capital of the DRC's North Kivu Province, Goma. The agreements covered aspects like the promotion and protection of investments, avoidance of double taxation and tax evasion between the two countries, and gold mining cooperation. Broader discussions also took place on regional security, the recent eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano, as well as the integration of the DRC into the East African Community.

The symbolical significance of the event, though, transcends the formal coverage of the talks. After years of conflict and tensions, in fact, these two adjacent nations have de facto come together, without the evident brokerage of a major third party, to mend ties and promote dialogue and cooperation.

This *détente* could not come a moment too soon for a region blessed with vast natural resources and human capital, yet long plagued by common troubles. Particularly brutal and exploitative forms of European colonisation left the DRC and Rwanda completely devoid of physical, social and politico-economic infrastructures for growth and nation-building. Furthermore, a legacy of ethnic cleavages, artificially exacerbated for decades as an expedient to maintain colonial control, weighed heavily on the development patterns of the two countries long after independence.

The vast, resource rich DRC was subjected to the infamous ambitions of Leopold II, King of the Belgians, who from 1885 managed the Congo Free State, essentially, as private property and in personal union, before the government decided to annex it as Belgian Congo in 1908, amid international condemnation for the large-scale atrocities committed against locals in a macabre attempt to enhance rubber and copper productivity. Foreign interference continued even after the independence in 1960, as the newly established Republic of the Congo soon faced a complex existential crisis. Secessionist movements arose in Katanga and South Kasai, followed by a coup that overthrew the first elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, and the ultimate seizing of power, in 1965, by Mobutu Sese Seko, whose proverbially kleptocratic and authoritarian rule would go on to last for 32 years.

In Rwanda, instead, the divisive policies of German (until World War I) and Belgian colonizers aimed at rather meticulously classifying the local population on the basis of ethnicity. The Tutsi minority – about 10% of the local population – was proactively involved in the administration of the colony, while Hutus actually represented the overwhelming majority (over 80%). This legacy of division and resentment persisted and “brewed” over the years, de facto setting the stage for the killing, in 1994, of over 800,000 mostly Rwandan Tutsis at the hands of Hutu extremist groups. No actor from the Global North or any multilateral organisation (e.g. United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda, or UNAMIR) was able to prevent the genocide, despite their presence in the region both before and during the horrific events that unfolded between the months of April and July.

The circumstances surrounding the genocide of 1994 and its aftermath soon spilled over into the adjacent Eastern DRC. There, key Hutu rebel *génocidaires* (e.g. “Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda”, or FDLR) had fled to escape retaliation from Kigali's restored central government, controlled by the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), ultimately ushering the two countries into a season of rather continuous open conflict often referred to as the “Congo Wars” (1996-97 and 1998-2003).

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Rwanda, in fact, increasingly concerned about the hostile Hutu presence near its borders and frustrated by Mobutu's inability to control the region, resolved to take matters into its own hands by promoting the ultimately successful replacement of Mobutu with the more closely aligned Laurent Kabila in 1997. However, not much time passed before Rwanda turned against Kabila himself (and his son Joseph, who succeeded him in 2001) too, for very similar reasons. The "wars" ended up involving several other African nations – such as Burundi and Uganda on Rwanda's side, and Chad and Sudan on the DRC's – causing 4 million deaths and displacing at least 2 million in the process.

Yet, Kinshasa's dysfunctional central government and the persisting presence of rebel offshoots and remnants of the Congo Wars kept causing unrest in Eastern DRC (especially in the Orientale, North and South Kivu Provinces) and tensions with neighboring Rwanda well beyond the formal cessation of hostilities in 2003. Armed groups that remained active in the region, in fact, included the FDLR, the "Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo" or FARDC, as well as allegedly Kigali-backed groups like the "Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple" (CNDP) – before the capture of its leader Laurent Nkunda in 2009 – and the "Mouvement du 23-mars" (M23).

The fact that these two nations have decided to meet (in Goma, no less) and resort to formal, direct bilateral dialogue is an encouraging step that might bode well for the development of both.

A significant portion of the vast mineral resources that the DRC is naturally endowed with – including the highly coveted "3T's and G" (tin, tungsten, tantalum and gold) – lies exactly in the restive Eastern region, whose pacification would hopefully pave the way for a more effective governance of the mining activities (in many cases still artisanal in nature). This could also allow the country to overcome market challenges like those posed by the American Dodd-Frank Act (section 1502 in particular) of 2010, aimed at reducing the export of so-called conflict minerals – i.e. minerals originating from mines controlled by rebel groups using revenues to finance their guerrilla movements – by imposing hefty due-diligence and disclosure requirements on any US-listed company sourcing from the broader Great Lakes Region. This legislation, in fact, has led to the unintended consequence of "scaring off" many foreign buyers, who would misguidedly perceive the problem as far more ubiquitous and pervasive than research demonstrated it to be – resulting in massive job and livelihood losses on the ground.

Against all odds, Rwanda – a small, landlocked country that, unlike the DRC, is not particularly blessed with natural resources – has risen from the ashes of a violent tragedy of immense proportions to become a beacon of growth, hope and reconciliation for the rest of Africa and beyond. Under the controversial leadership of President Paul Kagame – former RPF commander, in office ever since 2000 (till, potentially, 2034, thanks to ad-hoc constitutional reforms adopted in 2015) – the country has been making great strides in the realms of land tenure, women empowerment, agricultural value chains, as well as sectors like eco-tourism, air travel and ICT.

Important pre-conditions for sustainable socio-economic progress are, at any latitude, peace and stability. In particular, good neighbourly relations after years of conflict, acrimony and wasted opportunities can significantly improve the chances for both nations to positively impact one another. This is especially true considering the high degree of complementarity of the two economies: one (DRC's) endowed with immense natural resources, a vast territory and an abundant workforce eager to escape poverty; the other, landlocked and relying on far smaller territory and population, yet eyeing further rapid progress especially in the services and manufacturing sectors. Will the prospect of greater prosperity, if nothing else, drive them closer?

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